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# Learning from Mentoring Relationships within and between Higher Education Institute staff

by Sinead McCann, Dublin Institute of Technology

As part of the PERARES project, staff on the Programme for Students Learning with Communities (SLWC) in DIT have been formally mentored by staff at Queen's University Belfast, with over 20 years experience fostering community-based research (CBR) projects. This paper shares both experiences of the invaluable support, insight and practical guidance emerging from this mentoring relationship, and considers early outcomes from a pilot of informal mentoring relationships in DIT between academic staff experienced in CBR and staff starting CBR projects with students for the first time.

## Introduction

As part of the EU-funded Public Engagement with Research and Research Engagement with Society (PERARES) project, experienced staff at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) Science Shop are mentoring staff in Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). This paper outlines the invaluable support, insight and practical guidance emerging from this mentoring relationship, and also discusses an internal DIT mentoring pilot.

## Background

DIT is one of the largest third-level institutions in Ireland, awarding qualifications from certificates to PhDs. Programmes emphasise applied learning and research, and links with industry. DIT's Community Links Programme has been building civic engagement successfully since 1996, addressing educational disadvantage at local, national and international levels, and widening participation. Since 2008, DIT's centre for community-based learning (CBL) and research (CBR) - the Programme for Students Learning With Communities (SLWC)<sup>1</sup> - has been based in Community Links. One full time co-ordinator and one part time project officer supported over 20 individual student CBR projects, supervised by academic staff, in 2010/11.

Mentoring is often linked to collaborative and cooperative learning as they share common features, such as active, reciprocal helping behaviors amongst groups or pairs. Definitions of mentoring include lateral, hierarchical and group mentoring. As contexts vary and the workplace becomes increasingly diversified, individuals may have several kinds of mentoring relationships, or networks of support, with mentors performing different roles. (McLoughlin et al 2007) The term 'mentor' stems from Greek mythology. Odysseus entrusted his family, and the care and education of his child, to his friend Mentor in his absence. Mentor advised Odysseus's wife and son. (Wood, 1997) Today the word 'mentor' means one who can be trusted to give good counsel. (Shrestha et al 2009) Mentoring describes a variety of relationships, from role model, coach, guide, sponsor, friend, and adviser and "provides first, an instrumental or career function (e.g., sponsorship, coaching, corporate culture instruction), and second, an intrinsic or psychosocial function (e.g., serving as a



model, a confidant, a friend)" (McLoughlin et al 2007). Interactions between peers are qualitatively different from those between expert and novice, or teacher and student. Recent research indicates that peer learning and mentoring relationships can offer cognitive challenges as well as support, because both parties are more likely to engage in mutual dialogue and shared activities. (Wood, 1997)

## Case study 1: QUB mentoring DIT

Since 2010, as part of the PERARES project, SLWC staff in DIT formalized an existing informal mentoring relationship with staff at the Science Shop, QUB, who have over 20 years' experience fostering CBR projects. Rather than a teacher/pupil mentor relationship which 'implies dependence by the mentee on the mentor' (Wood, 1997) this formal mentoring relationship is a continuous enquiry through dialogue and discussion exploring ideas and issues related to CBR projects. The relationship provides space for on-going learning, and leads to tangible and practical actions.

From the start of our programme, the benefits of engaging in CBR projects, to students, academic staff, and CSOs were clear to us in DIT. However the tasks of starting up a CBR centre, and promoting CBR across DIT raised many questions. Were there CBR projects already in DIT? What was the best way to map these? Who were the key people to talk to? On setting up an advisory board, what should be its format and purpose? What kind of a structure could match supply and demand for research projects? How could CBR projects be initiated? Through a shared common focus on CBR projects and issues, and mutual respect, the mentoring relationship provided insight into these areas. While we never explicitly defined it, the aims of the mentoring relationship included:

- Building networks and relationships with colleagues and peers
- Access to 'know how' on CBR: projects, models, practices, experience and policy.
- Mobilizing knowledge gained, to continue to grow and support CBR projects in DIT in line with best practice.
- Sounding out ideas on CBR projects and related issues
- Exploring possibilities for collaboration.

The set-up of our mentoring relationship is formal and is written into the PERARES project, for the duration of the project. We communicate frequently as our diaries and workloads permit. We always have an agenda for our communications, focusing on issues related to CBR work. Communications include face to face meetings, conference calls, e-mail, phone calls, seminar and conference participation.

<sup>1</sup> [www.communitylinks.ie/slwc](http://www.communitylinks.ie/slwc)

The mentoring relationship significantly and positively impacts the work of SLWC. It provides invaluable support, insight and practical guidance, and has specifically guided the following aspects of our work:

- Building processes for developing and maintaining relationships between SLWC staff, academic staff, CSOs and students in setting up CBR projects. Examples of procedures include: meeting checklists; application forms for students; a CBR process map; and timeline agreement forms for all parties in a project to sign.
- Looking for opportunities for promoting CBR projects in DIT including; e-mailing heads of schools with updates on CBR projects in their school; faculty board presentations; asking for a short window in a lecture to promote CBR topics from CSOs to students in high-demand areas (such as IT); adverts in student journals; production of promotional material; and policy work to embed involvement in CBR into DIT, such as inclusion in promotion criteria..
- Developing processes to ensure we and CSOs receive results of CBR projects
- Planning for reduced staffing levels (down one full time-staff member since September 2011) -options included: a first-come first-served system; targeting students in particular areas; or quotas of projects per programme or per CSO.
- Seeking opportunities to share CBR work practices and experiences - e.g. in January 2011 DIT invited QUB to a seminar hosted by DIT and the Irish Higher Education Authority on civic engagement. CBR was discussed at this seminar, with valuable input from QUB staff, who also contributed to a follow-on seminar in May 2011
- Inviting QUB staff to join our Advisory Group.

There are challenges in sustaining this mentoring relationship, including finding time in busy diaries, and the limitations of different institutional structures and political systems. Given the benefits, however, we work to overcome these. Another possible challenge (which hasn't been an issue for us) is if mentor and mentee have different expectations of the relationship.

The QUB staff also identify benefits to them in the mentoring relationship in that it 'flows both ways'. They feel they can raise sensitive issues because of the trusting relationship they have with staff at DIT. QUB staff have indicated the following as positive outcomes of the relationship so far:

- Requires them to reflect on their practice
- They can bring models of practice from DIT back to QUB.
- They can point to DIT as an example of another successful Science Shop in Ireland and this helps provide a national context for the work.
- They can use DIT staff as a sounding board for new issues. (McKenna 2012)

### Case study 2: Informal Mentoring pilot within DIT

We realised that some DIT academics experienced in CBR and CBL had the capacity and knowledge to informally mentor staff new to this area. In 2011/12 we piloted an informal mentoring relationship between two lecturers: Mary Moloney, in Nutrition and Dietetics, and Sara Boyd, in Environmental Health. We asked both to review the process after 6 months.

Initially the aim of the mentoring relationship was to provide a space where Mary's CBL knowledge and experience could be shared with Sara. Mary identified further objectives of the rela-

tionship, including building a "collegiality with a faculty member from a sister college that might not otherwise develop" and creating the opportunity for collaboration on future research projects. (Moloney 2012).

Mary viewed the mentoring sessions as "a non-threatening, positive, encouraging, and a motivational experience for the mentee" where the "mentor's positive experiences and mistakes can be shared" and "future anticipated problems and difficulties can be discussed". Together they considered what could be achieved, exploring a wide variety of possible projects, discussing strengths and weaknesses.. Mary saw her role as a mentor as "a valuable career development tool", building leadership skills and providing opportunities for possible collaborative work.

Mary also identified the possible challenges of this informal mentoring relationship:

- Investment in self and time for the mentor.
- Making sure that the mentor appreciates the importance of keeping to their commitment, as cancelling or not showing up for a meeting, or poor provision of support, can be worse than not being mentored at all.
- Ensuring that there is strong SLWC support for the project.
- Consideration of possible implications for financial cost. (Moloney 2012)

Sara described the experience of being mentored by Mary in her first year working with students on CBL projects as 'very positive', as Mary was generous with her time and easily accessible. Sara was "very encouraged by the success of [her] mentor - [CBL] can be done and it's a very positive experience for all involved. It's achievable!" (Boyd 2012)

The mentoring experience enhanced Sara's confidence to undertake her CBL project. The relationship provided an opportunity for her to hear about her mentor's projects and processes. Sara felt that the "mentoring match" was excellent because their projects had many similarities. "Although we are working within different disciplines I could certainly identify how transferable some of processes and techniques could be to my project and discipline group". She described conversations with Mary in which she received clear direction and guidance based on Mary's experience, and returned to her meeting notes later for reflection. (Boyd 2012)

As our first mentoring pilot between academic staff, we were pleased that both lecturers felt that it was valuable, mirroring our own experience of the benefits of being mentored by our colleagues in QUB. We would highly recommend this process, and hope to set up, and be involved in, more mentoring relationships.

### Recommendations

From our own experience, and feedback from Mary and Sara, we would offer the following questions and guidelines to consider at the start of a mentoring relationship, to overcome some potential challenges:

1. What is the focus of the relationship - i.e.: a particular project... Identify purpose and goals, considering partners' needs and potential benefits.
2. How long will the relationship last? Identify a time frame.
3. Is the relationship formal or informal?
4. Can you assume mutual respect and recognition between mentor and mentee?
5. How will you communicate - face to face meetings, phone-calls, Skype, participation at conferences? How often? Give it a structure, but leave some room for flexibility.

6. Allocate 11/2 - 2 hours for the first meeting, to share experiences and explore areas of particular interest.
7. Set achievable goals, and design realistic and measurable processes, as actions to review at each meeting.

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## Learning from an Irish multidisciplinary collaborative project where students are the community

by Dr Catherine Bates (Dublin Institute of Technology), Sergeant Jim McAllister (Garda Road Safety Unit)

College Awareness of Road Safety is a collaborative course-based multidisciplinary CBR project between students and staff at Dublin Institute of Technology and the Garda [police] Road Safety Unit, begun in 2007/8. Both partners describe this collaborative research model, whose aim is to improve awareness of road safety among the target group of 17-24 year olds - i.e. students themselves - by engaging them in course-based research. This paper presents both perspectives on the benefits of mentoring in this model, where academic staff from various disciplines and the Road Safety Unit mentor students to creatively develop individual approaches to road safety-related research.

### Introduction

We consider the benefits and challenges of a multi-annual, multi-disciplinary community-based research and learning collaboration between Dublin Institute of Technology and the Road Safety Unit of An Garda Síochána (the Irish Police Service). A mentoring approach encourages and supports students to research the issue of road safety and disseminate their research effectively among their peers.



**PERARES**  
Public engagement with research  
and research engagement with society

### Introducing the collaboration - the Garda perspective.

The Garda Road Safety Unit (founded 2001) researches, prepares and delivers road safety initiatives to a variety of road user groups in the community, with particular emphasis on 17 to 24 year olds. Initiatives are well established in the 1st and 2nd level education system (up to age 17 approximately), however the 3rd or university level, is not so well served.

The Road Safety Authority's 'Safegrads' programme - guidelines for the Students Union and college administrators to run a Road Safety week - is available in a number of colleges, but doesn't allow students to explore road safety issues over a longer period.

In 2008 the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) in partnership with Garda Road Safety Unit, initiated the College Awareness of Road Safety (CARS) project across the Institute. The Garda Road Safety Unit (RSU) initially addressed a number of lecturers from a variety of faculties to outline their objectives for the initiative. Mainstream advertising and other road safety initiatives were not having the anticipated impact on fatalities and injuries in the 17 to 24 year age category (see table 1).