

The Four Constructs of Collegiality

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Abstract

This paper presents a new approach to understanding how and why colleagues come together in professional partnerships. The 'Four Constructs' model looks at the motivations of those deliberately engaging in collegial relationships in a Higher Education context in New Zealand and seeks to determine the common characteristics of objectives around replication, validation, aspiration or exploration. The model draws on many of the strengths identified from studies in the mentoring field, and attempts to extend the discussion to advocate the possibility of a series of relationships, as well as linking these to the expectations and investment by the institution. By understanding the nature of professional relationship drivers, it is then possible to work with new or existing systems, policies and programmes to ensure a better fit for professional and personal development.

Key words: Tertiary and higher education, professional relationships, transformative learning

Introduction

**He aha te mea nui o te ao?
He tangata! He tangata! He tangata!**

What is the most important thing in the world?
It is people! It is people! It is people! (Korero Maori, n.d.).

The most significant resource and expense in higher education lies with the institution's staff and their collective ability to support one another in transformative learning. Yet, too often there is an assumption that the frameworks which facilitate this are automatically understood and will occur with little or no direction. Further, the initial impetus for engaging staff in collegial relationships often has an operative, inductive focus and fails to address or foster the further development of an individual's potential. This may have repercussions for programme delivery, succession planning, and organisational direction.

This article advocates the clarification of organisational vision around the cultivation of staff capability, through an institutionally shared understanding of the constructs of collegial relationships and their enhancement. A new model is presented which seeks to synthesise the range of modern conceptualisations of how collegial relationships such as mentoring can function in an institution. One significant departure from existing frameworks lies with the model's ability to access the expertise of many different staff members in providing assistive direction to colleagues at different levels. A second benefit of such an approach is the manner in which it relates the institutional expectations and investment to the personal and professional development of the individual.

Collegial Relationships

Inherent in all discussions around the structure of collegial relationships is the belief that meaningful growth and learning occurs when individuals are working together, and that institutions benefit when these relationships are effectively fostered in some way. Potentially transformative collegial relationships such as mentoring, coaching, supervision and aligned methods of ongoing professional development have been much discussed in the literature, yet there remains definitional ambiguity about institutional and personal parameters of operation which can make implementation challenging (Fraser & Ayo, 2007). Indeed, it is not easy to even establish what an effective collegial relationship really looks like. For the purposes of this discussion, however, collegial relationships are defined as the professional interactions which arise from on-going communication between two or more individuals who share the same workplace, or work interests. The transformative learning that results from the most effective of these, can best be summarised as a shift in paradigms for the participants: a new way of knowing, rather than merely the acquisition of new knowledge.

In recent years there has been a clearly defined ideological shift away from mentoring as the most effective approach of fostering a community of reflective practitioners, especially where a relationship with a mentor is often the only assigned partnership for a new staff member other than with the immediate manager. Instead, alternative collegial relationships are advocated. Development alliances, for example as described by Hay (1999), refer to long-term significant and holistic growth where people come together for commonly agreed purposes. She describes relationship roles which move from a traditional, operational and content-grounded focus, to more transitional accessing of deeper levels of change, and then to transformative learning, a two-way process which focuses on learning within a framework of increased self-awareness - the most important step for tertiary institutions. Further changes in the way institutions operate in their development of relationships are now coming to reflect the greater involvement of groups such as Maori and women, who are increasingly influential in developing institutional paradigms where collaboration and partnership are a more overt norm (Hay, 1999; Mitchell & Joyce-Eruiti, 2004). The following section outlines a series of research initiatives undertaken by the authors which has sought to relate these concepts to observable practice within a tertiary institution.

Underpinning Research

The first phase of research explored the erstwhile mentoring practice at the authors' institute, and established the use of a qualitative case study design followed in subsequent phases. Primary data collection tools included face-to-face interviews, document collection and focus group discussions. Ten mentors and eleven mentees highlighted a range of barriers, including historical, contextual and structural practices, key to which was an inherent tension between the required roles of inducting new staff into the organisation (including documented classroom observations), and the concurrent shared exploration of teaching and learning pedagogy and inquiry. Subsequent to the completion of this phase of the research, the mentoring policy was suspended (Gorinski, Fraser & Ayo, 2006).

The following year, the authors moved to a second phase of examining in detail a number of highly successful relationships which had evolved within their own team. Data analysis sought to identify both descriptive and explanatory insights into the interactions, patterns and shifts within these relationships. Fifteen team members participated, and, as in all phases, an effort was made

to include allied (i.e. administrative) as well as academic staff, representatives of both genders, and of both Maori and European ethnicity. This last demographic group is important in the New Zealand context: we are a bicultural nation operating under the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, which specifies the rights of Maori as the indigenous people of New Zealand, to a status of full partnership, and self-determination. Key findings from this phase of our research included the motifs of reciprocity, generosity, diversity and the interconnectedness of the personal and professional aspects to collegial relationships (Ayo & Fraser, 2005).

A third level of inquiry extended the focus on professional relationships beyond the team to across the wider institution, by initiating and supporting a number of relationships between 24 staff who had previously not worked together. An action research methodology made it possible to incorporate developments and suggestions from group and individual meetings, responding to emerging themes and offering possible guidelines, models and strategies sourced from the literature. Thus the researchers were also participants, involved in the reflecting, planning, implementing and evaluating processes which are integral to action research. A qualitative interpretation of final data revealed a number of congruencies with the previous study: the personal attributes required for successful pairings, the social / work connectivity and the value of shared goals and drivers in ensuring reciprocal benefits through a range of outputs (Fraser & Ayo, 2007).

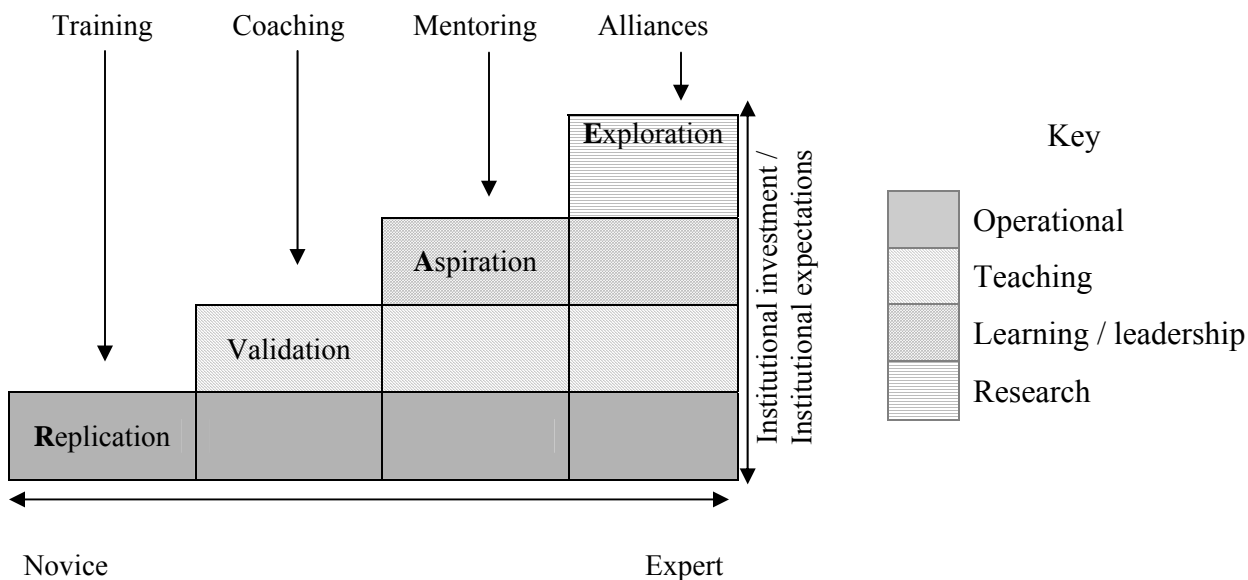
The fourth and ongoing phase of this research focus has been to construct and monitor a further series of staff relationships, but this time with an agreed outcome in mind – that is, starting from the final learning gained in the previous phase. Eight staff partnerships, across faculty, gender, experience, culture, ethnicity, allied and academic roles, have been formed, each with a goal in mind: interdisciplinary research, academic writing and conference presentation, and programme development.

Exploring the factors that shape and influence collegial relationships from these several approaches has allowed the authors to review and reflect on the needs and wants of the participants in rather more detail than an institutional review of policy would uncover. The result is the development of the model introduced in the following section, which attempts to describe the constructs, or schemata, of those involved.

The Four Constructs of Collegiality Model

The model proposed here seeks to amalgamate a number of the key themes found in the literature of mentoring and institutional culture. The analogy used is a building-block framework, where the base level, 'replication' remains a core component of a staff member's sense of self-actualisation throughout their tenure with the institution, with additional layers of objectives and goals added through the contribution of colleagues charged with different, distinctive roles. The shading represents the deepening engagement with the scholarship and pedagogy of education which this entails. The horizontal axis represents the individual's journey from novice practitioner to 'expert', while the vertical axis indicates the increasing level of institutional resources this will require. The following discussion expands on each of these areas.

Figure 1: The Four Constructs of Collegiality Model



**What are participants seeking from collegial relationships?
 What is the nature of the relationship?**

The first collegial relationship which an institution needs to facilitate is the foundation level which we have termed ‘replication’. This is where organisational culture is passed on, in a ‘How we do things here’ approach, or rules for ‘getting started’ (Haigh, 2006). It is about information and instruction, largely around operational procedures and in-house expectations, and responds to new staff member’s concerns: ‘How does this work? What’s the right thing to do here?’ It may include induction processes, formal training sessions, introductions to networks and social connections. Above all, it offers reassurance and information from experienced colleagues who can offer direction, alleviate stress and generally be a buddy, or ‘peer pal’ (Smit, 2000).

The second level, ‘validation’ is more focused on job requirements such as teaching, classroom management and curriculum delivery. The near-novice is looking to a more experienced colleague to address queries such as ‘Am I doing OK?’, ‘Show me how to do what you’ve just done’ and ‘Can I use the same idea in my area?’ Coaching around skills and strategies is more likely to centre on transferability and adaptation, rather than innovation.

By the ‘aspiration’ level, individuals have largely mastered the day-to-day requirements of the first two building blocks of professional learning. It is at this point that they are likely to be most disposed to seek out a mentor-type relationship to grow their own personal and professional capability. The preminent motivation is along the lines of ‘I’d like to be where you are, to walk in your shoes’, which may include progression from an allied to academic role, a general staff member to a programme coordinator, publishing a paper, travel to conference, an entrée to external consultancy projects - and so on.

The final level, 'exploration', sees participants in a relationship closer to an even footing. Colleagues coming together with expertise from their own fields are establishing professional relationships to investigate 'Where can we go together where neither of us has gone before?' Alliances forged at this level of institutional knowledge and experience may target research, consultancy or business development opportunities, be working to re-shape policy and strategic direction, or to contribute to the sector on a regional, national or international level.

Who are the relationships between?

With four distinct tiers of needs, this article contends that these are unlikely to be addressed through a single professional relationship. By distinguishing between the 'roles' (training, coaching, mentoring and allying) taken by the more experienced of the participants, and the 'tasks' (operational, teaching, learning and research) which are covered, it becomes clear that the 'relationships' are likely to be very different (Gorinski et al., 2006). There will also be significant variation in the numbers and expertise of those available for such engagement within the institution. For instance, the replication level, the largest component or building block of the collegial constructs framework, will have the greatest numbers of staff involved. This area offers opportunities for allied, as well as academic staff to establish fulfilling and meaningful relationships with colleagues, most frequently within their own areas, but also across the campus. By the next level, in most higher education organizations, there will still be a considerable number of incumbent staff with the particular practitioner skills involved in coaching. However, for mentoring and collegial alliances which offer truly transformational learning (Hay, 1999), there will be a far smaller pool of candidates.

In addition, as the nature of the relationships proceeds to higher levels of endeavour, the gap in experience and expertise between the participants is reduced. Thus at the training stage, the relationship is unidirectional, with the novice staff member as recipient and the senior staff member as bestower of information, whereas by the alliance stage, the relationship is one of reciprocity and mutual respect for specialised expertise. The progression, then, is experiential, rather than the more hierarchical models of traditional mentoring programmes (Robertson, 2006).

How do participants move from novice to expert status?

The Four Constructs model indicates a movement from novice to expert practitioner status which accompanies an expansion of needs, inquiry and interest from the operative replication stage to the synergistic partnership focused on exploration. While this model is not concerned with any further breakdown of this process, it does conform to a number of more in depth studies discussed in the literature. Haigh (2006) for example, refers to two alternative models: the first is that offered by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) who differentiate five phases: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient and expert. He also suggests a '3Rs' model of professional development: '*from Rules – to Reflection – to Research*' (p. 112).

Perhaps the more important point to note here is that while all three models suggest an ordered and steady progression from one phase to the next, the reality is likely to be rather different. Recruitment and selection processes, job requirements, candidate availability, experience and proficiency, as well as a host of personal attributes, will mean that all staff are *not* equal. For some the learning curve may be a sharp rise, for others, a slower, flatter movement. Many will

not reach the final construct column. Barriers such as personal or management preferences, personal circumstances, availability of colleagues interested in forming supportive relationships and a lack of institutional or departmental support may be implicated – however, such speculation lies beyond the bounds of this article, which is concerned more with presenting and explaining a model than with the micro-management of implementation (For a discussion of barriers to implementation, see Fraser & Ayo, 2007; Gorinski, Fraser, & Ayo, 2006).

What is the role of the institution?

The vertical axis on the model indicates the interface which exists between the collegial relationships participants and the institutional context in which these occur. Probably the rising level of expectation of staff as they move from novice to expert and engage in deeper and more complex professional initiatives is fairly obvious. However, the suggestion that this be accompanied by an increasing level of investment in time and resources may be less so. Many institutions in higher education have well-defined induction processes and programmes, essential when new staff are being recruited from industry or offshore. Often run by human resources teams and monitored by managers, these may well include compulsory modules of formal teacher training, so that they are labour intensive and comparatively expensive to run.

All too often, any ongoing support relies on a ‘top-down’ imposed and unevenly applied mentoring system with more experienced colleagues coerced or duty-bound to coach/mentor newcomers. This is not to imply any lack of goodwill, but rather reflects the structural (such as a framework which merges mentoring and probationary reporting requirements), contextual (including issues of culture and the logistics of meeting) and historic (for example, a lack of institutional clarity and definition concerning where mentoring is located within the organisational framework, and what constitutes an effective, functional, mentoring relationship) barriers which are frequently present (Gorinski, Fraser & Ayo, 2006). There are also external restrictions: in a commercially driven environment, with growth and performance tightly monitored by the New Zealand government’s Tertiary Education Commission, it is common to hear of colleagues from institutions across the country struggling to win funding grants to travel to conferences, to find sufficient time to develop projects or to play leading roles in industry/educational associations.

The proposed Four Constructs model seeks to revisit this investment pattern: in order that experienced and expert staff remain motivated to enter into exploratory alliances and undertake more ambitious projects that extend their capabilities and add value to the institution, we argue that institutional investment must increase and broaden its parameters. In our own institution, a small start has been made with two recent initiatives: the first is a residential writers’ retreat where up to a dozen research-active staff have spent a week developing papers to the point of submission to reviewed scholarly journals. The second is a new category of merit awards, with four grants to be awarded to recognise successful research outcomes. It is this sort of support which is needed to encourage and enhance the efforts of this smaller grouping of staff whose loss through disillusionment or frustration is so costly to an institution.

Above all, whatever framework the institution adopts, and whatever enticements to higher achievement it is able to offer, a fundamental requirement is that of transparency. Policy which defines the types of collegial relationships the institution chooses to foster must be made overt, and honestly supported with time allocations and ring-fenced resourcing. The institution must be

led by the needs of staff to ensure they can replicate procedures, have practice validated, aspirations assisted and explorations into new realms viewed as a valuable and critical investment.

The Need to Incorporate a Range of Collegial Frameworks

Mentoring and associated relationships

While difficulties exist, the literature on mentoring continues to offer the clearest signposting to new ways forward, and so is essential in underpinning the new model proposed in this article. Smit and McMurray (1999) hold the view that a mentor's purpose is never to merely induct novice employees passively into an existing culture, nor to reproduce existing skill sets and expertise. Rather, it is their contention, and ours, that mentoring identifies and encourages a 'network of individuals participating in cooperative and coordinated ways' (Limerick & Cunnington, 1993, in Smit & McMurray, 1999). Thus, they advocate a three-dimensional model of mentoring similar to Hay (1999) above as a basis for extended professional development, with levels of traditional ('how to'), transitional ('how to do it differently') and transformational (the deepest, reflective level) learning. Their model also involves peer pals, guides, coaches, sponsors and mentors and they posit that several people may take different distinctive roles in inducting a new staff member. However, a key consideration not explored here relates to the potentially extensive changes that organisational structures may need to make to accommodate such an approach, as well as identifying that innovation challenges existing understandings.

Well structured mentoring programmes enable novice academics personally and professionally and can play 'a crucial role in the recruitment, nurturing and support of minority teachers' (Holloway, 2002, p88). Such relationships become the cornerstone of an institutional community where everyone must participate in order to assist colleagues in adapting and becoming more responsive to change.

Communities of practice

'Communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998 in Smith, 2003) place a strong emphasis on learning as a social activity which arises from experiences gained through participating in the daily life of institutions. Wenger's definition of an active community of practice operating in education identifies the development of collegial relationships as critical to the validation of practice, so that all have opportunities to learn, reflect and adapt. Recognition of the shared repertoire of communal resources held within an institution functioning as a social entity, must be understood and continually renegotiated by its members for there to be benefits for all (Viskovic, 2005).

As educational institutions more clearly identify themselves as professional learning communities, there will need to be culture shifts to include opportunities for rich conversations about learning (Wilson in Gerritson, 2006) and careful consideration of where roles which enhance ongoing professional development sit within organisations (Hellner, 2007).

Conversation as a tool

Quality professional conversations are a powerful tool used to deepen understandings about one's own practice and can develop through coaching in reciprocal learning relationships which allow input critical to enhancing teaching and learning (Gerritson, 2007; Robertson, 2006). It is important that such conversations take place as part of a planned and systematic approach to professional dialogue and development within an institution (Hollins, 2006). Haigh (2005) goes

further to state that everyday conversation can and needs to become a vehicle and context for professional learning and development across institutions.

Institutional culture

It becomes imperative then that institutional direction follows a clearly envisaged course of action through explicit policies and procedures because ‘improving teaching quality requires multiple levels of intervention (individual academic, course, school, faculty)’ (Ramsden, 2003, p12). Contributing factors which will influence both the goals and the success of an institution in such an undertaking include identifying the existing capabilities of staff and the conditions within the institution, aligned with the nature, existence, availability and intensity of professional development (Barnett, 2006).

Benefits of the ‘Four Constructs’ model as a combined approach

The old adage that “It takes a village to raise a child” encapsulates the advantages inherent in the Four Constructs model. As a more modern way of blending mentoring and associated relationships, a multi-layered team approach shares opportunities and responsibilities across staff from all sectors of an institution. With novice staff able to build a series of valuable collegial relationships, a number of the pitfalls associated with traditional mentoring practice are eliminated. Where studies have recorded professional partnerships as stumbling at barriers of gender, power, age or ethnicity (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004), the option of multiple candidates with whom to work at different levels in a structured framework supports diversity with a choice of alliances and role models (Holloway, 2002). The key to this model is that it is primarily concerned with the needs, or constructs, of the individual(s), rather than an imposed pairing dictated by the more rigid parameters of a traditionally structured policy.

Learning and resultant organisational change are continuous, and the proposed model recognises this by encouraging staff to engage in a series of relationships where discussion around change can occur. In the earlier type of replication and validation relationships, this will focus on the interdependent parts of the organisation (‘single-loop learning’). The next level of collegial relationships is likely to see the questioning of underlying values and assumptions (‘double loop learning’), with, finally, the ongoing process of reflective analysis allowing participants to act as agents of change (Smit & McMurray, 1999).

The Four Constructs model not only offers a framework for supporting and extending staff at all levels of expertise, it also offers a formative tool for managers. A model like this, once adopted and disseminated across the institution can provide a reference for discussions with staff about roles, training paths and individual and team development. It can guide planning around recruitment and selection, and even contributes to performance management.

Conclusion

Professional collegial relationships enhance the capability, practice and professional experiences of the participants. The field of enquiry around mentoring has much valuable wisdom to contribute for institutions seeking to support staff in forming transformative relationships. The concepts of communities of practice and reflective, professional conversations complement this body of research. By seeking to combine these three starting positions, the Four Constructs model

proposes an extension to traditional policies and structures which are shadowed by a number of limitations.

Allowing for a series of relationships with an initially broad number of participants acknowledges the accumulated repository of knowledge and experience available in the higher education sector. And linking the deepening nature of these progressive relationships to the parent institution's expectations and need for continuing investment is really just acknowledging the commercial realities of today's climate. Above all, this paper seeks to recognise and, in a small way, to offer a way forward in an era of tertiary reform and uncertainty. As the ways in which our organisations operate change to suit the demands of the twenty first century, so the ways in which we develop staff capability must adapt. One route to organisational transformation, then, lies with our most significant investment – our people.

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