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My TAU project was motivated by self-interest. While I am no longer considered an early career academic, I do not consider myself as an established or even emerging one. I have been at UKZN since 2007 and in that time, many of my most trusted and valued senior colleagues have left, taking with them vast repositories of knowledge, skills, and institutional memory. In most instances, they were not replaced – or their replacements were as junior as I was (am). This left me in a situation which Pithouse *et al* describe far better than I can, in an article entitled ‘Sink or Swim?: Learning from Stories of Becoming Academics within a Transforming University Terrain’ (2016):

Overwhelmed, scattered  
Vulnerable and exposed  
Have to find your way  
To go forward together  
The self becomes the resource.

At the start of TAU in 2018, I recognised that what was missing from my academic life – and perhaps those of others – was mentorship. I did not know much about mentorship but I realised two things. The first was that in the context of UKZN, traditional one-to-one mentoring whereby the protégé ‘takes lessons’ from a single mentor over a long span of time and depends on that mentor to cultivate their academic skills and career was not possible. Due to the exodus of senior academics, there were not enough people who could be mentors – or at least relied upon to be there for the long haul. And those who were left, were not necessarily up for the job. At the best of times,

it is difficult to find academics who are disposed to and adept at being mentors (with all that that entails), given the significant demands on academics already. The challenge is to find mentors who not only possess disciplinary and institutional knowledge, but also have the appropriate disposition, the generosity to share their knowledge and experience with their mentees (<https://mg.co.za/article/2012-10-05-00-training-new-academics-is-a-complex-challenge>).

My second realisation was that this was not necessarily a bad thing. In his 2013 article *The Master-Apprentice Model Is Dead*, Klickstein explains that in the past,

when cultures and technologies changed little from one generation to the next, apprentices could reasonably expect that the knowledge masters conveyed would remain relevant. In contrast, in our rapidly changing world, the knowledge bases of people who built careers a generation ago remain pertinent in some ways... But the cultural, technological, and economic transformations of the preceding two

decades mean that aspiring 21st-century professionals require knowledge and skills that experts of earlier generations often lack (<https://www.musiciansway.com/blog/2013/04/the-master-apprentice-model-is-dead/>).

Klickstein proposes an alternative to the ‘antiquated master-apprentice scheme’ which he calls the ‘mentors-apprentice system’ whereby ‘students’ receive coaching from ‘multiple mentors and not primarily from one applied teacher’. He suggests that this model would allow students to benefit from the masters in their fields but these masters would not be the ‘exclusive source’ of the students’ education.

And there it was: my TAU project. I would establish a model of mentorship at UKZN based on the concept of communities of practice. A community of practice is a perspective that locates learning ‘in the relationship between the person and the world, which for human beings is a social person in a social world (Wenger, 2010: 1). It is a ‘social learning system’ (Wenger, 2010: 1) where people join together to engage in a ‘process of collective learning’ (Wenger-Trayner, 2015: 1). Early-career, emerging, and established academics – we would all come together and engage in reciprocal relationships whereby we would assist each other to learn and develop skills, acquire knowledge, and offer support. The literature refers to this as ‘group mentoring’ and promises all sorts of advantages:

Individuals gain access to networks, reduction in feelings of isolation, greater connectivity, increased confidence and commitment, career progression, knowledge acquisition, better understanding of the culture and academic demystification (Darwin and Palmer, 2009).

Cassidy *et al* argue in respect of CoPs that ‘the quality of relationships within will determine the degree to which it achieves its desired purpose’ (n.d.: 12). They further argue that ‘it is critical that the group develops a deepened sense of trust which facilitates critical debate’ (Cassidy *et al* n.d.: 12). As such, what seemed to me to be of critical importance was that the members of the CoP did not come together at the behest of HR as is frequently the case in formal mentoring relationships. Typically, formal mentoring refers to mentoring relationships that are established, recognised, and managed by organisations and are not spontaneous (Chao *et al*, 1992). In their research into formal and informal mentoring relationships, Chao and colleagues (1992) concluded that individuals in informal mentoring relationships (i.e. not part of formally sanctioned programs) report more career support and higher salaries

than those in formal (sanctioned) mentoring relationships. In their review of the literature on mentoring, Bozeman and Feeney refer to conclusions by Eby and Allen (2002) that relationships based on formal programme assignments can 'result in poor dyadic fit leading to more negative experiences and higher turnover and stress than is found in mentoring relationships that are informal in origin' (2007: 19). Bozeman and Feeney argue that 'the dependence of mentoring on formal hierarchies is a misstep that occurred early in the history of mentoring research and is now well worth rectifying (2007: 18). Understanding mentoring as an informal social exchange, they define mentoring as

a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psycho-social support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career or professional development (2007: 17).

Indeed, Bozeman and Feeney make the bold claim that 'formal mentoring is an oxymoron' (2007:19).

I was further spurred on by the success of Yun, Baldi, and Sorcinelli's 'mutual mentoring' model which had begun in 2009 as 'little more than an idea, a hopeful vision of the future' but by 2014 was a 'fully-operational, campus-wide initiative' which had a 'successful and sustainable impact' (2016: 441). Their model seemed closest to what I was envisaging, a CoP which would involve 'non-hierarchical, collaborative, and cross-cultural partnerships' (Sorcinelli and Yin 2009: 369 in Cassese and Holman 2018: 2). As such, would avoid the pitfalls associated with many of the issues with traditional mentoring such as negative stereotyping, homophily, lack of female (and minority) senior mentors and so on (Cassese and Holman 2018: 2).

Hmm, campus-wide. UKZN is composed of five campuses, in two cities, 80km apart. Stuck. TAU project hit a wall. Oh well, I thought. While I try to resolve this, let me check Facebook.

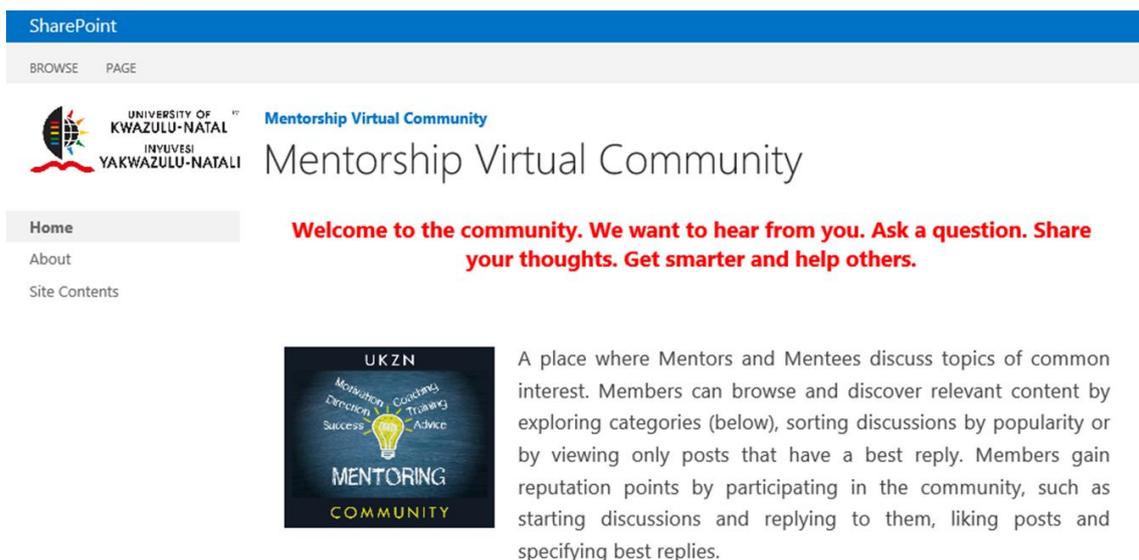
And then I had an epiphany.

Technology. Why not go online? While online mentoring is indeed 'relatively in its infancy' (Walsh 2016: 7), it does offer a number of advantages:

it is much more likely to be learner or mentee centric than traditional forms of mentoring; it has great potential to save costs; it can enable a more continuous and long-term relationship to develop; it enables the recording of mentoring activities, goals and milestones by means of online portfolios (Walsh 2016: 7).

In discussing online mentoring in medical education, Walsh does acknowledge certain disadvantages relating to security and the inability of the parties to read each other's facial expressions and body language. Nevertheless, he postulates that in time, it will be seen as 'no different from other forms of mentoring and what makes for good face-to-face mentoring will be second nature in online mentoring' (Walsh 2016: 8). The big advantage of going online is that it can 'equalise access to expertise and capitalise on anytime, anyplace learning collaborations' (Adams and Hemingway, 2014: 1042).

And so the Mentorship Virtual Community: an online discussion forum aimed at providing support for and the development of teaching excellence among staff at the UKZN. My TAU project would provide a space where staff could share insights into, resources for, and experiences of, teaching and learning – one that focused less on productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness (as the 20 plus teaching policies at UKZN do) and more on the needs and lived realities of staff.



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Mentorship Virtual Community

Mentorship Virtual Community

Home  
About  
Site Contents

**Welcome to the community. We want to hear from you. Ask a question. Share your thoughts. Get smarter and help others.**

UKZN  
Motivation  
Direction  
Success  
Coaching  
Training  
Advice  
MENTORING  
COMMUNITY

A place where Mentors and Mentees discuss topics of common interest. Members can browse and discover relevant content by exploring categories (below), sorting discussions by popularity or by viewing only posts that have a best reply. Members gain reputation points by participating in the community, such as starting discussions and replying to them, liking posts and specifying best replies.

The MVC is a virtual space for knowledge generation and dissemination, which serves as an information base for reference purposes, a first-hand enquiry platform, and a collaborative tool for staff. Perhaps most important is that it is convenient: once a staff member identifies her needs, she can then go on to the MVC, state that need, and connect with those who are willing to get her started on the path to achieving it. As Rockquemore points out, ‘it doesn’t matter one bit if they are formally designated as a mentor – it only matters that they have what you need’ (<https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/02/03/most-mentoring-today-based-outdated-model-essay>). In this way, rather than being ‘yet another burden’ on staff, The MVC provides an opportunity for staff to seek out and offer solutions that are flexible, relevant, and context-specific. Because participation in the forum is voluntary, the idea is that staff will contribute as and when is needed, thus taking into account the very real demands that our jobs place on us.

By May 2018, thanks to the help of a technologically proficient colleague – the MVC was ready to launch. By May 2019, it still had not been launched. As I write this report, it still has not been launched. Why not?

I got cold feet. Self-doubt flooded in. Who was I to think that this silly little idea was necessary, desirable, or even valuable? I had not done any empirical research – I had no evidence – to support what was actually just an intuition that such a platform could be useful. I had not really discussed it with anyone – certainly not – as that would be exposing my vulnerability. And who was I to think I had the skills, time, or energy to curate the platform – me, just a lecturer, trying to survive the slings and arrows of UKZN? Sitting alone in my office, these were the thoughts that paralysed and prevented the launch of the MVC.

The irony is not lost on me. If the MVC was up and running, I could have used the MVC to develop the confidence to get the MVC up and running.

So where are things now, at the end of TAU? I have no idea who Bill Widener of Widener’s Valley, Virginia, was but Theodore Roosevelt quoted him in his autobiography (first published in 1913) and it has always resonated with me: Do what you can,

With what you've got,  
Where you are.

Roosevelt referred to this 'homely philosophy' as summing up 'one's duty in life' and in my mini-conference presentation discussion, it was suggested that it was 'my duty' to take the next step with the MVC – to get over my fears and get it to the next step: up and running.

I hope to do just that in the coming months.

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