

Group Peer Mentorship in Academic Libraries:

An Approach to Enhancing Research Engagement

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Background

Academic librarians are increasingly required to participate in scholarship as a function of their professional roles, yet perceived barriers to research engagement persist.¹ These barriers include a lack of research capacity, confidence or motivation, time, and organizational cultures that actively promote participation in practice-based research.² In a 2015 survey of academic and research librarians, Kennedy and Brancolini (2018) found that only 17 percent of librarians believed

that their LIS (library and information science) graduate degrees had adequately prepared them to engage in research.³

Peer mentorship is a promising means through which librarians can increase their capacity to engage in research. Peer mentors provide one another with “guidance, expertise, support, counseling and advisement from a position of equality ...[with] ...all members functioning as both mentor and mentee.”⁴ In academia, peer mentoring is well established, and mentors are valued for their ability to help orient new faculty into their academic roles.⁵ Peer mentors can support new academics to achieve tenure and secure promotion through the development of individual or collective research agendas.⁶ Support from peers has also been shown to advance research engagement among academic librarians and help to align professional roles with those of faculty in other disciplines.⁷

Although many academic libraries have implemented mentoring programs to facilitate the socialization and promotion of new librarians, relatively few programs have been designed to promote librarians’ research engagement.⁸ In this chapter, we report on an in-depth case study of academic librarians’ experiences of participation in a research-focused group peer mentoring program. Group peer mentoring programs are akin to educational learning circles or communities of practice in that they focus on collaborative learning and the sharing of experiences and expertise.⁹ Group peer mentorship enables participants to benefit from a variety of knowledge and experience.¹⁰ Given the positive outcomes associated with peer mentoring in other disciplines, we sought to explore the impact of group peer mentoring in advancing research capacity among academic librarians. Our research questions were: (1) How do librarians value their participation in a group peer mentoring program? and (2) What program conditions can support or hinder librarians’ participation in a group peer mentoring program?

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

We contend that social contexts and interactions facilitate learning.¹¹ Given the social character of mentoring, we anchored this study in the social and situated learning theories developed by Bandura, Lave, and colleagues who uphold learning as a cultural and social process.¹² This paradigm emphasizes learning as an active social process rather than an individual or isolated activity and suggests that individuals may be inherently predisposed to seek out and benefit from

mentoring relationships.¹³ Correspondingly, our study focuses on the role of peer mentors in supporting research capacity building among academic librarians, and those conditions that may advance or detract from the development of these relationships.

Design (Qualitative Case Study)

We implemented a qualitative case study approach to explore academic librarians' participation in group peer mentoring programs. The qualitative case study research methodology facilitates in-depth explorations of individuals, events, or experiences. This research approach "can confirm what is known about particular phenomena, identify new knowledge, or areas worthy of further investigation, and inform future practice."¹⁴ Given that case study research is grounded in the exploration of specific phenomena or cases in natural settings, a detailed exploration and description of the program or case is essential to situating and contextualizing the findings revealed through research.¹⁵ In the following sections, we present our group peer mentoring program case (Research and Writers' Group) and describe steps taken to recruit participants and to collect and analyze data. This study received ethics approval from the authors' university ethics board.

Case Description: Research and Writers' Group

The Research and Writers' Group (RWG) was established in 2012 in a research-intensive university in an urban center in Western Canada. The university is comprised of 33,000 students and 1,875 academic staff, one central library, and six branch libraries. The Health Sciences branch library provided the context and immediate setting for the RWG. Prior to 2012, the Health Sciences Library had entered into a consortia relationship with five hospital libraries situated within the same urban center. At the time of the formation of the RWG, twelve university and hospital-based health sciences librarians were affiliated with the Health Sciences Library and delivered research support, collections management, and instruction services to students, faculty, and staff at the university and associated hospitals. Then, as now, librarians were evaluated and promoted based on the metrics of professional practice, scholarship, and service. However, while scholarship was expected and required, no mechanisms, apart from meetings with managers and informal conversations with peers, had been established to encourage or support research engagement.

In September 2012, the Health Sciences Library director and a librarian affiliated with the University's Faculty of Medicine invited all health sciences

librarians to attend a meeting to discuss the creation of the RWG. This group was comprised of three librarians with full professor equivalent status, six associate librarians (associate professor equivalent), and three assistant librarians (assistant professor equivalent). During this initial meeting, the group discussed and established the goals, objectives, and processes that were to guide the implementation of the RWG. The goals of the RWG were to (1) support group and individual engagement in research activities, (2) facilitate peer discussion and learning, (3) promote the development of research skills, and (4) encourage research collaborations. Topics of interest for future meetings were identified, and two librarians volunteered to act as program coordinators, booking facilities and guest speakers as required. Meeting activities included presentations on specific topics of general interest, including data management, ethics applications, poster design, and research methodologies. Roundtable discussions of planned and ongoing research as well as peer review of manuscripts and conference presentations were also included in these meetings.

Initially, the RWG met every two weeks for approximately ninety minutes. The meeting frequency was reduced to monthly meetings in year two, eventually moving to every two months in year three. In addition, ad hoc meetings were called when individuals required time-sensitive guidance or feedback on a particular project. To further develop peer relationships among the members, a list of areas of expertise was developed and shared as a means of enabling individuals to more easily connect with colleagues with the capacity to advise or collaborate on specific learning activities or research projects.

Data Collection and Analysis

All twelve librarians in the RWG program were invited to participate in this study. Between August and November 2014, ten librarians participated in semi-structured interviews, which were digitally recorded and transcribed. Interviews were between thirty-five minutes and one hour in length. From September to November 2014, one researcher (a member of the RWG) attended planning and peer-group meetings to gather observational data on the organization and delivery of this group peer mentoring program. Observational data in the form of field notes were used to contextualize the findings derived from interview data.

We applied qualitative thematic analysis techniques to analyze and triangulate study data.¹⁶ We began with open coding, wherein concepts were identified through closely examining and labeling small segments of raw data.¹⁷ We also sought to verify and explore predefined codes that had been derived from our review of the published literature on the role and impact of group peer mentoring

in academic libraries.¹⁸ As we generated codes, we focused our analysis on deeper explorations of concepts related to these codes. Through pattern identification and constant comparisons of data, we determined the “relational fit of data within existing codes and the appropriateness of reinterpreting, coding, and clustering” data within broader theoretical constructs.¹⁹ We employed memo writing and member checking to enhance the credibility of our analysis.²⁰ During the member-checking process, the first author contacted and invited study participants to review, verify, or expand on the research team’s initial “interpretations of [the] collected data, and specific quotations attributed to” them.²¹ We then reconsidered our interpretations in light of this feedback and edited quotations to better align with participants’ reflections of their interview experiences.

Librarians’ Experiences

Two full librarians (FL), five associate librarians (AL), and three assistant librarians (ASL)—all women—shared their experiences of participating in the RWG. (To maintain participant anonymity, librarian comments are identified by librarian rank and a number.) Through analyzing interview data and observational field notes, we identified two broad themes that reflected librarians’ experiences of participating in this group peer mentoring initiative: benefits and enabling factors. We found three sub-themes under the theme of benefits and five sub-themes under the theme of enabling factors (figure 18.1).



Figure 18.1
Benefits and enabling factors

Benefits

Librarians were asked to reflect on the benefits they received through participating in the RWG. Through our analysis of librarians' reflections, we identified three sub-themes: developing research skills, experiencing and providing support, and networking with colleagues.

Developing Research Skills

Librarians believed that the RWG had a “positive impact on the quality” [ASL2] of their research activities. Structured opportunities to discuss research methods were described as offering new perspectives on issues relevant to professional practice. Participants were also able to integrate what they learned during these meetings into their research activities. One full librarian [FL1] observed that the RWG appeared to stimulate more diverse research engagement: “I saw a move away from just little conference presentations, a move away from presenting the same poster at a whole bunch of different conferences.” Peer feedback on manuscripts and conference presentations was also viewed as essential to the development of research and writing capacity: “When you’ve done [a draft] you’re almost too close to it.... I found that kind of cold-eyes review of someone [not] involved in the project ...helped.... It ended up changing the structure but making it better” [ASL1].

Some librarians commented on the motivational aspect of RWG meetings, noting that meeting attendance inspired them to prioritize or reinvigorate their interest in research engagement. As one associate librarian noted, “It’s good to learn what other people are working on. It kind of stimulates you to want to try to do something” [AL3]. Other librarians echoed this comment stating, “Because I’m deadline-driven [RWG] ...forced me to write ...it was an impetus to do something” [ASL1] and “It’s always a good kind of kick in the pants to start thinking about it [research] again” [AL2].

For many librarians, RWG meetings were seen as a time apart during which they were free to focus exclusively on professional development. As one participant noted, “It gave us an opportunity to have dedicated time to talk about [research], to learn from each other” [FL1]. Another librarian reflected, “It’s dedicated time where we get together and talk about either research, research-related issues, or research or scholarship that we are pursuing. We’re all so busy that it’s one of those things that always get pushed to the side” [AL2].

Experiencing and Providing Support

RWG librarians appeared to appreciate opportunities to interact with colleagues who shared their values and concerns. The RWG was seen by some, though not all, as an occasion to set aside supervisory relationships and reporting structures. Rather, they could “meet as equals” [FL1] and focus on common objectives or “group thinking” [ASL2], realizing that they were not “the only one that ...hasn’t figured this out” [AL5]. As one of the librarians shared, “You know the worst feeling in the world is ...to feel like you’re floundering and you don’t know where to turn as a new employee or as a new researcher” [AL2].

RWG librarians shared that they considered it their responsibility to help colleagues socialize into and develop the competencies necessary to succeed in the profession. Participants who had benefited from prior mentoring relationships expressed that they felt the need to “invest something as well” [ASL3] by sharing their experiences and expertise with others. As one participant [FL1] mused, “Perhaps it’s simply because I’ve been so lucky in having [my mentor] that I want everyone else to have that kind of support.” Another librarian expanded on this idea, noting, “I would appreciate it if someone gave me feedback when I send something out, so I want to give feedback” [ASL1].

RWG librarians viewed mentorship as a meaningful and vital aspect of their professional lives, stating that peer mentors enabled them to develop professional skills, build ongoing relationships with colleagues, and advance career goals. While some job-related professional activities were characterized as “the flavor of the month” [AL5], peer mentoring was recognized as fundamental to professional growth. As one participant [FL1] reflected, “The decision I make today is going to be reversed and we’re going to do something else next year ...but the way that I can contribute to people’s work life and careers, that has a lasting effect on them and on the organization ...that is the most important thing that I do.” Librarians also commented that the RWG enabled them to practice and enhance their mentoring skills. As one participant observed, “When teaching, you always learn something yourself” [AL5]. Another librarian expanded on this theme, stating, “I’m usually listening to how other people have given feedback. So, they give ...that sandwich thing right—positive, constructive, and end with a positive” [ASL3].

Networking with Colleagues

Librarians reflected on the extent to which the RWG provided them with opportunities to develop their professional relationships and raise their awareness of

colleagues' research. As one librarian commented, "I find it really helpful knowing what our group has done ...before [RWG], there was no real communication about what people are working on or anything ...now it's a bit more consistent" [ASL3]. Another associate librarian [AL2] also reflected on this aspect of participation, noting, "It's really the only venue where we talk about people's scholarship goals or research goals and activities." While the RWG did not appear to result in any new research collaborations, it was viewed as an "entry point" [ASL1] for the development of these relationships. As one assistant librarian [ASL2] explained, "Being in Research and Writers, I think, highlights who comes prepared and engaged, and those are the types of people that I like to work with."

Enabling Factors

Librarians in this study were asked to reflect on the conditions or issues that enabled or impacted their participation in the RWG. These themes included prior research experience, expectations for program participation, established feedback channels and norms, training for mentoring effectiveness, and finding time.

Prior Research Experience

Although RWG librarians shared a common interest in research, they varied in their knowledge and experiences of research engagement. While some librarians had led research studies, others had participated in projects led by others, where they had specific and discrete roles to play. As one librarian explained, "I'm happy sort of helping researchers with their systematic reviews, but that's a whole different kind of ...research" [AL5]. Another associate librarian [AL1] expanded on this theme, observing, "It's only in the last few years that research has been a part of my life ...to make the requirements of being part of (the university) faculty." Hence, not everyone was equally familiar with every topic presented during RWG meetings, causing some to feel reluctant to ask questions or present research plans to the group. One librarian [AL1] described her experiences of attending RWG meetings as both "stimulating" and "daunting," while another [ASL2] observed, "I've got some irons in the fire, you know, all the time, but sometimes I get intimidated when I see folks doing a lot of library-oriented stuff."

While everyone acknowledged that scholarship was a required component of their professional roles, some owned that they only had a passing interest in research. As one librarian [AL1] explained, "I don't feel like a dyed-in-the-wool academic...it's only in the last few years that research has been a part of my life

and some of it feels a little bit forced...I'm not sure a lot of it comes out of really deep interest." Another elaborated on this theme, stating: "I don't want to just do research for the sake of research...unless I feel that it has a strong application or a strong purpose, I don't really want to do it" [FL2].

Expectations for Program Participation

While most librarians in this study valued the time spent interacting with their colleagues in the RWG, they occasionally felt burdened by the expectation to participate during these meetings. As one librarian explained, "Sometimes I'm just not there. [If] I'm just going to show up and be one of those people who sits there and not saying anything. I don't think I want to be there" [AL1]. Some participants also stressed that equality of participation was essential to the effective functioning of the RWG. As one librarian explained, "If there is a choice of not to raise our hands, we probably will do that" [AL4]. Another participant [ASL3] expanded on this theme, saying, "If people are asking questions you need to contribute. If someone is putting out an article, you need to read it because they put work into that and they're asking for your help." For more junior librarians, this pressure to participate may have been exacerbated by the participation of supervisors at these meetings. One assistant librarian [ASL2] described these feelings as follows: "Sometimes I've felt that the more outgoing people have more pressure on them to talk or to deliver their own material. I've been asked, or... have I been asked? I've been kind of voluntold."

Established Feedback Channels/Norms

All librarians commented on the process of soliciting and providing feedback within the RWG. While many felt comfortable requesting feedback on planned conference presentations through presentation practice sessions during RWG meetings, others seemed reluctant to discuss research ideas within the group or solicit feedback on draft manuscripts. Rather, they preferred to contact colleagues with whom they had formed prior personal connections. One participant [ASL2] explained her hesitancy as follows: "When I'm doing written work ...I feel more protective [of manuscripts], and I identify those people I trust ...to run my drafts by." Within the RWG, the physical proximity of researchers and reviewers may have also factored into the discomfort that some felt with this process. One associate librarian [AL1] spoke of the "pressure ...to look good" in front of her colleagues while another [AL3] mused, "Some people I work with...they're just very intense... they don't feel like they're doing their best if they don't know all the answers."

Training for Mentoring Effectiveness

RWG librarians were asked to comment on the extent to which the presence or absence of program-specific training impacted their participation in program activities, including peer review. As one assistant librarian [ASL3] noted, “So we’re learning this on the job ...that’s something that we should formalize as opposed to let that just happen because I’ve had some terrible feedback from colleagues.”

Participants also reflected on the importance of mentorship skills, specifically interpersonal skills. While more senior librarians appeared comfortable in assuming a mentoring role within the context of the RWG, others were more hesitant to volunteer to act as mentors or characterize their activities as mentorship. As one associate librarian [AL3] shared, “You have to learn how to do it.... I’ve always been a good listener, so it’s just, for me, it’s providing my opinion.” This hesitancy seemed characteristic of both peer mentors and mentees at all levels within the RWG, with one senior librarian sharing, “As the mentee ...[it] feels like I am imposing on the person I wish would mentor me.... I don’t know what to ask for, and I don’t know what’s reasonable and I don’t know when I’m stepping over the line” [FL2].

Finding Time

Librarians commented on the challenge that a lack of time can present in developing the capacity to engage in research. As one librarian noted, “I think everyone will agree that we all need to learn continuously, you know...but it’s just you know you’ve got seven hours every day...and how much time you can leave for that?” [AL4]. Another librarian emphasized the ongoing challenges she experienced in prioritizing her professional development: “I had this plan [for a research project] and it just keeps getting delayed. I like to do things during working hours [and] there is no immediate need for it to get done. So, it falls down ...the priority list” [ASL1]. Many of the participants appeared to believe that this lack of time, rather than the absence of mentorship, was the prevailing barrier to research engagement. While librarians appeared to value opportunities to participate in RWG meetings, they cautioned that “we actually ...aren’t given the time to do a lot of what we talk about” [ASL3]. As another shared, “If I could have even like a day a month which was dedicated to that and was protected, that would be huge ...because I’m not short of ideas ...I just need time” [AL2].

Implications for Best Practice

As libraries focus on implementing ongoing and increasingly complex assessment activities into professional practice, the need for individuals with highly developed research skills will continue to grow.²² Building research capacity within the library profession requires developing the skills, environments, and conditions that enable engagement in research.²³ This case study highlights the role of peer mentorship in supporting research engagement in academic libraries and describes a program model that may be adapted and expanded to other academic library settings.

Librarians in this study reported that participation in the RWG enhanced their knowledge of research methods and the peer-review process and provided them with unique opportunities to discuss and share their research experiences and expertise with colleagues. When asked to reflect on those factors that did or could have further enabled their involvement in the RWG, librarians highlighted the importance of mentorship training, clear guidelines regarding program participation and peer feedback, and competing priorities that limit the extent to which individuals have the capacity to advance research agendas and scholarship.

These findings align with prior investigations of librarians' and other academics' participation in peer mentorship programs.²⁴ Specifically, recent surveys have noted time and peer support as both barriers and enablers to research engagement, with the authors of one study reporting that 48.6 percent of survey respondents lacked dedicated time to engage in research activities.²⁵ It also appears essential that librarians perceive that the time they allocate to scholarship is valued by supervisors and organizations.²⁶ This highlights the important role that academic institutions can play in creating organizational cultures that explicitly support and promote peer mentorship as a means of advancing ongoing professional development.

Practice implications arising from our study highlight the advantages of prior training in mentorship, including approaches to providing and receiving meaningful feedback in the context of these relationships. The availability of explicit mentorship training may help participants establish a baseline of skills and self-confidence that can increase their willingness to actively engage in group activities. Further, while explicit management support appears to be critical to the success of research-focused group peer mentorship programs, our research also suggests that direct management/supervisor participation in peer mentorship research groups can impede junior librarians' full and open participation in group activities, negating any positive effects that may be accrued from engaging

in these initiatives. Rather, explicit organizational support may take the form of dedicated time to pursue scholarship, including but not limited to research sabbaticals, internal research grant funding, and access to research training.

Finally, as prior research has suggested, peer mentorship initiatives succeed when all participants feel a sense of ownership of the mentorship program, are directly involved in program planning and coordination, and can implement mechanisms to encourage equal participation by all members of the group.²⁷ Such mechanisms can include talking sticks, matchstick discussions, and discussion partners, which can be part of the initial training.²⁸ Additional research may be required to continue to advance our understanding of the roles that individual and organization-level factors have in promoting both participation in group peer mentoring initiatives and research engagement.

Conclusions

Our case study explores the benefits that can accrue from librarians' participation in a research-focused peer mentorship group and the conditions or enablers that can facilitate engagement in these initiatives. Although this case study focuses on a group of academic health sciences librarians, our findings and practice implications have relevance to both health and non-health librarians, as well as to academic faculty in other disciplines. Additional research efforts are required to develop a sufficiently robust body of evidence to guide and improve both the quality of group peer mentoring and the research capacity of academic librarians.

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