Peer Mentoring: A Potential Route to Researcher Independence

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Introduction

Despite the traditional professional research training for doctoral scholars offered by most universities, learning and mentoring opportunities among peer doctoral scholars are less examined, but can serve as crucial elements of doctoral scholars' learning and development processes. Reflecting on the authors' personal and professional hidden learning opportunities from our experiences of working collaboratively as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) during our international PhD journeys at a UK university, this

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chapter will focus on our development experiences through the lens of peer mentoring. We will discuss how we took the agency while being given flexible teaching instructions, to construct this crucial peer mentoring collaboration, particularly during the pandemic, and then elaborate on what and how we learned and benefited from engaging in this peer mentoring activity, with a focus on post-PhD careers. Ultimately, enhanced agency and engagement in this collaborative peer mentoring process have enabled the successful harnessing of the 'hidden curriculum' leading to the development of both researcher independence and career (see also Aarnikoivu's chapter discussing advancing one's career).

This chapter is based on our reflections when we were working as GTAs for a semester-long research methods course 'Introduction to Educational and Social Research' (IESR) (Dangeni et al., 2021). This course is an introduction to the fundamentals of research philosophy, methods, and practice. In the academic year 2020/2021, it hosted 571 master's-level students. We were each at a different stage of the PhD journey, which also meant that we had different study goals we needed to achieve. For instance, Natthaphon was collecting data for his PhD project, Dangeni was working on her Discussion chapter, and Rui had just passed her viva. Nevertheless, we were able to provide reflective insights from different stages of the PhD journey.

In this chapter, we first discuss peer mentoring to share the value of crucial 'in-practice' collaborative learning opportunities embedded in a GTA group and to voice our experiences. We then exemplify how we harnessed hidden collaborative learning opportunities, before commenting on our deeper understanding of the fruitful gains from this opportune peer mentoring process. Finally, we offer our thoughts on the ways such an experience has contributed to our ongoing development in becoming more independent as researchers.

What Is 'Peer Mentoring'?

Being a doctoral scholar brings diverse and multifaceted opportunities and challenges as one enters a unique academic research culture that requires a new level of learning and knowledge production. In contexts such as the UK, the core of the doctoral learning process tends to be embodied by the regular interactions between the doctoral scholar and supervisor(s) (Parker, 2009). However, given the complexity of doctoral scholars' learning and development, growing attention has been paid to more open and

flexible opportunities and approaches to doctoral education, e.g., hidden curriculum (Elliot et al., 2016), community-building (Cai et al., 2019). A key concept of this chapter, peer mentoring not only describes a relationship where more experienced doctoral scholars support the less experienced with advice and knowledge (Collier, 2017; Colvin & Ashman, 2010), but it is also about everyone in the group supporting each other and reflecting on researcher and career development. Typically, peer mentoring relationships are characterised by 'regular/consistent interactions' between individuals (Lorenzetti et al., 2019) and have been highlighted as a way of enabling the provision of psychological support and diverse learning opportunities (Webb et al., 2009). Examples of peer mentoring generally include a more experienced student helping a less experienced student improve academic performance in the university (Colvin & Ashman, 2010) or ethnic student groups as an effective source of support for international students (Colvin & Jaffar, 2007). Yet, there is limited understanding regarding peer mentoring among doctoral scholars who are engaged in teaching. Arguably, such areas warranting attention include: ways in which doctoral scholars initially join a peer mentoring group, seek to develop and reflect upon their teaching practices and experiences, and ultimately experience researcher development. We further argue that doctoral scholars develop their researcher independence through engaging with peer mentoring. For us, facilitating and supporting this research methods course as a GTA team was an unanticipated but golden opportunity to enhance our academic identities by learning from observing each other and reflecting together on our experiences. The following section will contextualise peer mentoring through our engagement with teaching. Through our reflections, we further elaborate on the developmental trajectories contributing to our researcher independence.

Peer Mentoring as a Route to Researcher Independence

GTA Experience as a Secondary Source of Learning

Before the semester started, the course convenor of IESR suggested potential ways in which our GTA team could support students' learning, including providing weekly office hours (i.e., a weekly online drop-in space for students). At the same time, we, as a team, determined how

many hours each of us could contribute. Being at different stages of our PhD, we designed and planned a working pattern to maximise our efficiency as a team, e.g., a merged table to assign these office hours for the entire semester. We carefully discussed and prepared a schedule that would not overlap with any of the students' other classes or courses, with a view to encouraging greater student participation. By tailor-making the schedule to suit student timelines and availability, we, as doctoral scholars, learned to make independent decisions within the guided instructions from the course convenor.

During Zoom meetings, we flexibly allocated our responsibilities according to the number of attendees. If there was only one student, all of us would remain in the main room. If more students entered the room, each of us would go to separate breakout rooms. The team would try to answer students' questions while directing the students to their tutors or relevant resources. Sometimes, we received hardly any questions, but at other times, we had a rather active group, especially towards the end of their assignment deadlines, as expected, as students prepared for submission. Another task was to help answer discussion board questions via Moodle. There would be one discussion board for the whole course, and we needed to check it regularly and answer questions. In the indicative task allocation we created, we had one member in charge of the discussion forum while the rest of us would lead the drop-in sessions each week. This meant that even amongst us, we started to take turns exerting our independence while being supported by one another—perhaps, the starting point for a very informal peer mentoring scheme.

Negotiating plans and timetables to achieve our tasks by ourselves was the beginning, instilling in us a real sense of researcher independence by solving most small problems (i.e., operational issues) independently. As an example, many master's students in this course found 'research paradigm' a very challenging term to understand. The three of us then further reflected on, discussed, and shared our understanding of it and some useful resources we used for our PhD learning. On reflection, teaching others spontaneously contributed and enhanced a sense of researcher independence among the three of us. In handling the students' questions in the main and breakout rooms, we also informally mentored each other—further applying these lessons in our respective PhD studies. To illustrate, Natthaphon was able to emulate his senior colleagues' approaches to completing their PhDs. He also learned from the students' questions and how other GTAs handled them, such as questions about data analysis, findings,

and discussion. By listening to various applications of creative research methods, e.g., vignettes, visual methods, and diary studies, Dangeni was able to reflect on her chosen research methods, and, in turn, refine her methodology and discussion chapters, i.e., epistemology and ontology. Altogether, discussing and sharing our understandings and experiences proved beneficial not only in supporting master's students but also in supporting our own doctoral research.

Working in Academia as International GTAs

As international doctoral scholars, we were somehow expected to understand more about the 'real world' of teaching and learning provision in the UK Higher Education (HE) context, even before joining this GTA group. Natthaphon already had five years of undergraduate teaching experience in Thailand, and so his initial expectations regarding GTA work were to prepare him further, perhaps for postgraduate teaching responsibilities since these responsibilities would be expected of him after his PhD. Dangeni had previously worked as a GTA, but mainly supporting students' group work and online discussions. She was equally keen to explore the different roles and learning opportunities that a GTA role could provide to engage students given her research interests, i.e., student engagement. For Rui, she aspired to gain more practical experience to support her job-seeking at the end of her PhD. Despite varying personal objectives for what the GTA role could offer us, the shared opportunity to learn how to run a module and initiate a GTA team benefited us equally in terms of broadening our knowledge of working in academia—a destination aspired to by a number of doctoral scholars. Being briefed by the course convenor on the course details, GTA roles, and tasks in general allowed us to learn the basics of setting up a module, e.g., course timeline, handbook, Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs), launching online learning platforms, and teamwork (among course leader, admin staff, GTAs, and more), which is valuable and meaningful for our career progression, especially for those who want to teach in HE in the future.

Working collaboratively, we took the lead in designing how we wanted to run the online office hours and decided how many hours each of us could contribute. This is considered a vital step and valuable exercise for us as we need to take ownership of our teaching and its management. The planning not only gave us a good foundation for our future teaching with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. (This is a concrete example of what Skakni and Inouye argue to be crucial in planning for post-PhD

career aspirations.) Equally, we found that being involved in the planning enabled autonomy and the skills to manage our teaching as doctoral scholars and future academics. We did not expect such an opportunity, especially since some of our previous GTA experiences had only involved some administrative work, with very little systematic design and planning. It was a bit daunting at first, but soon became exciting because of the sense of ownership it gave us. Being at different stages of our PhDs crucially informed how we designed and planned a working pattern that maximised our efficiency as a team, e.g., via creating a merged table with our available hours for the entire semester. One member was responsible for the online discussion forum used to discuss, clarify, ask questions, share ideas, and help students out as and when needed. The rest of us ran the drop-in sessions, where students met with us, the course GTAs, to ask questions about the course and course content, for general study and reading advice, to ask questions about where to find things on our course Moodle page, or to check-in for any other course-related questions. This can be considered an example of optimising our time and task management skills through working in a team, which is useful in developing researcher independence and is an equally essential skill for our career in the long run.

We practised many teaching approaches we had observed, experienced, and researched as effective, engaging, and supportive for students throughout the semester, e.g., feedback and feedforward. We also gained a better understanding of some 'career notions' that were new to us, e.g., drawing boundaries. We found that the ease with which we allowed students to ask questions sometimes led to opportunities for students seeing the GTAs as the final validation for their research topics/dissertations. For example, some of us kept receiving individual emails from a particular student. We discussed this within the team and also sought advice from the course leader. As a result, we decided that we would not make the final decisions but would only provide suggestions and signpost students to useful resources. Additionally, while being a GTA gave us a realistic insight into real-world teaching, we also reflected on the concept of 'independent learning' as doctoral scholars. Independent learning does not mean that you are always learning and researching alone. In contrast, you can always find a way to seek and access support and resources in order to engage with peers and communities to explore the process with you.

Peer Support During Lockdown

Our experience of peer mentoring took place during the UK's third Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, i.e., January–July 2021. Working collaboratively as part of a GTA team, as described comprehensively earlier, also paved the way for our experience of mutual psychological support via peer mentoring. (This is in line with Rainford's chapter discussing 'support villages'.) Surprisingly, but gratefully, our peer mentoring was not limited to academic learning and course-related topics as part of our GTA remit. All three of us found it somewhat difficult to continue writing our thesis or other work efficiently, or to maintain a healthy work-life balance as our lives were constrained by living in a 'small box' (i.e., our houses or studios in student accommodation). Spontaneously, we made the most of our time and took the opportunity to regularly check in on each other's lives and wellbeing. For example, while waiting for our students to join the online Zoom session, we would chat about things happening around us; share our thoughts, feelings, or academic or life challenges; encourage and cheer each other up; and offer practical suggestions for various challenges we were facing. By supporting each other during this difficult time, we all felt greatly supported, both academically and personally. For Rui and Dangeni, in particular, who were living alone in studios in student accommodation, being able to 'see' familiar faces with encouraging smiles greatly helped alleviate our isolation and anxiety.

By the time this chapter is being written, Rui and Dangeni have moved on to academic careers and Natthaphon has also become the 'grandfather' of the School's GTA team (i.e., a senior member who would, for example, explain the overall expectations of being a GTA to newcomers). However, we are all surprised at how much we benefited from this opportune peer mentoring experience during our GTA work, and how interesting it was for the three of us to continue it in different ways. Natthaphon, who just learnt his GTA ropes two years ago from Dangeni and Rui, is now mentoring his junior PGR peers and supporting them in the same way that he was supported. Dangeni now works as a practitioner in HE, supporting doctoral scholars with teaching responsibilities. She is becoming very confident in setting up modules from scratch and designing different ways to support doctoral scholars' learning, engagement, and community-building. Rui now works as an academic and supervisor for both master's and PhD scholars. She also tries to create supportive communities and

promote these 'hidden curriculum' opportunities for her students, encouraging them to peer-mentor and support each other.

More importantly, the three of us have developed a strong camaraderie that continues. We still support each other and act as peer mentors, even though two members of the team have moved to different cities. Completing (or about to complete) the PhD journey can be exciting but also daunting as we leave our supervisor's nest and become completely independent. However, this peer mentoring experience from our GTA work and the ongoing peer support reassure us—that we are not alone in the process of becoming more independent scholars. Arguably, interdependence, as demonstrated throughout this chapter, is key.

Takeaway Messages from Peer Mentoring

We hope to share our reflections on our peer mentoring experiences with other doctoral scholars (especially international doctoral scholars), supervisors, and practitioners. We believe that these reflections have meaningful implications for anyone involved in doctoral education. For doctoral scholars, the multifaceted GTA experiences, e.g., familiarising oneself with the curriculum, teaching and communicating with students, as well as peer mentoring, have greatly facilitated our researcher development from multiple perspectives. Our reflections provided solid and vivid evidence of the importance of peer mentoring experiences in the doctoral journey, such as balancing teaching and researcher identity (Collins et al., 2021) or deeper exploration of the subject area (Muzaka, 2009). As we demonstrated, such experiences can also have a significant impact on becoming independent researchers with enhanced problem-solving skills in academic contexts (Lorenzetti et al., 2019) and a safe space for mutual growth. For doctoral scholars who are interested in exploring GTA roles and any other peer mentoring opportunities, we encourage you to give it a go! Initiating a peer mentoring community, whether small or large, is likely to make a difference as you try to make the most of engagement and development in your doctoral journey. First, here are the essentials to bear in mind:

1. Be aware of the opportunities available to you by ensuring that you have navigated the various opportunities in your department/school/university.

2. In creating a peer mentoring community based on any context (e.g., teaching), you need to be prepared not only to receive but also to offer reciprocal support.
3. Peer mentoring prompts reflection on your activities (e.g., teaching) but also on researcher development—individually and collectively.

Supervisors and key stakeholders involved in supporting researcher development (e.g., directors of doctoral scholars, researcher developers) should consider encouraging and supporting doctoral researchers to engage in peer mentoring practices or other forms of community building alongside teaching and research. These activities can arguably help equip doctoral scholars with the necessary skills for their future careers. Opportunities from departmental and institutional communities for and with doctoral scholars, and communities of shared interests and needs (Cai et al., 2019), are all potentially meaningful contributors to the development of researcher independence. Given the rewarding experiences and reflections awaiting doctoral scholars, such as academic development, psychological support, and career suggestions (Lorenzetti et al., 2019), such engagement can powerfully transform the often isolated and challenging journey into a reflexive and developmental one. Researcher independence does not come automatically. One example of hidden curricular learning through peer mentoring, as featured in this chapter, has contributed greatly to our own development and researcher independence journey via proactive planning, learning, and continuously reinforcing each other's learning. Based on our collaborative GTA experience, we contend that this is a meaningful ongoing process for achieving and enhancing researcher independence that is core to our career development.

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