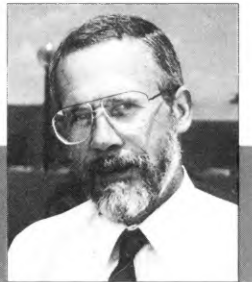


Front Line



John Levett
President

Mentors and mentoring

'Mentor': a wise counsellor. 'Mentoring': the provision of counsel, advice, especially by an elder or a journeyman.

At the 'Note the 1990' Conference organised by WA students of librarianship and information studies as a postscript to the ALIA Conference in October last year, the recurrent theme was the need for 'mentoring'. The President-elect and the then Chair of the Board of Education, Fay Nicholson, both of whom attended the Conference and were impressed by it, noted this preoccupation on the part of the students present, and undertook to carry the matter further.

Accordingly, it was raised at the first Board of Education meeting for 1991, and the (now)

President offered to prepare a first discussion paper; this Front Line reflects his thinking to date, and the topic is raised here to allow wide discussion, for it is not, primarily, a matter for library educators nor the Board of Education (although each will quite properly have, and express a view on it). It is,

In the early days of education for the profession mentoring occurred incidentally

essentially, a matter for the profession as a whole, for the body of mentors, if the proposition does take wing, will have to comprise, in the main, practitioners. In addition, the end objective of mentoring should be to inculcate a post-qualification appreciation of the dimensions of professional competence.

In the early days of education for the profession, when the then LAA's Registration Examination was the sole avenue to qualification, mentoring occurred incidentally, inevitably, and unconsciously for the majority of candidates. Not all; those who for whatever reason were studying in isolation (and I for a time was one of them), worked at the formidable syllabus as best they could, but others, luckier, perhaps, worked in contexts in which there was

at least one, often several, already qualified librarians.

These stalwarts often provided tutoring either formally, or informally, in the syllabi for the nine papers which comprised the Registration quota. It was taken for granted that they would do so. But more than that, in the classroom and out of it, they offered yardsticks by which the student could measure and acquire that instinctive and essential knowledge of the practitioner-in-context; it was the perceived lack of this incrementally, often unconsciously acquired ethos, which underlay the reiterated concern of the students in Fremantle last October.

However excellent the academic contexts from which they came — and they were clearly very good indeed — they felt that something significant was lacking; they hungered, as it were, for the 'soul' of librarianship to give a core and a centre to what they had learned, painstakingly and well, in the academy. That this hunger should exist is no reflection on their lecturers, most of whom, I suspect, would agree that study out of context makes the acquisition by the student of a sense of relevance one of their hardest tasks. Practicums and field work always lack, no matter how carefully arranged and sympathetically provided, that essential edge of understanding which only comes with extended contact with practitioners.

The Association has, over the years since the cessation of the Registration, noted the need for a mentoring process to complement and illuminate the theoretical base acquired in the

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academy. Many of its members have expounded on the need to instil an understanding (as distinct from a mere awareness) of the concept of professional competence as the essential corollary to the acquisition of the equally significant body of knowledge.

Some have carried the argument beyond the students to the library educators themselves, and in a celebrated exchange at the Australian Libraries Summit in 1988, Geoff Allen thought that a periodic return to the coalface to 'get their hands dirty' would be salutary for library educators. And so it would, but this perhaps is a side issue; our central and primary concern is with the students.

How might the problem be moved along? Anyone wishing to acquire an overview and a framework for further discussion could do no better than resort to Margaret Trask's exemplary review of the context of mentoring in a paper 'Professional practice — whose responsibility?' published in the Australian Library Journal in February 1983. Careful perusal of this paper will be a sine qua non for further consideration of the problem. It, together with the considerations sketched in this brief note, will form the substance for extended discussion by the profession at large, and the Board of Education. Margaret's paper ended with the exhortation:

I seek discussion and challenge on:

- the responsibility of librarians for their continued professional development;
- the responsibility of the LAA for the guarantee of competence in the practice of librarianship;
- the responsibility of library managers for the development of their staff;
- the responsibility of senior members of the profession for mentoring;
- the responsibility of library schools for supporting services of further education and training opportunities, career assessment and

development, consultancy and research.'

Her paper embeds the question of mentoring firmly in the context of professional competence and development, and allocates the responsibility for it to 'senior members of the profession'. The record does not show what discussions and challenges followed as a consequence of that paper, but whatever else happened, the LAA did not move, apparently, formally to adopt any policy on mentoring, or if it did, that policy has since lapsed, and the question of what might comprise a policy and guidelines on the topic remains open. Hence the concern of the WA students.

How might a program of mentoring be put together?

How might a program of mentoring be put together? What benefits might ensue for the mentor, the neophyte and the profession? What follows are the ideas of this individual; they reflect no official stance, but are offered merely as a step along the way to formulation, adoption and implementation of a policy.

In outline, the steps are simple:

1. An evaluation of the possible advantages of a mentoring program;
2. Agreement in principle to proceed with the development of the program;
3. Preparation of a draft program;
4. Adoption of the program by General Council, which would also identify and allocate the support needed;
5. Recruitment and 'training' of a pilot group of mentors;

6. Enlistment of a pilot group of neophytes;
7. Run the pilot program, seek feedback, adjust;
8. Launch the main program;
9. Evaluate, fine-tune.

How would it work? Broadly, the Association would determine the objectives, establish outcomes and recruit and educate the mentors; it would make the connection between mentor and neophyte, and set up waypoints at which both would comment on the effectiveness of the relationship and the process. The Association would provide the necessary back-up and support for the program (mentors would not be paid any form of fee), and evaluate its effectiveness. Mentor and neophyte might work face-to-face, or at a remove. The relationship might be established while the neophyte was still a student, or after formal completion of the first professional award. Completion of the program by the neophyte would need to be suitably marked in a format which would reflect his or her input and growth, and which would provide a further indication to a potential employer of the neophyte's grasp of the ethos of the profession.

What would be the advantages? To the neophyte, an introduction to a potential colleague who would, in an entirely neutral way, provide structured insights into the practice of the profession, would offer a point of counsel and advice to the student on issues of both a theoretical and practical kind. To the mentor, one of the richest experiences any profession offers: the opportunity to assist in the formulation of professional ideals, competencies, philosophies. To the profession, a generation of neophytes who would have had the benefit of working in an extended fashion with an experienced and committed individual.

Difficult? Undoubtedly! Worth trying? I think so, and more importantly, so do the students. Comments welcome, as ever. □

A new Branch... continued from 1...

to make adjustments because they live in these regions — consultations on how greater involvement within ALIA might be achieved may be part of that continuing adjustment.

Conclusion

- The North Queensland Regional Group has mounted a strong case — equally strong

cases could be made for the Port Hedland, Green Triangle, Central NSW Regional Groups. However, it is important that each case not be considered in the broader context of the structure of the Association. If ALIA wishes to have each of these groups represented on General Council, the rationale for changing the established balance of

membership and the cost has to be clear and accepted beforehand.

Averill M B Edwards
Past President and member of the By-laws and Regs Committee

Jean is calling for public debate. Do any members have views that they would like to share with us? □

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