More than one way to mentor
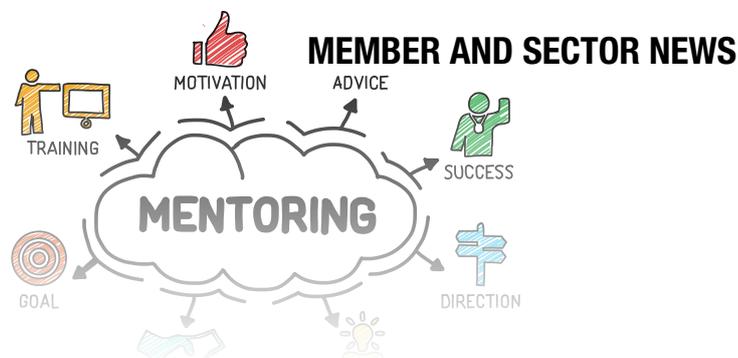
Most of us know the value of having been mentored at various stages of our careers. But as FIONA SALISBURY writes, mentoring doesn't have to be highly structured to be of value.

In library workplaces, our peers, supervisors, senior colleagues, friends and team members – at all stages of their careers – have valuable career lessons to recount to us, and we generously share these stories with one another. In my experience, 'informal' or 'accidental' mentoring regularly takes place around us but, because it is so familiar, we sometimes hardly notice it. Colleen MacKinnon and Susan Shepley[1] are two professionals who have paid attention to their own experience of informal mentoring. Their analysis makes a strong case for challenging more formal mentoring programs. It's a convincing argument for reimagining mentoring relationships in libraries.

For MacKinnon and Shepley, informal mentoring provides individuals and organisations with the freedom to rethink how they approach mentoring. Drawing on their lived experience, they reflect on the value of informal mentoring – spontaneous, purposeful, varied and sustained by peer networks. They argue that these benefits are a welcome alternative to the repeated reliance on a 'one-to-one dynamic' and the fixed structures that are characteristic of formal mentoring programs.

Because informal mentoring is not linked to a hierarchy of position or age, 'confidence levels rise, and windows for growth and opportunity open'. MacKinnon and Shepley's enthusiasm stems from their experience of informal mentoring as an equal and trusted relationship. Flexibility is inherent in informal mentorship and it enables both parties in the relationship to see themselves as the mentee and mentor, which can sometimes occur simultaneously. MacKinnon and Shepley conclude that informal mentorship establishes colleagues as partners in learning, who intentionally 'benefit from the help, advice, and guidance of others, no matter the stage in our careers'.

Building trusted and respectful relationships with colleagues is essential for a purposeful approach to informal mentoring. The importance of trusted professional relationships is the focus of Marian Hoy's research[2]. Her emphasis is on the connections supporting professionals starting new positions in libraries and other collecting institutions. Hoy's 2011 study is a good example of adopting interpretative qualitative research methodologies to understand individuals' experience and expectations. The study involved 48 interviews with 16 professionals over two years. The results demonstrate that numerous relationships based on trust and respect are an essential component in developing professional skills and knowledge for individuals starting new roles. Hoy found that people 'learnt most from those in whom they trusted and respected whether they were supervisors, mentors, teams, managers or colleagues'. In the discussion of her results, Hoy says that 'single approaches to mentoring programmes with structure and pairing might not reflect the changing dynamics of mentoring relationships from the perspective of the individual'. This concept of a range of trusted mentoring relationships resonates with the case study presented by MacKinnon and Shepley.

These two articles make excellent complementary reading. Juxtaposing direct and heartfelt reflections about informal mentoring with empirical conclusions about trusted professional relationships helps to enliven new ways of thinking about mentoring. Both articles point to the fact that mentorship, conveyed through multiple relationships, is a valued source of professional learning and career advice. They serve as a reminder to bring a purposeful, questioning, and reflective approach to our professional mentoring relationships.

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[1] MacKinnon, Colleen, and Shepley, Susan. (2014). 'Stories of Informal Mentorship: Recognizing the Voices of Mentees in Academic Libraries', *Partnership: the Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research, 9(1)*.

[2] Hoy, Marian. (2011). 'Relationships, trust and learning: experiences of emerging professionals working in collecting institutions', *Archival Science* 11(3): 391–408. These articles are available to ALIA members via the Members' Portal.