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Coaching for Publication in Higher Education: Views of the Coach

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Mentoring is a professional development approach that can be effectively used in improving publication outputs among academics. The challenge to develop academics in the area of publication is essential. This study highlights the role of the mentor in the process of encouraging academics to improve their skill in publishing. **Method:** Participatory action research was used in this study. Nine academics, with the authors as mentors, participated in a support group over a 10-week period and monthly follow ups for 12-months. **Results:** Key aspects identified by the mentors were information sharing, providing and receiving feedback, and continuous support and motivation. Support in developing novice authors does not end when the manuscript is submitted but has to be maintained throughout the process until publication. **Conclusion:** Mentoring can assist in the development of academics regarding the skills for writing for publication.

INTRODUCTION

The primary focus at the university level is shifting from teaching to finding a balance between teaching and research. University staff has to develop and explore methods of finding a balance between teaching and research.¹ Allied health professions have not been spared this shift and have had to adjust to these changes. Currently in South Africa, the basic requirement for educators to teach at a tertiary institution is a Masters degree.² An appointed educator's workload in a tertiary institution in South Africa is divided into teaching, research, administration, and community engagement. There is no clear divide for every section, but promotion is dependent on adequate output in each identified area. With this shift in higher education, it is not clear who facilitates this process from student to clinician and finally to educator. It is thus necessary for mentoring and coaching in the academic field to assist in providing a "unique perspective on career development" in different fields.³ Researchers have identified that there is "the need to develop adequate research skills including better understanding of research methods and research writing."²

The question that arises is who provides the opportunity and guidance for individuals to learn new skills and develop positive attitudes toward research? Various authors have defined this as the role of a mentor, i.e., a person who guides, advises, and supports.⁴ In the academic arena, the mentor has to focus on the teaching and research skills of their protégé. Part of the development of research skills is scholarly writing. Productivity at the university level is measured in various ways, one of which includes the number of articles published in peer reviewed journals. Thus, there is a need to assist novice academics in the process of publication and research.

Mentoring approaches have been used increasingly in the academic environment to improve and empower young educators in all aspects of academia. Mentorship can be used to successfully develop and grow new staff at the university level.⁵ Mentoring is an ongoing process, either by virtue of current responsibility of the mentor, or by default in the case of the student-supervisor

responsibility. However, the mentoring process does have its limitations and in the academic environment, could not possibly meet all the needs of the young academic.⁶ In academia, it is not always clear as to how mentoring is used to assist young educators within the hierarchy of an academic institution.⁷ Mentoring and coaching skills and strategies have been found to be generic and context free.⁸ In most mentoring and coaching strategies used, "learning will take place from the experience of others and will offer insights into concepts developed elsewhere."⁹

Coaching is currently seen as a mentoring technique that could be used to develop young academics. It is not aimed at completing the task but providing support and encouragement to the person to find ways to complete the task.¹⁰ This would seem to work well in a group situation such as a school at a university or a department within a school. As part of the mentoring process, it is beneficial to work in a group who has a common goal.¹¹ In this way, the group can support one another, critique each other's work and hold each other responsible for achieving the goals of the group. Within the process of coaching for publication, the following characteristics must be present: support, structure, a clear process, and clear outcomes.¹² It has also been reported that coaching will succeed more if it is a voluntary, ongoing process that is not linked to performance evaluation.¹³ The model of coaching used in the current study was based on the mentoring model suggested by Daloz.¹⁴ Within this model, support and challenges are presented to the mentees. A summary of the support and challenges are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. A summary of the support and challenges

Support	Challenges
listening	setting tasks (structured programme)
providing structure	heating up dichotomies
expressing positive expectations	setting high standards
serving as an advocate	construction hypotheses
sharing ourselves (coaches)	engaging in discussions
making it special (celebrating every achievement)	

Promoting research among allied health professionals is important to maximise knowledge development and provide the research evidence for teaching. The need to provide effective support and encouragement for young academics is thus a priority. The need by academics to be equipped in the skills of finding evidence that would influence their teaching has been highlighted.¹⁵ The study also highlighted that assistance was needed by academics to develop the skills needed for research activities. Academic writing is crucial for the development of academics and collaborative peer mentoring can be used to facilitate the development of knowledge, skills, and correct attitude towards writing for publication.¹⁶ We realise that the ability to write well is not naturally acquired but can be learned through formal or informal instruction and in different settings. Byrne stated that "coaching is about empowering people to take responsibility for themselves and make the necessary changes relevant to their professional and personal lives."¹⁷ Thus, this study aimed to evaluate the effects of coaching for publication on academics in a specific department.

METHODS

The study was undertaken using participative action research techniques. This meant that the authors facilitated the process and participated in it as full members. Within this process of action research, the researchers were gathering information throughout the process in the form of a reflective diary focusing on the process and reflecting on their situation in terms of motivation and coaching during their interaction with the group. The coaches also facilitated the process by providing continuous feedback, support and encouragement.

Research suggested that coaching should be guided by the following opportunities:¹⁸

1. Support and encouragement through the opportunity to review experiences, discuss feelings and describe frustrations
2. Fine tune skills or strategies through feedback
3. To analyse practices and decision making on a conscious level
4. To adapt skills that will facilitate specific outcomes
5. To reflect on their decision making processes in order to improve knowledge

The researchers initiated a support group to facilitate writing for publication among a group of academics. All academic staff members of the department of physiotherapy at a university in the Western Cape were selected to take part in the group. The group consisted of 9 staff members of which 2 were male and 7 were female. Of the 9 staff member, 5 were novice authors while the other 4 had experience with publishing. The structure for the programme was provided by a senior staff member, who in conjunction with other senior staff members with an established publication record, acted as coaches during the process. Participation in the group was voluntary and the programme focused on writing for publication. The programme was delivered

over 10-weeks with continuous support and monthly encouragement following the 10-week period from the coaches for 12-months after. The programme was presented to the group with clear criteria that demanded full participation. The objectives of the programme allowed participants to write various sections of an article while receiving feedback from critical readers. Thus, the cycle of writing included writing, editing, and revising following continuous feedback and advice. A summary of the programme is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of writing for publication workshop

Week	Objectives
1	Participants were expected to prepare for writing the article by identifying a topic of interest and identifying an appropriate journal as well the authors' guidelines. Relevant articles to assist in writing the introduction of the article were also obtained by the participants.
2	Participants were expected to write the introduction section of the article, submit it to a critical reader, review an introduction section written by someone else in the group, and finally, provide the author feedback. Reflections on challenges were discussed in an open forum.
3	Participants were expected to work on the feedback given by the critical reader, write the methodology section of the article, submit it to a critical reader, review a methodology section written by someone else in the group, and finally, provide the author feedback. Reflections on challenges experiences were discussed in an open forum.
4-5	Participants were expected to do corrections recommended by the reviewer, write the results section of the article, submit it to a critical reader, review an introduction to results section written by someone else in the group, and finally, provide the author feedback
6-7	Participants were expected to do corrections recommended by the reviewer, write the discussion and conclusion section of the article, submit it to a critical reader, review a draft article written by someone else in the group, and finally, provide the author feedback
8-10	Participants were expected to do all corrections, prepare the article for submission to a journal with abstract and references, and submit draft 2 of article to a critical reader with the journal guidelines. Participants then also reviewed a complete article and provided feedback

The participants were allowed to voice the challenges experienced at each stage and to reflect on how they were able to make decisions to overcome the challenges. The reflection of the open forums were collected in a diary on a weekly basis and coaches focused on recording the process according to the predetermined guidelines for coaching. The learning process combined the exchange of the participant's knowledge and experience with that of the coaches' expertise and enabled the process of reflection, feedback, decision making, and action planning (Kolb's learning model theory).¹⁹

DATA ANALYSIS

To better understand the coaching and learning process, data from the diaries were linked to the specific coaching guidelines and activities expected from the participants. Feedback is presented below using quotes to substantiate the information reported. Ethical consent was obtained from participants to share the information and experiences in the form of publications. The authors acted as inter-rater reviewers of the information decided upon to be reported.

RESULTS

The findings will be presented according to the coaching principles as highlighted above¹⁸. These principles were used as predetermined themes to guide analysis:

1. Support and encouragement through the opportunity to review experiences, discuss feelings and describe frustrations
2. Fine tune skills or strategies through feedback
3. To analyse practices and decision making on a conscious level
4. To adapt skills that will facilitate specific outcomes
5. To reflect on their decision making processes in order to improve knowledge

The results are presented in table 3 below focusing on the coaching principle, the learning opportunity, and the supportive quote of coach and participant.

Table 3. Coaching principle, the learning opportunity, and the supportive quote of coach and participant.

Activity	Coaching Principle	Learning Opportunity	Supportive Quote
Participants were expected to prepare for writing the article by identifying a topic of interest, identifying an appropriate journal as well the authors' guidelines. Relevant articles to assist in writing the introduction of the article were also obtained by the participants.	Support and encouragement through the opportunity to review experiences, discuss feelings and describe frustrations	Dialogue and reflection as to lack of confidence Purposeful action following discussion	"I don't really know which journal I want to publish in....I'm not sure how good or valuable the work is that I have"(participant) "The fact that you have produced research that can compare to other studies and you are able to highlight the uniqueness of your findings is evidence that your work is worth sharing" (coach)
Participants were expected to write different sections	Fine tune skills or strategies through feedback.	Identifying skills needed Implementing strategies provided	"I have my masters thesis but writing an article is different. One needs to be more to the point without losing the important points you want to make. Just when I think I have it then there are more changes... but I realise that it has to be clear for the reader."(Participant) "It is important to realise that in an article, the word count is 2500 compared to 12000 in a thesis. Thus the ability to highlight and summarise the most important findings of your study without losing the detail is a skill that can be achieved by repeating it several times" (Coach)
Finding the time to write	Support and encouragement through the opportunity to review experiences, discuss feelings and describe frustrations To analyse practices and decision making on a conscious level	Dialogue and reflection Purposeful action Own experience	"... it is not easy to make time to write and complete this article. It is only a small section needed but finding the time..." (participant) "How important is sharing your information with others to you? Time will also influence whether the information you currently have is still relevant in an ever changing environment" (coach)
Reviewing and thus providing and receiving feedback	Fine tune skills or strategies through feedback To analyse practices and decision making on a conscious level To adapt skills that will facilitate specific outcomes To reflect on their decision making processes in order to improve knowledge	Dialogue and reflection Concepts and practices Purposeful action following discussion	"Feedback could at times be seen as criticism" (participant) "There was fear of the critical reader's feedback" (participant) " Feedback given should be seen as a way of developing and if this is the way in which it is taken then it becomes easier to give feedback. A colleague once said when giving feedback remember: "step lightly on my dreams" (coach) "The feedback process should be looked at differently ... not as constructive criticism but rather as an opportunity to reflect on your work and ways to improve it" (coach)
Submitting an article to a journal	Support and encouragement	Own experiences	"I submitted my article and that feels good. Now I'm waiting for it to get published" (participant) "That is a wonderful achievement, however, you need to be aware of the reviewer process that occurs before final acceptance and publication thus there are still a few more revisions in between before we really celebrate" (coach)
Dealing with journal reviewer feedback	Support and encouragement through the opportunity to review experiences, discuss feelings and describe frustrations To adapt skills that will facilitate specific outcomes	Purposeful action following discussion	"I'm not sure what these reviewers want.... I tried to explain things in the article already... what more do they want" (participant) "Start by focusing on the fact that you were given the opportunity to revise and that the article was not rejected. Then address the comments step by step and you will realise that the feedback truly enhances the final product." (coach)

A summary of the results suggests that the main concepts highlighted during the coaching process was support and encouragement followed by opportunities to fine-tune skills. From the start of the group, the participants needed to be encouraged and motivated in a collegial manner as they did not have confidence that their research was publishable. Continuous encouragement was needed from the start of writing an article to the process of dealing with feedback from reviewers. Giving and receiving feedback was a challenge experienced by the participants. The coaches were thus involved in an ongoing process of facilitating participants to not grow weary but focus on their goal and staying motivated to complete their article. Assistance and motivation took the form of motivating emails and personal one-on-one sessions. As part of the learning process, the opportunity to reflect and engage in dialogue with colleagues assisted the participants in making informed decisions and engaging in purposeful action following discussion.

DISCUSSION

Scholarship is more than teaching; it is the "pursuit of learning and understanding through research and writing."²⁰ These authors assert that "not publishing your thesis impacts on your career as an academic." In addition, they also emphasised that writing is an art and you need to develop the skill that would best express or share your information. Peer coaching in this study has been used as a technique to assist the development of novice authors in the process of writing for publication. As highlighted by previous authors,²¹ peer coaching builds on prior knowledge and skill and incorporated the process of reflection and feedback. The process engaged in by this group clearly highlights the principles of peer coaching and primarily highlights the role of the coach as offering support and encouragement. Coaching was used to help the individual to reach their goal by facilitating the learning process. Therefore, the key aspects that should be included in the coaching process include enhancing learning, facilitation, tutoring, instruction, development of skills, and improving performance. In addition, coaching is usually goal and solution focused.²²

The peer coaching process promoted reflection by the participants and allowed them to highlight their challenges, thus creating a self-awareness that is needed for reflection. In addition, the process of engaging in dialogue and the provision of feedback allowed the participants to make informed decisions about their progress and thus assisted in promoting self-confidence in the group. During the learning process, the participants were allowed to identify their own needs and shortcomings and thus develop their own practices needed to improve their development. The weekly dialogue among the participants allowed thoughts and concerns to be brought into the open, thus allowing discussion and the opportunity for participants to restructure knowledge and apply it to their own situation. This process of "reflection in action" and "reflection about action," lead to deeper learning.²³

The process of giving and receiving feedback was one in which lots of lessons were learned relating to academic and personal skills. The coaches in the current study found that participants were anxious at times when receiving feedback. This is similar to the findings in other studies where it was reported that not all writers were comfortable with receiving criticism from fellow professionals.²⁴ However, it is a skill or experience that needs to be positively developed, as very few articles are submitted and accepted during the first round of submission. Critical feedback and the use of a critical reader can have a significant impact on publication output and assist in the formation of a scholarly identity.²⁵ However, novice authors have the tendency to focus on their fears of being judged by others and their personal inadequacies and thus need guidance through this process. Coaches had to remind novice authors that even experienced authors have to revise their articles and some even experience rejection. Novice authors were also reminded that outright rejection had not occurred -- only the opportunity to revise and resubmit. Advice and examples of letters to editors had to be provided in order to ensure that authors addressed the reviewer's comments adequately.

CONCLUSION

Publications in the academic arena tend to be a challenge to novice authors, and thus attempts to overcome this needs to be considered. Currently in higher education, publications are a measure of both individual and institutional successes. However, despite this drive for publications, academic publication output is relatively low in South Africa with 0.4 papers per researcher per year.²⁶ As academic departments and institutions, it is important to realise that the expectation of publishing articles is far different from the reality of actually publishing or writing an article. The various stages an individual goes through when writing an article and the emotions experienced during these stages can contribute to the successful output of the individual. Coaching as a form of mentoring has been found to facilitate the writing process. The current study highlights the need to keep the novice author motivated throughout the entire writing process. Senior academics in departments can fulfill the role of coaches in a department in order to encourage and motivate junior staff to complete tasks such as writing articles for publication. At the time of submission of this article, all of the nine participants submitted at least one article to a peer reviewed journal. In addition 45% of the participants had an article published during the year following the intervention. This study thus supports the findings of previous studies which highlighted that peer coaching is a valuable tool for staff development strategies.^{21,27}

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The results of this study are limited due to the small number of participants, but this is common in qualitative research. The results are thus not meant to be generalizable; however, it is hoped that they shed further light on the process of writing for publication and how peer-coaching can be used as a staff development strategy.

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