RESEARCH ARTICLE

Triadic partnerships: Evaluation of a group mentorship scheme

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ABSTRACT

We synthesised views and experiences of three teams (student mentees, alumni mentors, and staff) in our pilot mentorship scheme within a distance learning MSc, evaluated the scheme, and developed a conceptual model of "triadic partnerships." Thematic analysis of our qualitative data revealed a strong consensus across all teams. The triadic partnerships were reported to help reduce the feeling of "distance" in distance learning. Through developing triadic partnerships, our mentorship scheme provided added value beyond that offered previously by staff alone: credible and relatable authenticity within supportive mentoring by alumni. Since the scheme's launch, student engagement has increased, with high levels of reported satisfaction and positive feedback and greater confidence among all teams. Our research connects the framework developed by Healey et al. (2014, 2016) to the literature on mentoring, offering a conceptual model on triadic partnerships. We encourage readers to consider the different relationships within multidimensional student partnerships in their own contexts.

KEYWORDS

students as partners, triadic partnerships, alumni, mentorship, distance learning

The Distance Learning (DL) Public Health MSc at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) has nearly 1,200 students from 119 countries. Around a third of completing students register for the optional project module, usually in their final year, run by staff known as project module organisers (PMOs). This is often the first time that students have undertaken independent research, which can be an isolating experience within a DL programme.

In response to student requests, we developed and launched a mentorship scheme. The scheme operates within a staff-monitored online environment, in which a group of alumni-mentor volunteers support the new cohort of students to enhance students' learning experience by developing partnerships. The aim of this associated research project was to evaluate this pilot group mentorship scheme and offer reflections for others involved in similar partnerships.

BACKGROUND

Mentoring is often assumed to be a one-to-one activity, but issues can arise with personality clashes in mentor-mentee matching (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Group mentorship (with peer-group, one-to-many, many-to-one, or many-to-many models) offers a less problematic alternative in this regard (Huizing, 2012). The benefits of the peer-group model relate to personal and professional growth, but this can be limited by the fluidity of the mentor role being shared among all the peers (Huizing, 2012). The many-to-many model overcomes this limitation while maintaining the benefits of the peer-group model (Huizing, 2012).

We took a Students-as-Partners (SaP) approach within our many-to-many group mentoring model that reflected the conceptual framework for teaching and learning of Healey et al. (2014, 2016). In this way, we began the formation of a partnership learning community, focusing on the enhancement of learning and teaching through the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Collaboration leads to an improved learning environment and student engagement by respecting the values of trust, responsibility, and empowerment (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016). Furthermore, we were guided by the three principles of "respect, reciprocity, and responsibility" noted by Cook-Sather et al. (2014), as well as Matthews (2017)'s five propositions: "(i) Foster inclusive partnerships, (ii) Nurture power-sharing relationships through dialogue and reflection, (iii) Accept partnership as a process with uncertain outcomes, (iv) Engage in ethical partnerships, and (v) Enact partnership for transformation" (page 2).

To our knowledge, the terminology of "triadic partnerships," found in school and medical/therapeutic models (De Civita & Dobkin, 2004; Deveaux, 1997), has yet to appear in the SaP literature. This project aimed to synthesise the views and experiences of three teams connected by three different partnerships (student mentees, alumni mentors, and staff PMOs), to evaluate our pilot mentorship scheme and to develop a conceptual model of triadic partnerships within SaP. We hope this will add to the sparse literature on SaP for advancing SoTL (Healey et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2016) and transfer the concept/terminology of triadic partnerships into the SaP literature.

METHODS

Recruitment and training of participants

Students (n=49) who successfully completed the LSHTM Public Health MSc project module in 2016–17 were approached, and eight alumni volunteered (subsequently referred to as "mentors"). Seventy-three new students enrolled onto the project module in 2018–19, and all were approached to join the scheme as mentees, with 10 volunteering (subsequently referred to as "mentees"). Although these formally recruited mentees provided feedback for this research, the mentors provided support to the whole student cohort. Mentors were trained on role expectations and boundaries (included in this training was the guidance to

share experiences and pose questions rather than give advice) by the PMO/principal investigator (PI) via a one-hour webinar, with ongoing support provided by the PMOs afterwards.

Support offered by mentors to students

Interactions between mentors and mentees and other students occurred throughout the academic year 2018–19 via LSHTM's online communication platform (Moodle). These consisted of written posts on the discussion forum and live sessions via virtual classroom video/web conferencing software (Collaborate). All interactions were supported and supervised by the PMOs.

Ethics

The project was approved by the LSHTM Ethics Committee (ref: 14623). Our research follows the British Educational Research Association guidelines and code of conduct for educational research (2011).

As is typical of the participatory action research paradigm we followed (Durham University and Lune Rivers Trust, 2011; Elliot, 1991), the research participants (alumni mentors and student mentees) were invited to take on the role of student partners, and were involved in decision-making about ethics application amendments as the research unfolded.

Data collection

The datasets collected are summarised below:

I. Three end-of-pilot focus group discussions (FGDs): one for mentee feedback, one for mentor feedback, and one for PMO discussion. FGD questions were also emailed in advance. The PMO/PI transcribed all FGDs and included the responses to FGD questions received via email.
II. Other interactions via email and Moodle posts throughout the academic year 2018–19.
III. Recordings of five 1-hour Collaborate sessions spread throughout the academic year 2018–19 with mentors responding to questions from mentees/students. Any mentee/mentor feedback about the mentorship scheme was fully transcribed by mentors.
IV. An annual online student satisfaction survey, sent to mentees and other students after they had submitted their project reports for assessment.
V. Data on numbers of discussion forum posts and participants in / views of Collaborate sessions.

Data analysis

The PMO/PI analysed the quantitative data (datasets IV and V) using descriptive statistics (frequencies) in Excel.

Across the various qualitative datasets (I, II, and III), seven student partners (four mentees and three mentors) undertook thematic content analysis by applying an inductive approach to obtain subjective information about mentors' and mentees' opinions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014; Green & Thorogood, 2014).

To reduce bias, mentors analysed mentee data and vice versa, with each analyst working independently initially. A mentee (who had not participated in the mentee FGD) also analysed all three FGDs to mitigate possible recruitment bias while exploring convergence and divergence of opinions across the different stakeholders of mentees, mentors, and PMOs.

Following consistency checks and reconciliation, the team of student partners and PMOs discussed a combined set of emerging themes.

FINDINGS

A summary of the numbers of research participants in each team and the amount of data they generated in the main datasets is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Research participants and volume of their contributions for key datasets

	Number
Enrolled students	73
Mentees	11
Mentors	8
PMOs	3
Dataset (I)	
Mentees in Mentee FGD	4
Mentees responding via email to FGD questions	2
PMOs in Mentee FGD	3
Mentors in Mentor FGD	2
Mentors responding via email to FGD questions	1
PMOs in Mentor FGD	3
PMOs in PMO FGD	3
Dataset (II)	
Mentees who provided feedback	10
Emails/posts from mentees	70
Mentors who provided feedback	7
Emails/posts from mentors	54
Emails/posts from PMO/PI	98
Dataset (IV)	
Students completing satisfaction survey	27

Quantitative analysis

While there was a similar number of students across the 2017–18 and 2018–19 cohorts (75 vs. 73, respectively), Moodle activity increased in 2018–19, including more student-to-student peer support, and initial Collaborate sessions were earlier and more participatory than in previous years. The PMO-mentor partnership meant PMOs needed to

provide fewer responses on discussion forums due to mentors' prompt and comprehensive responses to student queries.

Twenty-seven of the 73 students completed the satisfaction survey at the end of the academic year 2018–19, with 85% reporting that they were satisfied with "information and support from alumni mentors" and none reporting being dissatisfied. Eight students positively mentioned alumni mentors in their list of "up to three things that you felt really worked well in this Module," whereas only one student listed the mentorship program in their list of "up to three suggestions for change which you feel would improve the project report experience" (this participant suggested matching mentees to mentors).

Qualitative analysis

The main qualitative findings are synthesised below across datasets I, II, and III, organised around three broad themes.

Theme 1: Added value

Mentees felt that the mentor-mentee partnership provided them with mentors they could "identify with" and who supported them "emotionally" by reassuring them about "doubts, challenges, and successes" (Mentee E, FGD-email) and by helping them feel "less anxious" (Mentee F, email). Another said that mentors "can often relate to what I was doing better than my supervisor" (Mentee J, Collaborate), and yet another explained, "I think sometimes things stick in your head if they are a story or someone's experience rather than a generic set of instructions" (Mentee D, email). Mentors from different backgrounds brought "different opinions and different approaches" (Mentee G, email).

The promptness and relevance of mentors' responses, including practical tips, was appreciated by many mentees. Other benefits included confidence building, moral support, and "credibility" (Mentee F, email) through the mentors' "empathetic" (Mentee G, email) and "enthusiastic" tone (Mentee E, email).

The PMOs also expressed benefiting from the mentors' presence, observing the "irreplaceable" (PMO D, mentor FGD) value added to the mentees' experience. The mentors have "gone through the journey like the students" (PMO D, mentor FGD), have more "informality" and "authenticity" (PMO A, mentor FGD), and "connect with the students immediately" in that they "really get it" (PMO A, FGD). PMOs also valued mentors "because of the ambiguities that we [PMOs] don't see when we write to them [students] but a student [alumni] might see" (PMO B, PMO FGD). In these ways, the complementarity of what PMOs and mentors offer students led to a strong PMO-mentor partnership in supporting students.

Mentors appreciated staying linked to LSHTM (Mentor F, FGD-email) and "connected to the academic world [and] research world" (Mentor H, email). The knowledge and skills gained helped increase mentors' confidence. They also derived satisfaction from the mentor-mentee partnership through receiving positive feedback from students, saying "I feel really happy to hear that it was helpful to people because that was the number one reason that I signed up" (Mentor C, Collaborate).

Theme 2: Connections and relationships

The mentorship scheme was said to have "created a virtual bonding environment" (Mentor D, FGD). The partnership between mentors and PMOs developed before the

partnership between PMOs and mentees as the mentors were recruited and trained prior to launching the scheme. Even early on, the relationship between mentors and PMOs felt more like a partnership than the traditional hierarchal relationship. Mentor D and PMO B both mentioned the "encouragement" of the other as a valued support. The PMO/PI's initial concerns around asking too much of alumni volunteers were unfounded as mentors offered more than the PMO/PI had asked, resulting in an alumni-led radical expansion of the mentorship scheme plan. Mentees also commented on the "cohesion" and "good collaboration" between PMOs and mentors (Mentor F, FGD-email).

Theme 3: Sustainability and transferability

The recommendations from mentees were focused on improving the scheme itself, its sustainability and transferability, and enhancing student experience. One mentee remarked that "I guess many other modules could benefit from a similar scheme" (Mentee G, email).

One of the main challenges for mentors was a lack of time to commit to the scheme due to their own work, travel, and personal commitments, making it "difficult to sustain a continuous level of involvement" (Mentor F, FGD-email). A shorter commitment period was discussed but it was decided the appreciated benefit of building relationships between partners/teams would then be lost.

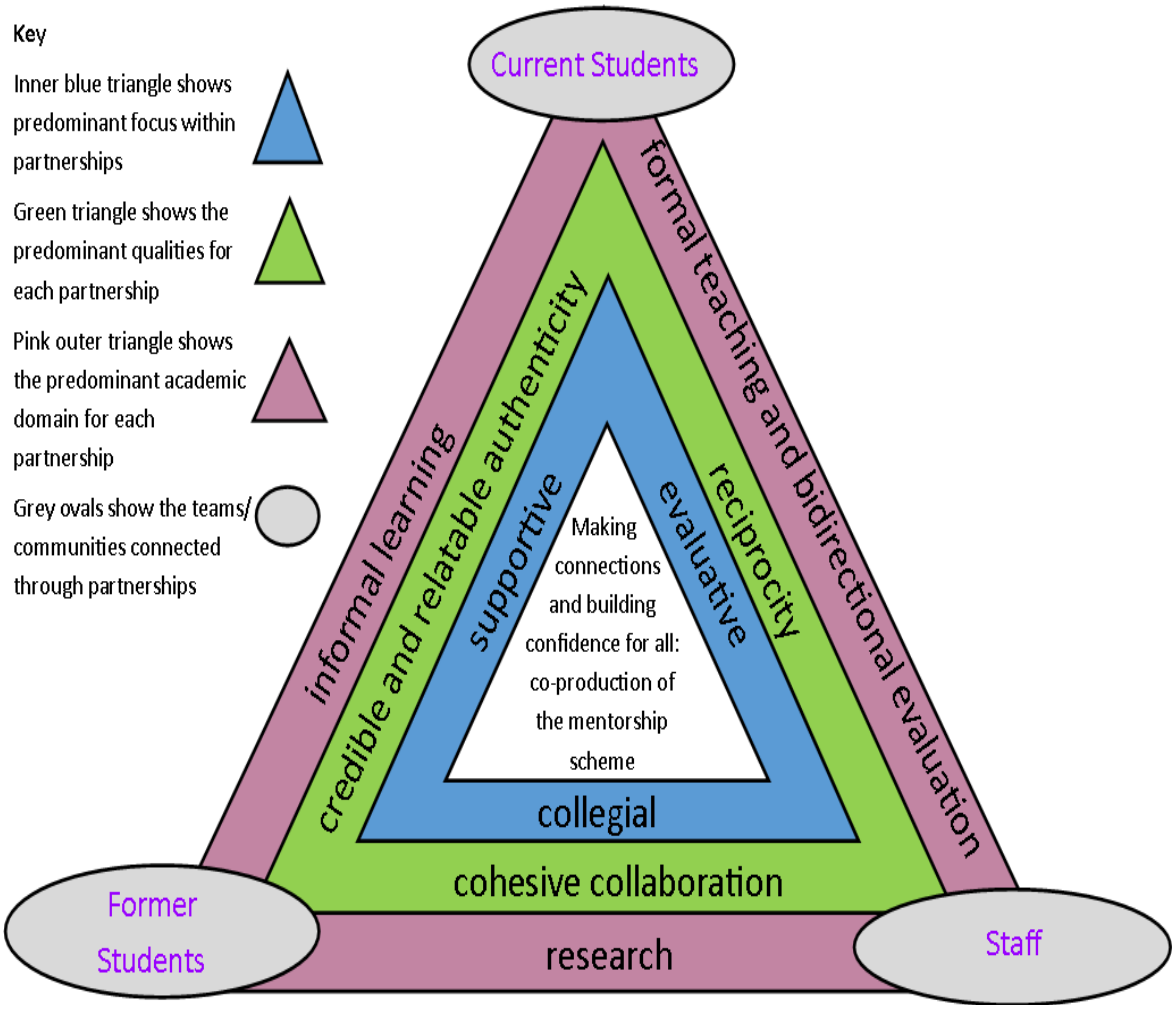
Following debate, all parties agreed that the group mentorship model delivered within the "transparent" (Mentor D, email) and PMO-monitored discussion forums and virtual classroom video/web conferencing sessions was the most appropriate for the broadest/fairest reach of students and the most sustainable.

Conceptual framework and reflections on this research project

We used the findings, further reflections on our experience in co-producing this research and co-authoring this paper (see below), and the terminology used in the SaP framework of Healey et al. (2016) to develop a conceptual framework for capturing multidimensional partnerships (see Figure 1).

We observed that the evaluative teacher-student partnership was bidirectional, with the presence of traditional hierarchy but also the inverse as students were evaluating the mentorship scheme by feeding back to the PMO. Movement between the different teams (from corner to corner in Figure 1) as the student mentees graduated to become alumni while remaining involved in this partnership-learning community is implicit. Our triadic partnerships resulted in a contribution to change by all parties (teams), as emphasised by Healey et al. (2016) . Power dynamics shifted over time, "tipping the scales of power" (Matthews, 2017) from teacher-student to more mutual learning and dependencies. For example, the PMO/PI was dependent on, and learnt from, the student partners who had stronger backgrounds in qualitative research.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework: Triadic partnerships in the enhancement of learning and teaching through SoTL



DISCUSSION

Research in context: Reflections on our triadic partnerships positioned within the broader SaP and mentorship literature

Drawing on the framework developed by Healey et al. (2014, 2016), we contribute to the limited prior literature on SaP for advancing SoTL since current and former students were not solely research participants but actively engaged in the research too: they became change agents in the co-production of the mentorship scheme and this paper. We also illustrate, in our own conceptual model, how the concept of "triadic partnerships" (De Civita & Dobkin, 2004; Deveaux, 1997) can be transferred into the SaP literature.

Our finding, that the triadic interaction helped both student-mentees and alumni-mentors to build confidence and connectivity/community, is aligned with research in the mentorship literature (Kaur & Noman, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Looking at the three principles of self-determination theory (autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Kaur & Noman, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000)), relatedness was particularly emphasised by our mentees since mentors were seen to relate better to the situation of mentees than staff, which led to a meaningful interaction (Kaur & Noman, 2020) that helped maintain students' motivation. Moreover, as Cook-Sather and Abbott (2016) highlight, we too found that the SaP process involves empowering transformations for all involved to "become more informed (by multiple perspectives) [and] more confident" (page 7).

Finally, we were struck by the direct or indirect overlap between the circle of values in Healey et al. (2016)'s SaP framework—from the Higher Education (HE) Academy's (2015) *Framework for Student Engagement Through Partnership*, which lays out nine scholarly informed values—and some of the key qualities of a mentor described by Terrion and Leonard (2007). We hereby draw a connection between the SaP and the mentorship literature. For example, the following are features in both: honesty, trustworthiness, responsibility, and reciprocity. In fact, the first three of these terms are somewhat synonymous with the phrase "credible and relatable authenticity" in our conceptual framework (which also includes reciprocity). Additionally, the mentor qualities of supportiveness, collegiality, connectedness, and collaboration are present in our conceptual framework, while those of ability and willingness to commit time, experience, empathy, and enthusiasm were drawn out in our own findings (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Harrington et al. (2016) touch on these parallels too by commenting that "when done well, mentoring can aid students in building communities of practice" (page 116), which we propose have much in common with Healey et al. (2016)'s partnership learning communities.

Strengths and limitations

Although the aim of our primary research to elicit views and experiences of mentors and mentees was met, we had difficulties in obtaining representative feedback from across the full cohort of students (beyond mentees), largely due to the low response rate to the end-of-year student satisfaction survey. Findings from mentors and mentees themselves may not be representative of other students and alumni since they were recruited as volunteers and so may have been more engaged in the mentorship scheme or project module than others.

The written feedback data from emails and Moodle posts were a richer data source than the FGDs because they were continuous throughout the year and represented the

evolving experience of the scheme and partnership formation, and also contained views of a broader range of mentees and mentors beyond those participating in the FGDs. The FGDs were more summaries of what was said in the emails, although they did allow for open discussion and reflection from a whole-project perspective at the end. The main added value of the mentor FGD beyond the emails and posts was the perspective of PMOs, which was also included in the PMO FGD.

Although the authors were involved in the development and implementation of the scheme and were research participants themselves, we allocated mentors to analyse mentee data and vice versa to reduce potential bias.

A key strength was the number of analysts involved, reflected in the authorship list, spanning a wide range of experiences and views. The numerous different datasets enabled triangulation of the data and collectively provided different perspectives, which helped reduce bias.

The scheme has been sustained over time (a fourth cohort of mentors are supporting students 2021–22) and transferred to a new team of PMOs (2019–20). The training resources for mentors are available as transferable outputs for use and adaptation elsewhere (Foss 2019; Foss et al., 2019).

With increased demand for virtual education, particularly over the COVID-19 pandemic, our group mentorship model offers a "constructive response to (inter)national policy drivers . . . for the transformation of HE fit for a contemporary world" (Healey et al., 2016).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the development of triadic partnerships, our mentorship scheme provides something additional to what was offered previously by staff alone: credible and relatable authenticity within the supportive mentoring offered by alumni. Since the launch of the scheme, we have observed increased student engagement, high levels of reported satisfaction and positive feedback, and increased confidence among all parties. A staff-supported model with a group of alumni mentoring students is shown here to be sustainable (across time) and transferable (to different staff).

Drawing on the framework developed by Healey et al. (2014, 2016), our research contributes to the sparse prior literature on SaP for advancing SoTL by connecting the literature on mentoring with that on SaP and offering a conceptual model on triadic partnerships. We encourage readers to consider the different relationships within multidimensional student partnerships in their own contexts and undertake further research to explore the transferability of our conceptual framework to a wider range of triadic partnerships and higher dimension partnerships. Such efforts might be well integrated within the connected curriculum framework proposed by Fung (2017).

The project was approved by the LSHTM Ethics Committee (ref: 14623).

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