Peer Mentoring and Identity Formation in Higher Education:

An Autoethnographic Study

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study concerns a Peer Mentor's identity development through the experience of peer mentoring. It aims to expand our understanding beyond instrumental notions of peer mentoring within the current higher education literature. It draws from my 10 years' involvement in a peer mentoring programme at a large New Zealand university, first as a Peer Mentor and now as a Peer Mentor supervisor. This autoethnography explores the peer mentoring programme through looking inward at myself and understanding how the programme culture became embedded in me and manifested in my practices. The primary research method involved writing a series of seven letters to my best friend about my professional practice and setting out my reflections on my work as a Peer Mentor supervisor. An analysis of the letters arrived at four themes, which are *Seeing myself in the Peer Mentors, A 'big sister' becoming a Peer Mentor, Peer mentoring as part of a Peer Mentor's development journey, Feelings and intuition vs. rules and structures*. These findings suggest that a Peer Mentor tends to draw heavily on herself and her embodied experiences when working with others. Her mentoring of the Other^ is informed by her whole being, including who she is as a person, how she sees and understands her role as a Peer Mentor, as well as what kind of person she wants to be, in relation to the Other and herself. These findings bring to light three characteristics integral to a Peer Mentor: courage, care and integrity. Moreover, peer mentoring is ultimately an experience of subjectification. This study concludes that peer mentoring affords a Peer Mentor not only the experience to contribute to another student's journey of higher education, but also an intersubjective space for her to come to understand her own uniqueness. In her response to the otherness of the Other, the Peer Mentor recognises her irreplaceable uniqueness. When she responds with her unique voice, her subject comes into presence.

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^ The capitalised 'Other' is used to capture the unique other or an absolute relation to the other person, which Levinas depicted in his book, *Totality and Infinity*; the 'other' with a lowercase is used to indicate otherness, in terms of one's characteristics. The usage is not entirely consistent.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Date: 14.12.2020

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Peer mentoring in higher education has long been misunderstood as only a support mechanism where the more experienced students are given opportunities to help other students who are struggling within the higher education context (Collings et al., 2016; Keup, 2016; Peregrina-Kretz et al., 2018; Wright & Angelini, 2012). This very transactional understanding of peer mentoring has been evidenced in how Peer Mentor's experiences are discussed in the literature. For instance, the Peer Mentors may benefit from peer mentoring as they get to practice their people skills, consolidate their academic content knowledge and gain a sense of purpose (Keup, 2016). Even those who attempt to understand peer mentoring as a transformative experience for the Peer Mentors (Bunting & Williams, 2017; Wright & Angelini, 2012), the level of insights which they were able to provide through empirical research was limited to the Peer Mentors' reported adaptability and competence, such as, enhanced critical thinking and analytical skills, self-awareness and ability to critically reflect on their knowledge and skills. The rather technical language used to discuss peer mentoring tends to undermine the profoundness of the whole peer mentoring experience.

I am currently working as a professional staff member managing a peer mentoring programme at a large university in New Zealand. I have 10 years of experience participating in this programme, first as a Peer Mentor, then a programme administrator and now a Peer Mentor supervisor and the only programme lead. I am privileged in a sense that I not only experienced being transformed by the programme myself when I was a Peer Mentor, but I also get to witness the transformation of the Peer Mentors through my work as their supervisor. My understanding of peer mentoring is far more complex than the transactional view. However, from my experience working with other parts of the university, as well as my exploration of the current literature on peer mentoring of university students, I found very limited attention given to the care and development of the Peer Mentors. Yet, that is the primary focus of our programme.

As a Peer Mentor supervisor, my work is to focus on the Peer Mentors' holistic wellbeing, as well as supporting them in picking up the skills and strategies to respond to the ups and downs being brought to them by the complexity of their role, their interactions with others, as well as their aspirations for future. Peer Mentors are current university students, who are managing their own studies and challenges in life while working closely with their fellow students to attend to theirs. Moreover, being a student who is also a Peer Mentor (a university employee) brings complex dynamics between them and their fellow students, the course that they are studying and their lecturers and academic schools, and new insights into all these aspects of their studies. Often, how a Peer Mentor navigates their own journey is reflected in how they are guiding their students on a similar journey. Therefore, our programme runs compulsory supervision aiming to attend to the whole being of the Peer Mentors acknowledging who they are and who they will become, both for themselves and those they love and care for. So, from a different perspective, peer mentoring could be viewed as part of a Peer Mentor's overall experience of higher education, it provides an avenue for them to consolidate their experiences and knowledge of going through university (acquiring knowledge and life skills), as well as to practice being a professional functioning as part of a large institution, working and supporting other's success (applying knowledge and skills).

In contributing to our understanding of peer mentoring, I have undertaken an autoethnographic study to add nuances to the topic by exploring my own experiences as a past Peer Mentor through my current lens as a Peer Mentor supervisor. I chose to study myself because I live and speak the programme's culture and I recognise myself as an educational connoisseur (Barone & Eisner, 2006). This means that I have developed a complex and subtle understanding of peer mentoring from my intense involvement in the programme which enables me to present and critique the insights in meaningful and significant ways (Barone & Eisner, 2006). I aim to explore what it means to be a Peer Mentor and how my experience may contribute to the development of a Peer Mentor's sense of self or their identity. By a Peer Mentor's identity, I mean a specific way of thinking and speaking, which comes from within rather than being a mask which one puts on in order to perform. I chose identity as a concept to focus on because I want to broaden the instrumental understanding of peer mentoring to a process which is shaping the Peer Mentor's

being and becoming. With this study, I argue the critical importance of the Peer Mentor's development as an integral component of peer mentoring rather than a taken for granted 'by-product' of the process.

How does the past experience of participating in a peer mentoring programme shape the current identity of the peer mentor supervisor?

- *Which aspects of the peer mentoring programme have the most influence on the supervisor's current work with the Peer Mentors?*
- *How does peer mentoring experience create, reinforce or modify the supervisor's identity?*
- *How does the identity as a past Peer Mentor influence the supervisor's current professional practice?*

The term 'Peer Mentor supervisor' will be shortened to 'supervisor' for the rest of this dissertation.

In the coming chapters, I explore my research topic in the following order. First, I undertake a literature review about peer mentoring and identity formation within the domain of higher education. Then I discuss the conceptual framework for this study, which includes autoethnography, postmodernist thinking and the ethical considerations informing the research design and process. Next, I introduce letter-writing as a method of inquiry which is accompanied by a reflexive account of the letter-writing process. Following that, I present the findings elicited from the seven letters I wrote about my professional practices for the purpose of this study, which are then synthesised into four main themes centralised around the experiences illustrating my current identity and practices as a supervisor. Then the discussion chapter is intended to make sense of the findings and provide a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Peer Mentor and how that experience contributes to a Peer Mentor's understanding of who they are. The last chapter concludes this study with a letter I wrote to demonstrate the development in my thinking through this research journey. All the seven letters I created and used as research data for this study are attached in full as appendices at the end.

Literature Review

Introduction

The following chapter locates this study in the domain of higher education because this is where the current study of peer mentoring is situated. The Peer Mentor which I am exploring in this study is first and foremost a current university student. Her experience of peer mentoring tends to be an integral part of her higher education journey. Therefore, the first section of this chapter examines the current higher education environment and its implications for the students. The second section explores the factors influencing one's identity formation through higher education. The last section examines the existing literature on peer mentoring and highlights how a university's peer mentoring programme could be further explored. Overall, the coming discussion is built on the understanding of higher education as a journey of becoming and peer mentoring as an avenue within higher education in which the Peer Mentor's sense of self or identity could be experimented with and developed.

Higher Education

The focus of the following discussion is on how university students may engage with higher education within the given environment. Narrow educational policies that derived from market economic models play a critical role in creating the "normative expectations about appropriate process, outcomes and dispositions" (Ecclestone et al., 2010, p. 2) which often subsequently defines the success and failure of higher education (Murphy & Brown, 2012; Sandberg, 2016; Tomlinson, 2013). In this neoliberal environment, the current economisation of education "tend(s) to frame educational goals in a strongly technicist way that is accompanied by a range of terms such as 'skills', 'employability' and 'outcomes'" (Tomlinson, 2013. p. 155). The term 'employability' is particularly problematic because it is understood as requiring students to take on certain imposed values, for instance, to engage as learners in a particular manner to suit the employment market (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017). Under this current climate, the role higher education institutions play is called into question in terms of whether they are producing "fit-for-purpose future workers" (Tomlinson, 2013, p. 174) or developing "proactive and engaged lifelong learners

who can learn independently and across multiple contexts through their life course" (Tomlinson, 2013, p. 157).

In such an environment, most students come into higher education with a limited understanding of what higher education provides; thinking that simply gaining a qualification will lead to working in their desired profession. Higher education could well be more than only a degree, but what the students expect is often influenced by how higher education is communicated to them (Murphy & Brown, 2012). For instance, the broader aim of higher education is also to develop "… global citizens who are socially responsible, empowered and engaged with the needs of the community" (Jackson, 2016, p. 935). Higher education learning is more than the acquisition of knowledge and becoming employable, but also learning to become a citizen who is valuable to society and who holds a sense of responsibility for themselves when facing and managing challenges in the precarious labour market (Sandberg, 2016). Moreover, students are also learning to become more aware of those around them, for instance, their peers who are struggling together in the same journey of becoming (Peregrina-Kretz et al., 2018). The challenge is not to devalue higher education's responsibility to contribute to economic prosperity of society, but is to bring higher education's focus back on engaging with its students as critical thinking citizens whose learning is going to have an impact on how the society or the community operate (Zepke, 2018, as cited in Tight, 2019). It is also to argue for the students to learn to be caring and critical, and to have the self-confidence to make a difference.

From a university student's perspective, she needs to be able to adapt and respond to the competing demands within and outside the higher education environment on top of getting through the coursework required by her desired qualification. That means she needs to become ready and prepared for what her chosen profession demands of her, such as, enhanced self-awareness, sense of purpose, self-esteem, as well as her transferable skills (Jackson, 2016). Moreover, she needs to not only have the motivation but also the confidence to articulate and undertake the desired professional attributes (Smith et al., 2019), taking into account the fact that her perceived self-image and the professional identity she developed throughout her learnings in progressing towards the profession may well be challenged and

questioned when she becomes a graduate searching for a suitable job (Reid et al., 2019). In this case, her ability to sustain herself in the chosen professional field is determined by how strong her sense of self is. Her adaptability becomes more important because the expectations, boundaries and the understanding of a good professional keep shifting (Bauman, 2009, as cited in Trede et al., 2012).

As demonstrated above, this journey taken by a student through and from her higher education is highly complex and personal. Therefore, literature suggests higher education institutions need to provide the environment and opportunities for students to explore who they are in relation to others and their future work (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017; Jackson, 2016; Reid et al., 2019). In one example, a study of art and creative students' transitioning into the workforce, Reid et al. (2019) found that the students tend to gain a better understanding of their work through observing how their practice is impacting on other people's lives and shaping the way people in the community interact with each other. Moreover, by critically and constructively exploring ideas with others, students may learn to become critical thinkers who are also able to care for and respect the ideas of others (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017). This practice also helps to develop their confidence to stand on their own values and to challenge the common assumptions of their professional field, rather than taking things for granted and being reluctant to make changes. The current study is built on the understanding of peer mentoring as an authentic learning environment (Reid et al., 2019) in which the Peer Mentors can engage with the ideas and different values held by others, in order to experience the meanings and impacts of who they are becoming.

To support the students' higher education journey requires effort and attention at the institutional level. It also needs empowered staff members who perceive themselves as educators, whether they are academic staff members or professional staff members, such as a peer mentor supervisor (Roberts, 2018). The higher education institutions must come from the understanding that they are preparing the students to not only fit into a predetermined graduate role but also supporting their "freedom to become in multiple ways" (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017, p. 1328). That involves acknowledging each individual student's unique background and personal attributes and how that is influencing their current perception of themselves, their motivation

to overcome obstacles and their support seeking behaviours in their pursuit of higher education (Cotton et al., 2017; Ecclestone, 2010; Thiele et al., 2017). It also requires an educator to become attuned to students' current concerns and needs, and to be able to respond accordingly (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017). For instance, when students experience a specific challenging task in their learning, it could be a result of relational and structural factors rather than the student's ability to learn (Ecclestone, 2010). Then the educator's role is to be attuned to how those factors are playing in the students' journey and to focus resources on supporting the students to navigate those factors rather than viewing the challenges as a result of the 'deficit' in the personal characteristics of the students (Murphy & Brown, 2012). This requires educators to consider themselves to be in a caring role with their students and to be able to openly discuss with them the feeling of uncertainty derived from learning (Clouder, 2005). Within the context of peer mentoring, a supervisor's role is to act on behalf of the institution to engage with the Peer Mentors in such an in-depth and impactful manner.

To conclude, "while education will inevitably shape who people are and who they become, a crucial issue is the extent to which students are actively engaged in shaping who they are becoming, rather than merely fulfilling pre-specified requirements" (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017, p. 1328). In this case, the question is really about how higher education institutions and educators are engaging with their students to enable them with a more active and wholehearted role in their own journey of becoming. The current study perceives peer mentoring as a possible avenue for the students (Peer Mentors) to explore who they are and who they are becoming, with the facilitation and support from their educators (supervisors). Therefore, the coming sections further develop this concept by investigating identity formation and peer mentoring in the domain of higher education.

Identity Formation

The discussion of identity in higher education is often associated with the idea of transition. This is because transition is a process of change, as well as a shift from one identity to another and a process of 'being' and 'becoming' (Ecclestone et al., 2010). For instance, the transition from a student to a graduate involves the change

between two states of 'being' and may concern the student's learner identity shifting to a professional identity. Such a change process needs to be taken seriously because it requires the students to progress cognitively, emotionally and socially in order to navigate the competing demands placed upon them by the different environments (Ecclestone et al., 2010; Masika & Jones, 2016).

However, instead of focusing on transition, the current study's interests are more to do with students' identity change throughout their higher education experience. For an individual, such a process of change often involves a sense of the self being questioned and challenged as a result of the change in environment. The individual's ability to exhibit certain attitudes or strategies in response to that questioned self may be influenced by their background or previous experience (MacFarlane, 2018; Thiele et al., 2017), their personal values and aspirations (Reid et al., 2019; Yuan et al., 2019), prior opportunities made available for them to experiment with possible selves and develop towards an ideal self (Bunting & Williams, 2017; Smith et al., 2019), as well as their ability to balance the demands of different spheres of life, namely, personal, professional and private (Nyström, 2009).

Moreover, identity formation could potentially be a process of personal growth and transformation. This approach attempts to understand students' shift from one way of being to another as a result of the shift in their frames of reference, personal beliefs or values due to the need to adapt into a new environment (Bunting & Williams, 2017; Hart et al., 2017). For instance, an individual may experience her sense of self being threatened or lost due to being confronted by a new environment. In this case, personal transformation could be enabled with the facilitation of the educators to help her unpack the inner conflict and struggles (Hart et al., 2017), tap into the emotions and unconscious related to that sense of self being threatened (Muir, 2014) and come up with strategies to engage with that discomfort in empowering ways.

On one hand, studies in higher education and adult learning tend to understand identity formation as an individual assimilating themselves to the environment that they are in, for example, a learning environment or a professional setting. This perspective often draws from the situated learning and social learning theories, such

as community of practice (De Weerdt et al., 2006; Jackson, 2016; Masika & Jones, 2016). It assumes that the environment creates certain cultural norms and desirable behaviours to be observed and carried out by an individual participating in the given environment (Hart et al., 2017; Nyström, 2009). It perceives the gaining and redefining of one's identity as a result of negotiating the desirable attitudes, behaviours, skills of that environment and reconciling oneself to them (MacFarlane, 2018; Yuan et al., 2019). It is important to highlight that the researchers in this domain tend to approach identity formation as an individual's learning about their (in)adequacy based on what is expected by the environment, and 'reforming' themselves in order to 'fit in' (De Weerdt et al., 2006).

On the other hand, several researchers have also acknowledged that identities are socially constructed as a result of social interactions (Hart et al., 2017; Jensen & Jetten, 2018; MacFarlane, 2018; Masika & Jones, 2016; Nyström, 2009; Smith et al., 2019; Yuan et al, 2019). To understand identity formation as an interactive process does not necessarily separate it from the environment and its culture. It is, however, placing a specific focus on the quality and purpose of interpersonal interactions and locating one's identity formation in the intersubjective space. It is suggested that through interactions, certain aspects of an individual's identity would be empowered or subverted by the responses of her interacting partners (Thiele et al., 2017). Moreover, the response an individual receives may be influenced by the existing social and cultural norm which inhabit certain self-narrative or privilege one over another (Hart et al., 2017). The above highlights the potential influence on an individual's identity from others that she is interacting with, instead of viewing an individual as being solely responsible for her own identity formation (Jensen & Jetten, 2018). Hence, the current study explores how a Peer Mentor's identity may develop in the interactive space of peer mentoring.

Reflecting this understanding of identity, both Jensen and Jetten (2018) and West et al. (2013) drew on Axel Honneth's Theory of Recognition to understand university students' identity process. Honneth's theory suggests one's identity is built on three forms of self-relations, namely self-respect, self-esteem, and self-acceptance, which are developed respectively through three forms of interpersonal recognitions: respect, solidarity and empathy (Jensen & Jetten, 2018). Recognition, in Honneth's view, is

not mere validation or praise but a socially mediated process (Jensen & Jetten, 2018). Here, the development of one's identity tends to be a result of self-realisation. In that process an individual's capabilities and attributes are acknowledged and perceived by her interaction partners and so she becomes conscious of her own uniqueness (Jensen & Jetten, 2018; West et al., 2013).

Drawing on Honneth's theory to understand university students' identity development is an attempt to locate issues and challenges facing university students in the relationships and the context of the university (Murphy & Brown, 2012). It is to call for educators and their institutions to recognise the importance of the intersubjective space in relation to the students' sense of self. For instance, the development of one's self-respect may require educators to recognise students' rights and autonomy in what they choose to study by making them feel capable of providing and receiving knowledge (Jensen & Jetten, 2018). Self-esteem could be developed through recognising students' professional skills and knowledge being developed through their participation in the chosen course and how that could enable them to contribute in the broader community or the field of their professional practice (Jensen & Jetten, 2018; West et al., 2013). Lastly, self-acceptance may translate to students' feeling of being accepted by their lecturers or significant others, as well as feeling permitted by their peers to participate in the discussions and activities within the university context (West et al., 2013).

Building on the above discussion, the current study centres on identity formation as a process of personal transformation through intersubjective interactions. A peer mentoring programme may provide the culture, context and interpersonal relationships for a Peer Mentor to develop her sense of self.

Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring is often adopted as a form of intervention and support for students in higher education (Holt & Fifer, 2018; Keup, 2016). Commonly understood functions of peer mentoring include the support in academic and psychosocial domains, and in careers and wellbeing, provided by a senior student to a less experienced student

(Keup, 2016; Lorenzetti et al., 2019; Peregrina-Kretz et al., 2018; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Higher education institutions tend to devote resources into peer mentoring programmes to help facilitate their students' engagement, retention and transition process (Collings et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2018; Honkimäki & Tynjälä, 2018; Keup, 2016; Wright & Angelini, 2012). Hence, a growing body of research about peer mentoring has been conducted in relation to the aforementioned institutional objectives, by examining the outcome of peer mentoring programmes (Collings et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2018; Keup, 2016) and exploring the benefits, characteristics, and risks involved in peer mentoring relationships (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Dutton et al., 2018; Holt & Fifer, 2018).

Specifically, peer mentoring programmes' design and relationship outcomes have been studied to shed light on the various experiences that the participants had in those programmes (Holt & Fifer, 2018). The review of the literature identified two main areas of concerns, sometimes overlapping with each other. They are the quality of peer mentoring relationships (Collings et al., 2016; Dutton et al., 2018; Holt & Fifer, 2018; Honkimäki & Tynjälä, 2018; Keup, 2016) and the impact of peer mentoring experiences on the participants (Bunting & Williams, 2017; Terrion & Leonard, 2007; Wallin et al., 2017). These studies tend to base the idea of peer mentoring in a developmental dynamic (Dutton et al., 2018; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Wright & Angelini, 2012) which requires the mentors to serve as role-models (Collings et al., 2016; Honkimäki & Tynjälä, 2018) and take a holistic approach to understanding the learning and wellbeing of the mentees (Dutton et al., 2018; Honkimäki & Tynjälä, 2018) in order to support their academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993, as cited in Collings et al., 2016; Holt & Fifer, 2018; Peregrina-Kretz et al., 2018; Wright & Angelini, 2012). Overall, the studies related to peer mentoring reflects a focus on how the peer mentors may function to meet the institution's objective, but not enough attention was paid to the peer mentors and their personal growth.

Several studies had a focus on the learning experience and the development of the peer mentors. The findings showed that the peer mentors are developed in relation to their enhanced academic knowledge and strengthened professional and personal skills, such time management, interpersonal skills (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Keup,

2016), as well as being able to take on more sophisticated approaches to challenges (Bunting & Williams, 2017). However, peer mentoring could potentially be "a highly impactful experience" which offers "much more than knowledge acquisition or skill development" (Bunting & Williams, 2017, p. 177). For instance, the peer mentors reported higher benefits in the increased sense of connectedness with the university community gained from meaningful interactions with their peers and university staff (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Keup, 2016). Moreover, they also developed a greater sense of self-awareness through gaining purpose in supporting others' success and a broadened understanding of themselves in relation to the community and society (Wallin et al., 2017). As only a few researchers have addressed the peer mentors' perceived benefits from their peer mentoring experiences, the current study aims to investigate the impact of that experience on the peer mentors' identity or sense of self.

Identity formation relating to mentoring is understood as a multidimensional learning process (Masika & Jones, 2016) which is "based in reciprocity, and [is] formed and transformed individually and collectively through professional relationship in social contexts" (Van Lankveld et al., 2017, as cited in Simmonds & Dicks, 2018, p. 283). Hence, all the interactions within a peer mentoring programme, such as between the peer mentor, their peers and supervisors could potentially contribute to the peer mentors' sense of self being formed or redefined. There is limited research in the area of what influences the development of the peer mentors' identity or sense of self. It was identified that peer interactions tend to be based in a shared community (Bunting & Williams, 2017; Masika & Jones, 2016) where participants with different personal histories, beliefs and values engage with each other to achieve a shared goal (D. L. Clouder, 2012). The participants learn more about themselves through experimenting with different ways to engage with others (Bunting & Williams, 2017), and reconciling the difference between themselves and others while working towards the same goal, for instance, helping each other on their coursework (D. L. Clouder, 2012; Masika & Jones, 2016; Merolla et al., 2012).

The literature calls for the formal training and ongoing support of the peer mentors (Bunting & Williams, 2017; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Dutton et al., 2018; Honkimäki & Tynjälä, 2018; Keup, 2016; Wallin et al., 2017). Most studies only

suggest this as a future direction rather than providing detailed descriptions and rationales to demonstrate what an effective development framework looks like. In order for the peer mentor's development to become impactful and even transformative, three key components have been identified. Firstly, the peer mentors themselves need to be intentional and committed to engaging with the learning opportunities presented in peer mentoring (Bunting & Williams, 2017), for example, stepping up instead of avoiding challenging situations with the mentee. Secondly, it requires the programme staff to take an active role in facilitating the critical reflections of the peer mentors with purposeful guidance (Dutton et al., 2018), and by adopting a co-constructive approach in a non-judgemental environment so as to minimise the potential power dynamics (Wallin et al., 2017). Lastly, it requires the institution to recognise the value in the development of the peer mentors (Bunting & Williams, 2017), so that resources and effort are put into sustaining the programme (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Faber, 2016) and learning opportunities are facilitated by the intentional interactions between the peer mentors and other functions and participants within the institution (Peregrina-Kretz et al., 2018).

The current study also focuses on the potential impact of the supervisors on the peer mentors' development. From my personal experience, the supervisors often act as mentors to the peer mentors. They tend to have close contact with the peer mentors and often facilitate the peer mentor's reflections on their practices (Bunting & Williams, 2017; Dutton et al., 2018; Wallin et al., 2017). Moreover, as mentors, they may potentially impact on the development of those being mentored/supervised in areas including emotional, social and cognitive domains, and identity (Rhodes et al., 2006). This brings awareness to the supervisors of their ability to act as role-models and become a significant other who may contribute to the peer mentors' development of self-esteem and self-image (Cotton et al., 2017; Rhodes et al., 2006). Being people who are respected and trusted by the peer mentors, they could potentially contribute to the peer mentors' understanding of themselves and their sense of self-worth by making them feel acknowledged and accepted (Rhodes et al., 2006). However, little attention has been given to the supervisor's role and contribution in the current peer mentoring literature which this study is going to explore.

Concluding Thoughts…

The literature brings to light three key insights. First, it challenges the notion that higher education is solely about 'being employable', rather than an open-ended journey of becoming. It highlights that the institutional structures and educators are playing critical roles in determining how that journey is encountered by the students. Second, it recognises the intersubjective space as a key influential factor in one's journey of becoming and transformation. Last, it challenges the current technical understanding of peer mentoring by reimagining it as a space for the Peer Mentors to explore and develop their sense of self. The current study builds on the above and explores identity formation as a self-realisation process and a result of interpersonal relationships within the context of a university's peer mentoring programme.

This chapter not only does the groundwork for my study but helps me to reflect on my journey of becoming a supervisor. The discussions in the first section help me reflect on my ideologies and responsibilities in working in higher education – that is, to acknowledge the whole being of each individual student and take seriously my role in their journey of self-realisation. The second section on identity formation and transition shifts my thinking towards my own journey of becoming. I ask, what exactly was the magic mix of the personal efforts, environmental factors and interpersonal interactions which I experienced and which made me who I am today? As I arrive at the last section to discuss peer mentoring, I start to think that the peer mentoring programme is the context at hand for me to realise my ideologies and responsibilities. This chapter sets the foundation for me to explore how my own experiences of higher education and peer mentoring could potentially impact on university students. The next chapter explains how I have done that through drawing on the self as knowledge with the adaption of letter-writing as a method of inquiry.

Methodology and Research Design

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework and the research design of this study. First, it explains why autoethnography is chosen as the methodology, recognising the self in its cultural settings and the use of that self as knowledge to contribute to the existing literature. Second, it explains the philosophical grounding of and ethical reasoning behind the research design. Then the last section explains in detail the methods of data collection, interpretation and analysis used in this autoethnographic study. A reflexive account follows to make transparent how conducting this research contributes to a transformed understanding of myself and the way I relate to others in this research. The data used in this research came from a series of letters I wrote to my best friend, which will be presented in italics throughout the coming chapters.

Conceptual Framework

This whole study is built on the recognition that I am who I am today because I once was a Peer Mentor. I am analysing how my past experiences as a Peer Mentor are still influencing the way I supervise and the way I understand my role as a supervisor today. It is about looking at my past experience as a Peer Mentor using my current lens.

...

So yes, I have shaped and am still shaping the current culture and practices of the programme which is influencing the current Peer Mentors. But the way I supervise now and the way I shape the current programme did not happen in a vacuum, they came from the culture and practices of the programme when I was a Peer Mentor.

...

This study is about looking at my way of being now, as well as the way I look at the current Peer Mentors and the programme (presented as findings) today, to understand how they are the way they are as a result of the influence of my past experience as a Peer Mentor. So in a way, it is to acknowledge that the essence of the

programme is embedded in me over time and I'm discussing how I am living that through looking at my way of being in the present.

- An excerpt from a letter to my best friend during this study

Autoethnography and the self as knowledge

The above reflection demonstrates how my current identity is shaped by my experience of the peer mentoring programme and influencing the students [Peer Mentors] that I am working with. In this study, I want to make use of my experiences and my unique relationship to the programme to generate knowledge which only I could. This led me to autoethnography as my methodology, for its inward looking at the self and outward looking at the culture and social context (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), in order to create a more intimate and informed inquiry into the self (Berry, 2013; Parkes, 2015), as well as to understand the cultural and social forces experienced through the self (Denzin, 2014; Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008).

Many researchers have used autoethnography "to interrogate and challenge aspects of their worlds and themselves in these worlds and to work towards reshaping these worlds" (Le Roux, 2017, p. 198). This process tends to help them understand their way of being in relation to others both professionally and personally as practitioners and researchers (Bénard Calva, 2018; Preston, 2011; Tour, 2012). In order to do that, the researcher needs to look from the inside of themselves (Pennington & Brock, 2012; Wright, 2006) through "self-exploration, introspection and interpretation" (Starr, 2010, as cited in Le Roux, 2017, p. 198). This approach aligns with my research question attending to how my current identity is shaped by my past experiences and is influencing my current practices as supervisor. Instead of taking for granted my familiar self, I recognise that there are multiple layers or aspects of myself which are not yet surfaced into consciousness (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008). This greater level of self-awareness or self-knowledge is waiting to be uncovered using autoethnographic reflexivity, which will be further discussed later in this chapter (Berry, 2013).

Autoethnography is taking an individual's personal experience as insider knowledge to add a different perspective and a more nuanced understanding into existing discussions. The valuing of the researcher's personal experiences, feelings and stories highlights two critical limits of the existing literature. First, traditional research methods are often unable to access aspects of cultural life at the level of depth which insider knowledge could do (Holman Jones et al., 2013). Second, the fact that what has been presented in the published literature or perceived as the mainstream view is only one fragment of the phenomena or the participant's life (Muncey, 2010). Bringing it back to my study, autoethnography is used to bring out the complexity of the peer mentoring programme to deepen others' understanding of otherwise overlooked 'everyday' educational phenomena and widen their imagination of how things could be different (Barone & Eisner, 2006; Denzin, 2014). My experiences and position provide a layered account about the programme drawing from my experiences as a student, a Peer Mentor, a supervisor and a programme lead. The interplay and clashes of my multiple positioning and responsibilities may contribute to a holistic understanding of how a peer mentoring programme operates within the existing culture and structure of a large institution.

Furthermore, as the insider-researcher, I exercised my peer mentoring connoisseurship to comment on and critique the culture and cultural practices of the peer mentoring programme (Barone & Eisner, 2006; Holman Jones et al., 2013). A connoisseur tends to be able to disclose the qualities, meanings and significance of educational phenomena through the activities of educational critic (Barone & Eisner, 2006). As a connoisseur, I have undertaken educational criticism through four lenses; the first three are descriptive, interpretative and evaluative, and the process culminates with thematics (Barone & Eisner, 2006). For instance, I wrote about my experience of and my unique insights into peer mentoring in vivid descriptions to form a holistic picture of this particular educational phenomenon (presented in Appendix A as research data). To be interpretive, I accounted for the significance in the presented interactions and relationships within the peer mentoring programme to draw out its deeper meanings (presented in the Findings chapter as a result of data analysis and interpretation). I then evaluated how a Peer Mentor's experience of higher education could be enhanced or even transformed by her experience of peer mentoring. To take it further, I connected the being and becoming of a Peer Mentor

to how she relates herself to others and the social world, which is what Barone and Eisner (2006) described as 'thematics'. According to Holman Jones et al. (2013), the exercise of the author's self and social consciousness and the use of her story to illuminate and interrogate general cultural phenomena is what marks a piece of work as autoethnographic.

Philosophical grounding

This study is located within a postmodern paradigm of qualitative research, recognising there is no universal truth or one best way of knowing or presenting the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). The data being produced and presented in this study are not "meant to explain, predict, [or] control the outcomes of similar future events" (Barone & Eisner, 2006, p. 96). Nor is it to be assumed that there is an absolute true account of a phenomenon (Ellis et al., 2011). Instead, this study embraces the multiple forms and shapes to present multiple perspectives and angles to understand the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Here, the readers are not passive receivers (Holman Jones et al., 2013) but they "take explicit responsibility for the meanings they de/construct" (Roth, 2005, p. 12). I appreciate this way of approaching my study because it opens up possibilities for the readers to form their own meanings, which aligns with my personal philosophies (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008). For instance, I perceive my way of being with others as a researcher, an educator or a citizen of the world as creating the opportunities and space for others to grow through exploring "competing visions of the context, to become immersed in and merge with new realities to comprehend" with one's own mind (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 10).

Informed by the postmodern thinking described above, autoethnography's methodological grounding recognises that the researcher will never observe and describe from a neutral position. Her knowledge is always created intersubjectively (Roth, 2005) or dialectically (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008); it is also historically constituted (Bénard Calva, 2018; Tour, 2012) and is context-bound (Preston, 2011). This enables me to understand my study as "an interactive process shaped by [my] personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity and those of the people in the setting" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 11). Thus, being an

autoethnographer means that I acknowledge the situatedness of my interpretation and understanding, and I wish to utilise that to help me look into the student's challenge and experience through my own experience rather than as an all-knowing outsider/observer (Roth, 2005).

Delamont (2009) raised her concerns about autoethnographic studies that focused on those in power, instead of the "powerless and unvoiced" (p. 59). This view recognises the researcher's power in the research and meaning-making process. It has, however, overlooked the complexity of the researcher's identity makeup (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Holman Jones et al., 2013). For instance, I could be a researcher in a position of power because I manage the peer mentoring programme being researched. However, I am also a marginalised Chinese person looking after a team of students working as casual employees within a large institution which is filled with complex power dynamics and market-driven initiatives. This example only represents parts of my whole being and the interpretations and perceptions I am bringing into this research (Parkes, 2015; Roth, 2005). Failing to view the researcher as a whole person also means that she is prevented from recognising her own privilege and vulnerabilities and how they are playing in her research and the everyday interactions within her professional settings (Parkes, 2015). Essentially, that would ignore the potential impact my professional practice may have on the students I am interacting with and their educational experiences as part of it.

Ethics and ethical considerations

According to AUTEC (n.d.), research ethics was not required for this study. However, the nature of studying oneself requires ethical considerations broader than the risk and harm to participants required by ethics committees when doing conventional research (Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 2007). The ethics and ethical issues involving autoethnographic work tend to be "highly contextual, contingent, primarily relational" (Tullis, 2013, p. 245). Precisely, they concern the ethics of care, responsibility and empowerment (Denzin, 2014), for instance, the care and responsibilities held by the researcher for her people within the community. That is not limited to the best interests of others, but also the potential consequences of the researcher exposing herself in relation to the cultural and social life of her

community. The coming section further discusses my ethical considerations and responses throughout this autoethnographic study.

First, a feminist communitarian ethical model was used to guide the ethical decisions and practices throughout the research and its presentation (Denzin, 2014). That is, as a researcher, I acknowledge that my research experience is nurtured and shaped by the relationships I have and the cultural context within which I am studying. Enacting such a set of ethical principles meant that I respected and protected the ideas, interests and rights specific to my cultural context, for instance, my students and colleagues within the university. I needed to hold their best interests at heart, but that does not necessarily stop me from being critical in the research so as to challenge the taken for granted (Denzin, 2014). That was because this research aimed to create ongoing and open-ended dialogues (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008) between the outsiders and my community, in order to criticise the culture and systems and to call for actions (Denzin, 2014) through performing the imagined greater good (Ellis, 2007).

Further to the complexity of ethical issues involving the autoethnographic work, it is necessary to consider the best interests and wellbeing of those being mentioned in the research who are related to the researcher (Ellis, 2007; Sinding & Gray, 2008; Tullis, 2013). This is an important consideration in my study. As a researcher studying myself and my own community, I was reminded by Ellis's (2007) relational ethics that describing my own revelations and experiences would inevitably expose others' personal stories and histories. Hence, I needed to consider how I mentioned events relating to others in my stories and what effects my stories would bring to them as a result. To protect those mentioned in my stories from being identified due to their relationship with me and the interrelated nature of a community, I layered and combined different situations and individuals. For instance, I combined the characteristics of multiple students into one so nobody is identifiable (Sinding & Gray, 2008).

At the same time, I was mindful not to neglect my own wellbeing, including my emotional involvement in conducting the research. Conducting an autoethnographic study required me to relive challenging and painful experiences in order to further

inquire into my personal feelings, histories and meanings which are exposed to others for scrutiny (Sinding & Gray, 2008; Tullis, 2013). Also, as a result of that, I cannot predict what emotional baggage and political stance the readers may bring into their interpretive process. It may cause distress because my stories could trigger them to interrogate their personal philosophies and question their positioning in the world. However, in going some way to minimising harm, I remind the readers to be mindful of the insightfulness of the representation (Sinding & Gray, 2008). That is, to bear in mind that distress and emotional struggles are different from harm, because they could potentially evoke a greater sense of awareness in the readers and empower their actions.

Reflexive Research Design

Letter-writing as method

Letter-writing as a method of inquiry has been used in a few autoethnographic studies to generate a conversation with others and oneself (Heyward & Fitzpatrick, 2016; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012; Wyatt & Gale, 2013). It tends to draw on the private life events and emotional dimensions of the authors as they write to and with each other in a collaborative inquiry (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012; Wyatt & Gale, 2013). For instance, such a process helped authors to make sense of their painful and sensitive experiences from undertaking HIV/AIDS research (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012) or using Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'assemblage' in their interpretation of the world (Wyatt & Gale, 2013). In both cases, the authors unravel and complexify the meanings of those experiences through exploring them with others (Wyatt & Gale, 2013). Building on the idea of letter-writing as a meaning-making process, Heyward and Fitzpatrick (2016) used letter-writing to construct a conversation with an imagined other; in one case this was Elwyn Richardson, an educational philosopher who influenced the education and teaching career of the particular author. Here, letter-writing was also taken as a creative process in which the author drew on his partial and fragmented memories to "connect the readers to his experiences, in order to evoke an emotional intellectual response" (Heyward & Fitzpatrick, 2016, p. 699).

Letter-writing is used in my study as my way of being co-present with others to create and give new meanings to my own life (Denzin, 2014; Wyatt & Gale, 2013). In this study, I wrote seven letters to my best friend. Letter-writing is familiar to me because my best friend and I have been hand-writing letters to each other for the past eight years. Writing letters has always been my way of reflecting on the challenges in my life and settling the competing ideologies within myself. So it is a natural way for me to search for meanings. However, the letters written for this study were not shared with my best friend; she was taken as my imagined other with whom I had a history of confiding my vulnerabilities. The letters in this study were constructed from real-life events that occurred in my professional practice. The selected events were taken in fragments and created into stories I tell about myself and my work as a supervisor. These letters were written between March and June, precisely during the 11 weeks of peer mentoring in semester 1, 2020. I did not plan how many letters I would write for this study. But I set myself a parameter for selecting events to write about within the 11 weeks' time frame. Those stories that fell within the parameter had to be representative of the work I do and had to have triggered a response in me at a personal level, so I had to write about them in order to process what happened. In doing so, my letters tended to unveil my emotions, embodiments and self-consciousness (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). For me, letter-writing is rather spontaneous and fluid, and my contemplation and intuition were woven in as part of my natural process (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008).

The seven letters are then used as data and organised into themes for interpretations. There are three stages to my data analysis and interpretation process. First, as I was writing the letters, I was also interrogating and analysing myself and the events being performed (Denzin, 2014; Richardson, 2000). By reading the letters over and over, the layers within the narrative could be unpacked. The unpacking could lead to new connections being made and new challenges and deeper meanings being uncovered (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008). Second, I used theoretical thematic analysis to focus on specific aspects of the data, guided by my research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). So instead of a bottom-up approach which involves coding everything within the data and then trying to identify themes from the massive list of coding, I took a top-down approach which meant focusing only on the key themes relevant to my research question. Four themes were first identified to structure the narrative: *Seeing*

myself in the Peer Mentors; A 'big sister' becoming a Peer Mentor; Peer mentoring as part of a Peer Mentor's development journey; Feelings and intuition vs. rules and structures. Then, excerpts from the letters were selected to fit into the four themes to form a narrative of how my past experience is influencing my current practices. Lastly, the themed data was interpreted in culturally meaningful ways (Chang, 2016). That was meant to connect the data back to the programme culture and the broader higher education context. This approach links back to the core of autoethnographic studies, which is an interactive process of moving back and forth between seeing the individual in the culture and understanding the culture's influences on her (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008).

Reflexive letter-writing

Autoethnography as a form of contemporary qualitative research cannot be judged and assessed using only the traditional criteria like validity, generalisation and transferability (N. L. Holt, 2003). It is critical to understand that "rigour does not lie in the chosen method per se, but in the judicious application of the method and explaining how the process was implemented" (Le Roux, 2017, p. 203). Therefore, this section provides a true account of the reflexive thought process I went through when writing the letters for this study. It aims to serve as evidence of my intense awareness of the role and responsibilities I held in this research, as well as within the culture being studied (Le Roux, 2017).

Using letter-writing to study myself has been a very intimate and tiring process. Letter-writing itself is very close to my heart and I am readily opening myself up when writing letters. When letter-writing becomes as a method of inquiry, it involves a much more complicated process. That process reveals both how I would like to be seen by the reader and how well I am presenting myself as the reader's version of me (Berry, 2013).

For instance, I was writing letters to my best friend about my work. The letter-writing process involved decisions about picking an appropriate event to write about, selecting the part(s) of the event to form a story, portraying myself in the context and

culture of the event in a way which makes sense to my best friend, and much more. This very process involved me constantly asking questions about why I describe something in certain ways, how I understand my emotions derived from the event being described, and how can I make sure that the event being described here is giving the reader an understanding of the meaning and values of my work. This continuous self-questioning is understood by Parkes (2015) as a way of progressing ourselves. It calls on our deeper consciousness to dwell in our situated, contingent and often contradictory selves (Berry, 2013). It also creates "generative forces" (Hoppes, 2014, p. 67) which shape personal and professional responses, move the person along through time, provide alternative perspectives and shines light on new meanings which one may have never thought of before.

The fact is, however, no matter how carefully I crafted my stories, it is still up to the readers to interpret and understand my story through their own worldview and frames of reference. Scott-Hoy and Ellis (2008), therefore, reminded us that "the researcher sees parts of herself that we, the viewers, cannot; yet we see parts of her that she cannot" (p. 134). In a way, I had to accept the fact that there would not be an absolute or static truth about my stories, so instead of worrying if my story was 'correctly' understood, I decided to go ahead and embrace the multiplicity and the multiple ways of interpreting, learning and knowing. The bright side of allowing the readers to make their own meanings is to trust that by making transparent how and who I am in the presented stories and the described cultural settings, the readers are left with enough information and space to gain insights which were previously unimaginable or unavailable to them (Berry, 2013). As a researcher, autoethnography taught me "to sit comfortably with questions that have no answers and to meet ourselves with kindness and understanding, even when we are hurting, anxious, or afraid" (Hoppes, 2014, p. 70).

In conclusion, this study adopted autoethnography and a postmodern perspective for their potential to present different perspectives for understanding a university's peer mentoring programme and to broaden the reader's imagination about the breadth and depth of such programmes. Being the subject of this study, I want to draw out my insider knowledge about the programme and its cultural practices to add nuance to the existing literature. Moreover, I want to gain greater self-understanding through

the inquiry process as I recognise that my knowledge about myself and the world is formed dialogically, and is constitutive of my history and sociocultural relationships and context. The knowledge of this study is constructed from the letters I wrote to my best friend about my work and me. In the next chapter, I present the findings derived from those letters.

Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents findings from the seven letters I created which were synthesised into four themes. The first theme, *Seeing myself in the Peer Mentors*, presents findings about how, as a supervisor, I draw on my various past experience as a Peer Mentor. The second theme, *A 'big sister' becoming a Peer Mentor*, intertwines the attributes of a 'big sister' with that of a Peer Mentor. *Peer mentoring as part of a Peer Mentor's development journey* is the third theme, which contains findings around how my understanding of the peer mentoring programme's culture and philosophy influence supervision discussions. The last theme, *Feelings and intuition vs. rules and structures*, consists of a series of reflections in relation to my way of being within the confined rules and structures put in place by those I am engaging with, as well as the institution.

The seven letters are referred to by the numbers allocated below:

Letters (order by time created)	Number code
I thought we're not in high school anymore (07.03.2020)	1
The student Rainie (18.03.2020)	2
My own graduation (22.03.2020)	3
The big sister Rainie (02.04.2020)	4
It's so easy to be kind to others than to yourself (25.04.2020)	5
What is a good mentor? (25.04.2020)	6
Why writing these letters? (08.06.2020)	7

The complete version of each of the letters can be found in Appendix A and an excerpt of the first letter is presented on the following page.

Dear Vicky,

… I want to tell you something that I'm not particularly proud of.

Let me start from what happened last week.

                                    …

"I'm sorry do I look like I've been crying?" she said.

I nodded and smiled at her.

She looked into my eyes again and said,

"I thought I've pulled myself back together," Tears started to run out of her eyes, "I just never been yelled at by my lecture before. I never expected something like that to happen at uni. I mean, we're not in high school anymore …"

… it turns out, her tutorial tutor felt vulnerable because her group of friends and her are having too much chat and being disruptive in class for quite some time. The tutor decided to address the issue on that day but became emotionally distressed.

                                    …

I'm surprised that now I can write about what happened [to my student] to you in one paragraph without crying or feeling angry … those feelings I received from her reminded me of what happened between my school and me last semester. The struggles of wanting to be respected and the feeling of being belittled. But what's more important, is the reason that I didn't feel so proud to tell you, because I thought I've moved on from what happened to me but apparently not. I was so easily brought back to those emotions of mine when I saw my student being treated the same way.

… as I was writing, I had anger and tears coming out. It got too intense, so I put it down and never get to finish that letter.

… I still can't explain why it sticks in me for so long. I just remember I was shocked knowing that not everywhere in this university treats students the same way that we do… when I said that to my colleague Lily, she said, haven't we heard all about that from our students already? Yes, Lily, but now it happened to me… now I *really* know how it's like…

-    An excerpt from Letter #1

Seeing myself in the Peer Mentors

There are two aspects to *seeing myself in the Peer Mentors* which relate to the various past roles and experiences shaping my supervisory practice. For instance, I tend to draw on my own experiences to empathise with others. In doing so, I am able to see from, and shift between, multiple perspectives to interpret and understand an event and others.

In Letter #1, there is a student who applied to become a Peer Mentor who burst into tears during our meet and greet session because she had just encountered an unpleasant event with her school before she met me. As a result of my interactions with her, my past experiences were triggered by the emotions and experience I received from her. It made me realise that when I am sitting in front of a student, I am also carrying with me my experiences, my passion, as well as my sentiments and resentments from the past. As I wrote in Letter #1:

Those feelings I received from her reminded me of what happened between my school and me last semester. The struggles of wanting to be respected and the feeling of being belittled…

… it brought me to when I felt I was 'being dumped on' by my school's announcement of my [research] supervisor allocation. I was told this is what you get, you don't need to know why, you don't have a choice if you don't feel comfortable working with the supervisor that is assigned to you. Learning might be an emotional and vulnerable experience for you, but that's none of our business. This is how we run things here and most other students don't have a problem with it, why you?

… I can't remember what part of my pride kept me going. I'm glad I did carry on because I love my supervisor now and I won't know this if I didn't push through it.

My ability to empathise with my students enabled me to gain insights into their feelings and understand how a similar event might be impacting on them. It also triggered me to look into myself and evaluate my own values and the meanings and significance of that event. It is an important aspect of my current supervisory practice: because I value my own feelings and experiences, so I can do the same for my students; and because I can feel it at a personal level, so I am embodied with the importance of making the university a better place in order to prevent similar situations being repeated with other students.

Furthermore, of critical importance to the development of my supervision practice is the ability to shift between perspectives readily in response to any given situation, as I reflected in Letter #2:

> *I guess I always know that I'm constantly shifting between my roles [that is, coming from the perspective] of a student, a mentor and a supervisor. But as I became more experienced and had less trouble navigating the shifts, I started to see how my shifts are having an impact on the people I'm engaging with, especially on my students.*

I understand this as a result of my experience as a former Peer Mentor because a Peer Mentor always holds at least two roles in peer mentoring. She often draws on her experience as a student to understand the challenge facing her students. Then she shifts back to her Peer Mentor role to advise her student, so instead of telling them the answers or exactly what to do, she provides resources and strategies to guide her student to put themselves back on track.

Such a shift was demonstrated in Letter #5 when during a group supervision, two Peer Mentors' "*uneasy look on their faces*" reminded me of my own struggle in "*feeling [that it was] hard to stay motivated and easy to lose track of time*" during the Covid-19 lockdown. In that case, my Peer Mentor role jumped out first as I thought to myself "*so, how do I cheer them up?*", then "*my thinking quickly flew back to another discussion I had with another group of [peer] mentors earlier that*

week", in which, I was asking for the Peer Mentors' advice as a student because I have been finding it difficult to concentrate on my own studies. Their advice *"pointed me to think about how I perceive time in relation to being productive. It reminded me that having the time and space away from my writing is also a critically important part of the process."* Then I turned my learning as a student into something which might be helpful to the two Peer Mentors in front of me, as I was speaking from my Peer Mentor role: *"maybe your body and mind are just taking the break needed for it to be ready again … because of the sudden slow-down, we all need to re-evaluate what 'a productive day' should look like in this new environment"*, and I shared my own coping strategies and reflections to help them think for themselves, "*I've been starting a new journal since the lockdown … [which] helped me to practice making realistic goals, it also helped me to keep track of time and most importantly, it made me realised how little I can do in day"*. As illustrated here, as a supervisor, I often shift quickly between my own experiences from my different roles as a way to help me empathise, strategise and work with others.

This developed agility and ability to shift perspectives quickly also enabled me to gain a better understanding of myself through other's narratives because I often find the Peer Mentors to be a reflection of myself. I reflected on that experience in Letter #5 and described the shifts as unpredictable and sometimes scary:

> *When they [Peer Mentors] were more actively engaged in discussions [during supervisions], me as their supervisor often find myself in a place where so many ideas are bouncing between the walls around me. There are multiple mirrors being placed in random angles on the walls, catching me off guard in my students' narratives. I can never predict what and when I will see in those mirrors. I tell you, that is a very scary place to be in lol.*

A 'big sister' becoming a Peer Mentor

In Letter #4, there was an image of a 'big sister' being described in relation to my understanding of a specific aspect of my identity. The findings also indicate some

overlapping features between the images of a 'big sister' and a Peer Mentor. They are both driven by a sense of responsibility and wanting to care for others. However, as the data was peeling off each layer of the 'big sister' image, it was also showing how my understanding to the role of a Peer Mentor evolved over time. The following section explores the synergy and the evolution.

> *I realised that the 'big sister' role has always been residing in me without me knowing. I think I always wanted to be the person that can help, the person that knows things and the person that looks after others. But somehow, I didn't really like the idea of always being the 'big sister', because being the 'big sister' for me, also means, being the person that takes control, the person that makes decisions and the person tells people what to do.*

From my experience working with the Peer Mentors, I have noticed that many of them share the attributes of a 'big sister' being described above. They tend to be driven, self-motivated and can manage their own academic journey. They might be only one year in advance of their students, but they chose to step up and become a Peer Mentor because they wanted to help others and contribute to others' success. This was demonstrated in Letter #6, where Katy, the Peer Mentor, in working with Peter, [a physically impaired student], wanted to go through the assessment details beforehand, to *"list up the key points which Peter should be paying attention on in a PowerPoint. So in the actual session, that will save them some time to figure out exactly what Peter is struggling with.*"

In Letter #6, I reflected on Katy's peer mentoring approach:

> *[T]hat process of asking student questions helps the students to think on their own feet, it helps them to learn how to learn. I wonder how does Katy manage to do that with a list of bullet points of her own understanding to the question.*

It reminded me of the other side of that 'big sister', who takes control and makes decisions for others without asking about what others need or want. My reflections carried on in that letter:

> *Sometimes, it's so easy for us to fall into the trap of wanting to get through a lot of questions with our students, but forgetting how the student would take them in. Can they really get everything we went through in that session? Are they really learning it for themselves? Yes, boundaries is also very important, especially in a case like this. The awareness needed doesn't only rest in maintaining the mentoring relationship within the professional boundaries, but also how much personally, the mentor is investing themselves into their students. The mentors' enthusiasm is a double-edged sword, when their students are not doing the work or just couldn't pass the paper, the mentor might see themselves as a failure or the student may feel that they have been imposed on by their mentor.*

I was afraid that this 'big sister' Katy will stop her student from learning for themselves and she might become overly invested in this mentoring relationship without realising it herself. I hoped for her to also see another possible way of being a 'big sister', which was described in Letter #4:

> *A big sister that offers her help from a position of genuine care. She doesn't have to prove her worth from being helpful to others. She is stepping up because she's simply got the capacity to take on a bit more and she wants to share the load with others but not necessarily changes the way others do things.*

I think I could see this other possible way of being a 'big sister' when I was supervised. In Letter #3, I described three of my favourite responses from my

supervisor: "*but you're not them*" when I was reminded to focus on who I am and my own strengths; "*what do you think triggered you?*" when I was asked to reflect on and rationalise my own actions and responses to others; and "*what role do you think you played in this process?*" when I was asked to reflect on and understand how my own actions and decisions could impact on others. My supervisor helped generate a greater sense of awareness in me and my practices. I learned from my experience of being supervised that it is important to stay moderate while being driven by my own sense of responsibility and care, and not to be lost in my own ego of wanting to prove myself as helpful.

My way of understanding a Peer Mentor's role as a 'big sister' shifted from 'wanting to help others' to 'meeting others at where they are'; hence, there has been a shift of attention from meeting my own desire to meeting others'. I learned that from my experience of being trusted, respected, and supported by my supervisor, as I described in Letter#4:

> *I felt respected by her and that respect came from trust. She trusted my ability, trusted who I am and who I will become. I never felt being pushed to come up with an answer. We sometimes agreed on having some 'homework' for me to do in my own time, but the expectation is always for me to do them at my own pace.*

Reflecting on that experience, I learned that it is okay to have my own ideal, but it is to not assume that all others share the same ideal. For instance, when working with students as Peer Mentors, our job is to help the students to identify their own needs and respond to that accordingly. It is also to trust the student's ability to engage with their academic journey at their own pace, and to respect that.

Those experiences enabled me to recognise the importance of looking inwards to myself, which does not necessarily *"make me a more selfish person but rather a more considering one. Neither I have become selfless."* It is the experience of being cared for by myself and others which made me understand how to care better. It tends

to require maintaining a balance between feeling responsible to care and allowing others to recognise their own role in being cared for. That is the approach I am now taking as a supervisor and a big sister to the Peer Mentors.

Peer mentoring as part of a Peer Mentor's development journey

Analysing all the letters together made me realise that my current practice as a supervisor is influenced and underpinned by a key philosophy behind the programme. That philosophy is that the development of Peer Mentors will impact on how their students experience and benefit from peer mentoring. I learned from my past experience as a Peer Mentor that the level of care and the focus of attention which my supervisor had for me during our supervisions tended to influence the way I engaged with my students and perceived their challenges during my peer mentoring sessions. Hence, my understanding of the philosophy underpinning our programme is that the Peer Mentors are viewed as independent and capable learners, and that while we [as supervisors] could make a difference in their academic journey, so could they with their students. For instance, as I reflected upon my own supervision approach in Letter #5, I wrote that I hold the following principles in mind when facilitating the Peer Mentors' reflections during supervisions:

> *How can this discussion link back to the mentor's work, how will that impact on their interaction with their students? How will the student experience it?*

This thinking process reflects my belief that a supervisor is in an active role in developing the Peer Mentors' ability to reflect on the challenges that they are currently experiencing. This was also evidenced in Letter #5 when I was responding to two Peer Mentors' frustrations about themselves not being able to concentrate on their studies during the Covid-19 lockdown:

> *If you think about it, you all lived a very busy life before the lockdown, with uni, relationships, families and all your other commitments, then*

suddenly everything just slowed down and your system needs time to digest and respond to that. That itself is an energy-consuming process because your body was probably in shock... also because of the sudden slow-down, we all need to re-evaluate what 'a productive day' should look like in this new environment.

I then shared an example of how I have been managing myself during this time, with some of my learnings from practising that:

This process helped me to practice making realistic goals, it also helped me to keep track of time and most importantly, it made me realised how little I can do in day.

During the above discussion, I unpacked how our physical and mental bodies may respond to changes, acknowledged how challenging that process can be, then provided possible actions and strategies to help the Peer Mentors to start thinking for themselves. Moreover, I used myself as an example to normalise the struggles which they had to go through and to rationalise that as part of a fun journey of self-discovery. I had the expectation in mind that the Peer Mentors will model the same for their students in their peer mentoring sessions.

The focus on the development of the Peer Mentors was evidenced again in Letter #6, when the group of supervisors were discussing the request from Katy [a Peer Mentor] to contact her student, Peter, outside their peer mentoring session – not a usual practice – to get more information about Peter's assignment, so she could be better prepared in her session with them. The supervisors raised three main concerns:

First, there is the consistency of peer mentoring approach across the whole Peer Mentor team:

> *If Katy is doing extra prep for Peter, then does that mean all our mentors are expected to do that for their students? If they will be spending their own time preparing for their sessions, I think we should be paying them for the prep time.*

Second, there is a concern about whether Katy is mentoring her student to learn and practise the skills that they need to pass their paper, or trying to make things easier for the student but ending up spoon-feeding them:

> *what is it that Katy has to do which cannot be done with the student together in the actual session?*

Lastly, a comment about *"Katy's in her teacher's hat…"* reflected the supervisors' concern about Katy's understanding of the nature and scope of a Peer Mentor's role, which is not to teach the content of the paper.

However, instead of stopping Katy from doing what she was proposing, the supervisors' approach consisted of two principles, which are to trust her and to help her to reflect so she could gain a better understanding of her own way of mentoring and relating to her students:

First, they acknowledged Katy's good intention that *"when it comes to our very lovely students whom we just really like, of course we wanted to do extra to support them, we have to also realise that ourselves."* And they trusted that Katy was in the best position to judge the situation and identify the most appropriate approach to support Peter by stating that *"I think Katy is the person working directly with the student, so she knows the best about what the student really need and would benefit from having."*

Then, their attention was on trying to help Katy to think more about the meanings and consequences of her chosen mentoring approach. They were hoping that Katy could articulate why she chose to mentor Peter in one particular way over another:

> *That process of asking student questions helps the students to think on their own feet, it helps them to learn how to learn. I wonder how does Katy manage to do that with a list of bullet points of her own understanding to the question.*

Katy was also expected to think about whether her chosen approach is really in response to her student's impairment or it is more about her perception of who the student is and what the student needs. This was done by comparing Katy with another Peer Mentor, Danny, who was mentoring another student with the same type of physical impairment, *"Danny didn't need to ask for more time, then does that mean Danny didn't do a good enough job for his student?"* So, if Katy thinks Peter would benefit from having more attention and time due to his physical impairment, then why did Danny not think that way? There is no perfect answer to these questions, but an attempt to understand the meanings behind one's mentoring approach and how one relates to a student as a Peer Mentor.

At the end of Letter #6, I reflected on the series of discussions presented above and asked

> *if there's no right or wrong in a case like this, what should I do to support the [peer] mentor in this process and enhance their learning about their practice and themselves? ... then how much space am I allowing them to trial and error so they could find their own answers?*

I think as a supervisor, I learned to make peace with the openness and level of uncertainties which my chosen supervising approach would bring. However, *"I'd like to think that I'm prepare for everything"*.

Feelings and intuition vs. rules and structures

I refer "*the feeling of listening to my heart whispering to me*" as my intuition. Those inner voices appeared several times in the letters. They tend to be sudden thoughts or realisations appearing in my head which connect what happened in front of me with my feelings and memories. I tend to be aware of my inner voice, and I listen to and act on it in response.

For instance, this is a piece of thought which appeared when I had to make an immediate decision about whether I want to show my very personal writing to a Peer Mentor who was going to help me with creative writing in Letter #2:

> *oh, he's going to see all the personal stuff in what I wrote, my immaturity, my not-very-professional and possibly my inadequacy. I thought about that for only a moment, then I said to myself, if this is what I'm expecting my students to do when they come to see a peer mentor, then this is what I'm doing for myself.*

That moment of pause enabled me to quickly examine my personal philosophy to help inform my decision. That was my inner voice saying, if I am not vulnerable, how can I expect my students to be vulnerable?

> *Oh my god, I sound so 'forgiving' here, why I never thought about that to myself when I caught myself being lazy?*

That was a thought which appeared in my head when I was trying to remind those Peer Mentors in Letter #5, who were struggling to concentrate on their studies during the Covid-19 lockdown. I said to them that their bodies were probably in shock because of the unexpected slow-down, so they needed the time to recover and respond, and they needed to be gentle with themselves. My inner voice this time also made me reflect quickly in my head on how I relate to the Peer Mentors, for instance:

my natural position when it comes to my students is to be kind to them, to remind them that it is okay and you are still doing really really well. But when it comes to being with myself, I don't seem to be treating myself the same way.

Those inner voices started to make sense when I was discussing intuition with some Peer Mentors during a group supervision in Letter #7: "*I basically made a decision about whether or not to hire you guys in the first five minutes of your interview*". When interviewing for new Peer Mentors, my decision is usually based on the feeling of whether an unconfident and sensitive student would feel comfortable to be mentored by the interviewee in front of me.

In the same letter, I made a link between my feelings and intuition and the rules and structures:

As I manage to operate with a clearer mind, and with less rules and structurers placed on me by myself, my intuition really got awaken again and started to flourish.

Some of the structures and rules that I placed upon myself were because of the practices of being a good Peer Mentor. For example, in Letter #7, the Peer Mentors discussed with me in our group supervision how as Peer Mentors, we share the same attributes, such as being good at planning, setting our own expectations high and not wanting to let others down. If viewing all these as the rules and structures we framed around ourselves, then procrastination was the downside of it "*because we are overwhelmed from just thinking about going through everything*".

Moreover, some of those rules and structures were placed on us by the context in which we are operating, as presented in Letter #1, and the following is what I was taught by the negative experiences I had as a student:

As a student, I had to accept that my message can't be understood in the way I wanted. As a student, I had to re-adjust myself to the way that is expected of me. As a student, I learnt to suck it up because I don't have time to argue over something that was never going to be understood because I needed that time to have my coursework done on time.

Rules and structures here represent a lecturer's style and worldview, for instance, how they understand our concerns and needs, and whether those concerns and needs are viewed as legitimate in their eyes. The rules and structures also represent the way in which a course runs, for instance, the learning outcomes and tasks which we must fulfil within a certain amount of time, otherwise we would need to do the whole course all over again. For a Peer Mentor, her lecturer's style and worldview and the design and requirements of her course often determine how she engages with her learnings, which may sometimes require her to block off her feelings and intuitions in order to get through. That also is the case for her own students; hence, her ability and ways to navigate those rules and structures would become valuable insights when she is peer mentoring her students in a similar scenario.

From analysing the data, I realised that in many ways, my feelings and intuitions were flourishing within the existing rules and structures, rather than the two perspectives going against each other. My past experience as a Peer Mentor and a supervisor taught me the importance of navigating the rules and structures put in place by the university, the course, the people teaching the course and myself. Those experiences taught me to be creative when operating within the set of rules and structures, so I do not have to change who I am and my feelings can remain, but I still get to where I wanted to be. There is a metaphor in Letter #7, used by my friend from primary school when she was describing her understanding of me:

Say you're a cup of water, there's a drop of colour being dropped into you. You love that colour so much but, you know it will change

the colour of your own, so you work hard to embrace that drop of colour, in a way that you are keeping it as part of your shade rather than letting it to overtake you. That, shows your inner strength.

In this metaphor, I see the cup and the drop of colour as structures and rules. If I am the water in the cup, I am physically constrained by the cup and I need to find ways to manage that drop of colour. However, to do this is to explore how "my inner strength(s)" enable me to embrace that drop of colour and strive in the cup, and perhaps dare to dream that I can change the colour(s) in my cup and pass on my strengths to the Peer Mentors so they are also adaptable and resilient enough for the unpredictable drops of colours coming at them.

Zooming-out and looking over the findings…

The findings highlight how a Peer Mentor makes use of the self as a way to relate to others. Peer mentoring is an encounter in which a Peer Mentor brings her whole being to receive and respond to another whole being which is her student. A Peer Mentor's heavy use of and reliance on the self enables her to empathise with others and draw on embodied experiences as knowledge. Moreover, peer mentoring is an empowering process informed by a sense of responsibility to others. As evidenced in the findings, peer mentoring is often built on trust, care and support from a Peer Mentor to her student. For instance, a Peer Mentor trusts that her students are capable of knowing and doing so she does not need to hold their hands all the time. She cares for the whole being of her students which includes who they are, where they come from and where they are heading to. Lastly, a supportive approach must derive from perceiving each student as a unique being, as a Peer Mentor learns to guide her students in the journey of finding their own answers. The following chapter will discuss the above understanding of a Peer Mentor from a current supervisor's perspective, leading into a philosophical understanding of peer mentoring.

Discussion

Part A: Character virtues of a Peer Mentor

The previous chapter accounted for who I am as a supervisor in light of my past experiences as a Peer Mentor. This reflexive account helped me to realise that some of my character virtues were brought out by and nurtured through peer mentoring. I recognised that I did not only mentor with some technical skills, but from virtues that were drawn from my core (Wilson & Johnson, 2001). For instance, as a Peer Mentor, I could learn to be a good listener, but what I am hearing is often shaped by who I am and how I want to be for my student. To further explore this notion, I will discuss the three characteristics of a Peer Mentor evident from my findings: care, courage, and integrity.

Courage

A Peer Mentor needs to be able to understand, accept and manage herself. According to Wilson and Johnson (2001), accepting oneself is a courageous act because that requires the Peer Mentor to not only recognise her own shortcomings and vulnerabilities, but also to become more aware of how these shortcomings and vulnerabilities may impact on others and develop her own ability to manage them. This process of managing herself demonstrates a Peer Mentor's ability to weave her own flaws and errors as part of her whole being, as well as her potential to assist her student to do the same. In this autoethnography, I shared in a group supervision my own experience of struggling to manage myself and my studies over the Covid-19 lockdown. That was to first expose my own vulnerabilities and to welcome other Peer Mentors' opinions on the situation so I could learn from their experiences. Then I brought what I learned to share with another group of Peer Mentors as a way to help them to think for themselves and to assist their navigation through a similar frustration. In order to really expose herself to others, a Peer Mentor needs to become a fully functioning person who is "in a perpetual state of emerging and becoming… (and) is motivated by the value of facilitating self and others" (Kelly, 1962, p. 19-20, as cited in Gay, 1995). This means that a Peer Mentor accepts the fact that she is not yet finished nor will she ever be perfect. So she enjoys the process of developing herself and facilitating the development of others, as life to her means discovery.

The courage of a Peer Mentor is also reflected in the trust she places in both herself and her students. A courageous Peer Mentor trusts that she can recognise and provide the support needed by her student but, more importantly, she also trusts that her students are able to find their own answers. That is what Wilson and Johnson (2001) called the 'patient courage' which "is often required to look beyond immediate demands and devote precious time and energy to the nurture of juniors" (p. 127). For instance, this form of trust was illustrated in this autoethnography when the supervisors were discussing the Peer Mentor Katy's proposed mentoring approach. Based on their understanding of the possible consequences of Katy's proposed approach, the supervisors did not stop Katy from trialling her own way but they were more concerned about helping Katy to explain the rationales behind her actions and to be able to see and understand the possible consequences of that in relation to others or in the bigger picture (the team as a whole). In this case, the supervisors prioritised letting Katy take her time to explore and experiment rather than telling her what would be the best thing to do. Hence, a Peer Mentor's courage is in her appreciation of the impact that her perspectives and actions may have on her students, as well as being courageous enough to allow time for her students to become autonomous and self-empowered (Gay, 1995).

Care

Before a Peer Mentor can really care for her students' best interests, she needs to first recognise the role of empathy in the process of care. Empathy has been a theme constantly surfacing in this autoethnography. For instance, I was constantly empathising with others to help me understand how they feel in order for me to identify a better way to care for them. However, empathy can sometimes be so powerful that makes me see a lot of myself in other's shoes, such as when my student's unpleasant experience with her school brought me back to the sentiments and resentments I had from a similar experience in the past. That was a moment in which I took things very personally because of my ability to empathise. If I had stayed in that mind-set, I would have failed to care because my attention was on my own agenda rather than my student's best interests. On the note of empathy and one's commitment to care, Tsang (2017) reminded us that the understanding of other's pain and struggles gained from empathy is always partial and fallible. That is because

that understanding is always mediated by the communication medium used and influenced by the individual's social and cultural makeup; also, emotion itself is complex. Therefore, only being able to empathise with others is not enough to fulfil a Peer Mentor's virtue to care.

A caring Peer Mentor recognises the distinct personhood (Wilson & Johnson, 2001) of her students and cares with a genuine sense of openness towards it (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017; Noddings, 1984). Yet, it is inevitable that a Peer Mentor would empathise with her students, because the role itself is built on the similar experiences that the Peer Mentor had in the past and which she is expected to draw on when guiding her students through a similar journey. It is, however, for a Peer Mentor to acknowledge that her student is not another version of her but a completely different being. They might share similar experiences, perspectives, and aspirations, but they each have unique talents and vulnerabilities so one can never fully understand the other. This means a Peer Mentor enters into the receptive mode of caring in which she is caring without any assumed knowledge about her students, but rather caring by receiving their whole being (Noddings, 1984). It requires a Peer Mentor to devote attention and time to really listen to her students because what is to be cared for is always challenging to identify and cannot be assumed (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017). As I reflected in Chapter Four (Findings), a Peer Mentor helps her students to identify their own needs and concerns so she can work with her students collaboratively to attend to that mutually agreed need/concern. Therefore, by being attuned and responsive to what her students are experiencing at that moment and facilitating their learnings from that experience (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017), a Peer Mentor's care for her students can truly come from the students' best interests, and move towards the students' ultimate goals.

Integrity

Integrity is often reflected in the wholeness of a Peer Mentor as someone who practices what she says. Wilson and Johnson (2001) introduced trust as the foundation of a mentoring relationship, where integrity is the first thing a mentor needs to demonstrate in order to establish that trust. "Integrity is characterized by both honesty and behavioural consistency over time and contexts" (Wilson &

Johnson, 2001, p. 126). In my opinion, such consistency comes from within a Peer Mentor and tends to be a genuine expression of who she truly is, not a persona which she just borrows, meaning that she is using that persona without really possessing it. I had an experience of sharing some personal reflections with another Peer Mentor, and I held myself back in that moment because I knew that I would be cutting open my own vulnerabilities. However, I very quickly decided that "*if this is what I'm expecting my students to do when they come to see a peer mentor, then this is what I'm doing for myself.*" In other words, the integrity of a Peer Mentor comes from her genuine acceptance of herself in the totality of her humanness. Her humanness means the wholeness of her being, including multiple dimensions; for instance, she could be disheartened and hurt, she may also cry and disappoint herself (Gay, 1995). Drawing from the earlier discussions on courage, if a Peer Mentor genuinely sees herself as being in a perpetual state of becoming, then she is able to truly arrive in the peer mentoring relationship with the patience and trust that her students will certainly flourish one day, in their own pace. Therefore, integrity means that when a Peer Mentors says that she trusts her students, she first has to practice that with herself.

Part B: Peer mentoring as an avenue of subjectification

In this section, I draw on Biesta's (2006, 2013) conception of human subjectivity to understand the becoming of a Peer Mentor. While the findings of this autoethnography suggests that the Peer Mentors tend to integrate and internalise the attitudes and practices of mentoring into their way of engaging with and participating in the world (Bunting & Williams, 2017), I want to further argue that a Peer Mentor does not usually undertake mentoring as a formal role to be played out, but rather takes up mentoring as "an important aspect of their identity" (Bunting & Williams, 2017, p. 180). However, instead of understanding a Peer Mentor's identity as a result of assimilation or socialisation, I intend to view it as something that emerges as part of her peer mentoring encounters, which is similar to Biesta's (2006, 2013) concept of a subject coming into presence. Hence, the following discussion is based upon viewing the Peer Mentors "as subjects in their own rights; subjects of actions and responsibility" (Biesta, 2013, p. 18). This will provide insight into the philosophy or the *why*s behind a Peer Mentor's practice.

A human subject for Biesta (2006) is not a certain kind of human or a mould that humans are required to fit into, but rather "a unique and singular 'being,' as a 'oneself', comes into presence because it finds itself in a situation where it cannot be replaced by anyone else" (p. 52). Moreover, the emergence of one's subjectivity is an event rather than a controlled programme in which certain outcomes could be guaranteed (Biesta, 2006, 2013). Such emergence is only possible when the existing and already-known space is interrupted by an encounter with the otherness brought to it by "a world of plurality and difference" (Biesta, 2006, p. 49). In these encounters with the other, one needs to come up with something new rather than relying on a programmed language. Therefore, subjectivity is dependent on the otherness and the other, and the human subject comes into presence when it finds itself needing to act and respond. In acting upon and responding to that otherness and the other, one's response tends to arise as an integral part of one's world and one's horizons, hence, one's response is a confirmation and a reflection of one's unique self (Strhan, 2012).

As illustrated in this autoethnography, a Peer Mentor does not operate solely on sets of standards and best practices in her mentoring of another student. For instance, the Peer Mentor Katy is expected to work together with her student during the encounter of peer mentoring so the student can learn and practice the skills needed to pass the paper. The actual mentoring approach, however, is something which Katy needs to figure out herself. 'Figuring out' is a process of coming to understand who the student is sitting in front of her, what is it that this particular student is needing or calling from her, as well as what knowledge and experiences she possesses that she can draw from in response to that student's call. This is a deeply responsive practice. In this way, I see peer mentoring as affording the opportunity for a Peer Mentor's subjectivity to emerge.

Moreover, because a Peer Mentor can never predict what her student is going to be like and what struggles that student is experiencing, she cannot rely on any "rational imperative that determines what is to be said" (Lingis, 1994, p. 110, as cited in Biesta, 2004), so a Peer Mentor does not speak with a "borrowed or representative voice" (Biesta, 2004, p. 316). This language being used to communicate with the stranger

or the other who is absolutely unique and different from oneself was described by Lingis (1994, as cited in Biesta, 2004) as communication within 'limit situations'. In these situations, the Peer Mentor finds herself having had no experience prior, hence, she does not have the skills and cannot come up with the absolute right thing to say. In this case, she can only respond with her own voice, in a responsive, always-new way, which completely depends on what the other is presenting in that here-and-now. That precisely depicts a typical peer mentoring encounter in which a Peer Mentor does not have the perfect answer for her student's struggles. However, what really matters in that situation is the fact that the Peer Mentor engages herself in a conversation with her student, to listen and to really hear, that is, to hear the other's unique voice, unique to the individual and to the experience the student has brought. And only because a Peer Mentor hears her student's unique voice and struggles, she becomes irreplaceable in answering the calling from that student and only then does her answer in her own voice becomes responsive and responsible.

According to Biesta (2013), his understanding of human subjectivity is inspired by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who argued for an ethical responsibility we are all inscribed to, in relation to the Other. For Levinas, such an ethical responsibility exists prior to our consciousness or ego because that implies an attitude we shall hold towards others before any prior knowledge or relationships. Such a responsibility demands that we maintain the otherness of the Other, rather than attempting "to supress through bringing the Other into the order of the Same" (Strhan, 2012, p. 21). Here lie two important notions of human subjectivity: first, that subjectivity occurs when one finds oneself in a situation where only one is able to respond because of one's uniqueness-as-irreplaceable being discussed above; second, our subjectivity is what we do with that responsibility (Biesta, 2013).

On the latter point, Levinas wrote: "the strangeness of the Other, his [sic] irreducibility to the I, to my thought and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question my spontaneity, as ethics" (Levinas, 1969, p. 43). For Levinas, being ethical means to be responsible to receive the otherness of the Other and to acknowledge that I do not know about the other in absolute terms. Such a free-of-calculation and inescapable responsibility to others is described by Strhan (2012) as the radical openness towards the Other which "comes from the exterior and brings

me more than I contain" (Levinas, 1969, p. 51). It is what Levinas called "to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I" (Levinas, 1969, p. 51), that radical openness is towards the possibility of being taught by the Other could be seen as the condition of both one's subjectivity (Strhan, 2012) and the true transcendence of what one already knows (Climacus, 1985, as cited in Biesta, 2013).

In my peer mentoring, I often arrive in the relationship with the Other, with that radical openness to be taught. The Other in this case could be the students I mentor, my fellow Peer Mentors and my supervisor, as well as the encounters within peer mentoring. In this autoethnography, I depicted the following experience of 'being taught':

> *I find myself in a place where so many ideas are bouncing between the walls around me. There are multiple mirrors being placed in random angles on the walls, catching me off guard in my students' narratives. I can never predict what and when I will see in those mirrors. I tell you, that is a very scary place to be in.*

It is an exciting yet scary experience because my students' narratives are almost always something external to me, something outside my imagination and fundamentally beyond my control (Biesta, 2013). Even when they are describing the same idea, the words will come out in their unique ways of speaking and my receiving of their understanding of the idea as original as in their unique narratives is when I am taught.

"To be taught means to encounter what is wholly other" (Strhan, 2012, p. 22). I am not there to add my own meanings to what I am hearing. Moreover, what I am being taught of is not some knowledge which is already known and exists in the mind of mine or of the Other's. It is what Biesta (2013) called the subjective truth. This subjective truth is the knowledge and understanding I formed as a result of my encounter with the Other. In this process, I was open for the Other to bring me their insights which could be new and radical, which challenges what I think and believe.

This truth is subjective because it is not the absolute or universal truth, but rather something I chose to give meaning to from hearing/seeing/experiencing what was placed in front of me by the Other. Hence, the meanings I chose to give must be something which matters to me or my current inquiry. Moreover, I can only give unique meaning to that truth because the way I make sense of it is a result of the way I respond to other's presenting of their truth, which is then used to form my own understanding of what that means and why that matters to me.

Furthermore, the presenting of the Other is not to be used as a way to fulfil my own agenda or ego, for instance, "one's own validity claim or the justification of their absoluteness" (Buddeberg, 2018, p. 153). In other words, the encounter with the Other is not a tool to validate who knows more or better, but to make possible the forming of a commonplace with the Other (Strhan, 2012). As Levinas wrote: "Speech first founds community by giving, by presenting the phenomenon as given; and it gives by thematizing" (p. 98). According to Strhan (2012), 'thematizing' here "refers to placing what is offered in speech before the self" (p. 24).

In the context of peer mentoring, it is when a Peer Mentor arrives in her encounter with her student with that radical openness. In this instance, she is not trying to over-empathise with her student's experiences and to jump quickly into what she thinks is bothering her student, perhaps because she had similar experience before. Her openness towards her student enables her to let the student present their experience in the way they have made sense of it. Through that encounter, she may also present to her student the similar experience she had, and her understanding of it, not to give her student an answer, but an alternative way to see that experience.

Such an exchange, with both sides acknowledging and receiving the meaning from beyond themselves, is truly when "a common world is created between self and Other" (Strhan, 2012, p. 23). It is also likely that through this process of acknowledging the experience and truth of the Other, both the Peer Mentor and her student are "subjected to the address of the Other with which subjectivity begins" (Strhan, 2012, p. 24). They are now starting to gain their own voices in light of the experience of the Other. In this moment, their subjects may come into presence. This

is why we tell our Peer Mentors that the students have really learned something when they own it through the process of identifying the problem, reasons and strategies for themselves. The Peer Mentor's job is to have conversations with her students, without any prescribed agenda in those encounters, guide them with her unique voice and affirm their unique way of understanding and responding.

To conclude this discussion, I would like to return to a piece of reflection in this autoethnography:

> *I realised that in many ways, my feelings and intuitions were flourishing within the existing rules and structures, rather than them going against each other. My past experience as a Peer Mentor and a supervisor taught me the importance of navigating those rules and structures being placed by the university, the courses, and the individual themselves*
>
> - an excerpt from Letter #7

I gained some new insights about this reflection after reading Biesta's (2004) discussion about the community of those who have nothing in common. I started to think that it is possible to understand the university as a rational community and peer mentoring as the other community. The other community is understood as one that does not replace the rational community:

> It lives inside the rational community as a constant possibility, and comes into presence as soon as one responds to the other, to the otherness of the other, to what is strange in relation to the discourse and logic of the rational community. (p. 319)

I suspect that there is, in fact, a need for this other community because a rational community which runs by the laws and theories and speaks with only a certain kind of language is simply not enough. For one to come to the world, we need the rational

communities to teach them the rules and principles, but we cannot overlook the complexity of human beings, their emotions and desire, how they manifest in their interactions with another complex human being. So we need the other community for one to harness the heart, to practice humanity and to learn about what really matters to human beings, so as to grow and nurture their own values (Palmer, 2012). I would like to believe that this other community holds the potential for one's subjectivity to emerge, as "it comes into existence when one speaks in one's own voice, with the voice that is unique, singular and unprecedented" (Biesta, 2004).

The university as a rational community runs with a common discourse which demands certain ways of behaving and engaging with learning from its students. However, the common discourse within this rational community is not necessarily compatible with the whole being of a student, that is to say, a student who learns at her own pace, who has a life outside her academic engagement at the university. With her she brings her experiences and passion, as well as her sentiments and resentments from the past. However, there are rules and structures within this university context which may de-legitimise this student because she does not 'fit' into the legitimised way of speaking or the way things are practised here. As I reflected in the Findings Chapter of this autoethnography:

> [The] rules and structures here represent a lecturer's style and worldview, for instance, how they understand our concerns and needs, and whether those concerns and needs are viewed as legitimate in their eyes. The rules and structures also represent the way in which a course runs, for instance, the learning outcomes and tasks which we must fulfil within a certain amount of time, otherwise, we would need to do the whole course all over again.

Peer mentoring comes into the picture as a place to come together for all the otherness and the complexity which a university's graduate profile simply cannot capture in full. The nature of peer mentoring, which is filled with strangers and their otherness, is precisely where a Peer Mentor comes into presence, that is, when her subjectivity may emerge. As mentioned in the foregoing exploration of peer

mentoring as subjectification, a Peer Mentor needs to be constantly exposing herself to the stranger and the otherness of the Other, in which every encounter becomes a call to the Peer Mentor to learn to respond with a new and unique self. This being constant challenged by alterity and the unknown is what taught her to form her own voice and values and her place in the world, just as, in this autoethnography, I use my feelings and intuitions to collect myself as a whole being when engaging with the world. My feelings and intuitions tend to appear as an inner voice. This inner voice guides my decisions, triggers and facilitates my reflections. It is more than the accumulated experiences which I embody into my practice. It comes from my hundreds of encounters with the Other, and the meanings I create from those moments of being taught by the Other, all of which consolidate me as I move towards the greater good, beauty, justice, and my subjective truth.

So this leads me to think that peer mentoring can provide our students with a way of being with others and being in the world, so no matter what they are engaging with and under what conditions, their way of responding is informed by their uniqueness and for the uniqueness of others. So I guess the ethical nature of our subjectivity is the fact that we are not using others to fulfil our egos and agendas, but we receive what is presented by the Other because we can only become unique when we form our unique meanings as we respond to and for others. As Peer Mentors, we answer to the Other's demand, but we are not demanding from others. To understand it in a very practical sense, we receive what the students bring with them, we work with what they bring and we respond with what is in us, for them to receive; but how and when they learn is in their hands.

Implications: A letter…

To the Peer Mentors:

I wish you to know that now you are a Peer Mentor, which doesn't give you a privileged identity to prove that you know more than others. In fact, now is a good time to remind yourself that you do not know everything, and being able to accept that, takes courage. Becoming a Peer Mentor involves some responsibilities, the responsibility to receive what the other brings to you, the responsibility to respond

to what is placed in front of you by the other and to help others to see, to hear, to respond, with your integrity and a sense of ethical responsibility. In order to do that, you'll need to find your own voice, from your encounters with others which this peer mentoring affords you to experience. You can only do that with a radical openness, to accept the whole being of your students so you can really care for them and be taught by them. To start, you acknowledge that you do not know everything, so you need your students to tell you what they know which you do not know. Throughout this journey, I know for sure that you will create your own meanings for what courage, care and integrity mean to you as a Peer Mentor.

Do not worry, I will walk with you.

To the supervisors:

Hi, you are probably the same as me: being a supervisor is not your full-time job. You might be an administrator, a manager of a community, a teacher, or another student, but I wish to remind you that having the privilege to supervise someone and to see their subjectivity emerge is one of the most beautiful things in this world. So I hope you will take it seriously and I hope you will be proud of being in a position to experience the emergence of a human subject, and remember you came in with the courage to care and educate, from the moment you stepped into a supervision relationship.

Something I learned about being a supervisor through this study is that a supervisor is not an identity one signs up to, it is seeing oneself in a position to receive, to shape and to make an impact in the other's life. The ones we are working with right now are all capable and know their stuff really well, so our job is to provide them with the parameters, the guidance, and the thinking framework. Plus, we do need to be able to see more than they do in order to help them to see, and we need to be there for them when we're needed. Before we hear their calling to us, we need to sit still with our 'patient courage' and allow things to grow organically for them in this safe space.

So, for our Peer Mentors, or those you mentor or supervise, I wish to remind you that the language you use to converse with them, and the way you perceive them, will impact on how they encounter this world. Hence, please be mindful of what you're modelling to them. If you happen to have more capacity, I also wish you could

create a space for your Peer Mentors to experiment with and explore what their values look like and mean to them. You could do this by making your peer mentoring programme open, with fewer guidelines on so-called the 'best practice'. That might sound easy but, in return, you need to devote your whole self and a lot of your time to caring for them and conversing with them, to exposing yourself to them, to receiving their whole being and whatever that whole being entails, and to being able to take up that responsibility to respond to all of these. Remember earlier I talked about a Peer Mentor's integrity? If you want each of your Peer Mentors to be a fully functioning person who is "in a perpetual state of emerging and becoming… (and) is motivated by the value of facilitating self and others" (Kelly, 1962, p. 19-20, as cited in Gay, 1995), you need first to be one yourself.

To the university:

You have your role to play as that rational community which reproduces future professionals who are skilful, knowledgeable, and have the language and ways to think in order to become functioning members of the society. However, I wish you could see your students for more than that. I wish you could understand that your responsibility as an institution is also to prepare your students for the unknown, the unpredictable, the new and the otherness of the world. To do that, please be courageous and allow for the other community to emerge from time to time. This other community is not there to undermine your importance but to it make possible for the greater good to emerge.

Also, please do not only include your students' voice as a token, but really hear what they want to tell you and incorporate their ideas and experiences into your decisions. When you do not take in their opinions, please tell them why not. Remember, these conversations you have with the students are an opportunity for you to establish a common world and a community with them. At least, in doing so, you are showing your students how they are an integrated part of a bigger world. And if you do it consistently with integrity, you will instil in your students the confidence to trust that the reason for your existence is for them to flourish. By gaining their trust, you're giving them the reason to stay and later give back to this community.

Lastly, when you are considering running a peer leadership programme like peer mentoring, please ensure that your staff members are nurtured. You need to help them to see and understand the real value in their work with students. If you could help them see themselves as educators who are courageous, capable of caring and acting with integrity, it would generate the potential for every encounter they have with their students to become an opportunity for new learnings to be created. So, be proud of yourself, institution, you don't have to be only driven by industry demands and worldwide rankings. You're capable of achieving so much more if you could focus your responsibility on caring genuinely for your students and staff members.

A letter for the concluding moment…

Dear Vicky,

I miss you. There's just so much that I want to tell you now. I wish I could say them all in-person when I see you again, but neither of us knows when that will be, so I try to put some of them down in this letter, as a way to put a full stop to a dissertation, a meaningful moment to be sharing with you.

Funny enough, the first thing I thought about was that discussion you and I had in February, about 'I want my Peer Mentors to be good people'. I remember getting so angry at the time because we were trying to connect my research to the university's goal of creating 'great graduates'. I got angry because despite talking about 'great graduates', what about working on the fundamental stuff of being a human? How can a person be a 'great graduate' when she doesn't even know how to feel other's pain and to be mindful of her own doings? Back then, I didn't think my research would have anything to do with a Peer Mentor who's acting with care, courage and integrity, but surprisingly that's where I landed in the end. Now I think I got a better idea about how I want to change the university's focus of a 'great graduate', which is to shift from being able to find a job in a famous company, to being able to recognise and nurture the goodness in others and oneself.

Luckily, I also encountered Biesta's books and his interpretation of Levinas's subjectivity and ethical responsibility. Finally, the things which I sensed, and thought as important throughout this study, started to surface and made themselves clear to be seen. I realised that doing research is like mentoring, in that I must first embrace the unpredictability, the unforeseeable and the foolishness of myself. Then my arms are open to be taught by the Other, then I could respond in a way only I could, as someone who has been living as a Peer Mentor. As I was responding, I drew on what is familiar to a Peer Mentor and combined that with what I was taught by the literature I encountered, to create something new. This new knowledge would help broaden the existing literature, because it was woven together using both the lens of the insider (my embodied experiences speaking in its unique voice) and the lens from the outside (the literature). I'm also hoping that this knowledge is bringing a new layer of thinking into how to make peer mentoring an enriching experience for our students and Peer Mentors.

Looking back now, I think I initiated this autoethnographic study with a sense of confidence and control. I thought I must know what's important to discuss because I created the data, I lived them, but I really didn't know. Halfway through, I lost sight of the significance in the familiarity of my everyday work with the Peer Mentors. But inviting you, Vicky, as the other I write with in my letters, you helped me to reflect in new ways. Because of the experience I had from the hundreds of letters we wrote to each other in the past, I learned to cut myself open to expose my whole being and to take pride in working through a personal experience. When I could face my true self and when there's nothing to hide, my thinking could become clear and I could see things again. Writing these letters allowed me to connect better with myself, as I interrogate and examine that in the work I do. So, towards the end of each letter, I'm always able to arrive at something new, whether that's a new way to respond to a challenge, or a new perspective to what's happened.

I wish you would read this dissertation one day and be proud of me for the unique voice I enabled it with. I think my past experience as a Peer Mentor gave me a unique way to think and speak, which also informed how I encounter the world, and this research. I hope that when you are reading this dissertation, you are listening to a Peer Mentor speak and engaging with her unique thinking, keeping in mind these come from my reflections of how my students are seeing and experiencing the world through, and with me. Overall, as an autoethnographic study, I was able to delve into my past and current experiences to understand a Peer Mentor's journey searching for her sense of self. However, I recognise this particular study largely contains subjective truth I created through my unique lens. In my day-to-day work with the Peer Mentors, and reading their multiple perspectives in their reflections, I wonder how future studies could incorporate more of their voices directly. This could potentially provide such a vivid and rich picture of the profoundness of peer mentoring. I think that will be another exciting journey to look forward to (smile).

Here I'm concluding this dissertation with a deepened understanding to the way a Peer Mentor lives, thinks, and responds. I think this concluding moment is also a moment that I come into presence as a subject...

Your most loved who loves you the most,

Rainie

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Appendix A – Letters used as data for this study

I thought we're not in high school anymore (07.03.2020)

Dear Vicky,

I wish you've been well.

I want to tell you something that I'm not particularly proud of.

Let me start from what happened last week.

I had a student visiting me for more information about our programme because she wants to become a peer mentor. She had to push our scheduled meeting to half an hour later. In her email she only said, something happened to my class, so I am running late for our meeting.

In the end, I met her at our reception, walked her into my office. I couldn't remember why I shut the door behind us because I usually leave it open. As I sit opposite to her beside the round table, I asked "I hope everything is going alright with you?"

She looked at me for a second or two which I sensed that she's probably going to cry.

"I'm sorry do I look like I've been crying?" she said.

I nodded and smiled at her.

She looked into my eyes again and said,

"I thought I've pulled myself back together," Tears started to run out of her eyes, "I just never been yelled at by my lecture before. I never expected something like that to happen at uni. I mean, we're not in high school anymore…"

It turns out, her tutorial tutor felt vulnerable because her group of friends and her are having too much chat and being disruptive in class for quite some time. The tutor decided to address the issue on that day but became emotionally distressed. She then asked her head of department to come in and mitigate the situation. The head yelled at the students the moment she walked in and asked them to leave without asking them what and why. The group now feels belittled and scared of going back to class next week.

I'm surprised that now I can write about what happened to you in one paragraph without crying or feeling angry. Last week when I was trying to put it into words, I really struggled. It was so much emotions and thoughts which I found myself in due to what happened to that student.

I can still see her face turning red as she was talking. She seemed sad and very unsettled.

She acknowledged her responsibilities in the whole thing, but found it difficult to rationalise how things were handled.

Those feelings I received from her reminded me of what happened between my school and me last semester. The struggles of wanting to be respected and the feeling of being belittled. But what's more important, is the reason that I didn't feel so proud to tell you, because I thought I've moved on from what happened to me but apparently not. I was so easily brought back to those emotions of mine when I saw my student being treated the same way.

> It brought me to when I felt I was 'being dumped on' by my school's announcement of my supervisor allocation. I was told this is what you get, you don't need to know why, you don't have a choice if you don't feel comfortable working with the supervisor that is assigned to you. Learning might be an emotional and vulnerable experience for you, but that's none of our business. This is how we run things here and most other students don't have a problem with it, why you?

I wrote this in my letter to you last week. As I was writing, I had anger and tears coming out. It got too intense, so I put it down and never get to finish that letter.

I still can't explain why it sticks in me for so long. I just remember I was shocked knowing that not everywhere in this university treat students the same way that we do. We listen, with respect and empathy. When I said that to my colleague, Lily, she said, haven't we heard all about that from our students already? Yes, Lily, but now it happened to me... now I *really* know how it's like.

I also remember I was feeling powerless, so I wanted to take a break from studies, at least take the semester off. But I can't remember what part of my pride kept me going. I'm glad I did carry on because I love my supervisor now and I won't know this if I didn't push through it.

I guess what really triggered me from that student last week, was when she said, "high school wasn't great but I thought we're in uni now, uni is different, I like being at uni." She didn't explain what part of that experience reminded her so much of her 'wasn't great' high school times. But one thing I took from her words was a reminder of how much I loved being at uni and how much a shock it was when that experience you always treasured got turned into something not so great.

I do wonder, why can't we just sit down and talk it through together? Why does it have to be a one-way-route? I mean, I tried to talk to my lecture at the time, but I don't think she really understood why I wanted to study with someone who I feel safe with.

That feeling of 'being safe' often takes time to develop.

It lays the foundation of the relationship.

As a student, I had to accept that my message can't be understood in the way I wanted.

As a student, I had to re-adjust myself to the way that is expected of me.

As a student, I learnt to suck it up because I don't have time to argue over something that was never going to be understood because I needed that time to have my coursework done on time.

I'm sorry, Vicky, I have been writing like a woman with no gratitude towards how much she is loved by her university. But it is exactly that love she treasures that she just couldn't stand it being ruined.

Always yours,

Rainie

The student Rainie (18.03.2020)

Dear Vicky,

It's been a while since the last time I wrote to you. How have you been? I think I have been doing well and surviving this new semester so far, which is good.

You know what, I went to see a peer mentor for the creative writing side of my study a couple weeks ago. He is very new and I was his first student as a peer mentor. I remember the first few things he asked me to do was to show him my writing. When he asked, I remember myself thinking for a moment in my head, oh, he's going to see all the personal stuff in what I wrote, my immaturity, my not-very-professional and possibly my inadequacy. I thought about that for only a moment, then I said to myself, if this is what I'm expecting my students to do when they come to see a peer mentor, then this is what I'm doing for myself. So I showed him my writing, those anger and emotions I wrote in my last letter to you.

It didn't take him long to read and he didn't comment on what I've written. Instead, he asked me to talk about what are the key messages I wanted to focus on with this piece of writing and reminded me that having a clear focus is going to help.

I told him that is exactly what I'm struggling with because there're so many different aspects of myself being triggered by that event, I found it really hard to pin down one or two things that matters the most to me.

He said to me, that's okay, we could talk through it.

I could see how having a few more prompting sentences under his sleeves would help. Also, be more clear or focused with where he's trying to lead the discussion to, would help.

However, I must argue for him that our session made me feel a lot better with what I'm doing. Although I didn't get a solution and my mind was still muddled.

I also want to be careful with saying "I find our session helpful", because being helped wasn't the most valuable thing I got out of it. If I had to explain what I enjoyed the most from that session, I would say, I enjoyed hearing about his experiences of writing letters to himself, he gave me different examples from his own writing and shared what he's learnt about creative writing which he thought would be helpful to me. As our session went on, I could see him becoming more open to tell me about his experiences with writing, which for the first time, allowed me to see his passion for it. How interesting!

What's more interesting is the feedback I got from his supervisor about his reflections on his session with me. He said, at first, he thought it was a test so he was a bit nervous. But he quickly realised in the session that I'm really there to get help. He said the fact that I've trusted him my writing was encouraging for him. At first, he wasn't sure what to do but then he decided to just be confident with himself and do the best he can.

You know what's interesting, but not surprising? I guess I always know that I'm constantly shifting between my roles of a student, a mentor and a supervisor. But as I became more experienced and had less trouble navigating the shifts, I started to see how my shifts are having an impact on the people I'm engaging with, especially on my students. I guess my shifts probably triggered my peer mentor to shift his role accordingly, which may have triggered new perspectives and insights for him as a student and a peer mentor. Also, I'm not sure exactly what part of our interaction during that session made him decided to be confident and go with what he can do. But I guess the way I presented myself was helping a little rather than hindering it?

Love from

Rainie

My own graduation (22.03.2020)

Dear Vicky,

I graduated from my supervisor this week ☺

We've been working together for the past three and half years and now it's time for us to move into a new chapter of our lives.

You must remember the many stories and great conversations I had with her. I couldn't believe how much I got from her and how much of a big part of me is a result of this relationship we had together. Our relationship initiated for the purpose of ensuring the safety of my practice as a supervisor. She has been, since then, my supervisor, my coach and my mentor.

I can remember many of the small milestones we celebrated together, and I can see how much I am transformed as a person. But when I try to think about what I got out of this relationship, I cannot name a list of things, so I turned to my mum for help. She's outside my work context but close to me and journeyed with me this whole time.

My mum thinks that I now spend less time tossing between my options and the way I approach the world becomes more holistic and the way I think and process information is more rounded and mature. Combining her feedback with my own observations, I think I now spend less time doubting myself, I place more trust in myself, I'm more reflexive and more self-aware. What do you think?

I tried to summaries what she did well in my development by trying to remember all the ups and downs she walked through with me in this journey. I guess my favourite questions from her were

"But you're not them" – when I expressed my frustration about not being able to approach the world like someone I wish I could become.

"What do you think triggered you?" – when I went through something I wasn't very pleased with due to my reactions to myself or caused me emotional distress.

"What role do you think you played in this process" – when I notice a change in my team member's attitude and their actions toward work.

All I can say is that I felt respected by her and that respect came from trust. She trusted my ability, trusted who I am and who I will become. I never felt being pushed to come up with an answer. We sometimes agreed on having some 'homework' for me to do in my own time, but the expectation is always for me to do them at my own pace.

I never thought about putting 'trust' and 'respect' together but it makes sense. The respect which is informed by trust. It was really powerful. I think because I sensed the confidence my supervisor had in me, so I wanted to trust myself more; as I trusted myself more, I became more confident in my own decisions; as there are less doubts in myself, I stopped rubbing off my own achievements, so I

contributed to my own confidence building; as I grown more confidence, I'm happier and I'm more capable to do better for myself and for others.

Surprisingly, we always talked about ME. But it didn't make me a more selfish person but rather a more considering one. Neither I have become selfless. I know that I have to maintain myself in a good space both physically and mentally to be able to care for and support my students, so I did. I really hope that is how my students' been experiencing me 😊

Always yours,

Rainie

The big sister Rainie (02.04.2020)

Dear Vicky,

I think I finally found the cure for the despicable me as the 'big sister'!

Remember the first time I went to an overseas conference by myself in Adelaide? That time I met the only other Kiwi attending that conference, Ivy. She was from another university in Auckland and lucky to have her so I didn't have to be the youngest attendee in the room. We both went alone so we appreciated each other's company as Kiwis, as well as being the youngest and being the not knowing what to do.

One thing that makes me think about those three days we spent together at that conference, was how being Ivy's 'friend' reminded me of how I've always been stepping up to be the 'big sister' in the room.

In that instance, Ivy was nervous about her presentation that afternoon, so I just offered myself to help her practice, and we spent the hour after lunch in her room going over her script.

I remember telling you after my trip, that when I was sitting in that seat watching Ivy speak, I really wondered, why am I here? Don't I have better things to do now, like exploring that supermarket I could see right outside the window in front of me? (a supermarket-lover as you know I am).

Ever since I got back from that trip, I found myself occasionally throwing back to that moment of realisation. The moment I realised that the 'big sister' role has always been residing in me without me knowing.

I think I always wanted to be the person that can help, the person that knows things and the person that looks after others.

But somehow, I didn't really like the idea of always being the 'big sister', because being the 'big sister' for me, also means, being the person that takes control, the person that makes decisions and the person tells people what to do. I wonder which 'big sister' Ivy was seeing in me…

Until today, I didn't know that there could be another definition for a 'big sister'. A big sister that is capable to care because she is well looked after herself, with her mind and body fully nourished so she knows better about how to care for others.

I would never expect a casual conversation with my colleague Sara today, would afford me such a big shift in my understanding of a 'big sister'.

I was trying to explain to her how I want my students to be kind to their groupmates and offer their time to work on the group assignment together.

I said I want them to help not from a position of 'you have no idea what you're doing but I can help you', but a position of 'I've taken care of my part of the group assignment and I would like to see if we could work your part out together'.

As soon as I said that, I realised, ah, that's my ideal image of a 'big sister'. A big sister that offers her help from a position of genuine care. She doesn't have to prove her worth from being helpful to others. She is stepping up because she's simply got the capacity to take on a bit more and she wants to share the load with others but not necessarily changes the way others do things.

Then I think, I wouldn't mind being a big sister like that 😋

Always yours

Rainie

It's so easy to be kind to others than to yourself (25.04.2020)

Dear Vicky,

How have you been? I feel I haven't been in touch for a while. This is the fifth week into lockdown in New Zealand due to the coronavirus pandemic. I have been working and studying from home for just over a month now. It doesn't feel like that much time has gone past, which was interesting.

This week happened to be the week of supervisions and next week, the students are returning to study online after five weeks of extended study break due to the pandemic. Because of this interesting intersection of time, I guess my students were in a unique position this week which made them extremely reflective during

the supervision meetings.

When they were more actively engaged in discussions, me as their supervisor often find myself in a place where so many ideas are bouncing between the walls around me. There are multiple mirrors being placed in random angles on the walls, catching me off guard in my students' narratives. I can never predict what and when I will see in those mirrors. I tell you, that is a very scary place to be in lol.

The discussions we had this week were probably centred around something new we discovered about ourselves since living in lockdown, and how that is going to influence our upcoming engagement in online learning as university students and online mentoring as peer mentors. For instance, feeling hard to stay motivated and easy to lose track of time, as well as, how the physical space or the concept of 'space' is influencing our performance and wellbeing.

During one of the group supervision sessions, two members in that group were experiencing the lack of motivation in slightly different ways. One is finding themselves being unable to stay productive during the day and they're feeling that their days often end before they have even done 'anything'. The other is finding it difficult to know their reason to get out of bed because they usually get up at certain time with the idea of going to uni. Then once they're in the uni environment, the classes they go to and the interactions they have with others will help shape their days and how around their studies.

I think I could sense their frustration about themselves because of the uneasy look on their faces.

So, how do I cheer them up?

With that voice in mind, my thinking quickly flew back to another discussion I had with another group of mentors earlier that week. In that discussion, the mentors were commenting on my frustration about my brain-fade, meaning when I wanted to write, my brain just quit connecting ideas for me.

One mentor responded with his own experience and described how after he reads an article, he needs to put it down to reflect on it before he could write up comprehensive notes, then when he writes, it sometimes takes him seven or even eight goes before finishing a paragraph to his satisfaction. Another mentor followed by sharing her process of reading over her draft in hardcopy to get a bigger picture of what she's written, then she could get a better idea about how to approach it in the next stage of editing.

Their ideas all pointed me to think about how I perceive time in relation to being productive. It reminded me that having the time and space away from my writing is also a critically important part of the process. Also, quality work always

requires persistent effort and time so I have to be patient with myself and trust the process.

Without a surprise, that most recent learning of mine got reflected into my response to the two mentors who were feeling frustrated about themselves. I briefly shared what I've learned and said to them, "maybe your body and mind are just taking the break needed for it to be ready again. If you think about it, you all lived a very busy life before the lockdown, with uni, relationships, families and all your other commitments, then suddenly everything just slowed down and your system needs time to digest and respond to that. That itself is an energy-consuming process because your body was probably in shock."

Oh my god, I sound so 'forgiving' here, why I never thought about that to myself when I caught myself being lazy?

Without giving too much attention to that thought in my head, I carried on sharing my reflections, "also because of the sudden slow-down, we all need to re-evaluate what 'a productive day' should look like in this new environment. For example, I've been starting a new journal since the lockdown and every morning I put down a few things on my to-do list, sometimes only one thing, sometimes four things including 'having lunch with mum'. This process helped me to practice making realistic goals, it also helped me to keep track of time and most importantly, it made me realised how little I can do in day."

"Sometimes I don't get to finish what I planned to do, but I still put down what I have actually done on the same list, pretending that I have thought of that in my initial planning and managed to achieve that at the end of the day" my co-facilitator Sara added with a satisfying smile on her face,

Nice work, Sara, that's adding a positive spin and showing how we're all learning ways to cheer ourselves up, and is tying nicely back to the 'being deliberate and intentional' in self-care, resilience building and staying positive which we discussed with this group in the previous session.

"So I can put down 'I had a brownie' in today's journal!" one of those two mentors followed what Sara said.

"Yes, that's perfect, that will remind you about how your day went and what made up your day, so when you think back, your memories are connected by those little things you did. It will give you a better sense of how you spent your time, then you will be surprised to know that you actually had a pretty decent day!" I said with excitement from seeing a slight glimpse of light appearing back on their face.

I couldn't recall exactly how we ended that session, but I remember thinking back to myself, my natural position when it comes to my students is to be kind to them, to remind them that it is okay and you are still doing really really well.

But when it comes to being with myself, I don't seem to be treating myself the same way.

It was also interesting to observe how the discussions on one topic could become so dynamic as we each share our ideas about that into the pool of discussions. Also, because I have been the person floating from one group to another, bringing with me the ideas I learned from the other groups into the most recent discussions, somehow, by the end of the week, I will gain a thicker layer of understanding or if I should say, a massive landscape of collage about one topic from just adding up everyone's perspectives in me.

However, I should also argue that no matter it was a thick layer or a big collage, all of them are building onto my existing understanding of that topic which fitted into a framework that is already existing in me. I cannot recall how that framework was constructed but it surely had a lot to do with linking back to my backbone principle which I always hold in my head during any supervision discussions,

> How can this discussion link back to the mentor's work, how will that impact on their interaction with their students? How will the student experience it?

I think that is the voice in my head which is always there, and it is part of me.

Love,

Rainie

What is a good mentor? (25.04.2020)

Dear Vicky,

I always wanted to tell you more about the work we do with the peer mentors. This week, there's finally a case which could represent a holistic picture of that, so I'd like to share it with you!

Our team had an intensive discussion this week about a case brought in by one of the supervisors.

"Katy will be seeing Peter (a physically impaired student) in the coming week. She asked me in supervision if she could contact Peter directly to get more details about the assessment which they wanted to get help on so Katy could be better prepared for their session. I told Katy that as she knows we don't usually encourage peer mentors to contact their students outside the mentoring hours, but we also know that she's very professional and could handle it really well, so I'm happy for her to do that."

The supervisor, Jane, brought the case up just to keep the rest of the team informed. However, she probably wasn't prepared for how much further discussions this could have led to.

…

"Oh, I will be a little concerned about this. If Katy is doing extra prep for Peter, then does that mean all our mentors are expected to do that for their students? If they will be spending their own time preparing for their sessions, I think we should be paying them for the prep time." Said Graham, another supervisor.

I nodded and carried on "well, Jane, I think what you're doing with Katy is great, you're empowering her by being encouraging and feeding into her enthusiasm of wanting to do well. We know that all our mentors are compassionate beings, they just wanted to help! But my question would be, what is it that Katy has to do which cannot be done with the student together in the actual session?"

"I think Katy from her first session with Peter, realised that because of Peter's impairment, it takes a lot longer to get through the things that they wanted to within an hour. So Katy would like to have a look at Peter's assessment details beforehand, list up the key points which Peter should be paying attention on in a PowerPoint. So in the actual session, that will save them some time to figure out exactly what Peter is struggling with, hopefully."

"Ohh…." The supervisors went into a surprise… "Katy's in her teacher's hat…"

"I think Katy knows where the line is and she knows that she's not helping Peter as a teacher but a mentor, I think she just wanted to make it easier for Peter" Jade said in Katy's defence.

"Well, when it comes to our very lovely students whom we just really like, of course we wanted to do extra to support them, we have to also realise that ourselves." Said another supervisor.

"Yes, Peter seems like a very lovely student from just reading his email." Another supervisor nodded to agree.

"I think Katy is the person working directly with the student, so she knows the best about what the student really need and would benefit from having." I still think there's not a right or wrong answer, "I just wanted to bring a bit more self-awareness into Katy. I mean, you know when we work as mentors on an assignment question with our students, we break down the question with them, ask them questions to facilitate their understanding to the assignment question and we ask questions again when brainstorming together about how they wanted to form their own answers to that question. That process of asking student questions helps the students to think on their own feet, it helps them to learn

how to learn. I wonder how does Katy manage to do that with a list of bullet points of her own understanding to the question. Jane, could you please ask her to unpack that in your next supervision with her?"

"Yes, I got some really helpful questions from you guys, thank you, I think I will ask Katy to say a bit more about this, especially a good way to get her reflect on that right after her next session with Peter. I think she knows where the line is, but it's helpful for her to think a bit deeper into this."

"I also think she knows where the line is, but she also needs to understand herself in the bigger picture." I added, "Danny was helping another student with the same type of physical impairment last year, for one hour per week over the whole year, Danny didn't need to ask for more time, then does that mean Danny didn't do a good enough job for his student? I mean, I don't think so. I think both Danny and Katy are awesome mentors. Then, I'm interested in why Katy would like to take the approach that she's proposing. I mean, I don't know for students with this type of physically impairment, how their brain function differently from ours, it would be helpful for Katy to let us know. If there's a better way to facilitate this particular type's student's thinking process, it would be helpful for us all to know."

The discussion left me asking myself 'what makes a good mentor?'

> Sometimes, it's so easy for us to fall into the trap of wanting to get through a lot of questions with our students, but forgetting how the student would take them in. Can they really get everything we went through in that session? Are they really learning it for themselves?

> If a 'good mentor' doesn't have a set number of tasks which they have to get through in a 30 minutes session, then how is that 'good' being measured against?

> Yes, boundaries is also very important, especially in a case like this. The awareness needed doesn't only rest in maintaining the mentoring relationship within the professional boundaries, but also how much personally, the mentor is investing themselves into their students.

> The mentors' enthusiasm is a double-edged sword, when their students are not doing the work or just couldn't pass the paper, the mentor might see themselves as a failure or the student may feel that they have been imposed on by their mentor. There're so many possibilities of how this particular case could turn out, I'd like to think that I'm prepare for everything.

> Then as a supervisor, if there's no right or wrong in a case like this, what should I do to support the mentor in this process and enhance their learning about their practice and themselves? I never want to only say, 'don't contact your students outside your mentoring hours because that will set an incorrect expectation for your students on you and your fellow peer mentors.' because there's always more than that, then how much space am I allowing them to trial and error so they could find their own answers? But, not to the detriment of themselves or the team.

Sorry, Vickey, I left you with so many questions that I couldn't answer yet. But I still think that it gives you some understandings about my work?

Always yours,

Rainie

Why writing these letters? (08.06.2020)

8th June 2020

Dear Vicky,

How are you?

It feels like a while since my last letter to you. I think in the past few weeks, I really didn't feel like writing much. I think I was too busy going through my thoughts and reflections about myself, my way of being in the world and my relationship with work and studies. I'm probably one of those people who's got a lot out of the whole Covid-19 situation, I think. It pretty much feels like I have never been this close to my own feelings. Because of having less distractions, my mind is more clear, so I started having less and less doubts about how I feel. As I manage to operate with a clearer mind, and with less rules and structurers placed on me by myself, my intuition really got awaken again and started to flourish.

The intuition thing was reminded by one of my students during a group supervision in which we were discussing about planning, procrastination, high expectation we placed on ourselves and decision-making.

We talked about how well we plan so we could get a lot done and achieve good results.

We talked about how we all go for planning when facing changes and uncertainties.

We talked about how sometimes having things planned to details also create the fear of making a start. We procrastinate because we are overwhelmed from just thinking about going through everything.

We talked about how we don't want to let people down, but do people really expected from us like we assumed?

One of us, however, it's so not into planning, she said she lives day by day, she doesn't look too ahead of things, she doesn't have a plan for when she finishes her PhD and she sometimes can't even decide which pair of shoes to buy, which colour to pick.

There, that's when I said "I don't have problem making decisions. Because my world is black and white, it's often easy to tell what I like and what I don't."

"How's that?" one of them probably wondered.

"I don't know", I said, "I basically made a decision about whether or not to hire you guys in the first five minutes of your interview."

"That's interesting."

Yes, I'm also in surprise when I said that myself, but quickly, I realised that the feeling is familiar, the feeling of listening to my heart whispering to me.

I soon was reminded of how long ago was the last time I made a decision so quickly without hesitation or second guessing. "I think it's my intuition, I think." No one said anything and I wanted to continue, "I just realised how well I could sense my intuition in these couple of weeks, after I removed all those rules and structures for myself, I can really sense it now."

At what point did I lose my intuition without me noticing and how it managed return to me…

…

Sorry. I was side-tracked a bit before.

I actually wanted to write about something Jiao said to me the other day, which was like a needle, pulling everything I'm doing now into one piece.

Remember, Jiao? My very good friend since first year of primary school? You've met her, we used to hang out together when we were visiting each other's hometown.

For me, she's like one of those people who has never left my life. No matter where I am physically, who I'm with and how long since we last talked to each other. She's always there, in my hometown. Whenever I see her, I know she will hear my inner voice.

I'm also a big fan of her dad. I think she's got a lot of her beautiful characters from him. He's funny and witty, he's also, always there. I always enjoy having lunch out with her family, when we just sit around the table and listen to her dad's funny stories, his wisdom about life was in those stories, he's ideal world which doesn't always reflects the reality but is part of the reality, is also in those stories.

For me, he's someone that always has a way to talk himself out of a bad experience or an unsatisfying situation. That's the ability I dreamed for.

Okay, so, the other day, this wise man's daughter and I was chatting over text messages, she told me that she thinks I am a very pure person. Pure was a direct translate from Chinese to English, which didn't make much sense to me, so I ask her to tell me more about what she meant by that.

She said, I think you are always very clear about what you want, for yourself, for work, for your studies. Being pure seems to be the ability to face both the good and the bad very directly. You don't tend to run away from problems, you deal with them from the forefront, and you don't allow them to take control over you.

Then she carried on with this example,

Say you're a cup of water,

There's a drop of colour being dropped into you,

You love that colour so much but, you know it will change the colour of your own,

So you work hard to embrace that drop of colour, in a way that you are keeping it as part of your shade rather than letting it to overtake you.

That, shows your inner strength.

I was completely amazed by the way she sees me, and how her understanding of me penetrates into what I'm trying to explore with my studies, so I said, "this summaries nicely what my study's about, and surprisingly, I could never explain it so well like you do."

"I don't know your work or studies that well, but just explaining my impression of you." She explained with a sense of surprise too.

I wanted to tell her more about my study, so this is how I summarised it in my text message to her,

"I'm interested to know if people could fit into different environments without losing who they are. For example, with the work I do with my students. They do need to follow certain requirements when they are working for the university. However, each one of them is unique in their own way, with different sets of strengths and areas to work on. My work is to grow and nurture their strengths and what they are good at, and to make them realise that the part of them which they might see as being different from others is in fact valuable and is something to be proud of. At the same time, I work to develop on the areas that they could improve on, to help them to see that those are not necessarily their weaknesses, from accepting themselves, seeing the possibilities of growing the different parts of themselves, I hope they could take a positive and more active approach to growing themselves."

By reflecting on what I said to Jiao, I wondered.

It pretty much feels like, every one of my student is a cup of water, with the possibility of being dropped in with different colours. Water, supposed to be passively absorbing whatever it is in it, it doesn't have hands to push things out of itself. When the water is in a cup, it also doesn't magically make the cup bigger to hold more water to dilute the colour.

However, I'm imagining that maybe that cup of liquid with no colour isn't just water.

Maybe someone has put some magical chemicals into it just like we did in science class at high school.

People who doesn't know about the magical chemicals will assume it as just water. They won't know that the magical chemical has activated and strengthened the water, so the water starts to manage the colours that goes in it, so it can hold the colours, play with them, mix them together into a desirable shade.

The cup of water is still water, it looks the same as any other cups of water. But it's probably a cup of water that is magically enhanced. So the pure impression of the water isn't just implying the look of it, but what it is able to do.

I do wonder, what is the magic playing here? Is there a formula to follow?

Love,

Rainie