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PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE MENTORS: THE QUEST
FOR AUTHENTIC EXCELLENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Seven years on from the commencement of Otago Polytechnic's Doctor of Professional Practice programme, there is a need to identify how 'excellence' manifests itself as the outcome of the collaboration of mentors and learners – if, indeed, it is present at all. Such an enquiry is necessary for the reputation, sustainability, and quality assurance feedback loops of the programme. I argue such an enquiry needs to be foregrounded by, firstly, an examination of the culture of the programme; and, secondly, a critical interrogation of the less-than-neutral term 'excellence.' Skelton (2005, p. 4), for instance, argues 'excellence' is a "contested, value-laden concept," variously defined according to different stakeholders: mentors, learners, managers, and organisations (Goode, 2021). Clearly, a multi-vocal study would generate evidence of a 360-degree understanding of 'excellence,' with top-down and bottom-up views and other voices in between. The current study examines a small group of mentors developing experiential understandings of mentoring excellence, and points to 'authenticity' as a feature of excellence.

This article pivots on my continuing to wonder what aspects of the work of a postgraduate mentor contribute positively to authentic excellence in a postgraduate professional practice learning journey. The word 'authentic' is there because excellence may look different from various positions of power: how authorities figure it may differ from the conceptions of mentors and, indeed, the experiences of learners. I suggest 'authentic' excellence is a bottom-up, affective quality related closely to "teaching well" (Brookfield et al., 2023) and figured by how graduate supervisors, more specifically mentors, feel about their experiences. In contrast, a less authentic form of excellence might involve quality as a top-down instrumentalist quantity defined by, for instance, timeliness and merely generating enough evidence to pass, as demonstrated in the discussion of inauthentic excellence below.

Teaching well

An appropriate bottom-up space to begin an enquiry into mentors' perceptions of how they strive for excellence is considering the 2023 book, *Teaching Well* (Brookfield et al., 2023), couched broadly in tertiary education contexts. The book's authors posit that affective traits, such as possessing empathy and recognising the psychosocial need to belong, are as crucial to teaching well as reflective and critical abilities. These traits are necessary both to communicate, orally and via feedback, and to enter into the learning worlds of the mentees. Andrew et al. (2020) show that the response to COVID-19 revealed compassion and care, qualities that repersonalise the individual, repurpose shared enterprise, and revalidate community.

Goode (2023), a graduate of the Otago Polytechnic doctoral programme, writes of excellent educators as "rebels, rogues, and risk-takers." Trying new approaches suggested by how student projects needed to proceed involved risk-taking, but taking risks grounded in experience. As Brookfield et al. (2023, p. ix) write: "the only way to improve our teaching is by experimenting and taking calculated risks, while constantly receiving student (and

ideally peer) feedback through our ongoing classroom research.” As applied reflective practitioners, mentors chart and critically examine their practice, sharing and debriefing in a secure community of practice.

Teaching Well also indicates the importance of educators scaffolding the learning journey (Brookfield et al., 2023). Instead of bombarding learners with readings, selecting pieces for which a learner is ready is a learned mentoring strategy to ensure gradual progress towards a learner’s desired direction of enquiry. With *Teaching Well* as a fresh resource, my study delves into what mentors do in their quest to mentor well. This opens out my own quest to explore how mentors strive for excellence in the context of professional practice doctorates.

In the next two sections, I first examine individuating aspects of the cultures of professional practice, and the programme itself, in Aotearoa New Zealand. I then move on to consider conceptions of excellence in critiques of tertiary educational practice, using a critical lens which views authenticity as its horizon. Before curating the mentor voices and presenting short thematic narratives, I consider the study’s methodological approach and the need for ethics of care in curating such voices. Let us begin with the programme culture.

THE CULTURE OF THE DOCTORATE OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Model of excellent mentoring

In examining ‘excellence,’ Grifoll (2016, p. 96) views it “as a link between innovation and the aim of moving up to better societies.” This connection of new work-based research and transformative, even activist, change, fits with what is distinctive about the mission of the Otago Polytechnic doctorate of professional practice. Grifoll’s words point to the programme’s transformative agenda to improve individuals, organisations, and communities. Further, they start to suggest features of authentic excellence in mentoring. The quote crystallises a drive for freshness, distinctiveness, and innovativeness, and a social imperative to make the world a better place. By extension, I see a possibility of supporting the mentee to become both their best researcher self and a thought leader in their contexts of endeavour. Within both organisation and programme, such ideas are key elements of the programme’s aims and outcomes.

Ker (2017), in a study of the facilitative nature of mentoring, argues a key skill lies in knowing *when* to be *what* (for instance, a professor, coach, or pastor). She indicates the importance of remaining fluid and nimble and thinking on one’s feet. In this model, learners and facilitators form a partnership of learning where there is genuine and mutual respect. Ker (2017) maintains that the manner in which they co-travel becomes a dynamic goal-oriented process, with critical reflection as the focus. Within the Doctor of Professional Practice, the self-determined learning is heutagogical in orientation (Carpenter & Ker, 2017; Hase & Kenyon, 2013), drawing on the capacities of the coach (Goleman et al., 2013).

Achieving these collectivist and individual goals, with the mentor aiming for excellence while drawing on their own authentic learning journeys, requires the exercise of compassion and empathy as coaching strategies. Mentors’ capacities for such qualities may be innate but can be understood as an echo of experience, as any mentor has significant knowledge about what their mentees are experiencing. This is, of course, because they were once in that position and have lived experience of what is being faced (Megginson & Clutterbuck, 2005). Correlative of empathy are mutual trust and regard, which manifest as an understanding of learner needs at a given moment. Brookfield et al. (2023, p. 19) note that trust results from being seen as credible and authentic, and confirm trust is crucial to teaching well in a bottom-up view of teaching excellence. The model of excellent mentoring outlined here can be seen as ideal and pertinent to all doctoral professional practice cultures, but in the local context the excellence of mentors is enhanced by the best practice of tikanga-led mentoring.

Tikanga-led mentoring

In addition to the ideal teaching and learning context of a professional practice programme, mentors need to consider key implications of Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the legally ratified foundation document of Aotearoa New Zealand. Rather than excavating those legalities, I want to move into applying tikanga (rituals, principles, protocols, ways of doing and being) meaningfully, and exploring how they might play out in the activity of mentoring and contribute to excellence. Ideally, if a learner is Māori, they will be supported by Māori on the mentoring team. However, regardless of ethnicity, all learners are embraced by core aspects of tikanga. Two primary concepts in the model of mentoring are aroha (empathy, compassion) and ako, which affirms the value of the trusting two-way journey between mentor and mentee. Ako also confers on learners the status or mana of a knowledgeable person. This is important as it is the learner who is the expert in this programme, and a mentor's excellence lies in their ability to support learners to achieve their leadership and applied learning goals.

Although tikanga-led heutagogy is critical, it does not involve the class suicide Freire (1970) identified as necessary for authentic educators in indigenous contexts. Such teachers, Freire noted, may be *in* the system yet not of it. Ako-led aroha is appropriate in professional practice where the learner is the expert in their area of endeavour, and the mentor's mahi (job, work) is to consolidate this expertise and make it rigorous for entry into a future community characterised by the achievement of doctorateness. In other words, candidates' enquiries have their own set of norms and practices (Lester & Costley, 2010). To return to Freire, the mentor may be in the system, but is also of the culture.

This model draws on the work of Pihama et al. (2019), which foregrounds, among other tikanga principles, the following four pou (pillars, principles). First, there is a need to understand the mentor (tuakana): mentee (teina) relationship through ongoing whanaungatanga (conversation or kōrero grounded in our lives and those of whānau/family). Second, high value is attributed to nurturing āwhinatanga, the quality of caring critical friendship. Third, a core aspect of tikanga on this programme is cherishing manaakitanga (generous regard for respect) and learners' mana (prestige, identities as learners full of potential). A fourth pillar focuses on providing safe and agreed parameters for kotahitanga (solidarity, unity; faith in the shared enterprise of the learning journey). At the heart of tikanga-led heutagogy is the shared understanding of tuakana and teina on their journeys together.

While this model nurtures all learners, Pihama et al. (2019, p. 59) emphasise of Māori learners: "it is fundamental that their culture is supported, nourished and celebrated at every step of the doctoral and academic journey." Esteeming culture is, I believe, a mark of authenticity.

Tikanga-based heutagogy impacts both mentoring and assessment practices, and I think contributes to the authenticity of the excellence the programme aims to achieve. The next section considers aspects of 'excellence' which I construe as less authentic.

INAUTHENTIC EXCELLENCE

For an understanding of authentic excellence, we need to consider less authentic conceptions. These include those in the literature of the neoliberalised or measured university with their Chief Executive Officers from the business world and importation of audit culture and surveillance (Ball, 2003; Giroux, 2009, 2019; Katz, 2015; Shore, 2010). In this literature, Henri Giroux's voice is the most critical of all: "the appeal to excellence by university CEOs now functions like a corporate logo, hyping efficiency while denuding critical thought and scholarship of any intellectual, civic, and political substance" (Giroux, 2009, p. 673). Without bottom-up authenticity, excellence becomes an object of audit, measurement, and control; an object of "Corpspeak" (Katz, 2015).

Measured inauthenticity

Saunders and Ramírez (2017) remark, “since excellence is a measure of a thing, and since everything in post-secondary education is committed to excellence, everything must be measured” (p. 399), but need it be measured quantitatively and thus arbitrarily? With measurement comes inauthenticity because excellence becomes a *performance* of a corporate self; not an authentic action of a passionate educator, but rather of a governmentalised educator, variously *homo oeconomicus* or the zombie (Katz, 2023). Ball (2003) considers the governmentalised subject as “performative worker;” “a promiscuous self, an enterprising self, with a passion for excellence” (p. 215).

Educator identity in the corporate game

Such excellence excludes the agency of the educator and the learner, and turns passion into playing the corporate game, a game Cheek (2017, p. 221) associates with the “ratings rodeo.” In such a game, the academic is figured, according to Skea (2021), as Foucault’s (1982) *homo oeconomicus* (‘economic man’). Roberts (2007) reports the presence of an inauthentically excellent but corporately ‘ideal’ academic in Aotearoa New Zealand: “The ideal citizen ... is a sophisticated, competitive, innovative and enthusiastic participant in the global economy, ever ready to apply what he or she knows ... to the goal of creating ... a ‘prosperous and confident nation’” (p. 363).

In a forced Faustian bargain (Ball, 2003), the educator’s soul is ‘sucked dry’ by performativity as Helen of Troy drains Dr Faustus. Under audit regimes, there is an impetus for “practitioners to organize [our]selves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations” (Ball, 2003, p. 215), enacting the process of sucking dry. The educator has no agency; it is a forced and actually one-way bargain.

Inauthentic because zombified

Zombie theory is used frequently in the literature to figure both the inauthentically excellent academic and the ones embracing counterintuitive corporate briefs out of economic necessity or fear. The analogy between the hegemonic impetus of the zombie and the zombification of institutions has been used by many scholars (Barker, 2017; Ginsberg, 2011; Katz, 2023; Ryan, 2012; Smythe, 2017). It is a mark of the non-critical application of the neoliberal growth imperative as the sole measure of success (Katz, 2023); a common theme in the recent discourse around the dissolution of Te Pūkenga and one at complete odds with any critical understanding of ‘excellence’ beyond its Zombielingo denotation, plundered “to promote and sell ‘product’” (Katz, 2023, p. 5).

In this literature, the top-down audit culture spread by neoliberalism is imagined as a toxin (Fleming, 2021; Smythe, 2017) or a global ‘variant’ of that disease, capitalism (McBride, 2022). In a similarly pathological vein, the neoliberalised university is figured as “schizophrenic” (Shore, 2010), meaning, in its 2010 context, partially inauthentic because dis-eased. Yet the vested inauthenticity of *homo oeconomicus* is presented as desirably measurable, but only among the neoliberalist citizenry (Skea, 2021). Like Roberts (2007), Fleming (2021) is scathing of the ideal citizen and their “academic star complex” born of “narcissism, insecurity, envy” (p. 116). The conflict of fighting values points to all-out war (Giroux, 2019): performing zombies against authentic educators – the veritable zombie apocalypse (Ginsberg, 2011).

Performed, or fake, excellence

Performed excellence is, then, inauthentic, but there are voices in the literature hopeful for the necessary return of authentic excellence. Tregear et al. (2022, p. 45) write of additional authentic academic values at threat: “Values that an academic might seek routinely to profess to uphold in one’s work such as a commitment to reason, objectivity, public responsibility, and the pursuit of knowledge are routinely compromised, thwarted,

trivialised, or dismissed by those above them.” Tregear et al. (2022) speak of the lost agency and authenticity of the academic as critical educator. A corporate, sloganised excellence has replaced the educator, mentor or learner’s authentic sense of excellence. Grifol (2016) offers a technocratic definition:

excellence can be (a) a certain combination of inputs (quality of the programme, quality of the teachers, quality of the learners, etc.) and outputs (even measured in quantities), (b) a culture in the use of inputs and cyclical progress for better outputs (ethos), or (c) a list of expected targets (achieved or not). (p. 96)

The use of ‘excellence’ as a business-oriented euphemism belongs to the vested discourse I argue is a form of imaginative, ideological and ethical constraint. Clearly, as Brusoni et al. (2014, p. 20) clarify, defining ‘excellence’ “depends on the person defining the term and their motivation for doing so.” The inauthentic excellence of the corporate and the authentic learner-centred, mana-enhancing excellence mentors aspire to are at odds.

METHODOLOGY

Autoethnography and narrative enquiry

What I write here derives unapologetically from my professional practice journey in mentoring and its methodological essence is evocative autoethnography (Sparkes, 2018). In evocative and indeed collaborative autoethnographies, a single identity unites the roles of author, researcher-explorer, and curator of others’ voices, a common feature of work-based methods (Costley et al., 2010). What I have observed, learned, and reflected on can only inform my study with experiential authenticity. While there is no one-size-fits-all model for the complexity of learners’ approaches to understanding the world and constructing their contributions to scholarship (Costley et al., 2010), there are common threads. Even though I may call on formal modes of evidence such as mentor kōrero (conversations, interviews), and solicited writing, I draw the threads together within autoethnography.

The study is qualitative, naturalistic, interpretative, and uses thematic narratives as a mode of curating the authentic voices, making it narrative enquiry, exploring experiences and stories (Reissman, 2008). Reissman argues stories are co-produced in a “complex geography;” “in spaces between teller and listener, speaker and setting, text and reader, history and culture” (2008, p. 105).

Ethics

The study started with a broadly heuristic phenomenology of the reported needs of new mentors, together with a study of whether learners felt their needs were met (Ethics approval, Otago Polytechnic HRE15-173). Because my daily practice involved textual exchanges with mentors, all shared and reported experiences fed into my emerging sense of what is seen as authentic about quality in mentoring. Relational ethics, requiring researchers to “act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and to initiate and maintain conversations” (Carey, 2008, p. 7) and Ellis’s (2007) ‘ethic of care’ came into play. Running with Ellis’s (2007) term, Andrew and Le Rossignol (2017) advise autoethnographers to “write for the greater good; remember you do not own your own story; expect the unexpected” (p. 235).

Participants

For the purposes of this short article, I draw on the voices of five mentors (four female, one male). Their average mentoring experience was six years, with two having 20 years’ experience, and three being relative beginners. As I admit of myself above, they carry within them the experiences of learners. These five mentor participants collectively function as a representative sample.

By way of limitation, I assert that within a broader construct of autoethnography, with myself as a sixth (but not directly quoted) mentor, I curate representative mentor narratives, weaving through a discussion that pinpoints cogent themes.

FINDINGS

The components of mentoring

I open this section with a guiding quote from a mentor. I position it here because it mentions core themes that resonate in the evidence sample, and which accord with my own perceptions. They state that the components of excellence in mentoring are embodied in the dispositions of the individual facilitator, and constitute a careful balance of judgement, intuition, compassion, and expertise:

Judgement refers to supporting the learner by careful guidance – meeting the milestones, signposting and referring the learner [to the most appropriate sources] when they meet the roadblocks of over-reading, underwriting or misdirection. Intuition relies on the core skills of listening and observing and checking in on the learner in terms of how they are feeling about their learner experience and progress. Compassion is the demonstration of support and empathy for the learner at moments of challenge, overload and stress. Expertise is the deployment of subject matter expertise for mutual benefit within the facilitation relationship. (Mentor 2)

Asked to nominate the elements of successful mentoring in a professional practice doctorate setting, Mentor 3 spoke independently but in thematic alignment with Mentor 2. They stated that mentoring is:

a recognition that the 'mentee' is developing in their critical analysis of a certain topic/area. The most important aspect is whanaungatanga – the relationship between the mentor and learner. The reciprocity of respect from both is also key. A good mentor shows empathy and keeps the space for whatever comes out. While it sounds a bit like therapy, the time in 'session' is *like* academic therapy. (Mentor 3)

The affective and relational aspects of mentoring are foregrounded in the evidence set, with a sense of mutual sharing of life's moments (whanaungatanga) setting the scene for building trust, and empathy characterising the developing interactional relationship. Mentor 4 echoes these themes:

The mentor needs to understand the psychology of their student, and to find a way of communicating with the students that motivates them and brings out the best in them:

- Build relations based on mutual respect and trust.
- Understand the strengths and weaknesses of the students (and your own).
- Enjoy the process.

Whanaungatanga functions to light the way to feeling the learner's psychological state and hence their needs at the outset of a session. A mentor may *kōrero* (converse) with a learner fortnightly or monthly, for instance, and will encounter a range of moods and states. Acknowledging how a learner is feeling is fundamental to a constructive conversation that both feeds back, acknowledges the present challenges, and makes way for future *mahi*. Creating spaces where it is possible to enjoy the journey is a key function of the mentor in the space of empathy. Mentor 4 paraphrases her learner, who believed: "Mentoring of any note develops over time, it's a relationship."

In addition to relational engagement, fostering researcher autonomy is also central. This process is figured by Mentor 4 in terms of promoting opportunities for critical decision-making:

I'm conscious of holding the space for the learner to make their own decisions about the directions they take in their inquiry. At the same time consistently reviewing the parameters of the requirements for the artefact, to provide guidance. I've learned that meeting progress deadlines allows the learner, and me as a mentor, time to review the work done, and to make changes or additions if needed to strengthen the work.

The more instrumental factor of keeping to time, in this text, becomes part of the mutual relationship of the mentor and mentee, so that the accountability loop is almost invisible within the close relational pact. Within those parameters, the mentor functions as a guide and advisor, feeding back on work reviewed and prospecting that needing to follow. Ensuring the learner retains responsibility for their pace of work and area of future endeavour is characteristic of mentors who promote the agency of research learners.

Mentor 5 lists the attributes of excellent mentors, reflecting on her own mentoring journey and reflecting on her co-mentors:

- Having a wide skill set from experience and knowing which skills to draw on, to suit different scenarios;
- Understanding different communication styles and learning styles and adapting to the students;
- Being clear on timelines for the project and to also manage one's own time;
- Building a deep trust bond over time;
- Staying in a learning space alongside the student;
- Staying forwards-focused on what can be done now, in place of what might happen.

There is considerable accord in the details offered by the mentors, possibly because they all share the discourse of a mentoring community of practice, but also because the mentor group shares practice in a way that pairs experienced with less experienced mentors, so that a culture of shared practice, discourse, and enterprise is formed.

CONCLUSION

Authentic excellence exists in the space of excellent teaching Goode (2023) identifies as occupied by rebels, rogues, and risk-takers. My call for the exercise of authentic excellence comes at a crucial juncture in the history of postgraduate education where authentic excellence is under fire. Saad-Filho (2021, p. 186) calls for "a politics of humanity and hope, organised around ... equality, collectivity, and economic and political democracy, against (a, by now, clearly zombie form of) neoliberalism." Extending the zombification metaphor, Hil et al. (2022, p. 3) write that polytechnics and universities "do not have to undergo a living death. They ... must contribute to the health and wellbeing of society, ensuring that students are prepared for jobs but also with a critical awareness of the changing world around them." The aspirational authentic excellence explored in this study works into this space, aligning with the programme's culture, as described throughout.

In this space and this time, a student-centred and person-focused model of mentoring that moves beyond problematic power differentials (Manathunga, 2007) is required. Since the context of the study is Aotearoa New Zealand, an emerging tikanga-led framework of doing mentor mahi has been proposed, inspired by Pihama et al. (2019).

The curated narratives of this study indicate that the features of an authentic mentor in a professional practice space include but are not limited to the following.

Firstly, listening and responding with empathy not only builds trust but also takes the mentor deeply into the world of the mentee's enquiry, enabling a more embodied understanding and fostering capacity for critical reflection.

Secondly, learners value effective communication in regard to issues of academic literacy (issues of structure, organisation, and referencing, for example) because these strategies make them proficient in the language of the discourse communities they wish to belong to through their professional doctorate journeys.

Thirdly, when mentors share insights and resources from their own communities of belonging, this enables learners to imagine themselves as able to network in similar professional communities.

Further, having a vision of the successful self is continually motivating, even in times of personal difficulty and moments when the Zeitgeist seems black, as for many during COVID-19.

Finally, tailoring support for individuals rather than applying a one-size-fits-all, institutionally-mandated, model of mentoring enables learners who think in non-traditional, creative, and subversive ways (or who may be neurodiverse) to develop authentic researcher identities and to utilise technology responsibly. Within this support and the reciprocity it implies, the instrumental factors of goal-setting and accountability become functions of care rather than process tick-boxes.

In *Teaching Well*, Brookfield et al. (2023, p. 193) conclude: "researching your context is the key to teaching well." Getting to know your learners and their journeys from the inside is crucial for professional practice doctoral mentors in pursuit of authentic excellence. This resonates well with the tikanga-led approach. Indeed, "unless you know how the people that you're dealing with are experiencing their learning, then you're severely hampered in your efforts to help them" (Brookfield et al., 2023, p. 193).

Authentic excellence starts with whanaungatanga, exchange, reciprocity, compassion, and empathy, and develops into embodied immersion in the learner's world.

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