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Tangled Threads: Mentoring within a community of practice
Fils emmêlés : le mentorat au sein d'une communauté de pratique

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Article abstract

Tangled Threads, a case study of a group of women art educators, examines the nature of mentoring relationships within the context of a professional association. Grounded in literature on *community of practice*, relational and peer mentoring, and an ethic of care, the study uncovers the complex interconnections between women's professional and personal lives that serve to create contexts for fluid and diverse mentoring experiences.

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TANGLED THREADS: MENTORING WITHIN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT. Tangled Threads, a case study of a group of women art educators, examines the nature of mentoring relationships within the context of a professional association. Grounded in literature on *community of practice*, relational and peer mentoring, and an ethic of care, the study uncovers the complex interconnections between women's professional and personal lives that serve to create contexts for fluid and diverse mentoring experiences.

FILS EMMÊLÉS: LE MENTORAT AU SEIN D'UNE COMMUNAUTÉ DE PRATIQUE

RÉSUMÉ. Fils emmêlés (*Tangled Threads*) est une étude de cas regroupant un groupe d'enseignantes en art. Elle examine les relations de mentorat prévalant dans le contexte d'une association professionnelle. Basée sur la littérature publiée sur les communautés de pratique, le mentorat relationnel et par les pairs ainsi que sur l'éthique des soins, cette étude lève le voile sur les interconnections complexes se tissant entre les vies professionnelles et personnelles des femmes. L'étude de cas souligne ainsi la manière dont ces liens favorisent la création d'un contexte propice à des expériences fluides et diverses de mentorat.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a portrait of a group of educators who have connected through the Early Childhood Art Educators (ECAE) special issues group of the professional organization, the National Art Education Association (NAEA), that serves educators working in school, museum and college settings. In a collaborative and reflective examination of the professional and personal relationships that we have developed over a 20-year time span, we have come to understand more deeply the role this organization has in providing a venue for developing a strong *community of practice* in that members "share a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p. 4) and how in creating this community, we have also created a community of mentors. One of the purposes of this paper is to describe the kinds of relational

(Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Ragins & Verbos, 2007) and reciprocal mentoring that developed over time within a group of women brought together through their interest in art education for young children (children 0-8 years of age) and the impact this has had on their professional and personal lives. Apparent within this mentoring is an ethic of care (Noddings, 1992).

METHOD

This research is a case study (Merriam, 1998) in that it examines a particular group at a particular time and is exploratory in nature. It is rooted in narrative inquiry in that "narrative is retrospective meaning-making – the shaping or ordering of past experience" (Chase, 2008, p. 64). The research reflects an autoethnographic approach (Bosetti, Kawalilak & Patterson, 2008) and like Bosetti et al., we have constructed deeper understanding through sharing our stories (p. 99). Within the context of interpretive research practice, the relevant literature and descriptions of methods and procedure are woven into the fabric of the paper (Creswell, 1994).

This study had its origins at the NAEA convention in New Orleans (2008) when the author sat back during a presentation and marveled at the wonderful friendships and relationships that had developed within this group of women since her first NAEA conference in 1987. I observed that our professional and personal lives have become intertwined into "tangled threads." I wondered how this entanglement had come about when meeting together only once a year. How could this be so powerful? What does this say about the importance of such groups within the larger NAEA organization and, subsequently, of possible importance to other professional organizations? Is this experience typical for members in other groups and other organizations? Is this experience a particularly feminine experience? Finally, I wondered whether these questions would intrigue other members of the ECAE special issues group?

The enthusiastic responses from the six colleagues I approached set the project in motion as a NAEA conference presentation for the following year. One qualification in this study is that it does not include all those who have attended ECAE business meetings or presented conference sessions under the ECAE category at NAEA over the years. This research involves only those members who have formed the strongest connections, including individuals at various stages in their careers – from new academics who became part of the group as graduate students, individuals in mid-career, and members nearing retirement. Time constraints in conducting the research meant that other members were not approached. Participants in the study all have doctoral degrees, although not all are currently working in higher education.

As I framed the project based on conversations with the colleagues I had approached, there emerged a strong belief that this was not my research, but our research and that the nature of the investigation itself must be collaborative

and dialogic. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board in February 2009 and in the informed consent forms participants agreed that they would like to be identified by name rather than represented anonymously.

I emailed guiding questions to the six participants asking them to comment on their length of membership in ECAE, describe the nature of their involvement, and how other members had supported them professionally and personally. As a way to gain deeper insights I asked them to respond to the "tangled threads" metaphor. Did it reflect their experiences with the group? I encouraged everyone to add to the questions as these were intended to be conversation starters. I also responded to the questions. I circulated all responses to each participant with the encouragement to comment on each other's responses believing that these would trigger memories or reflections. As electronic responses came in, I analyzed them for recurrent themes and began to research appropriate literature based on the emerging themes of mentoring and *community of practice*. I shared my analysis and insights with the participants and they responded. Three key themes emerged from the analysis of the responses and email conversations we held together: creating a *community of practice*, mentoring, and an ethic of care.

With the participants' support, I developed a conference presentation and we presented together at the NAEA conference in March 2009. When preparing this paper,participants were given the opportunity to be cited as co-authors. Consensus was that I should be credited as sole author with participants being acknowledged as collaborators. To ensure some anonymity around personal information that has been shared, some individuals are quoted directly and other quotations are cited anonymously.

CREATING THE EARLY CHILDHOOD ART EDUCATORS' SPECIAL ISSUES GROUP: A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice

Wenger (2006) says, "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) describe the components of a *community of practice*:

> A *community of practice* is a unique combination of three fundamental elements: a *domain* of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a *community* of people who care about this domain; and the shared *practice* that they are developing to be effective in their domain. (p. 27)

Wenger (2006) writes that communities of practice "Develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short a shared practice." To fully understand the creation of

a *community of practice* and the mentoring relationships which naturally and informally developed within the ECAE group, it is important to understand the history of this particular special issues group within the NAEA.

Annette, Tina and I first met at a NAEA conference in Washington, D.C. in April 1989. The following December, I met three other colleagues at the International Early Childhood Creative Arts Conference in Los Angeles, where we discovered that we shared an interest in early childhood art education. We reconnected in spring 1991 when a group of us that included Tina, Annette and me, participants from the LA conference, and others (now retired or no longer involved in ECAE), gathered at the NAEA conference in Atlanta to discuss our common interest in art education for young children, and to share concerns about what was being promoted through some of the conference presentations as appropriate art experiences for young children. Members of this gathering included individuals interested in young children's art education from a variety of contexts: higher education, graduate students, educators working with young children, and museum educators. We concluded that we needed to have visibility and voice within the organization to advocate for high quality art education for young children based on current research and practice. After five years of hard work together, the NAEA recognized us as a special issues group. A second event, tangential to NAEA, but significant in the development of the ECAE and our interpersonal relationships, was a conference on early childhood art education held at University of Illinois Champaign/Urbana in September 1992. It provided another venue for us to make the field of early childhood art education more visible to ourselves and others. We were in the process of creating *a community of practice* (Wenger, 2006; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder; 2002) in coming together to share and improve our work.

Our annual business meetings and extended sessions have provided opportunities for members to engage in such learning from each other. We reorganize meeting room chairs into a circle and invite each attendee to share their context and issues that emerge for them from their work with young children. In this way we have tried to be inclusive and to invite people into a more active participation in the group. Through these opportunities we have developed a shared repertoire of resources and experiences. For example, Jennifer wrote about her experience in joining the group in 2005:

> As a new member of the group and new professor, at the time that the ECAE position statement was being drafted, I found that the work we did on the document during our business meetings to be an important way to come to understand the other members' understandings, visions and passions. Our discussions of wording and our deliberations on the orientation of certain statements were invaluable to me in understanding the nuances of practice and philosophy espoused by a group that strongly shares core values.

Writing and publications have been another way to sustain our *community of practice.* Very early in our work together, prior to becoming a recognized group, Tina edited *The Visual Arts and Early Childhood Learning* for NAEA (published in 1995), which perhaps was our first visibility in NAEA. Although published before ECAE became an official special issues group, this book included many contributors who came together unofficially at NAEA. Our column in the NAEA newsletter is also a way that one member identified of staying connected between conferences and so has helped to support the maintenance of this *community of practice*.

Wenger (2006) recognizes that communities of practice do not need to meet daily but that members must interact and develop relationships. According to Wenger, members "build relationships that enable them to learn from each other.". We have built relationships through the work that we have done together: to establish the ECAE, to identify topics and writers for NAEA Advisories (short publications on a single topic published by the association), to write our position statement, to create ideas for conference presentations, and to share work at our business meetings. While engaging in these activities, we were not conscious of developing a *community of practice*, nor of building relationships; we were focused on the work. Much of our relationship building, or perhaps consolidation of the relationships being built, occurred outside of this direct work, over lunches, drinks and dinner as we connected pre and post conference sessions. Yet it is this community that has provided a site for diverse forms of mentorship.

MENTORING

Ragins and Kram (2007) define mentoring as a "developmental relationship that is embedded within the career context" (p. 5). They suggest that mentoring in the career context is different from other personal relationships "in that the primary focus of the relationship is on career development and growth" (p. 5). Consistent with this definition, research on mentoring seems to have focused on business, workplace and academic settings, and within particular professions, such as nursing and education.

Traditionally, mentoring is constructed as a hierarchical relationship "in which one person serves as a teacher, sage and sponsor to another in order to facilitate the other's professional and career goals" (McGuire & Reger, 2003, p. 56). Drawing from extensive literature, they describe mentoring as including both socio-emotional and instrumental support. They state that, "instrumental help in academia includes assistance with publications, networking at conferences, getting one's work noticed, and acquiring funding" (p. 56).

McGuire and Reger (2003) propose a co-mentoring model based on their own experiences when mentorships were not available to them. Lack of available mentors is an issue raised by others, especially when it comes to women and

minorities (e.g. Bennion, 2004). McGuire and Reger provided a structure for their co-mentoring relationship around goal setting and focusing on achievements. While they were employed the same field, the authors had different backgrounds and research agendas so were not in competition with each other. They identified their co-mentoring as feminist due to the balance of power in their relationship, and they "valued cooperation over competition and collective success over individual success" (p. 64). Additionally, in their relationship they integrated "professional and personal goals" which, they claimed "challenged the notion of the 'disembodied work' in academia" (p.64). "By making our personal goals as important as our professional goals, we sought to *re-balance* our roles as academics and to value the many roles we played as women" (p. 64).

From the perspective of an academic working on a task force on mentoring in the area of political science, Bennion (2004) takes up a similar theme of co-mentoring. She concludes that peer mentoring can benefit, not only junior faculty members, but also senior faculty who engage in co-mentoring relationships. McManus and Russell (2007) write in a similar vein:

> Once the peer relationship becomes a peer mentorship, it is characterized by increasing amounts of intimacy, vulnerability, and authenticity that span both work and personal domains. This differs from close friendships because there is a conscious focus on work and career development, though that is not the exclusive focus of the relationship. (p. 280)

Others (McGuire & Reger, 2003; Ragins & Kram, 2007; Ragins & Verbos 2007) suggest that the hierarchical definition of mentoring presents a limited view of mentoring as a one-way proposition that limits understanding of mentoring relationships.

McKeen and Bujaki (2007) argue that gender issues must be addressed in research on mentoring, stating that "a masculine model of mentoring considers the relationship from an instrumental perspective – what the relationship can do – while a feminine model of mentoring looks at the relationships from an affective or relational point of view – what the relationship can be" (p. 199). This is a theme that appears in notions of peer, mutual and reciprocal mentoring that have become foci for research (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; McGuire & Reger, 2003; McKeen & Bujaki, 2007; Ragins & Verbos, 2007). Ragins defines relational mentoring as "an interdependent and generative developmental relationship that promotes mutual growth, learning and development within the career context" (Ragins 2005 as cited in Ragins & Verbos, p. 96). It is a relational definition of mentoring that seems to provide the most appropriate lens through which to view the mentoring relationships described in this project. What seems to be missing in research on mentoring is the possible role that professional associations may play in providing mentorship opportunities

Mentoring within a community of practice

Many of the examples of mentoring within the ECAE as a *community of practice* are illustrations of traditional instrumental assistance and support as described by McGuire and Reger (2003) and have been included in the discussion of *community of practice*. In addition, members have mentored each other by reviewing article drafts prior to submission, discussing ideas for conference proposals and research, and engaging in informal discussions. Mentoring within the ECAE has been reciprocal in nature (Bennion, 2004; Ragins & Verbos, 2007) rather than based on age or experience.

For example, Pam, a member of the ECAE special issues group, describes:

> For the last three NAEA conferences, I have roomed with Marissa, who is at least 25 years younger than me, and shared her journey of writing a dissertation. She may not know it, but her work with young children continually mentors me. Every time I room with her, I always go away with a renewed sense of possibility and excitement about our work. Since I came of age during the low tech years, I feel that her involvement in contemporary technology, (e.g. blogs and Facebook for families) continues to educate me.

Mentoring has occurred in expected and unexpected ways. It was surprising to the author that mentoring was identified as including events such as conference presentations where the presentation provided a kind of scaffold of possibilities for ways of conducting oneself, and our attendance at each other's sessions created value for what the presenter may have to say. It is through the acceptance of presentations under the ECAE conference stream that individuals have also been brought into the group. Mentoring and support were provided through the creation of a *community of practice*, as we sat around a circle sharing our work at our business meetings.

Direct mentoring also occurred in less traditional settings, such as walking through an exhibition of Cindy Sherman's photographs at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago while discussing a dissertation proposal, or on the steps of a museum as when in 1989 Pat first met Annette whose doctoral thesis provided much-needed grounding for her own work. What she didn't know until this project was that Annette had been on the lookout for her because of an article Pat had written. Later, Pam shared that she had read most of our dissertations as a precursor to her own. Mentoring through writing occurs beyond dissertations:

> Another way that I feel mentored by the group members is through their writing. Every time I read their work, I am always amazed at what great writers my colleagues are. Whenever I read a draft, hear a presentation or read an article in a journal, I feel as if I glean from both the quality of their writing and the richness of their ideas. As a novice researcher, their voices give me inspiration to write and to write well.

Mentoring has taken another form in creating panel presentations for each NAEA conference. The first panel was in 1992 in Phoenix and since that time at least three of us have consistently presented together. We decide on a theme through which we can find a common point and prepare separate presentations. Tina comments:

> I think of the group presentations as the core of our coming together for many years. We would rotate the proposal duties, and engage in a flurry of discussion, by phone and e-mail, for a week or two in the summer. We would check in with each other a month or so before the conference, and often get together for breakfast or a drink to organize the session before it happened.
>
> But we did not communicate much during the year, all busy with our own projects. The remarkable thing was that, year after year, our presentations turned out to be cohesive and complementary. It so often turned out that we were reading the same texts and coming to similar conclusions and questions in the contexts of our own research and teaching.
>
> But I think this kind of convergence of interest and experience is what drew us together and led us forward throughout the years. There is a great deal of agreement, and very little rancor, among us. There is an agenda; there are no egos.

As one member indicates, the value of sharing extends to research projects:

> I have benefited from the mentoring aspect by getting support for research projects. I have tried out some of my ideas for papers on members of the group. It is good to have differences of opinion in order to examine the broader view from the group. There is a feeling of community when one has an idea or perspective that requires an informed response as well as social support and trust.

These examples illustrate the value for cooperation (McGuire & Reger, 2003). The feminine, relational aspects of mentoring described by McKeen and Bujaki (2007) emerge more clearly in the following discussion on Themes and Threads.

THEMES AND THREADS

When I conceptualized this project, I chose *tangled threads* as a metaphor as a way to describe the interconnections between our professional and personal lives. It seemed to be appropriate because of the association of fiber crafts as "women's work," whether it is spinning, weaving, knitting, sewing, lace making, or felting. Our network is composed of women – rarely does a man appear at our meetings – which is typical in the field of early childhood education. We were interested to understand more about the tangling of our threads personally or the socio-emotional support that McGuire and Reger (2003) identify as part of mentoring. These tangled threads are the themes from our professional work together and the intertwining of this work with our personal

lives as we come together. I asked the others to respond to this metaphor to see if I had created one that had meaning for them. One participant saw the threads as "our tether to each other between conventions." Over the course of 10-20 years, we have experienced many of life's major events: marriages (ourselves and our children), divorces, deaths of spouses and parents, arrival of grandchildren, health concerns such as cancer, dissertation completion, job changes, and even a house fire. These threads have indeed connected us throughout these personal events in our lives. It is in these discussions that the relational aspect of mentoring becomes especially clear.

Originally grappling with a feeling there were negative connotations in knots or tangles, Pam, a weaver, reflects:

> I decided to do a contour line drawing of intersecting threads. That was it! I began to draw a meandering line across a piece of paper and then another one, and then another one. I became entranced by how many intersections of a line crossing lines began to appear. I saw how the lines or *threads* – representing our individual lives – connected with each other sometimes randomly, sometimes planned. At a conference, I may bump into an ECAE colleague at a session and have a conversation about what's new in her life – and then connect right afterwards with another colleague, discussing her upcoming journal article or plans for summer travel.... Often we encounter a knot in the threads – what could be a problem we are having in our professional or personal lives. At these knots or junctures we support each other in seeing new and multiple possibilities.

In this way, Pam has described co-mentoring (McGuire & Reger, 2003; Ragins & Verbos, 2007) and the importance of affective relationships in mentoring (McKeen & Bujaki, 2007).

Tangled threads do imply knots or difficulties but these can be seen as possibilities rather than through a negative lens. Carolyn Edwards (1998) compares knots in thread to cognitive knots or "moments of cognitive disequilibrium, containing positive possibilities for regrouping, hypothesis testing, and intellectual comparison of ideas. They can produce interactions that are constructive not only for socializing but also for constructing new knowledge" (p. 187).

Another participant comments:

> We tangle sometimes on differing points of view, but always resolve our differences. We have strong personalities but know that we are united around a common mission. Our threads tangle when we stop to offer support and afterwards they run smoothly. It's a changing thing, I think. We are entangled because we share our personal lives as well as professional.

Marissa adds:

> I am a seamstress, so I like this metaphor! And, as I become more involved with the field, I see how the threads begin to tangle further. Too, I think about Loris Malaguzzi's idea that knowledge is like "a tangle of spaghetti"

(Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 7). I think tangles can be thought of as something to avoid, rather than something to seek and to make visible. I like that Malaguzzi's quote and the metaphor of tangled threads emphasize the positive connotation of the tangle.

Penny comments:

> This group of friends has been my main stay through my years of involvement with NAEA. We know about each other's research, families, students, and job changes. We enjoy sight seeing together and shopping and exploring the arts sights of the convention city. But most importantly, I know they will be there for my presentations. I also make my conference schedule out with their presentations in mind. We keep up with the research of the field and discuss it at the evening's dinner. I always bring back some of the content of their presentations to my current classes.

Another reflects:

> The Early Childhood Art Group is one of the most important associations I have professionally, but it is also an important personal association. Although I only meet up with these women every couple of years at the NAEA convention, I feel that I am a part of their lives, and they of mine. I feel a deep connection, even though we are so separated in time and space.

These comments illustrate the "intimacy, vulnerability, and authenticity" identified by McManus & Russell (2007) in their description of peer mentorship.

AN ETHIC OF CARE

Implicit in our work together is an "ethic of care" (Noddings, 1992). We care for each other under what Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) describe as "attentive caring" (p. 143) in which empathy plays an important role in constructing our understanding together. Our role as what Belenky et al. would describe as "constructivist" women is consistent with our early childhood value for constructivist learning where we do not listen to one voice of authority but operate from a social constructivist perspective. Reciprocity and cooperation are prominent in our interactions. It is within these notions of care and collaboration that we have grown together as a group whose strengths lie in both the strengths of each participant and the strengths of the group in a balanced relationship (McGuire & Reger, 2003). While these values and this way of working are not exclusively within the domain of feminism, they are certainly components of a feminist grounding to our work (McKeen & Bujaki, 2007). Porter (1996) writes, "Caring autonomy brings together concerns of 'others' and of 'self'" (p. 75). For example, Penny says, "I know they care for me. They have given me major support in my job changes. We bring photos to share our past year with each other." Another participant remembers:

> Two years ago my 20-year marriage ended. About six weeks after we separated, I attended NAEA in New York. The group was an incredible support to me, sharing their stories, their journeys, and providing windows of hope. I

suspect my respect for the women of the group is as much founded on their considerable professional accomplishment as it is on their strength, courage, kindness and compassion as women.

Marissa writes:

I found my footing in NAEA through the ECE group and encouragement and support for my research and teaching interests. The conversations I have had over the past years as Pam's roommate have supported me through two cross-country moves, four different teaching positions, one research position, a dissertation, and a tenure-track job search! .... I realize, too, that while the group has a rich history, they are especially open to sharing with and supporting newer members.

CONCLUSION

Our tangled threads have been knitted together to form a *community of practice* that is like a family that gets together once a year for several days. We have knitted together, through knotted yarn and entanglements, a family that has had a strong impact on both our professional and personal lives. From the stories and research, this small inquiry demonstrates the power and importance that such groups within NAEA can provide for its members. It has provided mentoring and networking opportunities that bridge countries (Canada and the United States), institutions, and ages. It is deeper than attending a conference to hear about current work in the field and engage in professional networking. It may be that we have a unique combination of values originating in early childhood education that has served to ground this family in ways that may be especially strong within this particular special interest group.

We could not find other literature on mentoring that addresses the kind of mentoring that has arisen from our membership in a professional association and suggest that this could be a rich area for future research. Nor did we find literature that addressed how strong interpersonal relationships support professional mentoring since the literature focuses on mentoring within professional relationships. This is another area that could be taken up by future inquiry. We think that several factors have come together to make our experiences of mentoring possible: an organization that has supported the development of a *community of practice*; an organization that has advocacy as well as professional and educational goals because advocacy work has been one of the key factors that has bound us together; working together on endeavors such as creating the special interest group, preparing conference papers, writing a position statement; values for constructivism and collaboration; and many informal as well as formal opportunities to connect which have supported mentoring in diverse forms.

We know that through these relationships, our research and writing endeavors, as well as our personal relationships have been supported and enhanced in ways that we are just beginning to understand. Many mentoring situations are

limited by temporal or formal boundaries, such as being mentored as a graduate student, or becoming a member of an academic community where new faculty members are mentored by senior faculty. These tend to be temporal and situational, which have closure. In our case, the relationships are ongoing and fluid, supporting diverse forms of mentoring. Through collaboration on this project, we have become more aware of the mentoring we do for each other.

We have suggested there is a feminist cast to our experience (Belenky et al., 1986; Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; McGuire & Reger, 2003; Noddings, 1992) but without further research we have no way of knowing how our experience may differ from men's experiences within the NAEA or other professional organizations. This has been a limited, exploratory case study of one particular group of women. It does, however, raise questions for additional research, such as further investigation about the role of professional associations in providing mentoring opportunities. Results from the present case study suggest that there may be other contexts where informal, reciprocal mentoring relationships contribute to the professional and personal lives of those involved.

NOTE

An earlier version of this paper was presented by the author and her colleague at the National Art Education Association Conference, April 17-21, 2009, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

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