

ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

Reflections on Mentoring: Women in leadership with technology in mind

Lynn Gribble

University of NSW

Jasvir Nachatar Singh

La Trobe University

Sandra Barker

University of South Australia

This reflective narrative explores the experiences of a mentoring group of three involved with the ASCILITE Women in Academic Leadership program (WiAL). It considers the difficulties and isolation which women in academe can face, specifically where their interests align with Technology Enhanced Learning. It demonstrates how support builds resilience to develop impact statements to enable recognition through promotion and awards. Through these accounts, the value of lived experience and shared interest underpins the success of the mentoring program and highlights how the lack of power structures can enhance mentoring outcomes.

Keywords: Women in academic leadership, technology enhanced learning, academic impact

This paper is a reflective narrative considering the specific needs of women in academic leadership who have a focused interest in technology enhanced learning. While mentorship is noted to assist women in academic leadership and also in technology it is this nexus which is important to explore. By exploring the specific focus of women in leadership where technology meets academe, this paper explores how unique circumstances can be effectively supported through mentorship to develop pathways previously unexplored or seemingly unavailable. The accounts consider the perspectives of being both a mentee and mentor or both. Importantly, these narratives see women rise both in status and efficacy through the program and the relationships that are developed, exceeding the stated outcomes and personal expectations motivating the original desire to join the program.

Women are underrepresented in academic leadership

Generally, women academics have been deprived of opportunities in the higher education sector globally, especially in career development (Aiston et al., 2020). Women are underrepresented in the most senior ranks and leadership roles, positioning this as an international phenomenon as well as a social justice issue (Aiston et al., 2020). While women represent more than 50% of the Australian workforce, they are less likely to participate or be provided the opportunity to occupy senior managerial roles than men (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). In academia, based on statistics offered by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2020), indicate there are nearly twice as many males above senior lecturer (10,523 male vs 5,919 female). It is clear, there are significant barriers for women in gaining leadership positions.

The main barrier relates to the greater role women academics play in domestic duties such as childcare, motherhood and carer responsibilities (Sang et al., 2013). According to Mousa (2021), women academics working in public universities are reluctant and demotivated to accept leadership roles due to their family responsibility especially in caring for and raising children. As these duties are time consuming, they have limited time to manage their research and teaching responsibilities, let alone to perform leadership roles effectively (Mousa, 2021). Bhopal (2020) articulated that those women academics who took two years' career break due to maternity leave faced challenges in transitioning back to research work. They were far behind in publication numbers and keeping up with current research and connecting with networks (Bhopal, 2020).

Another barrier according to Morely (2014) is related to women's identity as teachers as they are often tasked with teaching and student support roles, coupled with academic housework or administrative tasks. COVID-19 has intensified the 'teacher identity' issue, as teaching was conducted remotely, and the boundary between work and home was compromised (McGaughey et al., 2021). Although research is implicitly associated with the pathway to academic seniority and is perceived as an indicator for promotion (Morley, 2014), women leaders use their research time to meet teaching and administrative obligations (Acker, 2014) with the result that women's research performance and productivity are on the decline (Morley, 2014).

Women in technology

Aufschläger et al. (2023) note how women in technology have faced barriers long term. Their study, 2013 – 2022, indicates that the industry remains heavily male-dominated. Mentoring can be categorised under three domains: relationship, content-related and organizational aspects. However, where there are organisational aspects issues of power imbalance may occur. When this is considered in relation to educational technology, the needs of women in this area may be even more nuanced. This is also identified by Daniels et al. (2019) suggesting women's mentoring programs may need different design or have different requirements. For women in academe, who may be neither engineers nor information systems trained at a discipline level, their specialised interest in technology has the potential to see their interest marginalised. This marginalisation anecdotally could be caused by either a lack of focus of the academic on the technology research/discipline or that leadership in educational technology is often the purview of professional or "third-space" academics compared with education focussed or balanced academics outside the technology discipline. As technology users rather than experts, their leadership is often about inspiring others to adopt and adapt technology use to enhance learning outcomes, teaching delivery or administrative tasks. Given this, when gender is added to this mix, it would appear women in educational technology face two concurrent barriers (McCullough, 2020). Similar barriers exist in both areas which include balancing work/home life, devaluing of achievements, and imposter syndrome. While support from a partner, and encouragement from peers helps, the main assistance women are likely to get will come from other women in a similar situation as themselves. As a result, personalised mentoring that considers the overlap of educational technology and leadership seems appropriate, particularly as there may be a lack of role models to support such development.

ASCILITE is able to offer mentorship through its WiAL program. By co-locating women who share educational technology and leadership development expertise, the mentorship offered is both fit for purpose and unique in its combination of expertise. The WiAL program gives participants the opportunity to identify and access female academics in more senior roles to support development while concurrently creating a group of likeminded peers to share the journey (Bone et al, 2024). In consideration of the barriers, institutional support and strategies need to be put in place to assist women academics to thrive in leadership roles. Given that mentoring is a powerful tool for career advancement. This mentoring support will allow women academics to feel empowered and achieve a thriving career in academia (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016).

Method

To explore the WiAL mentoring experience, each person in the group was asked to complete a reflective narrative. These accounts enable a sense making exercise to provide a lens to the experience. Narratives enable each participant to explore the richness of the experience and consider the impact on their careers over the two-year long program. As ASCILITE is a 'sister' organisation the UK, Association for Learning Technology, provide a descriptor of such text for evaluation that are "of a reflective and analytical nature and not solely descriptive ... personal ... in the first person singular" (Association for Learning Technology, 2016, p. 3). Further, exploring practice through narratives as personal storytelling provides descriptions, critical reflection and evidence to illustrate practice (e.g., Beckmann, 2016; Bornais & Buchholz, 2018; Kuiper & Stein 2019). Beckmann and Gribble (2021) state "Learning to write, reflect, think and rewrite within the genre of a reflective narrative ... is very much a development part of the process of developing a conscious reflective practice". As such personal reflective narratives have been employed for this study. The following section uses extracts from these narratives to hear the voices in an ethnographic account of mentoring.

Being mentored and mentoring: The mentor's reflection

With a discipline background in organisational behaviour, technology is a great interest and passion. Seeing technology as an enabler of education, it was the 'how' of my job role rather than the role itself. This made my teaching easier and

more engaging (Barker & Gribble, 2024). In teaching online and large compulsory core classes, I want my students to have personalised learning and be successful in their learning (either measured by grades or work-based outcomes beyond the program). I joined the WiAL program as a mentee, recognising that to navigate the promotions pathway ahead would be complex as a digital innovator. My role had not been visible via a discipline and its impact was hard to quantify or measure. Being a mentee gave me access to see how other women had navigated the technology with teaching 'space'. It was their lived experience and the desire to support my development unconditionally that made a huge difference both tactically and emotionally. These women were agnostic to the institution, and my discipline but not to the challenges I faced. This was a 'game changer'. The conversations and opportunities were explored in a multi-faceted manner, seeing leadership as a process and a property but most importantly it was the uniqueness of leadership with educational technology that found me situated with likeminded mentors and other mentees exploring opportunities.

After two years as a mentee, I was promoted and I wanted to give back to the program and commenced as a mentor, with two newly promoted Senior Lecturer Mentees, we meet monthly via zoom, but we were focused. With a clear charter of capturing the impact of each month's wins and overcoming the shared challenges experienced as women leaders with technology. The sessions became support to develop professional statements, share the triumphs and challenges, and grow together. Having been through a similar process also meant I had developed an awareness of my own growth and the unconscious needs (after Maslow). I looked for specific collaborative opportunities, the ones that are 'hidden in plain sight' away from the pure disciplinary ones. Through the lens of SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning), activities such as conference presentations and papers were developed and exploited to provide all of us, together, opportunities for growth. It was also joyous to support applications for teaching awards that were pleasingly successful. Focused mentoring that looks at educational technology and leadership is a niche and often a complex area to unpack. Together, through mentoring, we were able to achieve this.

An international academic: Mentee 1 reflection

I consider myself an international academic as I was born and educated overseas in Malaysia and completed my general education and bachelor's degree there. I came to Australia to pursue postgraduate studies (master's and PhD) under Malaysian and Australian government (Endeavour) scholarships. Upon PhD completion I commenced as an Early Career Development Fellow (Level A) position on contract and within two years, became a continuing Lecturer at a similar university and then promoted to Senior Lecturer within three years. My research expertise in the higher education discipline with a particular interest in exploring international students' lived experiences of their academic success, employability and career aspirations, as well as learning experiences in a blended learning environment. I also explore international academics' leadership experiences, such as their challenges and opportunities in Australian higher education. I have recorded more fully my career journeys in book chapters (Singh, 2020; Singh, 2022a).

As an international academic, I face intersectionality barriers – being a woman and a migrant in Australian higher education system. The challenges that I have personally faced are navigating the academic work culture, lack of connections and web of networks in Australia, burdened with administrative duties (or academic housework) and lack of opportunity to be mentored and coached by Australian academic(s). These challenges are not only faced by me but also well documented in the migrant related literature (Singh, 2022b; Singh, 2023). Based on these challenges that I have faced in academia and wanting to apply for promotion to Associate Professor in two years, I joined the WiAL program. Each month we (mentor and mentees) meet to discuss challenges and celebrate successes. For me, this mentorship relationship was not a transactional one, but more of relationship building with not only with the mentor but also with the other mentee and built understanding to navigate Australian academia. I had the chance to discuss my research and teaching related challenges and be guided on how to address them. For example, the mentor has guided me on how to seize leadership opportunities (be it formal or informal) and most importantly on how to capture the impact of the achievements that I have received. This exercise has a profound impact on me as being an Asian, we hardly celebrate our successes let alone capturing the impact humbly.

Learning to lead: Mentee 2 reflection

As an analytical chemist by training with a background in computer programming, I moved into academe late. With a background in business, and a history of technology use I started out teaching first- and second-year undergraduate Business Information Systems courses and quickly developed an interest in using technology to support teaching. With the support in my early academic career of two strong female academics I was encouraged to investigate and

incorporate technology enhanced strategies into my teaching. Being exposed to such focussed mentoring early in my career has allowed me to recognise when to take up new opportunities. The loss of these mentors saw me stuck in the teaching treadmill, struggling to complete a PhD and experiencing a long and drawn-out promotion track.

Joining ASCILITE meant finding my 'tribe'. Unlike my experiences in the workplace where my colleagues were not really interested in testing out new technologies or teaching techniques, the ASCILITE community was one of acceptance and new ideas. While leadership opportunities have regularly come my way due to my interest in Technology Enhanced Learning and the enthusiasm I bring from my ASCILITE 'tribe', the ability to navigate the academic terrain of promotion has been more problematic. Being part of this mentor group allowed me to focus on ME and the mentor's enthusiasm for us and the process is infectious. It has encouraged me to not only consider mentoring the next round of WiAL but to seek out more mentoring opportunities within my own workplace.

Discussion and implications

Considering the context of the mentor and mentees through the narratives, along with what they gained during the program is insightful. They deflect from the criticism of mentoring programs (Dashper, 2019) as these reflective narratives highlight how the mentorship covered the three domains of relationship, content-related and organizational aspects as noted by Aufschläger et al. (2023). The organisational aspects were also of importance because while higher education as a sector may be a common factor, each institution has its own promotion and awards pathways to navigate. Further, it is clear that these women have bonded, navigated difficulty and have used the experiences and support of each other to succeed. Perhaps this mentorship is more akin to shepherding or stewardship where guidance and safety combine and as a result what emerges goes beyond a change in status to a change in identity.

With one turning into a mentor and another seeking to do the same, the helped become the helper. There is a sense of reciprocity, and a benevolence to assist others to navigate this complex and often male dominated environment. Further, such a program provides visibility to enable others. While getting a mentor is widely acknowledged as helpful, it would appear when multiple barriers are at play, specialised mentorship may be even more important.

Conclusion

Mentoring is noted to be valuable, but where the mentees have niche interests and needs, the mentor's own niche experience can assist to navigate the complexities noted for women in technology and HE. By sharing lived experience and recognising the intertwined nature of navigating leadership through the lens of being female and involved in technology, programs that are designed to bring together mentors and mentees on an interest basis without any power relations can be seen to be successful. Together, the road is more tolerable and less difficult.

References

- Acker, S. (2014). A foot in the revolving door? Women academics in lower-middle management. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(1), 73-85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.864615>
- Aiston, S. J., Fo, C. K., & Law, W. W. (2020). Interrogating strategies and policies to advance women in academic leadership: The case of Hong Kong. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 42(3), 347-364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2020.1753393>
- Aufschläger, L., Kusanke, K., Witte, A., & Kendziorra, J., Winkler, T. (2023). The Use of Women Mentoring Programs to Reduce the Gender Gap in IT Professions - A Literature Review and Critical Reflection. *Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS) 2023: Panama* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371874743>
- Barker, S., & Gribble, L.C. (2024). Exploring student response systems for large group teaching: a tale of engagement at scale. *Journal of Work-Applied Management*, 16(2), 316–328. [https://doi: 10.1007/978-3-031-17841-2](https://doi:10.1007/978-3-031-17841-2)
- Beckmann, E.A., & Gribble, L.C. (2021). CMALT 2011 and 2021: Personal narratives for professional recognition. In Gregory, S., Warburton, S., & Schier, M. (Eds.), *Back to the Future – ASCILITE '21. Proceedings ASCILITE 2021 in Armidale* (pp. 345–351). <https://doi.org/10.14742/ascilite2021.0150>
- Beckmann, E.A. (2016). Teaching excellence: Recognising the many as well as the few. In M. Davis & A. Goody (Eds.), *Research and Development in Higher Education: The Shape of Higher Education*, 39, 13–22. <http://www.herdsa.org.au/publications/conference-proceedings/research-and-development-higher-educationshape-higher-1>

- Bhopal, K. (2020). Gender, ethnicity and career progression in UK higher education: A case study analysis. *Research Papers in Education*, 35(6), 706-721. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1615118>
- Bornais, J., & Buchholz, A. C. (2018). Becoming a more reflective teacher by serving on a university teaching awards committee. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal*, 11(1). <https://journals.kpu.ca/index.php/td/article/download/783/267>
- Daniels, H. A., Grineski, S. E., Collins, T. W., and Frederick, A. H. (2019). Navigating social relationships with mentors and peers: Comfort and belonging among men and women in STEM summer research programs. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 18(2), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.18-08-0150>
- Dashper, K. (2019). Challenging the gendered rhetoric of success? The limitations of women-only mentoring for tackling gender inequality in the workplace. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 26(4), 541-557. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12262>
- Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2020). *Number of full-time and fractional full-times staff by age group, current duties classification and gender, 2020*. Retrieved 2 January 2022 from <https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2020-staff-numbers>
- Howe-Walsh, L., & Turnbull, S. (2016). Barriers to women leaders in academia: Tales from science and technology. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(3), 415-428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.929102>
- Kuiper, A.C. & Stein, S.J (2019) Engaging, innovating and inspiring: The paradox of the mediated voice of award-winning teachers, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(6), 1197-1212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1626811>
- McGaughey, F., Watermeyer, R., Shankar, K., Suri, V. R., Knight, C., Crick, T., & Chung, R. (2021). 'This can't be the new norm': academics' perspectives on the COVID-19 crisis for the Australian university sector. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1973384>
- Morley, L. (2014). Lost leaders: Women in the global academy. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(1), 114-128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.864611>
- Mousa, M. (2021). From intersectionality to substantive representation: Determinants of the representation of women faculty in Academic contexts: Voices of Egyptian academic leaders. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2021.1990317>
- Sang, K., Al-Dajani, H., & Özbilgin, M. (2013). Frayed careers of migrant female professors in British academia: An intersectional perspective. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 20(2), 158-171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12014>
- Singh, J. (2020). Why should I walk the same career development pathways as everyone else? In Nghia Tran, Thanh Pham, Michael Tomlinson, Karen Medica & Chris Thompson (Eds.), *Developing and Utilizing Employability Capitals: Graduates' Strategies across Labour Markets* (Vol. 1). Routledge.
- Singh, J. (2022a). An international early-career academic journey in Australia. In Jasvir Kaur Nachatar Singh (Ed.), *Academic Mobility and International Academics: Challenges and Opportunities (Surviving and Thriving in Academia Book Series)*. Emerald Publishing.
- Singh, J. (2022b). Leadership challenges and opportunities experienced by international women academics: A case study in Australia. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 19(1), 140-159. <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.19.1.09>
- Singh, J. (2023). Migrant academics' career capital experiences in Australian universities: A qualitative study. *Higher Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01152-3>

Gribble, L., Nachatar Singh, J., & Barker, S. (2024). Reflections on Mentoring: Women in leadership with technology in mind. In Cochrane, T., Narayan, V., Bone, E., Deneen, C., Saligari, M., Tregloan, K., Vanderburg, R. (Eds.), *Navigating the Terrain: Emerging frontiers in learning spaces, pedagogies, and technologies*. Proceedings ASCILITE 2024. Melbourne (pp. 573-577). <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2024.1382>

Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process. The author(s) assign a Creative Commons by attribution license enabling others to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon their work, even commercially, as long as credit is given to the author(s) for the original creation.