

The role of Mentorship in Universities: The Knowledge Management Framework

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Abstract: In this paper we discuss mentorship in the university context with a focus on knowledge sharing and creation. We assume from the outset that academics and actors representing practice, as well as students, can be considered as distinct or interlinked communities of practice, where the participants of the community share similar values, norms and practices that follow community-specific dominant logics. We suggest there is a role for mentors between academia, student life and fields of practice, and that the knowledge creation and sharing processes can take different formats, similar to changing mentor roles in facilitating or sharing the knowledge processes. We discuss the roles of mentors in the knowledge sharing contexts of communities of practice building on previous studies reflecting the professional identity of students and mentoring in those same contexts. We look at knowledge and learning as processes, acknowledging the specific nature of tacit and explicit knowledge following the perspectives from the SECI model and experiential learning. We further elaborate the role of mentors in sharing and building knowledge focusing on the university context. The results indicate that mentoring takes various forms and needs different enabling processes in different contexts within university cycles. The role of informal unexpected mentoring occurring within the 'ordinary' learning context is often ignored. The contribution of the paper provides a deeper understanding of mentoring in the university, as well as elaborating on the mentor as a knowledge activist contributing new insights in knowledge management discussions. The study has managerial implications related to new approaches to transforming mentoring from being an "add-on" activity to an integrated part of university curriculum development.

Keywords: Mentorship, arts universities, communities of practice, experiential learning, knowledge, professional identity

1. Introduction

This paper explores knowledge management in an arts university context. It discusses the challenges of sharing knowledge, finding a common language and identifying enablers for (or barriers to) knowledge co-creation in this particular setting. We introduce mentorship relations and processes as a unique perspective for exploring ways to facilitate and enhance knowledge sharing and creation in an arts university. We argue that communities of academic staff, and actors and students of a certain practice can be considered distinct or interlinked communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), where the participants of the community share similar values, norms and practices that follow community-specific dominant logics (von Krogh and Grand, 2000). We explore how mentoring could act as a facilitator within and between these communities of practice.

As each community of practice has its own practice, sometimes based in a discipline (i.e., academic field) and sometimes based on other university activities (e.g., entrepreneurial education offered across disciplines), this creates a multitude of communities for a student to enter. Since these communities are often discipline based, they are connected to a specific professional identity (see e.g., Henkel, 2000), but as mentioned earlier, the different communities may also have different perspectives or an emphasis on the future professional identity of the students. This diversity can be rather confusing and complex from the perspective of individual learners and the organization. We suggest there is a role for mentors between academia, student life and fields of practice. We discuss mentorship through previously identified mediating roles in knowledge sharing contexts (Wenger, 1998; Kauppila et al., 2011; Jyrämä and Äyväri, 2007 updated 2017;). The theoretical framework is built based on communities of practice, while specifically considering facilitation and the role of mentorship across communities. Our understanding of knowledge is based on contributions from Nonaka and others (Nonaka et al., 1996; Nonaka et al., 2000, 2001) and discussions of the nature of knowledge processes and experiential learning in general. We will also briefly discuss the connection between communities of practice in universities and professional identity.

We propose that mentors can be seen as helping, introducing, interpreting or integrating elements of one community or practice into another, or building new-shared practices or knowledge. We specifically look at the arts management/entrepreneurial classrooms and examine whether the learners or teachers can be perceived as unexpected mentors for other participants and their mindsets. We aim to discover the various ways in which mentorship takes place in an art university. Consequently, our research question is: How is mentorship manifested in art universities from a knowledge sharing perspective?

The paper builds on the REMAM EU project and recent findings from a doctoral study on knowledge management and the entrepreneurial mindset in an art university context.¹ Chapter 2 will discuss the theoretical basis of our study, our understanding of the nature of knowledge, followed by presenting the main discussions – communities of practice, experiential learning and professional identity. It will also integrate the mentorship approach with connections to knowledge mediating and facilitating perspectives. Chapter 3 will present the research design followed by the results and discussion in Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 will conclude.

2. Theoretical discussion

2.1 Perspectives on knowledge – the SECI model and experiential learning

Knowledge can be classified and comprehended in different ways. Tacit and explicit knowledge offer a perspective on comprehending knowledge and the process of learning, knowledge sharing and construction. Addressing, managing and constructing those two types of knowledge needs to be different – different activities albeit represented in the same context. Explicit knowledge is always grounded in tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1962); they are in some ways inseparable. Explicit knowledge is accessible through consciousness, in plain words, as information, and an individual is aware of possessing that type of knowledge. Tacit knowledge is tied to the senses, tactile experiences, movement skills, and it is rooted in action, procedures, routines, ideals, values and emotions. Tacit knowledge contains elements of explicit knowledge and contextual elements which support applying the given knowledge (e.g., Von Krogh et al., 2000; Nonaka et al., 1996). On an individual learner level, critical reflection skills and self-awareness are needed to navigate, structure and manage the interrelationships between tacit and explicit knowledge. From the organizational perspective, it is important to build ways and processes to consistently work with both types of knowledge – tacit and explicit – continuously moving through individual and collective stages, which is well presented in the SECI model of knowledge management.

The SECI model emphasizes the flow of knowledge through socialization, externalization, combination and internalization phases (see e.g., Nonaka et al., 2000, 2001). The movement and actual knowledge creation inside the model is along two main continua: tacit and explicit, individual and collective (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). The SECI model is not only a categorization of the movement, but it highlights the emphasis on enabling all the knowledge transformations to build spaces and practices that facilitate the flow of knowledge. By combining the SECI model and experiential learning theory within communities of practice we can explore the reflective processes taking place at the individual level within an organization. This allows us to address the essence of mentorship as a knowledge mediating activity. The experiential learning cycle (e.g., Kolb, 1984) focuses on experience, which is the basis and centre of the cycle, as well as experiential learning theory. Moreover, conceptualization and reflection are equally important steps in the experiential learning cycle and crucial for contextualising and building sustainable learning from the given experience.

2.2 Communities of practice, identity and knowledge

The concept of communities of practice has been widely used to study learning and knowledge sharing and creation (e.g., Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998; Wenger, 2000; Brown and Duguid, 1991). A community of practice is defined as a freely created community that engages in an activity together and then gradually forms a tight community that learns together through joint practice. The main elements of a community of practice are “the language, tools, documents, images, symbols, well-defined roles, specified criteria, codified procedures, regulations, and contracts that various practices make explicit for a variety of purposes” (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). Wenger (1998, p.73) further emphasizes the following as the property of a community: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Hence, communities of practice can be summarized as a community of

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people who share some activity or practice and have similar values, norms and language (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Communities of practice are based on a hierarchical structure where a novice moves from peripheral positions through learning towards the core of the community of practice – adopting the community's 'practice', meaning the values, norms and ways of acting (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). As identity and knowledge are closely connected, and the learning, especially the accumulation of knowledge, is a means to build the hierarchical position within communities, it can be assumed that it can also result in individuals hoarding knowledge rather than sharing it (e.g., Davenport and Prusak, 1996).

In the university context, communities of practice have been viewed as communities consisting of students, teachers and other academic staff. Hence, communities of practice are viewed as spaces for learning through shared experience and socialization processes. While the context of the communities of practice is seen as strongly supportive of a variety of knowledge sharing opportunities, the occurrence of a learning process is not a given but might need some catalyst for the learning process to start.

Nonetheless, communities of practice are supportive of members' individual identity development through socialization processes. Through joint practice and learning, students build not only skills and competences but also a shared understanding of the profession; that is, professional identity. Several studies have adopted a communities of practice perspective when analysing the learning or identity building processes in educational or higher educational contexts (e.g., Jawitz, 2009; Wiles, 2013). Fitzgerald (2020) conceptualized professional identity through the following dimensions, "(professional identity) ... including actions and behaviors, knowledge and skills, values, beliefs and ethics, context and socialization, and group and personal identity" – therefore, the dimensions of professional identity are closely connected to communities of practice.

Professional identity starts to emerge and is influenced by education from the commencement of studies (Lamote and Engels, 2010) and continues through the learning context, as well as via the socialization process inherent in communities of practice at the university, but also during work experience (e.g., internships) as well as through personal identity and the individual's own values and other experiences (Trede et al., 2011; Wiles, 2013; Goldie, 2012). Professionalism in a field and position in a community is created through the body of knowledge learned. When practitioners or professionals come together within (or visit) communities of practice, an effective opportunity for shared reflective space is constructed with little effort (Héliot et al., 2010). Still, the capacity of each individual to reflect and systematize all that knowledge varies widely. Mentoring offers crucial support.

2.3 Mentoring as a tool for knowledge sharing and facilitation across communities

Mediating, enabling and facilitating knowledge creation and learning has received considerable interest in previous research. The conceptualizations for catalysing or enabling creation are many (e.g., mediator, activist, broker, facilitator). For example, Jyrämä and Äyväri (2007) have categorised the various conceptualizations of mediating or facilitating into: the invisible hand, enabling more through structures than people, and brokers or mediators, looking at knowledge facilitation or mediation through individuals or groups of individuals, such as knowledge activists (see also Kantola 2010). It is important to point out that although the categories somewhat overlap, each does bring forth new tasks for consideration.

These mediating or facilitating categorizations can be used as a starting point for examining mentoring in the context of learning. We therefore reflect on what is needed to mentor or facilitate interaction between differing communities of practice. In order to pinpoint the role of the mentor in the knowledge creation context, we further elaborate the conceptualizations of knowledge mediating and contribute by adding a new perspective to gain a deeper insight.

The key elements involved in mediating knowledge can be summarized into three main elements. First, understanding the student and yourself, being aware of possible differing values and goals for the mentoring relationship. The practitioners might have a different understanding and perspective on the professional identity, especially since a professional or career identity is linked to mission (e.g., Bennett et al., 2008; Huhtanen, 2004). Hence, it is important to see the relationship as a process of co-creation involving the respective roles of each mentor and mentee, thereby acknowledging the individual level of mentorship. Second, at the process level, the mentorship usually has a beginning and an end; this involves the setting of aims for the

process but also an exit plan. Third, mentoring is a way to support overall learning goals, and can be integrated into the curriculum in the form of the required knowledge, skills and competencies, including academic competencies. To summarize, mentoring is not only being a practitioner role model but sharing experiences that build personalized relationships with respect for both participants (Johnson, 2003; Amayry and Crisp, 2007).

The relationship between knowledge and mentoring has been proposed as focusing mainly on tacit knowledge, seeing mentoring as sharing experiences in the organization, policies, methods of solving problems in a certain context (Karkoulian et al., 2008). Mentorship programmes are often formal, pairing up mentees (novices) with mentors (experts) – these mentors can be several levels inside the organization, often superior or more experienced peers. However, challenges in formal mentoring programmes can emerge in terms of ensuring relationships of trust and managing the personality match. It is worth emphasizing that in formal and informal contexts the perception of the mentor by the mentee (where they are seen as experts by the mentees on the topic of the mentorship) was found to affect the success of the mentoring relationship (Srivichai et al., 2012). When looking from a communities of practice framework, the roles of mentor and mentee are similar to expert and novice, one leading the other towards the core knowledge of the community.

Bryant (2005) looked at peer mentorship, which is less discussed than supervisor-novice mentorships, and pointed out that peer mentorship, often used either explicitly or implicitly to integrate newcomers into an organization, could be seen as an act of formal or informal mentoring. Peer mentoring was also explored in a study of the university context (Grant-Vallone and Ensher, 2000), emphasizing that the mentoring relationship that is student-to-student gained better results in terms of mentee adaptation to the social context of the university, although it did not provide a similar effect in terms of career setting as was the case in supervisor-student mentoring. Hence, we could suggest that peer-to-peer mentoring is a means for entering a community of practice, whereas moving from the periphery to the core might be better served by the supervisor (expert)-student (novice) relationship.

As discussed by Swap et al. (2015), people learn consciously but also spontaneously through experience, informal teaching and so on. We wish to emphasize that in order to have a holistic mentoring programme, both informal and formal practices as well as peer-to-peer and supervisor/expert-mentee relationships are needed; as is acknowledging the need for mentoring across different communities of practice and disciplines. The following figure (Figure 1) summarises these discussions.

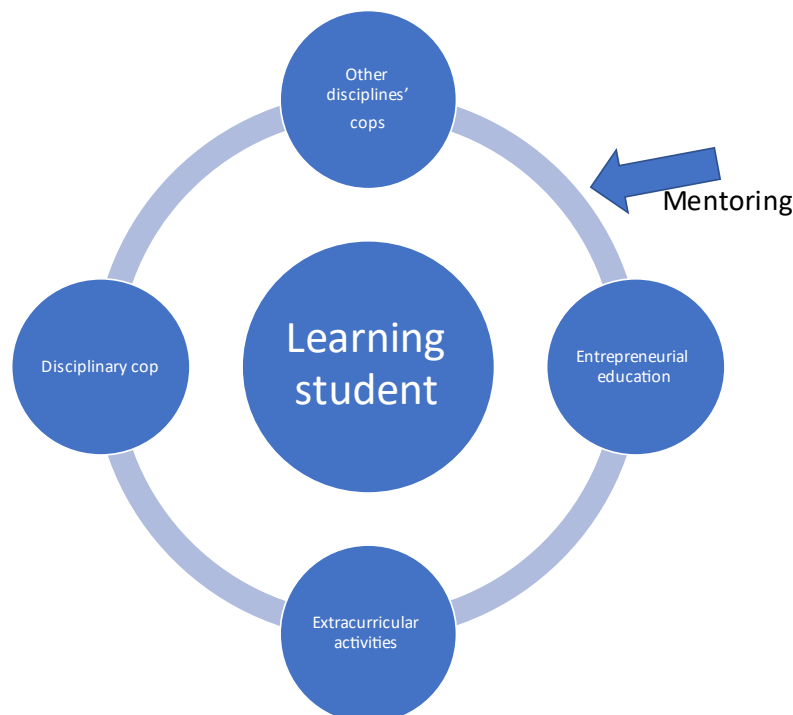


Figure 1. Holistic mentoring framework

The framework above opens up the cyclical and multiple ways mentoring may occur in the art university context, from education aiming to provide work life skills and entrepreneurship, to extracurricular activities, like project work or internships, as well as field-specific content and content from studies outside one's own discipline, such as minor studies. These are intertwined through the students' learning processes, sometimes in formal and sometimes in informal ways.

3. Research design

This is a qualitative study building on the acknowledgement of the importance of interaction and co-construction between the researcher and the study material according to the social constructionist paradigm (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006). We encourage the reader to contextualise and transfer the findings from this empirical analysis to other contexts of relevance for them (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006). We also attempt to keep a self-critical account of the research process, and remain self-reflective as educators in the arts university (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Tobin and Begley, 2004). Finally, we admit that the challenge in qualitative research, including data gathering and analysis, is to interpret the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991; Murphy et al., 1998). In order to address this difficulty we have used a wide range of data in several layers for the analysis.

To analyse mentorship we have used the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (EAMT) as the sample case. The data consists of observations from content and entrepreneurial classrooms, and from academic life in general, yet primarily from entrepreneurial modules between 2015 and 2020. Entrepreneurial education at EAMT takes place (among other programmes) within the Entrepreneurship Education Programme "Systematic Development of the Entrepreneurial Mindset and Education at All Levels" for the systematic and methodological implementation of entrepreneurship education based on the entrepreneurial competence model.²³ EAMT has entrepreneurial courses that are obligatory for all bachelor students; master students can choose from among specialist modules, and an Entrepreneurial Mindset module is one of those choices (up to 20 ECTS). Some programmes include specially designed courses that respond to their specific needs in preparing for working life.

The data analysis is based on generic data from teachers notes and observations as well as specific data from student survey-interviews, interviews with the leadership, teaching and administrative personnel, and follow up focus group interviews with students. This data was collected and analysed as part of a doctoral thesis looking at knowledge co-creation and management experiences, while in this instance the actors (mentors) were the focus of the analysis.

4. Knowledge sharing and co-creation in the university context, mentorship as building bridges

In this chapter we will further elaborate upon the specific context of the university setting, discovering what is mentorship – who are the actors, existing or potential mentors and mentees, and how is knowledge shared and created in this particular context. We will highlight this through the analysis of an art university (case). We look into the different mentor roles, conceptualizing these with communities of practice, experiential learning and knowledge related processes, with suggestions on the roles required in the specific context.

From our research we learned that in the context of an arts university as an organization, learning, knowledge sharing and co-creation occurs in communities of practice, where the community is often created around a discipline or main professor (e.g., violin players, harpists or cultural managers). Therefore, in the context of an arts university, the community of practice usually corresponds to an experiential learning situation involving arts studies but also entrepreneurial and other 'supportive' studies. Students go through the stages of an experiential learning cycle (or a combination of them) (e.g. Kolb, 1984). Conceptually, the communities of practice have borders and it could be argued that they encompass only the insiders in the university. However, in an (art) university context these communities often open up towards the professional field of the discipline in the larger context and this blurs the borders of the university as an organization. For example, **we know from existing studies that** many professors have both artistic as well as academic careers. They belong to broader communities of practice that encompass both academic and practice-based professions, and thus the

² eamt.ee/en/about/the-academy/development-plan/

³ The project publication can be found here: https://ettevõtlusõpe.ee/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Raamdokument_web_3.pdf

communities become potential platforms for wider professional networks, where future contacts are created and the logic of the given art field is learned (see also Ibarra et al., 2005).

The role of a mentor in such a context can be manifold, occurring in both a formal or informal manner, as well as according to a variety of relationship models – peer-to-peer, supervisor-student relationships that happen unintentionally or intentionally, and others. The table below (Table 1) summarizes some of the key mentor roles based on conceptualizations of mediator roles with the potential actors within the academic context.

Table 1: Mentoring roles and examples of actors in the context of the art university

Mentor role (adapted from mediator roles, see appendix)	Examples of actors in the arts university
Activist: catalyzing knowledge sharing and creation Invisible Hand: creating structures and enablers for knowledge sharing and creation Note that the Invisible Hand is needed for all knowledge management processes	Activists: often peer-to-peer model Also administrators and educators as mentors Invisible Hand: mostly leadership
Brokers	Mostly educators/experts as mentors In certain situations peer-to-peer model
Cultural intermediary; building understanding from one community to another through a translator; explaining specialist concepts; language from one community to another	For example, administrative workers; arts managers;
Supporters in identity building. Cultivators of care: identity building is often sensitive, and empathy and care are needed	Supporters in identity building and cultivators of care rather experienced practitioner-mentors

It is important to notice again **what we learned through the research** – that these mentor roles (Table 1) can function in the formal sense as mentoring, or occur in informal settings in an unexpected manner, as anyone may take the role of a mentor by sharing his or her expertise. We identified the relationship between mentor and mentee in terms of the mentorship roles and examples of activities in each category. These categories are not exclusive. Art universities, like many others, offer formal mentoring programmes using university alumni or other experts to mentor the students. External mentorship is often sought by the students and offered by universities especially as the students approach graduation as a means to prepare them for working life. In addition, the Invisible Hand of the university can demonstrate itself in the overall learning climate. We generally wish to emphasize the importance of university structures and the leadership as an Invisible Hand enabling mentoring to occur in its many formats (e.g., Maden, 2012). **In the following 3 sections, we discuss the outcomes of the research relying on the previous conceptualizations.**

4.1 Peer-peer mentoring among students

Above we have outlined peer-to-peer or student participation in mentorship processes as activists and brokers. This does not mean they cannot participate in other contexts and roles. The peer-to-peer mentorship model involves questioning the respective levels of expertise. Therefore, students might initially have trouble trusting the knowledge or guidance of their fellow student. However, within the socialization process, students are easily trusted as experts (see also Grand-Vallone and Ensther, 2000) sharing their experiences, stories, and best practices.

Such mentorship often happens unexpectedly in the process of (group) learning; for example, in the entrepreneurial classroom, sharing professional experiences, successes and failures, ideas and projects in relation to career development. At the same time, **we found** the role of brokers is offered to music students in the entrepreneurial classroom, so that practicing sharing between their respective communities is encouraged

within the wider economy (as entrepreneurial studies often involve diverse disciplines) . For arts management students in particular, they are often expected to act as translators or cultural intermediaries. These unexpected mentor roles are often the ones the arts management students quite readily accept and adopt, and although this might intervene with free knowledge flow and shared novel knowledge construction, at the very least, this acceptance should be discussed and reflected upon.

In the mentor-activist role in particular, creating opportunities for others to share knowledge (e.g. events, projects) is more complex because it is often seen as a personal initiative, yet it needs support from the structural level of the organization. Such opportunities initiated by the activists offer a trigger for communication and knowledge sharing or socialization (e.g., Nonaka et al., 2001; Nonaka et al., 2000) that may vary between formal and informal modes (e.g., invited speakers versus coffee break discussions).

4.2 The educator-peer mentoring perspective

The role of educators (teachers) in sharing and co-creating knowledge has received significant attention from various perspectives. Often educators are seen as the experts guiding student-novices to a community of practice, as well as offering access to a diversity of communities within the university (see e.g., Wiles, 2013; Jawitz, 2009). The role of educator as mentor guiding the student mentee is an often-accepted position, albeit a problematic one. The educator-student relationship when seen in a mentorship context highlights the problems associated with the strong power position the teachers hold within the academic community. As discussed by Hall et al. (2009), educators (professors) might implicitly, and even explicitly, provide only one possible path for student learning and a singular image of their future careers, thus limiting the potential learning paths that, for example, external mentorship could provide. Hence, there might be a tendency to guide students toward specific (accepted) tacit and explicit knowledge rather than offer a diversity of learning paths and contexts.

In the course of the research we found that entrepreneurial or work life educators and core field educators as mentors manifest different perspectives on working and learning life. Entrepreneurial educators often refer to the wider economy and career context, while core educators often focus on skill and knowledge development for a particular career in the art university as an artist, musician, actor etc. Yet, both teacher groups find the importance of professional networks, starting from communities of practice in academia, crucial, especially in relation to the sustainability discourse.

While brokering is one of the key elements in the case of the knowledge of educators, a broker is required to pass knowledge from one field or community to another. The way mentors do this might be quite different **as we learned above**. Ranging from a more authoritarian approach (this is the knowledge you need) to a mentee-driven approach (let us explore the knowledge you need). If a long-term identity-building and cultivation of care role is expected and accepted by the mentors, then considering the identity, values and tacit knowledge of learners becomes essential.

4.3 The internal knowledge worker or administrator-peer perspective on mentoring

Analysing the diverse academic roles in an art university **we reached the conclusion that** the role of often unidentified groups of internal mentors (e.g., administrators, study department specialists, R&D project managers) with potential for impacting professional identity development across disciplinary communities (internal knowledge workers) is neglected. Administrative workers acting as mentors have the potential to take on the role of identity builders across communities, as they have an awareness of the organization, knowledge of the learning and teaching activities across departments, as well as additional (out of class) knowledge/training in mentorship activities. These qualities provide broader perspectives for mentorship. They can potentially be considered skilled facilitators between individual learners and different organizational collectives, performing many different functions as cultural intermediaries between different disciplinary communities of practice and potentially enabling access to professional fields outside academia.

Arts managers work between art, management and society, and therefore arts managers (including students, practitioners) are often expected to fall into this category due to the nature of their work. Even when working with explicit knowledge, we need to understand what is meant by the terms, data and information, and be able to judge and evaluate it; mentoring can open up and enhance the building of these competences.

5. Conclusion

As we set out to look for ways to transform mentoring from an 'add-on' activity to an integrated model as part of university curriculum development, we underline first and foremost that mentorship needs to be present in a diversity of ways and practices throughout the learning and teaching journeys in academia. Moreover, connecting students to the variety of communities in and around an arts university could prove to be the common ground between core educators and entrepreneurial educators, even if their perspective may be different.

The above discussion of mentoring in an art university and analysis of mentoring through various positions or roles within academia, indicates that mentoring can occur through learning activities, yet the context of learning, namely the distinction between core disciplines and others (e.g. entrepreneurship), plays an important role in understanding what career or community students belong to and are being prepared for. In addition, the power position between student and mentor might influence the mentoring activity and the sharing of knowledge, especially what is perceived as relevant knowledge and necessary competences.

It is also important to recognise the experiences of mentorship (or being mentored) to create a holistic understanding and awareness of mentorship. The recognition of these activities would empower individuals and enable them to seek mentorship support as needed. These activities could also work across communities and disciplines.

Based on the findings that highlight the importance of sharing through language, we also encourage the use of storytelling as a tool for mentoring. Sharing experiences and doing things together are ways to share and co-create tacit knowledge and should be recognized as part of the mentoring process in informal contexts but also when the mentoring processes is formalised.

To summarize, we analysed mentoring in a university context using communities of practice as a framework. The mentor roles were adapted from previous literature on mediating. It is important to notice that these roles might relate to individual, collective and organizational structures. Hence, mentoring needs organizational structures and practices that enable knowledge sharing in the mentor-mentee relationship informally through events (e.g., openings, premieres, showcases), as well as formally through customized programmes, but also through creating an organizational culture that supports knowledge sharing and creation, and sees knowledge as a base for power positions in organizational hierarchies. We highlight that mentor roles can be integrated into several organizational positions within academia and discuss each to identify the relevant positive and negative elements.

Through this analysis of mentoring in an art university, we conclude by arguing that it is not enough to perceive mentoring through formal mentoring programmes, but to also acknowledge the informal and often unexpected mentoring occurring in peer-to-peer relationships, as well as in the context of learning both in the core educational programme and additional courses and activities.

5.1 Implications for further research

In this paper we explored in detail the different mentor roles of different actors in an arts university: peer-to-peer, mentor-to-mentee and so on. We discussed some of the key examples and situations these are applied and the implications they have for the university as an organization and the individuals therein. We suggest that looking at how one and the same actor can take on various mentorship roles simultaneously (in the same environment) would be an interesting avenue for further research. Similarly, research is needed to further elaborate how learners can be at different stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle at the same time, and how they can navigate between different roles in the same mentorship situation.

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