

CAL Cultural Fund Editors and Writers Development Project (Mentoring Program for Editors)

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SUMMARY

This paper describes the ‘CAL Cultural Fund Editors and Writers Development Project’, which is a mentoring program for editors conducted by the Society of Editors (Queensland) Inc. in partnership with the Queensland Writers Centre (QWC) and funded by the CAL Cultural Fund. The aim of the program is to give 16 emerging editors in Queensland the opportunity to develop their skills under the guidance of very experienced editors, and subsequently to have a better chance of establishing themselves in the publishing industry. For the 40 members of the QWC whose manuscripts are selected, this ‘taster’ editing service (for which a small fee is charged) may improve their chances of having their first manuscript published. Stage 1 of the program ran from August 2008 to September 2009.

The program involves four mentors—two editors very experienced in fiction and two in non-fiction—who each form editing teams with a pair of emerging editors (mentees), with the pairs of mentees rotating around the mentors throughout the year. At the request of the writer, each team provides a structural edit of a complete manuscript or a copy edit of part of the work. The program is overseen by a Moderator (project manager), with the help of an Administrative Assistant. The Moderator’s role is to: liaise with the QWC; allocate mentees to mentors; resolve any disagreements or conflicts; run full-day mandatory induction and evaluation workshops during each 13-month stage; and report regularly to the Management Committee and the general membership of the Society and annually to CAL.

The paper discusses the challenges and pitfalls of setting up and running such a complex project: issues such as setting up and maintaining budgets and schedules; sustaining the level of commitment required from participants; dealing effectively with the administrative processes; and recognising the importance of good communication.

INTRODUCTION

The mentoring of editors is not new in Queensland. Among others, Michael Kuter ran a successful mentoring program over many years and he was the initial driving force behind this project. Robin Bennett and the other members of the Queensland Society of Editors’ Management Committee were responsible for bringing this idea to fruition. The Society joined forces with the QWC whose members provide the manuscripts for editing

The first stage of the program ran from August 2008 to September 2009 and the second stage commenced in October 2009 and will run for another 12 months.

SETTING UP THE PROGRAM

The first thing to stress is the magnitude of the task and the level of commitment and funding required to run such a program. This entails not only finding very experienced editors who are willing to allocate a significant portion of their time as mentors over a considerable period, but also setting up the appropriate administrative services to support them. Very early on, the Society decided that the program would work best if the mentors and support staff were compensated in some way, rather than relying solely on volunteers. As such, Stages 1 and 2 of the program were made possible by a grant from CAL of \$39,000, spread over 2 years. The Society funded the balance of the budget.

To ensure that a reasonable calibre of manuscripts was received, the Society joined forces with the Queensland Writers Centre whose members pay a nominal fee of \$240 for the editorial service (which may involve copy editing part of the manuscript or structural editing of the whole manuscript). The payment of a fee ensures that the project attracts only those writers who are serious about having their work edited (which, hopefully, increases their chances of having it published). The initial call for submissions was placed over a month before the briefing workshop.

Participants

The structure of the program has been variously described as ‘innovative’ (mainly because it didn’t follow the traditional one-to-one mentoring model) and ‘ambitious’.

The program involves four very experienced editors: the mentors. In Stage 1, two of these, Craig Munro and Pam Collins, worked in fiction, while the other two, Jennifer Beale and Michael, worked in non-fiction. Finding such suitably qualified and committed mentors is certainly one of the keys to running a successful program.

The eight inexperienced editors, or mentees, were placed in pairs based on their relative experience, interests and, to some extent, geographical location. Interestingly, at the evaluation workshop some of the mentees said that they had learned as much from their fellow mentees as from the mentors, which was a surprising outcome.

I was appointed as the Moderator of the program after the CAL grant had been awarded and the original schedule and budgets had already been determined. My role is primarily one of project management: setting up and monitoring the systems and processes; keeping the program on schedule and on budget; advising the mentors and mentees; troubleshooting issues that may arise; reporting to the Management Committee monthly and to CAL annually and to the Society members via the monthly newsletter *Offpress*. I am ably supported by an Administrative Assistant, June Kant, who processes the invoices, tracks the expenses, organises any copying, carries out the liaison with the QWC, tracks the manuscripts and organises meetings and workshops.

Budget

Here is the original budget, which was set before any of the procedures and processes were finalised, but was the basis upon which the CAL grant was received.

Income

20 writer's fees @ \$240 = \$ 4,800

Expenses

Mentors (mentoring, meetings) = \$21,000*

Moderator = \$ 7,800*

Administrative Assistant = \$ 1,000*

Workshops (preparation, delivery, venue hire) = \$ 3,500

Communication (telephone, postage, copying) = \$ 3,000

TOTAL EXPENSES = \$36,300

NET COST PER STAGE = \$31,500

CAL funding (over 2 years) = \$39,510

As is evident, the program involved a significant financial contribution from the Society (over \$23,000 over 2 years) on top of the CAL grant. Fairly early in the program, it became clear that three lines in the budget were inadequate (as marked by asterisks).

One thing that hadn't occurred to the Management Committee was the time that the mentors would need to spend reading and assessing the manuscripts (the original allowance was for time spent mentoring and attending meetings only). The first call from the QWC generated over 1 million words of fiction alone for assessment (although there was no need to read anywhere near that number of words to assess the relative merits of manuscripts for training purposes). Additional compensation for mentors for the reading task was approved, but at a much lower hourly rate than for mentoring. As the program progressed, fewer and fewer manuscripts were received, so the expenses for manuscript assessment were loaded towards the front end of the program.

The time needed to administer the project was also much more than originally envisaged, so the budgets for the Administrative Assistant and Moderator were adjusted upwards accordingly.

All these additional funds were provided by the Society.

RUNNING THE PROGRAM

Processes

Each Stage begins with a full-day workshop to brief the participants. The original intention was to use an external mentoring consultant as the facilitator, but she became ill at the last moment so I ran the workshop based on a modified version of her materials. One important aspect was to carry out a skills audit of the mentees to determine their skills base at the start of the program; this would then be used as a basis for setting their goals for the mentoring relationships. We stressed the importance of mentoring being a ‘reciprocal relationship’ and discussed the characteristics that make a good mentee. The mentors joined the group after morning tea, when various models of mentoring were discussed and analysed. After lunch, the mentors worked with their new teams to establish the priorities for their partnerships and to draw up mentoring agreements for the first round.

Feedback from participants indicated that it was good to have someone familiar with editorial processes rather than relying on a generic theoretical approach to mentoring. In the meantime, the QWC had sent out a call for manuscripts to their members, who must be unpublished to take part in our program. The fiction genres acceptable to the program are novel or short story. The non-fiction manuscripts can be memoir, biography, history, family history, essay, education, and health and lifestyle. The allowable word count was from 10,000 to 70,000 words.

Writers specify whether they would like a structural edit of the entire manuscript or a copy edit of a selected section (maximum 10,000 words). However, sometimes the mentors would suggest an alternative: often that a structural edit was required before any copy editing would be worthwhile.

Mentors tried to select manuscripts to develop particular skills.

Before editing begins in each round, the mentors and mentees draw up mentoring agreements detailing the objectives to be met (skills were to be developed). These objectives should be both specific and measurable. The teams also set dates for meetings, and deadlines for work to be completed (based on the overall master schedule).

Each team member was allocated 12 hours of editing, although they often spent much more time than this (and then some participants commented, rather ironically, that the project was more onerous than expected).

Each team produced a report for the writer. Sometimes the report would be a combined response and sometimes from individuals (this was determined by the mentor). The participants then evaluated their mentoring relationships based on the objectives they had set. Some mentees found this self-assessment quite daunting at first, as perhaps did some of the mentors.

The pairs of mentees were then rotated to work with another mentor, with five rounds altogether in Stage 1 (so the last round was back with the first mentor with whom the mentees worked).

EVALUATING THE PROGRAM

At the end of each round, both the mentors and mentees have to complete an evaluation form to record their experiences and provide feedback to help improve the program. The development of skills is measured against the objectives set in the mentoring agreement. We held a half-day evaluation workshop in September 2009 where we received some very valuable feedback and will be making some adjustments to Stage 2 as a result. The most pleasing aspect was that everyone contributed to the discussion.

Here is a summary of the feedback:

- Success depends on support from mentors and enthusiasm of mentees.
- Effective teamwork was a big factor in the success of a relationship. Some strong working relationships were developed (both between mentors and mentees and between the mentees within each team).
- Confidence was a significant factor affecting the mentees' performance. There was a noticeable improvement in the mentees' confidence as the program progressed.
- Face-to-face meetings (either with the editing team only or the team and the author) work best, where feasible.
- Time management was a significant issue, with many teams spending far too long on the editing and report writing. The number of hours allocated was seen as unrealistic for some tasks (e.g. a combined structural report and partial mark-up).
- Different approaches were used by the mentors. Some encouraged individual manuscript assessment reports, while others felt that writing a coherent summary document for the author was important. This caused confusion among the mentees who were expecting all the mentors to follow similar procedures. As we pointed out to the mentees for Stage 2, the different approaches may reflect the experience of working in different workplaces.
- All mentees indicated that they had developed their skills, although some suggested that it was very difficult to quantify the level of improvement.
- Most mentees said that they found working in an unfamiliar genre (such as fiction) quite challenging.
- Some mentees praised the mentors for offering 'gentle guidance', rather than telling the mentees what to do when they asked questions.
- The feedback from writers was invariably very positive. Many commented that their expectations were greatly exceeded.

CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

Other Societies of Editors that may be considering a similar program may want to know what we would consider to be the critical factors to run a successful program.

Here are the things we found to be most important:

- There needs to be sufficient funding to compensate the mentors and administrative personnel for the time spent on the program. A purely voluntary program is unlikely to get the level of commitment (especially time) required.
- The full-day initial workshop to brief participants is critical for setting the program on the right track.
- Writers should be charged a fee for the editorial service to ensure they are serious.
- Participants need to be made fully aware of the level of commitment required.
- Good systems and processes (including setting clear objectives, and setting and monitoring realistic budgets and schedules) need to set up early in the program.
- Clear effective communication, whether by email, phone or in person, is another very significant factor in the success of the program.
- Mentees must develop the ability to read manuscripts critically and provide constructive (but sensitive) feedback to writers.
- Participants need to be made aware of the level of commitment involved (something we stressed strongly at the interviews for Stage 2). The amount of paperwork involved is quite high. As advised by the independent mentoring consultant, participants must complete mentoring agreements and evaluation forms during each round to document all the successes and failures of the program. The teams also produce written reports for the writers.

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

And, finally, here are some other things we learned along the way:

- The calls for manuscripts need to be specific to elicit suitable material (there is a natural bias towards fiction submissions).
- The mentors need to be flexible in terms of the types of manuscript they handle (some may be outside their normal sphere). Some of the manuscripts we received were quite challenging, including life stories about difficult pregnancies and post-natal depression.
- It is difficult to set realistic budgets until project is under way (the budgets for the Moderator and Administrative Assistant both had to be increased).
- Mentors should be compensated for the additional time spent reading manuscripts (we allowed a lower hourly rate for this).
- Care needs to be taken to focus on the objectives set (development of particular skills) and not to be overly distracted by the report to the writer. The mentoring relationship involves a delicate balancing act between providing training to mentees and providing adequate feedback to writers. The focus must be on skills development.
- Beware of changes in the personal circumstances of participants: a flexible approach is needed and contingency plans need to be put in place.

SWOT ANALYSIS

I think a quick SWOT analysis is worthwhile for any project, and here are my thoughts on our mentoring program:

Strengths: experienced mentors; CAL funding; partnership with QWC.

Weaknesses: most participants also work full time (applies to mentors and mentees); skills development depends on the quality of manuscripts submitted (this was noted and discussed at length at the evaluation workshop).

Opportunities: to promote mentoring of editors; to promote the uptake of the model in other states (hence my attendance at the Adelaide conference).

Threats: future funding (CAL grant for 2 years); lack of suitable manuscripts (we can already see the numbers tailing off: we received just six in the latest call, compared with more than 30 in the first call). With the writer's permission, we hold over any potentially suitable manuscripts for later selection.