Book Review / Compte rendu

Felten, Peter, Bauman, H. D. L., Kheriaty, Aaron, & Taylor, Edward, Eds. (2013). *Transformative Conversations: A Guide to Mentoring Communities Among Colleagues in Higher Education.* **San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Pages: 167. Price: CDN$33 (paper). ISBN: 978-1-118-28827-6**

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The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) committee at our Polytechnic had been looking into creating communities as one of the many initiatives that would allow our instructors to learn from one another. We were attracted to reading *Transformative Conversations* because it promised to offer a guide to mentoring communities. The introduction starts with a description of how the authors met. In 2009, all four authors were invited to participate in an experimental project sponsored by the Fetzer Institute.

We learn that during their first meeting, the authors ended up at the same table because they had all picked *formation* as the topic of their exploration. At the table, they met with their mentors, Angeles Arrian and Rachel Naomi Remen, and were invited to establish a project together. Following the meeting, through emails and phone calls, the group came to envision "small intergenerational groups or mini-communities where the fundamental orientation of each member would be to support the aspirations of every other member" (p. 4). The project aim then became to create and sustain so-called Formation Mentoring Communities (FMC) not just with each other but on their individual campuses as well. Chapter One describes the core concepts in the FMC name. *Formation* is the process of the "integral development of the whole person: intellectual, emotional, professional, moral, and spiritual" (p. 14). *Formation mentoring* entails drawing out of the mentee what is already implicitly available. Such mentoring involves recognition, support, challenge, inspiration, and accountability (p. 17). Chapter Two delves deeper into the values the authors deem essential for the community in which formation mentoring can be nurtured. These values include hospitality, safety, courage, honesty, trust, diversity, humility, accountability, and friendship. In each section, the meaning of the value is discussed in the context of a mentoring community. For instance, hospitality does not

mean food and drinks but rather "quieting the internal monologue of self-consciousness, clearing space in which we can reveal ourselves in conversation" (p. 33). Each description of a value is accompanied by a set of questions for reflection and an inspirational quote or poem. For those readers seeking to bring or find meaning in education, this chapter is the most inspirational and thought-provoking and provides excellent food for thought as well as great input for community discussions.

The first two chapters thus provide motivation and rationale for the establishment of an FMC—an attempt to address the "Why?" Recognizing that the best of good reasoning does not always manifest in action, the authors provide logical steps to follow if development of an FMC is sought. The final chapters focus on the practical and logistical processes involved in implementation, answering the "What? Who? Where? When? and How?" Sections and chapters are followed by anecdotal "interludes" to offer the reader a more personal vignette of what the authors experienced. Common obstacles to successful implementation, such as awkwardness in inviting potential members (p. 66), how finding time is really making time (p. 69), and describing how this is not just another committee (p. 70), are adequately explored. While admitting that the optimal group size depends on the members themselves, the authors recommended small groups of four to six participants (p. 79). The meeting place should be neutral, comfortable, and private to encourage conversations among members (p. 80). Chapter Four focuses on sustaining the community. While the initiator may be the facilitator for a period of time, the community should develop a sharing of facilitation (p. 97). For example, in a typically hierarchical academic institution, the group will only sustain itself when the members are dislodged from supervisory oversight among themselves. The authors suggest that the convenor "bring his or her own problems or questions to the table and ask the other members of the group for their mentoring help" (p. 99) as a technique to create a level playing field. Topics for conversations at each gathering are not specified but gleaned from the lives of the members, each of whom is encouraged to initiate as well as participate in the sharing. Most importantly, the personal growth/development experienced by these authors was, necessarily, well documented since no deliverables or outcomes are prescribed for the "community" as it forms but evolve as relationships grow among members.

As described, an FMC arises from and is sustained through the inspiration of individual faculty members. The authors suggest that anyone can start and sustain an FMC. However, an individual might overlook the importance of a source of inspiration. The Fetzer Institute sponsored the authors' mentors, and the mentors inspired the authors who, in turn, inspired colleagues at FMCs in their own institutions. In our experience, it is hard to sustain learning communities if there is no continued source of inspiration for those who initiate and facilitate the community.

In addition, the authors state there is no need for institutional support, money, or permission to start such a community. While this sounds ideal, it contradicts the work of Milt Cox on Faculty Learning Communities (Cox, 2004) who stresses that guest speakers, food, and space are essential to support and sustain faculty learning communities. Reflecting on the difference between the FMC and the FLC, we realized that FMC members participate because of an interest in formation. Would it be possible for people interested in formation to start off with the belief that they are still in the process of being formed and share certain beliefs about how formation can be supported? We thus wonder wheth-

er the book actually provides a guide to mentoring communities that include a certain type of academic or a faculty with certain personalities. Our experience at a Polytechnic is that many of our colleagues are concerned about student formation. But instead of talking about it, they would rather do something or experiment with strategies. While strategies may be shared in a casual conversation during lunch, not many people would be inclined to attend meetings in order to explore the issue unless they had been given time to do so and were empowered by their chairs to be active participants. And chairs would expect their faculty to have something to show for the time invested.

Finally, the authors suggest that FMCs can bring about change in institutions, but they provide little evidence of such change. The impact of an FMC on an academic institution is described as a ripple. In our experience, such a ripple needs to be sustained by consistent positive institutional energies (i.e. resources/support) to bring about a wave of change.

In our opinion, the book should therefore not be read as a scientific exploration of best practices in fostering Formation Mentoring Communities. Rather, it needs to be read as the story of four academics who provide advice based on their own experience. The book provides a source of inspiration for those seeking personal growth and development. It speaks best to people who see vocation in their work—that is, feel a calling to be themselves in the work they do but may be frustrated in doing so in their academic workplace. This book describes people who listen to each other with the purpose of growing the quality of their own life and vocation. The extraordinary tale of four mid-career male academics who occupy varying academic roles and hail from different disciplines and diverse academic institutions is very well written, fascinating, and provides ample food for thought. For anyone reflecting on greater meaning in education and academia, the book offers insights into the value of a number of attributes such as humility, openness to diversity, and honesty that are essential to mentoring relationships, formation, and education in general.❧

Reference

Cox, M. D. (2004). Introduction to faculty learning communities. In M. D. Cox & L. Richlin (Eds.), *Building Faculty Learning Communities. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 97* (5-23). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.