6 Experience, Considerations and Know-How from Different Perspectives

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6.1 Introduction

In recent decades, mentoring has become a popular instrument for the promotion of women. In most cases, mentoring projects contain a combination of the core mentorship relationship, networking and specific training. In this article, I will present some of my own considerations and know-how regarding these three fields based on my own experiences as a trainer and consultant in several mentoring projects, as a mentor and a mentee, and from my research in the fields of communication sciences and gender studies.

I would like to begin by stating that it should not be the task of mentoring projects to provide training course after training course for women who are, in most cases, overqualified in comparison to their male fellows or competitors. What women in fact need is to gain access to informal knowledge within institutions and organizations. They also need strong networks. The most efficient way of building strong and sustainable networks is to *do something together*. This *something* does not need to be yet another workshop or seminar as is frequently the case in networks and projects for women. Men's networks offer many common activities for their members, like trips, sports activities or simply going to the pub (Prokop 2006).

As Marie Sichtermann said: "I consider it important for the future and for the political relevance of women's networks that the women in these networks make collective experiences that go beyond their daily work or shared further education." (Sichtermann 2004 [Translation by the author]).[15]

In the first section of this article, I will depict some of my experiences as a consultant and/or trainer in mentoring projects. The settings for each of these projects were quite different: one had the backing of a large institution as well as Austrian and EU funding; the second covered the whole of Austria and was organized by an association with the legal status of social partnership; the third was realized by a consulting company, was aimed at enterprises and while it did not have a gender focus it did have an interesting diversity one. All three projects had excellent coordinators.

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[15] *„Ich halte es für wichtig für die Zukunft und die politische Relevanz von Frauennetzwerken, dass die Mitfrauen etwas miteinander erleben, das über den Arbeitsalltag und gemeinsame Fortbildungen hinausgeht"* (Sichtermann 2004).

The second section focuses on my experiences as formal mentor and offers a more subjective view. The first time I served as a mentor was in a project aimed at promoting young women in politics and civil society across Austria. The second time I was asked to be mentor was in a regional mentoring project with a broad, open setting that was designed to support women in their personal and professional advancement.

In the third section, I write about my own experiences of being mentee in a university programme.

Finally, in the fourth section, I offer a selection of benchmarks for a good mentoring project from my own point of view. I argue for training the mentors and recommend group coaching as career coaching for mentees.

6.2 Architecture, Design, and Training in Mentoring Projects

In the *Sophie A. Weitinsfeld* trainer's network (Regina Trotz, Sabine Eybl, Heidi Niederkofler, Katharina Pewny, Sabine Prokop), we developed the architecture and design for a mentoring project called *FreChe Materie* at Graz University of Technology. I later went on to provide consulting services to the fourth edition of *genderize!*, a same-gender mentoring programme run by the Austrian Youth Association. The third example given in this section is *careers without barriers*, a mentoring project for disabled employees in enterprises in which I trained the mentors. I will endeavour to compare my experiences in these different mentoring projects and highlight the special features in each case.

The *FreChe Materie*[16] fForte[17]–project at Graz University of Technology (Sünkel 2007: 68) was managed by Johanna Klostermann, who was also the manager of the Styrian branch of FIT (www.fit.tugraz.at). FIT is an Austria-wide project aimed at motivating female pupils to study technical and natural sciences subjects. To this end, female students go into schools as so-called ambassadresses throughout the year, and female pupils visit universities for several days of trial lectures and workshops, where they again meet these ambassadresses. In 2006/07, the implementation phase of *FreChe Materie*, nearly half its participants (mentees as well as mentors) had been or were still engaged in FIT initiative too. This transfer worked thanks to the persuasive power of Johanna Klostermann!

The whole *FreChe Materie* was basically fed by the specific energy, connections and networking efforts of the project manager. Thus, while some aspects of the project's design cannot be easily transferred to other settings, they could still be inspiring. For example, the matching, a crucial aspect of every mentoring initiative, was designed in the form of a gallery

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[16] FreChe Materie „Frauen erobern Chemische Materialien" (Sünkel 2007: 68): Women conquer chemical materials [Translation SP].

[17] fForte – Frauen in Forschung und Technologie: Women in Research and Technology – is an Austrian initiative to promote the potential of women in professions which have hitherto been dominated by men (www.fforte.at).

where the mentees presented their aims, wishes and interests on posters as an output of their kick-off day. The (same- und cross-gender) mentors also had a full-day kick-off event with a lot of information (cf. Genetti et al. 2005) and retrospection on their own childhood and former mentors/sponsors as well as discussions on and the definition of their role as mentors, their expectations and any no-goes. In the late afternoon, they chose their mentees for the one-to-one mentorship relationship from the gallery. And it worked – even though not all the mentors (professors at Graz University of Technology) could participate in the whole event and the prudent project manager had to serve as a substitute mentor for the 'remaining' mentees. Those two kick-off days in a nice hotel in Graz with excellent catering were very creative and spontaneous, with a lot of rolling wave planning for Regina Trotz and me as trainers. The whole architecture of the *FreChe Materie* mentoring programme was fairly flexible and thus easily adaptable to upcoming needs and circumstances.

The next bigger convention with us as consultants and trainers took place six months later. This time the venue was a beautiful castle and conference centre far outside of Graz, a highly recommendable choice since it meant that nobody could hop on and off as easily as they had been able to do during the kick-off in town. The first day was planned for new mentees and mentors, the second day for a get-together and sharing of experiences between 'new' and 'old' mentees. The aims were to encourage mixing between old and new participants and to enlarge the group as a whole: a good tool for the transfer of knowledge and experience (and a nice challenge for us as trainers). Another special feature in this second tranche of *FreChe Materie* was the mentoring relationship with two mentors (cross- and/or same-gender) for one mentee, one from within the university and one from outside, a form of cross mentoring, which provide the mentees with an insight into extra-university research and careers as well.

The second example of my experiences as a consultant is *genderize!,* a well-established same-gender mentoring programme run by the Austrian Youth Agency (www.bjv.at) since 2003 to encourage young women to take an active role in politics and civil society. I served both as a consultant in *genderize! 4* and as a mentor in *genderize! 3* in 2007 and 2008 (see below). In this project, the acquisition phase for mentors and mentees takes about six months, and the mentoring relationship lasts for one year.

For *genderize! 4* we developed an accompanying minimum package for mentees, which comprised one full day together at the start, one in the middle and one at the end, each followed in between by two half days of group coaching.

Figure 5: Minimum package for mentees (own illustration)

The optimum package for the mentees included two kick-off days, one intermediate day and one final day, with eight half days of group coaching in between, plus extra offers to cover any content required based on the actual needs of the mentees. These extra offers could take the form of training events (✧) or fireside talks (☆).

Figure 6: Optimum package for mentees (own illustration)

In both cases, the mentors were to have an introductory session (▽) lasting only two hours, because experience with *genderize!* 1 - 3 had clearly shown that the largely prominent mentors from politics, media and NGOs (cf. Pfeifer 2005) would not or could not take enough time for longer meetings. The more prominent the mentors, the better for project public relations, but this concept takes its toll, and there is no evidence that mentees benefit from 'VIPs' as much as they do from mentors who can and want to take the necessary time for the project and the mentorship. Nevertheless, the concept of *genderize!* included prominent mentors as the benchmark.

To reduce the burden on the mentors, we planned the use of group mentoring. In this model, three to five mentees with similar interests and aims are matched with one mentor. Before each meeting with the mentor, the mentees come together to discuss their experiences and current concerns as well as to prepare what they want to discuss with the mentor. This efficient approach not only saves the mentor a lot of time, it also allows the mentees to strengthen their peer network.

One essential aspect of the design we proposed for *genderize!* was group-based career coaching. Periodic coaching in this form also focuses on aims and objectives (like the mentoring relationship). At the same time, it is process oriented und provides space for any questions and problems that might arise for the mentees. The role of the coach is not to solve these problems but to empower the participants to develop their own strategies in exchange with their peers. The group as a whole represents an important source of know-how and experiences.

Mentee peer group projects were a constitutive component of *genderize!.* For example, in *genderize! 3* these projects were an interactive exhibition titled "Pictures of Women: 6 Women, 6 Sides", a film called "Structural Inequality in the Global World", one radio programme about "Feminist Education of Girls" and another about "Structural Inequality in the Work Environment" (Eljasik 2008: 94-96). Some of the mentees initially felt they were thrown in the deep end with their project and peer group (Eljasik 2008: 50ff), but the feedback at the end was very positive, especially with regard to the fun and positive experience of doing something together. Many of the participants hoped they would not only

continue to meet but that they would also work together again in the future (Eljasik 2008: 45ff). This is an excellent example of the above-mentioned 'doing something together' as a sustainable tool for networking.[18]

The final example in this section serves to illustrate similarities and differences in mentoring projects in business and academia. *Careers without barriers* was a project realized by the consulting company bab. The project covered the raising of awareness, analysis of potential, and implementation of mentoring programs for persons with disabilities (www.bab.at) in public sector or private enterprises. These enterprises ranged from small fashion boutiques and DIY stores to the Austrian post AG and international food chains. The mentors in *careers without barriers* were not celebrities but people above the mentee in the hierarchy of the specific enterprise. The mentors also had to work on a more or less daily basis with their mentees, whose disabilities differed from case to case. In this project, the mentees received no specific training. But the mentors were fully aware of their responsibility to their mentees and showed a strong interest in the content of the training that was provided to them.

In 2010 and 2011, I trained future mentors for *careers without barriers* in communication skills and regarding their role as mentor. After determining their expectations at the start of the 1.5-day workshop, we began by asking the mentors to embark on a kind of fantasy journey and to think back to their own childhood and youth, to the people who had supported them and about how they had done so. This module takes about 30 minutes and also works well in an academia setting (see *FreChe Materie* above). This was followed in the *careers without barriers* project by an explanation of different forms of mentoring, which might be too detailed for projects in academia, where mentors are often simply provided with handouts containing basic information specific to the university or institution. However, it is always essential to include the mentoring contract itself when talking about the role of a mentor, the importance of agreed aims, and ways of communication – regardless of the mentoring setting.

The afternoon session of the *careers without barriers* workshop was dedicated to communication issues and tools. We talked about different forms of communication, discussed relationships between sender and receiver, used the "square of communication" model (Schulz von Thun, Poenisch 2009) to explore the four sides of a message (Schulz von Thun 1981), did exercises in listening actively, tested open and closed questions and tried out various conversation techniques.

After a brief review and an interim balance, we continued the next morning with the Johari Window, "a model for self-awareness, personal development, group development and understanding relationship" developed in the 1950s by the American psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham (cf. Chapman 2003). A very effective method of exploring emotions

[18] Unfortunately, the *genderize!* project, which had been run with great success since 2003 (cf. Reiter 2005; Pfeifer 2005; Kienesberger 2006, 2007) had to be discontinued due to a lack of available funding in 2009.

when leading and being led is the so-called blind walk (Königswieser, Exner 1998; Königswieser, Hillebrand 2005), which we also used to train the mentees in the *FreChe Materie* project. In *careers without barriers*, exercises on giving feedback and preparing mentoring meetings were followed by information on practical details of the mentoring contract and the challenges of matching a mentor with a mentee.

All of these modules and methods would also be very useful for training mentors in academia. However, in addition to the time required, the habitus of university scholars and academics also comes into play here. Since they themselves have extensive experience of holding lectures and presenting their research to large audiences, they are often not particularly willing to train in the use communication tools (an obstacle that, incidentally, also confronts didactics training programmes at universities). Nonetheless, the success of future mentoring projects will depend to a large extent on training the mentors: since mentorship has now become a good thing to have on an academic CV, there will be people who are not predestined to be good mentors, yet who will apply to do so for reputation purposes.

6.3 Being a Mentor

In this section, I describe some aspects of my own experiences of being a mentor. My first mentorship worked very well, while the second had potential for development.

When I was first asked to be a mentor, two questions immediately came into my mind. Why are they asking me? ("They" were *genderize! 3*, the Austrian Youth Association's mentoring project in 2007-2008). What can I give to a mentee? One of my colleagues, a freelance feminist scholar, a part-time on a term-by-term basis employed university lecturer and an activist in feminist NGOs (like myself) had refused to be a mentor with the argument that she had nothing useful to give to mentees given her own precarious situation. I was sorry about her decision, because when the initial sense of amazement had worn off, I actually felt appreciated in my likewise precarious way of life and work (I had been asked to be a mentor in my capacity as co-founder and member of the board of the Austrian Association of Feminist Scholars[19]). I had also become curious about what it would be like to 'change sides': What would be the effect of being a mentor instead of a consultant or trainer in such a project? What would happen? Who would be my mentee?

I soon received a lot of printed material about the mentoring programme and the schedule. The fact that the one-to-one mentorship would be a same-gender relationship came as no surprise in a project called *genderize!* The matching was based on the applications received from the prospective mentees, interviews with each applicant and questionnaires completed by the (invited) mentors in which they could state their possibilities for support, wishes and exclusion criteria regarding the mentee. A prominent topic in the information provided in

[19] www.vfw.or.at

advance was the expenditure of time that would be needed. In addition to meeting the mentee once a month if possible, the bottom line was that – after a voluntary preparation meeting with the coordinators in a café – mentors should attend a) a half-day launch event to meet the other mentors, find out about their role as mentors and see their mentees for the first time; b) a compulsory intermediate meeting (which only four or five of the 25 mentors actually attended); and c) a consolidation session after the one-year mentoring relationship (which I was unable to attend). All in all, this did not demand much effort for the mentors, who were all to a greater or lesser extent prominent persons in politics, the media or NGOs. It is perhaps possible that this concept did not really stimulate commitment to the project on the part of the mentors. Indeed, most of the mentors did not even show any interest in networking with each other. On the other hand, the feedback from most of the mentees regarding the relationship to their mentor was positive (Eljasik 2008: 36ff).

I also received a list of my tasks as mentor at the start of the project. The first topic on this list was taking time; the next was listening carefully, asking questions and giving feedback (these were apparently competences that every mentor should possess, since no related training was included in the schedule). Then came the items I had been looking forward to: providing insights into my experience, opening up my network, offering advice, giving encouragement and providing practical tips. The information on the duties of the mentee was helpful, too, because these relieved me as mentor from some responsibilities: the mentee had to have clear objectives for the mentoring relationship, she had to know which kind of know-how she expected from the mentor, she had to take the initiative and be active. The mentees also had to attend obligatory meetings (start, interim and closing) plus two seminars and extra meetings for their peer group projects. While this did not seem to be a great deal at first glance, some of the mentees from other parts of Austria did have difficulties in making the trip to Vienna so often (Eljasik 2008).

We were also given a guideline for the first interview, which reminded us to show interest in the mentee. I was rather surprised by this apparently serious suggestion, but when I saw other mentors arriving late to the start event, leaving again before it had finished and spending the time in between on their mobile phones, I wondered no longer. We also received a guideline for the mentoring contract, which contained the topics I was familiar with from my own training courses: taking enough time to clarify expectations, means and types of communication, determining the frequency of contacts, thinking about the content and setting of face-to-face meetings and the subsequent feedback. We were also requested to fix the dates for the first (two) meetings and to always set the date for the next meeting at the end of a meeting (an approach that always makes sense).

I then met my mentee, and an intensive year of mentoring with monthly meetings began.

One of my own benefits as mentor was the relevance of my own CV and my precarious career as a freelance scholar on the fringes of universities (a model that was possible in

Austria at that particular time). Eight years after this mentoring relationship, this era is now apparently coming to an end. Extra-university research is being cut back, especially for smaller organizations, and it is now almost impossible to obtain funding for transdisciplinary projects or extra-university academic activities. Lecture contracts at universities on a term-by-term basis are harder and harder to obtain when budgets are being cut back – notably in marginalized fields like feminist or gender studies. But back in 2007 and 2008, I could still encourage my mentee to follow her path as a freelance feminist scholar and lecturer – and was proud to do so. Her positive feedback in turn gave me a lot of encouragement to proceed with my voluntary work in the Association of Feminist Scholars. I also gained a good friend and colleague!

My second opportunity to be a mentor was not so convincing – at least so far. I am (respectively have been asked to be) a mentor in a mentoring project for women in Lower Austria. This regional project has been in place since 2001, with its focus changing from year to year (Amt der NÖ Landesregierung 2007). It is linked to a series of (paid) seminars on good appearance, communication, self-confidence and resilience, all of which are intended to 'correct' women (Amt der NÖ Landesregierung 2015a). Prospective mentors have to fill in a short form giving their contact details and profession and indicating their professional expertise and the benefits they have to offer for a mentorship (Amt der NÖ Landesregierung n.d.). Mentees have to fill in a similar form. This sparse information is matched by the coordinators, and the mentoring relationship starts.

I received a blank mentoring contract and the contact details for my mentee with the information that she would get in touch with me in due course. Nothing happened. After some time had passed, I tried to reach her by email – without success. So I asked the coordination team for support. Two weeks later, I received the answer that my mentee was currently taking exams but would contact me in the near future. That was some months ago[20]. A specific of this particular mentoring programme is that you can start the mentoring relationship whenever you want – or can manage to do so.

> *And off it goes: Meetings to talk to each other, accompanying one another to events or shared excursions – it is up to the mentor and the mentee to define and agree the format for the mentorship. Our mentoring guideline helps you to choose appropriate elements and to prepare effectively for your first meeting.* (Amt der NÖ Landesregierung 2015b [Translation by the author][21])

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[20] In the end this mentoring relationship failed because of geographic reasons.

[21] *„Und schon geht es los: Gesprächstreffen, Begleitung zu Veranstaltungen oder gemeinsame Ausflüge - die jeweilige Gestaltung Ihrer Mentorschaft ist Vereinbarungssache, unser* ***Mentoring-Leitfaden*** *unterstützt Sie dabei, passende Elemente auszusuchen und sich sorgfältig auf das erste Gespräch vorzubereiten*" (Amt der NÖ Landesregierung 2015b).

In my opinion, a mentoring project which seeks to cover a large region like Lower Austria needs to have a more distinct focus than simply supporting women in their personal and professional development. Without anchor points, it can easily be too noncommittal. But the concept behind this project is, apparently, to give mentorships 'space', provide limited support through seminars and networking events and to accompany women on their career path. For example, last autumn the *Regional Mentoring in Lower Austria* programme invited mentors, mentees and interested persons (like myself) to a mentoring lounge at a beautiful venue with superb catering. There were presentations by mentors, opportunities for mentees to talk with one another and the chance for everyone to 'network' (or engage in small talk, as I would call it). This kind of networking event reminds me of the final agenda item in many concepts to support women: networking via the project's mailing list – mailing lists which seldom existed much longer than the actual projects themselves. As I pointed out above, establishing and maintaining sustainable networks takes much more than small talk over a nice glass of wine or being included on a mailing list. While I did, of course, meet some colleagues from former projects at this mentoring lounge, and we were able to renew our connections, it was still no place for building new networks.

6.4 Frequent Mentee Applications at the University of Vienna

As a transdisciplinary 'external', i.e. a lecturer on a term-by-term basis, I teach at various universities across Austria, including, for example, the University of Vienna, which runs a mentoring programme for female academics and scientists called *muv* (Wagner 2015). Whenever there was a call for mentees in a term when I was lecturing at this university (which qualified me to apply), I applied. I finally got a place in *muv 6* (2012-2014), which focused on postdoctoral researchers.

As a freelance scholar, my objectives for this mentoring were quite clear: to not lose my frail connection to this university and to continue with my term-based lecturing and coaching in academia. To achieve this, I needed strategic tips on how to enlarge my waning options; I also lacked personal contacts in institutes to which I had not yet applied. I teach in the transdisciplinary fields of Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Visual Studies and Media Studies at very different institutes and coach students in the exam phase. As a result, I need a contact person at a 'new'" institute to obtain inside information about the required topics and to allow me to adapt my proposed services accordingly. Knowing someone on the respective committee and having their support for my proposal has also proved constructive in the past.

When it came to the matching, the delicate and crucial element in every mentoring relationship, I had lot of discussions with the coordinator, who was extremely committed to finding optimal mentor-mentee solutions. This was apparently not easy in my case. First, I was very keen to be matched with a cross-gender mentor as I already have a tight network

with women in academia and I hoped that a male mentor would be beneficial in the hierarchical university system. In the end, after weeks of phone calls, I was ultimately given a same gender and feminist mentor. Our peer group consisted of three mentees, each with a gender focus in their research but with very different connections to the university as an institution: one in a management position in a large extra-university research institute; one with funding from the Austrian Science Fund, who was heading for a university career; and one freelance scholar, lecturer and coach (i.e. me).

In the first meeting with our mentor, she made it quite clear that the time for freelance scholarship had passed and that it was becoming harder and harder at the university to get budget for lectures or offers like mine. Those were essentially her 'tips' on how to enlarge my waning options. Since I got the impression at the start of the mentoring that my situation was too stressful for this new (and still fragile) relationship, I decided that I needed extra coaching for my professional life and in compatibility issues. I knew that *muv 6* offered coaching for each mentor-mentees group if required, but that it did not provide individual coaching. So I asked the coordinator to assist me in submitting a request to the university's HR department for financial support for my coaching. This proved possible, and the coaching itself turned out to be very helpful. Later, the possibility to get money for individual coaching became an integral component of *muv*. Flexibility regarding such requests from participants is a good indication of the quality of a mentoring program.

In our mentoring group, we discussed our publications and the notion of "publish or perish" at length with our mentor. I saw that most of my publications are peer reviewed, an aspect which had previously been of no importance for me. We screened our application papers, which grew longer and longer. Our mentor told us about the habilitation process. I found out that it is possible – and sometimes even preferred – for a candidate to do transdisciplinary research work for the PhD thesis and later (as I had done), but that the habilitation has to fit to an existing scientific discipline. Although I had not really been interested in a habilitation before, I then lost any possible motivation I might have had to pursuing one.

Although our relationship with our mentor was pleasant, I received no contacts from her for my lecturing and coaching work – not even in her own institute. And since my co-mentees were not based in university institutes, they could not provide me with any contacts either. Other mentees, who I talked to during seminars and workshops, were also located at the university fringe with no strong internal ties. As a result, I achieved neither of my objectives for the mentoring: finding new contacts and obtaining strategic tips on how to combat my waning options at the margins of the University of Vienna.

But the project did offer some interesting and excellent training and workshops for mentees, introduced me to potential speakers for the scientific debates that I curate, and provided me with good contacts in the programme environment. I was pleasantly surprised by my many peer reviewed publications and received the regard of my peers for my broad range of

competences. My self-confidence regarding my project acquisition skills also grew. The contact between the three mentees in my group was really amicable and provided us with an excellent setting to discuss the compatibility question, which is not easy to do in larger groups of women headed for academic careers.

6.5 Looking Back ... and Forward

My conclusions from my experiences as a consultant, trainer, mentor and mentee are as follows: First of all, a mentoring programme needs excellent and active coordination; second, mentors must support the programme's vision and structure; thirdly, a compulsory kick-off for all participants helps to establish a frame, an aspect which is all the more essential if the project is not situated within an particular institution to which the mentors and mentees have some basic ties. Furthermore, no matter where and how the matching takes place, it must be done very carefully. Facilitation of the mentor's tasks is another fundamental challenge for the coordinators, and the time and workload should be communicated transparently. The provision of simultaneously training for mentors should not be skipped as it is an important condition for the success of mentoring. (Cf. European Commission 2009, cited in ExpertInnengruppe LehrerInnenbildung NEU 2010: 67)

Even in academia, it should be possible to establish training for mentors that goes beyond the familiar 'selling' arguments of networking and transfer of valuable knowledge. Whenever I have trained managers in a business context, I have found that, after preliminary modules to feed their knowledge, they were keen to work with non-verbal methods like fantasy journeys, blind walks or living pictures – a module to 'read' classic paintings with your body, which reveals a lot about attitude and the subjective system of values, without the need for discussion (cf. Prokop 2009: 26-27). Such methods not only stimulate one's personal assets for mentorship, they are also a pleasure.

Last but not least, I would like to stress the importance of periodic group-based career coaching for mentees during a mentoring program. As the figure below shows, group coaching (GC) serves as a kind of ladder for the duration of the mentoring relationship.

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