

Mentor Me

Speakers: **Yarmila Alfonzetti:** Project Manager within Premier's Department, Office for Women
Kathy Baykitch, Director, Western Sydney Dance Action;
Miranda Wheen: UWS Dance graduate, director No Mean Feet schools dance program
Wendy Morrow: Dancer and performance artist; Australia Council Dance Board Fellowship recipient

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By Tracy Ellis

The word 'mentorship' tends to conjure a professional relationship, usually between an older and younger person. The person who is experienced in their field adopts a sort of protégé. Or vice versa, an aspirant artist or business person might adopt a role model to teach them, guide them and inspire them.

Mentorships can be very beneficial for the "mentee", who can access a kind of concentrated, one-on-one teaching not available in colleges or courses. It can also be a source of encouragement and support. Even if they aren't given to praise, the presence of a mentor simply taking the time to share their experience and impart their knowledge, is validating and can give a mentee the confidence they need to continue in their chosen field.

For a mentor, of course, the rewards may be less obvious, but it appears to be equally validating to be singled out as an example of professionalism and achievement in your field, and flattering to have someone want to learn from you. Many mentors also enjoy relating the details of their experiences to someone who cares. It can be an opportunity to claim their own achievements, perhaps refine their own approaches in the retelling, or distil them down to what is essential.

Many arts organisations have begun to recognise the benefits of these relationships and the March 2006 SAMAG seminar was devoted to the subject of mentoring. Four arts representatives with varying experiences as mentors, mentees, or as facilitators of mentoring programs, came to speak about their experiences.

The first speaker was **Yarmila Alfonzetti** from the **NSW Office for Women (OSW)**. Yarmila oversees the administration of a wide variety of strictly managed mentoring programs conducted by the Premier's Department, encompassing sports women, community leaders and university students. While her work might not necessarily be arts-related, her administrative practices are universal and lend themselves to any mentorship program. She brought to tonight's seminar a kind of template for arts organisations that might be looking to set up their own mentorship program.

The OSW's programs are developed by a committee and mentors and mentees are matched – often without consultation – based on the committee's appraisal of the needs of the mentee and the best possible mentor available to impart their knowledge.

Yarmila explains to the SAMAG audience that mentorships work on the premise that there two types of learning – tacit and explicit. A mentorship program encompasses both, but tacit learning is what separates the experience from more conventional educational methods. Tacit learning is also thought to be far more effective.

Mentorship programs can also be a way for arts organisations to attract funding. In the last SAMAG seminar, NSW Minister for the Arts, Bob Debus, announced \$52,000 for a new mentorship program for playwrights to be administered by the Australian Writer's Foundation.

But Yarmila cautions that mentorships can be "administratively heavy" programs to embark on and urges arts workers to "just accept that 80 percent of our work is admin".

The essential basis of her approach is a generic project management plan that adheres to four phases – initiation, planning, delivery and close out.

Within the specifics of each mentorship program, she identifies nine key components – management, scope, time, cost, integration, communication, human resources, quality, risk and procurement – and suggests making a plan for each one as part of an overall strategy.

Because the programs she is involved with are often initiatives that involve multiple mentors being matched with mentees, a comprehensive administrative plan is essential. She also strongly recommends the drafting of a mentorship agreement for both parties so that expectations and obligations from both sides can be managed and tracked effectively.

Kathy Baykitch is the director of **Western Sydney Dance Action** and has spoken at a previous SAMAG seminar that focused on arts and audience development in Western Sydney. Western Sydney Dance Action is one arts organisation that has been able to broaden their artist development by administering a dance mentorship.

Kathy says, "In dance, a form of mentorship is essential to deliver that 'tacit' learning to young dancers." In makes sense that, in dance, education is delivered through practice and experience, with less dependence on the written or spoken word than many other art forms.

In addition, opportunities to work in dance are rare. The dance scene in NSW is focussed on independent artists and there are few dance companies apart from the flagships, Sydney Dance Company and Bangarra. Therefore, dance development has to be focussed on independent artists and young dancers who are serious about making a living have to think about how they might support themselves.

Miranda Wheen is an ex-UWS dance student who was assisted into a mentorship with Western Sydney Dance Action through the Australia Council's 'Foot in the Door' initiative. Kathy, who goes to all the graduate shows, had seen Miranda's work.

The funding for the mentorship enabled Kathy to employ Miranda in the office, where she learnt practical skills that Miranda points out she, "didn't learn as part of her dance degree". While there, Miranda also worked behind the scenes on some productions, "such as sound-teching on [the show] Dance Bites," and participated in their education program, visiting primary schools and observing, and taking, classes.

She then had the opportunity to be directly involved in the creative process in the production Love Tales with dance artist Liz Lea.

The Foot in the Door funding provided her with an important source of income and employment as well as ongoing advice through her proximity to Dance Action's staff and resources.

Through this strategic and managed mentorship, Miranda has been able to get the combination of practical experience and tacit learning she needed to launch herself into her own initiative and has set up her own business, No Mean Feet, creating and conducting workshops for kids in primary and high schools.

While her performance work is still where her heart lies, she is able to "plug up the holes between the two" and create a self-sufficient life for herself and be sustained as a dance artist. Being a Western Sydney resident, Miranda is also keen to keep living and working in the region, where many schools offer dance as a subject and lots of young people are interested in dance.

The final speaker challenged the conventional model of mentorship as both a one-on-one, younger-older and experienced-inexperienced relationship.

Wendy is also a dancer – and a veteran. She has 30 years experience as a performer and teacher and is currently the recipient of a fellowship from the Australia Council's Dance Fund. Her field of interest is professional development for "mid-mature artists" across the board – not just dancers.

As a mid-career artist herself, in a physically demanding field, Wendy is interested in looking at alternative career paths and choices available to dancers as artists. Wendy didn't want to necessarily teach dance – often the only real career option left open to older dancers – "at least not in a conventional way," she says. She was interested in looking at other models, both for teaching and as a practitioner.

Wendy considers the word 'mentor' contentious and says that many people use it too loosely. She views mentoring as more of a partnership. A mentor isn't always a champion, and can also be a provocateur. She is interested in the more challenging end of the mentorship spectrum and things that might generate a different experience of learning.

One important step for her was to create an initiative that reconnects artists to each other and to find links to develop and strengthen supportive artistic communities. She worked on a project called ARM – Artistic Risk Management – with young people, that recognised that the process of making art is (or at least, should be) risky. ARM looked at what an artist's roles and responsibilities are when participating in a project, and also examined expectations, goals and objectives.

Another project she is involved with is MAP (Mentoring and Mature Artists Programs), which works from the observation that "people want to be partnered". As well as "creative clusters" – two-day forums, Wendy has also set up a retreat with "no agenda", to bring together mature and established artists from a variety of arts backgrounds.

"For me it was about looking at what other models – outside a workshop or a studio-based model, could work." The purpose was to decide, as mature artists, "What was our practice now ... how do we describe ourselves and our practice?"

It was essentially a kind of collective, intense, mentorship that was, also, anything but 'tacit'. The artists would go into the studio every day and begin what they called "practice". "The whole week was improvised so there was predominantly conversation," says Wendy, "...and the conversation had no boundaries."

A week-long talk fest between artists might not sound like a mentorship, but the results were ostensibly the same. "For everybody involved in that week, it was so affirming," says Wendy. "Personally, but also for their practice, and for the future kinds of ideas that they might generate."

For details on SAMAG seminars and membership: www.sama.org.au or info@samag.org