

Reflective Practice

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Pivotal moments in mentorship: Using arts-based reflective practice to explore the impact of mentorship on women in higher education

Author 1^{*a}, Author 2^b, Author 3^c, Author 4^b, Author 5^b

^a Author 1 University, ^b Authors 2 4 5 University, ^c Author 3 University

*Corresponding author: [redacted]

Biographical notes [redacted for review]

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Pivotal moments in mentorship: Using arts-based reflective practice to explore the impact of mentorship on women in higher education

Mentoring programs have been identified as a way of advancing women's career opportunities in many organisations, including higher education, by assigning a mentor who provides known measures of success to develop the knowledge and confidence of their mentee. The Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE) have instigated programs that aim to provide mentorship to support leadership opportunities and develop confidence in mentees. This collaborative autoethnographic study utilised an arts-based reflective practice to examine the experiences of five women in academia who each engaged and connected with each other in the ASCILITE Community Mentoring and Women in Academic Leadership programs. The results showed mentoring provided opportunities for mentees to develop academic identity and the positive influence of mentoring in fostering women's leadership opportunities in academia. The paper additionally confirms that digital technology mediated practices can facilitate connections and long lasting relationships between mentees and mentors.

Key words: mentoring; women; leadership, autoethnography, arts-based research, digital technology

Introduction

Mentorship programs have been increasingly used as strategies in academia to build staff capacity by matching aspiring academics (mentees) with experienced successful academics (mentors). While successful mentoring relationships have been found to be valuable for guidance and support to navigate the university culture required for career advancement (Abdollah & Heshmati Nabavi, 2023; Cleary et al., 2017), mentoring programs within organisations have been long criticised for lack of structure, producing negative or negligible outcomes (Montgomery et al., 2022) and subjective measures of success (Schriever & Grainger, 2019). Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that formal mentoring structures in universities 'can be rooted in patriarchal systems of power, hierarchy, and exclusion that

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perpetuate neoliberal and capitalist understandings of individualism and exceptionalism’ (Goerisch et al., 2019, p. 1742). Thus, while mentor programs can be seen as valued, the structure, purpose and relationships need to be carefully considered for success.

Understanding the need for mentoring in higher education, the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE) established a Community Mentoring Program and a Women in Academic Leadership (WiAL) program. The mentoring programs aim to encourage mutual support and collaboration among participants through mentoring sessions, focused seminars, skills for academic leadership and networking opportunities. Mentees are also linked with more experienced mentors to provide specific advice and opportunities to provide individualised support to ascend the ranks of academia. This paper reports on the experiences of five academics from Australia, who work across three states and universities, who were connected through ASCILITE mentorship initiatives during 2023.

The ASCILITE mentoring initiatives also encourage reflective practice to enable growth in academics’ professional identities (Van Beveren, 2024). Therefore, nearing the end of our mentoring program, we wanted to reflect on our participation, to share our experiences as women in leadership, and add to the limited scholarship of the perspectives of mentoring participants (Schriever & Grainger, 2019). Using a collaborative autoethnographic approach and an arts-based reflective research methodology outlined by Barton (2020), we each created artwork as a means to collectively interpret the affordances and challenges associated with women’s experiences of academic work, which we used to reflect on our experiences within the mentoring process.

In this research we address the question: *How can academic women’s leadership be fostered through technology mediated mentoring experiences?*

We commence by outlining the literature on womens’ leadership in the academy, technology

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mediated mentoring and the use of arts-based research to support scholarly reflection.

Women's leadership in academia

Throughout history, the structure of universities has limited job, career, and leadership prospects for women (Cullen & Luna, 1993) with challenges intensified when factors such as race, culture, religion, or age intersect with gender (Allen et al., 2021). Statistics highlight that '(white) men continue to constitute 70–74% of senior academics and executives in Australian tertiary institutions ... while women remain clustered at lower levels' (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020, p. 875). References of metaphors of disempowerment frame the work of women in academia – 'glass ceilings, glass cliffs, sticky floors, dead-end pipelines and leaky pipes' (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020, p. 875). However, according to Pasque & Nicholson (2023) empowering women into leadership roles ensures the perspectives and strengths of women in organisations is fully utilised. As a result, if universities are going to ensure fair and ethical opportunities in employment, career growth, and leadership for women, Allen and colleagues (2021) acknowledge there is a need for widespread institutional change. Our study aims to contribute to ways women can support each other with minimal resourcing through small scale measures such as mentoring and collaborative reflective practice through technology mediated communications without the need to wait for systemic change.

Technology mediated mentoring and the value of reflection in Academia

It is well established that effective mentoring enables open communication, supportive feedback, care, and reciprocal trust (Eller et al., 2014). There are different mentoring approaches depending on the purpose. Formal structured mentoring is a systemised convergent approach where there are focused objectives, identified content to be covered, and an explicit philosophy (Hairon, et al., 2020). The semi-formal mentoring described herewith comprises a semi-structured voluntary relationship between academics who share a common

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interest (in this case, technology use in education). While the ASCILITE organisation facilitated the connections between mentors and mentees, relationships were built on trust and an emotional commitment was quickly established. The foci were divergent, privileging just-in-time conversations, with topics addressing key issues arising for the mentees. The connection with ASCILITE enabled a form of leadership described by Bolden et al. (2012) as a sense of ‘colleagueship’ so where academics are part of a community there is the appearance of “accidental leaders”, people whose personal stories epitomise the predicament, ideals and hopes of academics’ (p. 142). Leadership aspirations, successes and failures through stories and experiences hope to inspire mentees to navigate their own experiences in academia.

Arts-based research as a reflective practice methodology

Reflection on the development of academics’ professional identities is an important part of the mentoring process (Van Beveren, 2024) and makes a contribution to the academy and to the communities with whom we research and teach (Schriever & Grainger, 2019). Reflection through creative arts-based research methods have been applied successfully by researchers from multiple disciplines (Burge et al., 2016; van der Vaart et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2017). Arts-based research is seen as ‘any social research or human inquiry that adapts the tenets of the creative arts as a part of the methodology... [and it] may be used during data collection, analysis, interpretation and/or dissemination’ (Jones & Leavy, 2014, pp. 1-2). Arts-based research adds value when generating data, for example when research questions cannot be answered in traditional ways, such as through interviews and questionnaires (CohenMiller, 2018). It also offers a platform for expressing emotions and symbolic experiences that language alone cannot capture (Dunn & Mellor, 2017). This is because ‘art can surface issues, convey messages, and elicit feelings beyond the written or spoken language’ (Pillay et al., 2021, p. 3). Further, arts-based research supports a proactive stance on ‘institutional

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pressures... promotion clocks,.. publish-or -perish dictates and funding agencies that reward “hard science” practitioners’ (Leavy, 2020, p. 1). In this way, art-based research is a suitable method for exploring participant experiences of mentoring as professional learning.

One of the hallmarks of arts-based research is participants can freely express their feelings and ideas, their capacity for immediacy and accessibility, and for giving voice to subjugated perspectives (Leavy, 2015). The work of Burge et al. (2016), Jones (2010), and Loads (2009; 2010) offers three examples of the application of arts-based research to higher education. Burge, et al (2016) found that arts-based activities fostered engaging and insightful reflections amongst university colleagues. They reported their methodological approach enabled participants to discuss artefacts which became rich data. Jones (2010) employed poetic transcription to delve into the complexities of teaching in higher education. They used art to illustrate the range of influences that shape the ways in which academics teach. They gained understanding the complexity and richness of a university teacher’s work life and ‘allowed for the emotional, ambiguous, contradictory’ experiences to be surfaced (Jones 2010, p. 594). Similarly, the effectiveness of arts-based methods was reported by Loads (2010; 2009) who used art to explore the teaching of university lecturers who were asked to produce a collage from magazine cuttings entitled ‘what teaching means to them’. The researchers found that the method evoked new understandings though the generation of novel metaphors for teaching. It has been demonstrated that arts-based research is a powerful tool for eliciting reflection beyond written text alone may not fully capture the richness of human experience (Barton, 2020). Therefore, as a group, we decided that arts-based approach would enable rich reflection on our experiences in the mentoring program.

In the discussion and findings section we discuss the positioning of women in academic leadership, technology mediated mentoring in academia and the use of arts-based reflective practice. Our artworks map different experiences of women at different career

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stages in the academy. Through our analysis of these data, findings are generated that illuminate the complexities of women's leadership, challenges addressed through mentoring and how technology mediated mentoring enables professional learning and growth.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Five women academics of differing levels and time in higher education, were participants in the autoethnographic study. We all had joined the ASCILITE Community Mentoring Program or Women in Academic Leadership Program as mentors and/or mentees and were connected to each other through the middle author, who was a mentor in the Community Mentoring Program and a mentee in the Women in Academic Leadership program. As reflective practice was encouraged by ASCILITE, nearing the completion of the formal mentoring programs, we decided to investigate the pivotal moments in our mentorship experience.

To engage in the research process, we followed six steps for the autoethnographic process to capture lived experience, as suggested by O'Hara (2018), as shown in Figure 1 and described below.

Step 1	• Selecting an approach
Step 2	• Ensuring ethical responsibility
Step 3	• Deciding theoretical underpinnings
Step 4	• Assembling and gathering data
Step 5	• Reflecting and analysing
Step 6	• Disseminating work with supportive drawings

Figure 1. Representation of O'Hara's (2018) six steps for autoethnographic research.

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Step 1: Selecting an approach

We initially met together through Zoom to identify our research question and approach to the study. We agreed to conduct a collaborative autoethnographic study using an arts-based method. Arts-based inquiry has been shown to be useful in practitioner research in higher education (Hannighan et al., 2021) as a means ‘to provoke reactions and emotions in the audience, or to instigate new ideas and perspectives on everyday practices and objects’ (Pangrazio, 2017, p. 225). We felt an arts-based collective autoethnography (Pretorius, 2022) would afford an understanding our experiences in the mentoring program.

Step 2: Ensuring ethical responsibility

Using autoethnography brings an ethical responsibility to ‘distinguish between scholarship and storytelling’ (Dauphinee, 2010, p. 799), to portray accurate experiences of the participants. We therefore followed the guide of Dauphinee (2010) who suggested that autoethnography should ensure a ‘reflexive awareness of the self’ (p. 806) by evacuating researchers from the public perception of what is expected of them, to instead strip away expectations of the academy and privilege the researcher’s voice. As we had worked together previously, we felt comfortable in providing true insight into our experiences. Additionally, we decided on a collective autoethnography, where we would analyse each of the reflections together, aiming to ensure a rigorous approach to analysing the data.

Step 3: Deciding theoretical underpinnings

Drawing inspiration from Barton’s (2020) use of artworks as a reflective tool, we decided to create individual artwork to depict moments when mentoring fostered pivotal learning.

Step 4: Assembling and gathering data

To create the artworks, we decided not to set any constraints as to the media used. Some of us

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used traditional ways to make an artwork, one using card and drawing materials and another using paper and mixed-media, another made a traditional collage by cutting out images from a magazine and then gluing the images onto paper. Two used digital means, one to collage images and another used prompts with an artificial intelligence image generator to create an artwork which represented mentoring for them. After creating our artworks, we each authored a description of our own artwork which outlined the choice of elements, structures, symbols and metaphors.

Step 5: Reflecting and analysing

Through a series of Zoom meetings, we met to engage in collaborative analysis of the artwork. We took turns to present our artwork to the group and shared our description of the use of metaphors and imagery to address the research focus. The sessions leveraged critical arts-based reflective conversations which were framed around an analytic question: *What does the imagery (symbolism and metaphors) highlight about mentoring in the academy that fosters women's leadership?*

We discussed each artwork in turn in the Zoom meetings, which were recorded and transcribed to elaborate our collaborative descriptions of our artwork.

Step 6: Disseminating work with supportive drawings

To disseminate our work we decided to publish artworks and descriptions along with our discussion and findings for the benefit of other reflective practitioners to illustrate how this method can enrich reflection and analysis to understand mentoring experiences.

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Resulting Artworks and Descriptions

Academic becoming as a journey in a community

<Insert Artwork 1>

ALT-TEXT: Artwork 1 depicts the academic journey through the metaphor of a landscape of a river with a sun that also looks like a wi-fi signal, rain that is depicted as love hearts and different sized planets that represent increasing milestones in academia along with five hands that reflect the support along the journey.

Figure 2. Artwork 1 - My academic journey nurtured through collegial support

This artwork shows my academic experience as a journey represented by the river flowing. The sun represents a source of energy that allows growth and the Wi-Fi technology as the way we connected and conducted of our mentoring experiences online. There is also earth and the creek or river, symbolic of my journey of becoming. There is not really a starting point and a final destination. It's a continuous cycle of becoming. This is a snapshot of a moment in time, a moment of being, in the present moment. There are some little flowers below the river that represent small achievements or milestones. Achieving the small milestone with support we can go on to the tulip or the larger fruit tree with apples. The different sized plants from the small grass flowers to the tree show the development through milestones that become larger as capacity builds. Our development is scaffolded, and capacity built as to what we accomplished with support along the way. This is nurtured in the context of care and love by the five hands that represent the community of women supporting each other through the mentoring. The rain is depicted as love hearts showing the care and nurturing in this community.

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Pillars of support

<Insert Artwork 2>

ALT-TEXT: Artwork 2 uses various media such as soils, branches, the skin of trees, and twelve images from the internet: two heads, a computer, a child at a different stage of development, a globe, and messages. Images are connected by drawing lines between them.

Figure 3. Artwork 2 – Pillars of support

Being an early-career researcher can be an overwhelming experience, as one faces numerous challenges, including the research publication process. I remember sharing my concerns and frustrations with my mentors - they had been a guiding light, a pillar of support throughout my academic journey. In that moment, I needed to raise my confidence, and I turned to them for guidance. My artwork depicts the interweaving roots of two trees, symbolizing a natural phenomenon known as inosculation. In inosculation, trunks, branches, or roots of two trees grow together in a manner akin to the artificial process of grafting. The term inosculation finds its roots in Latin, where 'in' signifies 'into/inward/against', and 'ōsculārī' means 'to kiss into/inward/against'. In forestry, trees that have undergone this process are referred to as 'gemels', derived from the Latin word meaning 'a pair'. In this artwork, the merging of roots reflects how one tree gains strength through the nourishment it receives, just as a mentee requires the support and guidance of mentors to bolster their confidence. Another element in the artwork portrays two heads connected via online communication, symbolising the link between each individual's thoughts and ideas, facilitated by technology such as computers and phone messages. This representation underscores the essential role of effective communication in my mentor-mentee relationships. Furthermore, the images of a child undergoing various stages of development within the artwork vividly mirror my own growth and transformation during my mentor-mentee relationship.

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Playful Pedagogy

<Insert Artwork 3>

ALT-TEXT: Artwork 3 is a series of collaged images from a newspaper. The words 'my family', 'transition', 'which way to go? Your way', 'tell a story', 'women' and 'puzzle' are written across the page. There are images of a woman throwing LEGO in the air, some tranquil images of water and rainforest, a cartoon duck and 5 people in a pool celebrating success.

Figure 4. Artwork 3 - Playful Pedagogy

All of my images were cut out from [redacted], an insert in the local paper, which had featured a story on me, so I was able to add my own image to the collage. When I reflect on my artwork, I think it represents not just the growth that I had during the mentorship, but it depicts the type of career I want in the academy going forward. The top left represents me as a young and colourful new academic and another with me throwing LEGO braille bricks in the air. As an initial teacher educator, I enjoy having a playful pedagogy in higher education, to inspire future teachers with hands-on activities for their own classrooms. At the top there is a character with flapping hands and lot in their brain at the bottom, representing how my mind works to tell a story as an inclusive educator trying to get across the stories of those who do not have equitable access. On reflection, I may not come across as passionate, as I recently had a person in a position of leadership tell me I needed to 'grow up as an academic' if I wanted to be seen and taken seriously in the academy. I decided that I have to ignore that advice because it's just the advice of one person, and this cannot be me! However, it has made me reflect on the advice I have received and what should be considered and important, which inspired me to sign up to the mentorship program. The collage moves from this younger academic, along a pathway to an image in the magazine, that reminded me in looks, of my grandmother and the words 'your way'. I feel this is inspiring me to be authentic to who I am.

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In the mentoring programs, I was both a mentee and a mentor. Along the path from younger to future academic, I found myself selecting images that spoke to me, and helped me to identify what was important in my life and career. I want to have fun in my work, have my family around me, trips to the beach, mountain walks, and mindful connections with others. I added the mentoring group that I have had, joining me and celebrating my successes as they have contributed to it. It was a group of strong, successful women who have validated my desire to go forward in my own way; one that allows me to be who I am, rather than who I am expected to be, and still thrive. I want to be a playful, but a kind and thoughtful academic, rather than someone who is just focused on their career.

Adapting, Aspiring and Soaring

<Insert Artwork 4>

ALT-TEXT: The image symbolises themes in women's leadership in academia associated with meeting challenges, the importance of gaining perspective, and making judicious decisions about time. The images highlight mentorship and adaptability through elements like mountains, scaffolding, a chameleon, and a clock.

Figure 5. Artwork 4 - Measuring, Adapting, Aspiring Soaring, Sustaining

The images of a mountain, birds, chameleon, rocks, clock and scaffold provide interconnected themes pertaining to women in leadership roles within academia, mentorship, and technology-mediated mentoring. The chameleon reflects the dynamic nature of leadership and a need for adaptability. Just as a chameleon changes its colour to adapt to its surroundings, there is a need to adjust to varying situations. Mentorship provides guidance on how to read environments and adjust accordingly. With eyes that move independently, chameleons have unique vision capability. Mentoring helps gain perspective.

The mountain reflects symbolic challenge. The peak is an aspiration to achieve which requires a strategic approach and consistent effort. As in mountain climbing, an experienced mentor knows the best paths, can help navigate around obstacles, and provide support during

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the journey. The base rock symbolises the foundation afforded through mentorship. It is stability amidst the change and disruption that marks the environment in universities over the last few years with the pandemic. The rock holds imprints of the past, just as mentors and mentees carry invaluable experiences that they use to co-produce knowledge. Birds in flight epitomise vision, and freedom, while their elevation provides perspective. This metaphor suggests how mentoring enables the intricacies of university dynamics to be understood, and opportunities to be identified. The clock alludes to a need to manage time amidst a myriad of responsibilities, and assistance to prioritise tasks and responsibilities. The scaffolding is a reference to the affordances of technology that cohere elements together as intrinsic to the process of mentoring.

Collaborative and successful mentoring

<Insert Artwork 5>

Artwork 5, created with artificial intelligence, shows two women, an experienced mentor sitting with a mentee on a comfortable couch. The mentor is holding a light globe at the centre of the image. The background is a collage of diverse women facing different directions.

Figure 6. Artwork 5 - A reflection of the mentoring processes – diversity and inclusion

Artwork 5 provides an AI generated collage image showcasing a pivotal moment of learning through mentoring with a peer. It captures the essence of mentorship in a cozy, and insightful environment, highlighting the exchange of knowledge and the moment of understanding in a rich backdrop of culture and empowerment. The eagerness of the mentee may represent the people I am mentoring, the easy relationship we develop, whereby there is an easy comradery, calmness, knowing they will be treated with respect and kindness. The images in the background provides more context of the type of mentoring that I have been involved with – diversity and inclusion, and perhaps indicate that mentoring one person, can have a flow on effect, to impact other women in academia.

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Discussion and Findings

Through the making of artworks, complex experiences of mentorship, such as challenges, growth, and transformation, were visually represented, providing insights into the nuanced nature of women's leadership in academia. While the artworks showed our unique experiences, they also highlighted similarities that we collectively shared as women in the academy. The process assisted us to determine that an art-based method was effective to answer our research question: How can academic women's leadership be fostered through technology mediated mentoring experiences?

Arts-based reflecting on mentoring experiences

The arts-based research enriched this process as the researchers collaboratively explored the different metaphors that they used to reflect and make sense of the discourses in the academy. There is a sensory richness in using art for critical reflection, as 'art is a form of aesthetic knowing' (Chien & Yang, 2019, p. 621). The art making enabled an exchange of diverse ideas and experiences as the metaphors in the images were surfaced and explored. The use of the arts-based method enabled participants to express complex emotions and experiences that may be difficult to articulate in words alone. The chameleon image in Artwork 4 provided a subtle commentary on the need to be known, when to blend, and when to stand out in the 'systems of power' and 'hierarchy' (Goerisch et al., 2019). Just as a chameleon changes its colour to adapt to its surroundings, there is a need to adjust to varying situations. Artwork 3 showed the need to adapt to challenges or pathways that did not seem the right fit, and the need to make decisions as to how to be portrayed.

The role of mentoring to gain insider knowledge about what counts in academia was acknowledged by Gregoric and Wilson (2015), who believed this support increased long term academic success. There was also evidence that this pathway not only included work priorities, but also personal elements, such as family and recreation (Artwork 3). However, if

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we are looking to find balance in academia, Martin and Stanfill (2023) propose that if ‘trying to find the road achieving work–life balance, many conclude that no such road exists’ (p. 553).

Our artworks identified the feeling of support the mentoring relationship provided. Artwork 2 entitled *Pillars of Support* represented their mentors which had been a guiding light, a ‘pillar of support throughout my academic journey’. Similarly Artwork 1 contained images of five hands which represent the community of women supporting each other and rain is depicted as love hearts showing the care and nurturing of the mentoring relationship. Interestingly, the image of Artwork 5, our most experienced mentor, showed care and nurturing of the mentoring relationships as her image showed ‘the easy relationship we develop, whereby there is an easy comradery, calmness, knowing they will be treated with respect and kindness’. While a pedagogy of care in the academy has been expressed in relationality between teachers and students (Burke et al., 2022), perhaps this same notion needs to be afforded amongst educators.

Collaborative Technology Mediated Mentoring Experiences

Technology provided flexibility and accessibility in mentoring experiences. While we could not feel the soil (Artwork 2), touch the pastel chalk (Artwork 1) or run our fingers over the layers of paper (Artwork 3) to experience the viscosity of the images, we were able to use technology supported modes (Artwork 4) and artificial intelligence to create images (Artwork 5) and in-built features of Zoom technology to share these images digitally. Although the researchers are dispersed across three universities in Australia spanning thousands of kilometres, the technology mediated communication enabled us to reflect at times that intersected across busy working lives in the academy, as it accommodated different schedules, time zones, and commitments. The structure of the ASCILITE mentoring programs and use of Zoom facilitated connection across geographical barriers, allowing for

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regular discussions and exchange of ideas amongst mentors and mentees. The collaborative technology was identified in Artwork 1, with the sun representing Wi-Fi technology and Artwork 2 portraying 'two heads connected via online communication, symbolizing the link between each individual's thoughts and ideas, facilitated by technology like computers and phone messages. This representation underscores the essential role of effective communication in my mentor-mentee relationships'.

Online mentoring was similarly found successful by Stöger et al. (2021) who used online mentoring for girls in STEM, finding that the one-on-one relationship online gave clear and undivided attention to the mentoring process and positive developments for participants in the project. For us, the technology enabled communication of diverse perspectives on higher education and conversations between academics at different career stages. Technology afforded us the ease to connect, collaborate and share reflections of the academy across Australian universities.

Fostering women's leadership

Fostering career development in the academy was an important goal for both ASCILITE programs. Mountains and peaks were used as symbols to show the challenge of growth by an experienced mentor; 'the peak is an aspiration to achieve which requires a strategic approach and consistent effort. As in mountain climbing, an experienced mentor knows the best paths, can help navigate around obstacles, and provide support during the journey' (Artwork 4). The guidance, clearly appreciated by newer members of the academy, identified mentors as the support when 'I needed to raise my confidence, and I turned to them for guidance' (Artwork 2). In fact, in this relationship Artwork 2 shows trees growing 'in inosculation, trunks, branches, or roots of two trees grow together in a manner akin to the artificial process of grafting' indicating the role of the mentor in supporting growth and growing at the same time. Artwork 1 also used the symbolism of nature and growth with small grass flowers to show

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development through milestones. Artwork 4 drew on the metaphor of the chameleon to also represent the flexible nature of the mentoring program, in how to guide the mentee:

The mentoring process afforded personalised guidance that was tailored to each mentee. The chameleon reflects the dynamic nature of leadership and a need for adaptability. Just as a chameleon changes its colour to adapt to its surroundings, there is a need to adjust to varying situations. Mentorship provides guidance on how to read environments and adjust accordingly.
(Artwork 4)

Flexibility can be particularly important for women in academia, with 'gendered structural impediments' (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020, p. 884) that can impact leadership opportunities and promotion. Impediments include inherent pressures associated with academic work, including the impetus to publish in high-quality journals with their high rejection rates (Barton et al., 2023). However, importantly, both the mentoring program and the arts-based reflection process, valued stories and experiences which underscored the importance of mentoring and empowering women in academia. It provided a platform for reflection on leadership journeys and to share these with the future academic leaders.

The metaphors of nature including running rivers, beaches, mountains, trees, chameleons and eagles flying high, revealed our thoughts about our lives as women being and becoming leaders in the academy. We would all argue that the opportunity to be involved in the mentoring program through technology mediated communication was a blessing, and the ability to engage in arts-based method, provided us with a cathartic tool to reflect on our role in supporting others to succeed in the academy. Arts-based research as a method for collaborative auto-ethnographic work was a useful tool to reflect on our experiences in the academy and the opportunities we hope for the future.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study explored pivotal moments in mentorship for five women academics

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involved in the ASCILITE mentoring programs. Using as an arts-based reflective research practice we created an image, and collectively analysed the symbolism and metaphors within the imagery to make meaning of mentoring in the academy that fosters women's leadership. Through the process we identified the usefulness of the arts-based research methods to enrich reflection and exploration of the mentoring process. Mentoring provided support at the point of need, kindness and nurturing, encouraged authenticity, and inspired confidence and aspiration. It was identified that collaborative technology, such as Zoom, was able to mediate mentoring experiences for all participants, who lived in different states and territories, including those of us who worked in regional universities. Despite only five participants in the ethnographic study, it was identified that undertaking mentoring solely online facilitated positive mentoring experiences, which enabled participation in the mentoring programs in a personalised and flexible manner. We recommend further autoethnographic research using art-based methods be undertaken by other women involved in online mentoring programs to explore the effectiveness of mentoring experiences in building academic women's leadership, to support equity in higher education.

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