

Subject Specialist Mentors in the Lifelong Learning Sector: The Subject Specialist Mentor Model; is it working? A case study approach

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Abstract

This short article explores whether using a mentoring model supports our Subject Specialist Mentors (SSMs) with their role of mentoring trainees on Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses. Although there are many mentoring models to choose from, our model is based around mentoring within the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS) where trainees need support for their subject specialism as well as their generic teaching skills. The main focus is the use of coaching and mentoring skills taking into consideration guiding, supporting and challenging the trainee during the lifetime of the mentor/trainee relationship. The SSMs found that using our model as a tool helped to structure meetings and to ensure that the trainee had the necessary support to enable them to become proficient, competent subject specialist teachers. In conclusion, it was found that there is a need for the use of a model or a framework to help the Subject Specialist Mentor (SSM) with such an important role.

Key words

Mentor; Subject Specialist Mentor (SSM); Subject Specialist Mentors (SSMs); Initial Teacher Training (ITT); Coach; Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS).

Introduction

This article considers the application of our subject specialist mentoring model by SSMs over a six month period. In doing so, consideration will be given to the benefits of utilising a model when mentoring trainees on ITT courses within the LLS. We also outline several models that influenced our design and discuss how the role of the SSM has evolved as a result of SSMs utilising our model. The aim of this article is to ascertain whether using and following a model provided assistance to the SSMs and whether it enabled them to structure meetings better with their trainees to ensure that the trainees were coached and mentored within generic teaching skills as well as the subject specialist knowledge and skills. A further aim is to give consideration to issues relating to the further development of our model and how it could be improved upon.

Our research is based on a case study approach conducted at the University Campus Barnsley (UCB) (part of the University of Huddersfield) between September 2010 and March 2011. SSMs were asked to apply and evaluate our model over a six month period. They were encouraged to document and reflect upon their application of our model with the use of reflective discussions with their trainees. They were invited to a mentor forum, where they were given an overview of the SSM and its six points. Our research explores issues associated with the SSM in a focused manner, as our approach allowed the application of our model to be explored from the point of view of the SSMs who support trainees from the UCB. Case studies are particularly useful when the researcher is trying to uncover a relationship between a phenomenon and the context in which it occurs (Gray, 2009).

Two main methods of collecting data were utilised: a focus group and semi-structured interviews. The focus group comprised of ten SSMs who worked within the LLS. It was a useful method of research as it enabled information to be collected that was framed around the application of our model. Using focus groups allowed rich detailed data to be collected through analysing interaction between the participants during the focus group and enabled a variety of views to emerge (Greenbaum, 2000). Its strength was that it allowed discussion between participants that revealed opinions and feelings about using our model that simply responding to a question would not have (Newby, 2010).

Findings are also drawn from semi-structured interviews with three experienced SSMs. The interviews were designed to elicit information from the respondents regarding the use of our model. The approach was essentially phenomenological; the method helped gather rich qualitative data that was personal and unique to the participants (Arksey and Knight, 1999). An inductive approach was followed when analysing data; attempts were made to find consistencies in the themes and patterns that emerged in order for some generalisations to be made pertaining to the use of the Subject Specialist Mentors Model (Gray, 2009). The interviews were focused directly on the topic of the case study and they provided original data that was illuminating.

Why have a model for Subject Specialist Mentoring?

Although there is no single conceptual model available, Connor and Pokora (2007) discuss how a model or framework can, when used sensitively, contribute significantly to effective helping. Interestingly, Megginson and Clutterbuck (2005) state that whilst for some, following a model may conflict with the humanistic tradition that is represented by mentoring, they maintain that many models can help guide practice and that they do not necessarily hamper meaningful authentic relationships between a mentor and mentee. Although there are many views on which model is best for coaching and mentoring, there is agreement that it is important for the coach or mentor to be clear about their approach and purposes.

This could be a pastoral role or inducting and guiding new teachers into the organisation as a point of contact away from the line manager or working alongside the trainee to motivate and challenge them.

Subject Specialist Mentoring is an intentional helping activity which requires a mixture of a task-oriented focus and supporting activities (Clutterbuck, 2004). There are times when the SSM will guide their trainee through working within their organisation and help guide them with subject specialist pedagogy. SSMs will also offer their trainee challenges to enhance their development as a teacher and/or subject specialist. They will also make sure that support is inherent throughout the relationship and that rapport and more empathetic skills are constantly developed (Wallace and Gravells, 2007). SSMs help trainees to articulate and achieve their objectives, to enable trainees to learn about themselves and become reflective practitioners. They motivate, encourage action and are agents of change, developing new skills or a change in behaviour to improve teaching. In order to help facilitate these helping activities we devised our model. Our model (see Fig. 1) views the SSM as a facilitator of learning, whose role is to provide the right conditions to enable trainees to develop by ensuring that they show interest, respect and empathy towards their trainee (Brockbank, 2006; Connor and Pokora, 2007). SSMs draw on all six points of our model during the SSM/trainee relationship. We view the core skill of a SSM as needing to have sufficient sensitivity to their trainee's needs to respond with the most appropriate points of our model (Clutterbuck, 2004).

Given the potential complexities involved in the SSMs' role we intend to review, develop and/or adapt our model (Fig. 1) based on primary research undertaken with current SSMs.

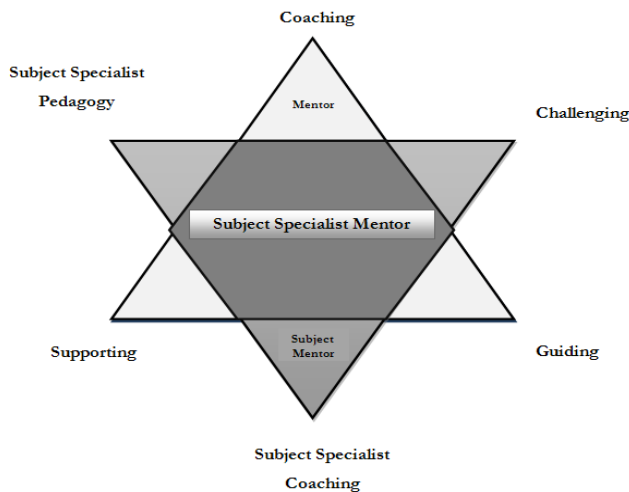


Fig 1 Subject Specialist Mentor Model

Models that influenced our Subject Specialist Mentor Model

Clearly, no one model of mentoring supersedes all others, and in fact as mentors we are encouraged to select and use different models/strategies that are appropriate to the situation in which we find ourselves (Butcher, 2003). Mentoring has been described as a multiplicity of roles that can often include the difficulty of assessing the trainee's progress, particularly whilst carrying out subject specialist observations, as well as being their guide and support (Orland-Barak and Yinon, 2005; Bray and Nettleton, 2007). With this in mind, our model and the development of our model on which this article is based owes much to research into the role of subject specialist mentoring and various models of mentoring. In reviewing the models that influenced our model acknowledgement must initially be given to Clutterbuck's four basic styles of helping. When carrying out original research with our SSMs and our trainees in 2009 it became clear that trainees wanted a SSM who offered support, advice and guidance, as well as somebody who could build rapport easily, coach, listen and guide them. Equally, SSMs saw their role as offering regular support to their trainee, as well as gaining their confidence. Reference was also made to making trainees aware of bureaucratic institutional and cultural issues within their organisation (Bailey and Schoch, 2010). Clutterbuck's model appeared to fit both the needs of the SSM and the requirements of our trainees to some extent.

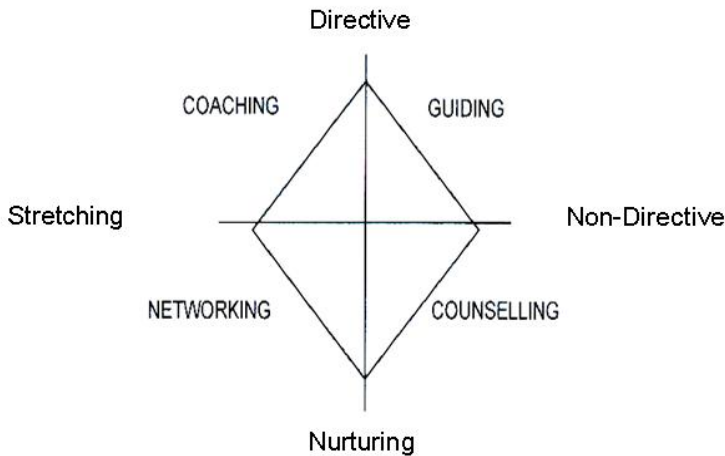


Fig. 2 Clutterbuck, 2004: p.19

Clutterbuck (2004) describes his model as being both simple and inclusive, with all helping behaviours fitting into the broad dimensions outlined above. He contends that an effective mentoring relationship requires a mixture of a task-oriented focus (challenge or stretching) and supporting behaviours (nurturing). When discussing coaching he makes reference to four basic styles of coaching which range from the highly directive to more simulative, learner-driven approaches. Counselling in this context is linked to support and learning, and acting as a sounding board. It is viewed as a relatively non-directive means of helping. Networking is an important element, as this enables mentees to find out what they need to know; the aim is to help make mentees develop self-resourcefulness by making them aware of the plethora of influences and information resources available to them. Finally, Clutterbuck discusses guiding and acting as a guardian, and how being a guide/guardian has a relatively strong element of being a role model attached to it. Clutterbuck's model is looked at in more depth by Clutterbuck and Sweeney (2005) (Fig. 3).

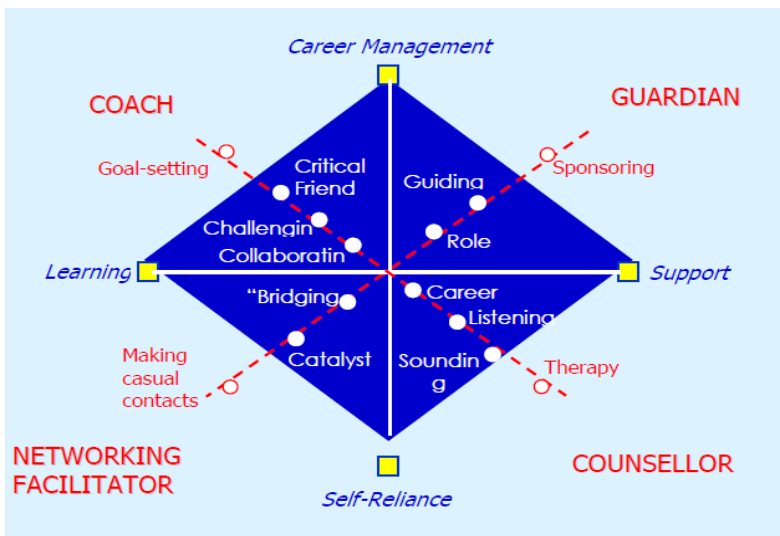


Fig. 3 Clutterbuck and Sweeney, 2005: p.8

This model illustrates that on the coaching line the mentor may act as a collaborator, as a goal-setter helping the mentee set his/her own goals, and as a challenger pushing them to think more deeply about issues and being a critical friend. On the networking line they discuss how mentors are involved in being a bridge (giving the mentee an introduction) and a catalyst (stimulating them to build their own networks). On the counselling line, behaviours include listening and being a sounding board. Finally, on the guardian line, the mentor may be a guide, giving advice, or a role model (Clutterbuck and Sweeney, 2005).

When developing our model we also gave consideration to the balance given between challenge and support as this is a particularly important element of the mentoring relationship (McNally and Martin, 1998; Butcher, 2002; Bailey et al, 2010; Bailey and Schoch, 2010). This balancing act has been discussed by several authors; although it is the work of Daloz (1986) (Fig. 4) which helped influence the development of our model.

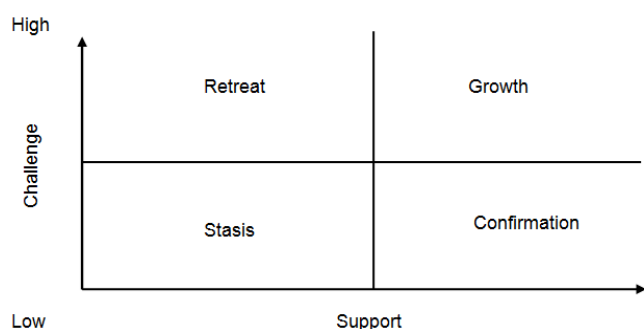


Fig. 4 Daloz, 1986: p.208

Daloz (1986) contends that too much challenge without support can lead to the trainee withdrawing or retreating due to a lack of trust between trainee and mentor. In contrast, support without challenge does nothing more than confirm the status quo with the trainee's development slowing down (Butcher, 2002). Given the varying experience and needs of our trainees, they would require the appropriate amount of each to ensure that they continue to develop, not only through their Initial Teacher Training, but throughout their career. The more experienced trainees may require and expect greater challenge from their SSM. In comparison, novice trainees may need more support than challenge in the first instance, with more challenge being introduced as the trainee develops and grows. According to Butcher, (2002: p. 206)

'There can be little doubt that students need mentor support as they are trained to become effective post-16 teachers. It is my contention they need the elusive strategy of challenge too.'

(Butcher, 2002: p. 206)

The work of Halai (2006) also influenced our model. Her findings made reference to a mentor as an 'expert-coach', 'a critical friend' and a 'subject specialist'. She gives examples of the expert coach discussing particular strategies for teaching, which might include teacher talk or the use of questioning technique to enhance student understanding. Subsequently she discusses how:

'The mentor's role appeared to be that of an expert proposing innovative instructional approaches to the mentees and encouraging their professional growth through reflection on the process of change initiated.'

(Halai, 2006: p. 704)

Halai (2006) also points out that as a critical friend the mentor, although supportive, encourages the mentee to take a critical stance towards their practice. There was also evidence of an element of reciprocity brought into the mentor-mentee relationship. The concept of subject matter knowledge was given significant focus, with reference being made to the positive impact mentors made on mentees' subject knowledge. Mentors were perceived as subject specialists with a sound knowledge and understanding of subject content, which is something SSMs should possess.

Findings

Common themes (forum)

It is evident from our findings from the focus group that the SSMs are coaching with regard to generic teaching skills and subject specialist support, as well as guiding with regard to departmental and organisational issues as basic as photocopying and ordering stationery (Bray and Nettleton 2007). They stated that their trainees, particularly during the first year of an in-service course, had expectations that the mentor would coach and instruct the trainees by giving them answers to their problems and telling them what to do, both in the meetings and also through telephone and e-mail discussions. SSMs new to the role felt more comfortable with the coaching part of our model by giving them instructions on what to do and how to do it. They then felt as they became more confident with their role they were able to support the trainee more by not necessarily giving instructions, but giving support to help the trainee come to their own decision and ultimately having a greater understanding of coaching and mentoring, and the ability to use different points of our model as necessary. The SSMs occasionally had difficulty with challenging their trainees to enable them to address any issues themselves with support from the SSM. During this research the SSM had a deeper understanding of their role and saw it as an essential part of the trainee teachers' course in order for them to develop. They appreciated the need to not only support and guide their trainees, but also to challenge them. Whilst training mentors over several years it had become apparent through feedback from the SSMs that whilst offering support and guidance to their trainees they had not consciously challenged them as well as they might. Incorporating challenge into our model appears to have helped SSMs become more conscious about ensuring that they were challenging their trainees.

The SSMs who took part in this research had undertaken the university's basic mentor training and had been given mentor handbooks and training materials which included looking at several models of mentoring, for example Clutterbuck's developmental model and four basic styles of helping model (2004), as well as access to reading materials such as books, journals and websites for extra help and support. All of the SSMs stated that using our model had helped them focus the support they were giving to their trainees and provided a framework for them to work with. They were developing a

sounder understanding of the differences between coaching and mentoring, and also coaching and mentoring within their subject specialisms. The findings below were how the SSMs had understood the points of our model and how they were addressing these with their trainees, and had used the points of the model as follows:

Coaching to allow the trainee to progress in practice, for example, classroom management and using the interactive whiteboards. Coaching with regard to what is happening in the classroom and giving examples of how the trainee could develop their teaching skills to inform them of how to improve their practice. Interestingly, what was also within this was the setting of ground rules and the structure of the mentor/trainee meetings which then helped the trainee when setting ground rules with their own students.

Challenge the trainee through the feedback that is given to them during mentor observations. Challenging the trainee through teaching at different levels within their own subject specialism and also teaching their subject within different departments where possible.

Guiding had originally been seen as something that all mentors did naturally, however, after the use of our model it was interesting that some of the SSMs had forgotten to help their trainees with organisational and departmental policies and issues.

Support, encouragement, empathy (remembering what it was like to be a trainee teacher) and reassurance. Supporting the trainee with regard to priorities; teaching and completing coursework for the Initial Teacher Training course. Providing support to overcome the challenges and improve their practice, for example, one mentor discussed the challenge he had set for his trainee of teaching for several lessons without using PowerPoint.

Subject specialist pedagogy: subject specialist coaching was used throughout the mentor/trainee relationship which often began with helping the trainee with the subject knowledge, giving them subject specialist resources to use and books to read in order to develop their own teaching resources. Once the trainees were more confident with this then the SSMs were more able to mentor and challenge the trainees with regard to their subject specialist knowledge and pedagogy.

The only other model some of the mentors had made use of was Clutterbuck's four basic styles of helping (2004) which was discussed in the initial mentor training all SSMs had attended over the past three years. Some of the mentors were keen to look at other models when they were mentoring new trainees the following year and had expressed an interest in attending some mentor workshops to look at these in more depth.

One interesting mentoring system discussed at the forum was having more than one mentor, for example, if the trainee was teaching three levels then there would be a mentor for each level: one for Level 1, one for Level 2 and one for Level 3, and there may be an overall mentor. This system ensured that the mentor was stretched and challenged within different levels and from different mentors. Mentors feel that they can also be a role model for their mentee by identifying '*with their skills, knowledge and personality*' (Cox, 2005: p. 404).

Several of the SSMs mentioned the fact that our model did not take into consideration the importance of reflective practice, although they could see that it was within each of the points. However, they did feel that if it was part of our model to be situated within the centre ensuring that reflective practice was discussed during the mentor/trainee meetings and to become an holistic part of our model.

Common themes (interviews)

Interviews were held with three experienced SSMs who had a mix of pre- and in-service trainees to support. Interestingly the use of our model was different with each of the SSMs with regard to coaching and mentoring. One mentor made a comment that the majority of his time spent with his trainee was coaching with regard to generic teaching skills and for subject specialist knowledge. He then stated that it became difficult to move into the mentoring role as he believed the trainee still needed a coach. However, during the mentor/trainee meetings, they were able to use our model to set targets that were more challenging to the trainee and would enable them to develop more as a subject specialist teacher.

A mentor within a Further Education (FE) college had several trainees which were both pre- and in-service, and also mentored a trainee in an area that was not her subject specialism; however, it was her role within her department to mentor staff across two subject areas. Due to this conflict she was able to find a subject specialist to help within the mentoring role enabling this trainee to have two mentors. There were differences with the pre- and in-service trainees whereby in the first half of the year the pre-service trainees needed more support with their subject specialist knowledge as well as their teaching skills, whereas the in-service trainees had better subject knowledge. She commented that by using and applying our model she was able to better understand and explain reasons for having a SSM. During her meetings with her trainee our model was the focal point and discussions took place around this. To begin with they looked at each point in our model and broke down their understanding of this before being able to see it as a whole.

All SSMs stated that using our model had given them a focus and a framework for their mentor/trainee meetings and had enabled them to set specific targets that were for both generic teaching skills and updating subject specialist knowledge and skills. They were also able to more easily distinguish between when it was necessary to coach and/or to mentor, guide, support and challenge through the mentor/trainee meetings and discussing each point of our model before seeing it as a whole.

Conclusion

All SSMs who took part in this research stated that they needed some support and guidance to help them in their role (Cunningham, 2004). We actively encourage our mentors to feed back to us any issues with their role and offer help and support where necessary. The support we give our mentors is often through meetings, mentor forums and training workshops which were ideas from the mentors. Workshops included observation support including feedback and terminology, introduction to the Cert Ed/PGCE modules and introduction to a BA (Hons) module on Coaching and Mentoring.

Mentoring must become an integral part of being a teacher, going past the Initial Teacher Training and into a supportive and challenging long-term relationship which would ideally include both work and personal support (Koeppen and McKay, 2000). Although there is still much confusion throughout the sector with regard to different models and frameworks, the most important issue is ensuring that there is quality support for trainees on Initial Teacher Training courses. It is clear that the mentor needs to be flexible in their approach to the role (Hennissen et al, 2008) and therefore our model is open to using a diverse range of skills and strategies for both the coach and the mentor, and for both the teacher and the subject. Our research did conclude that all our SSMs new to the role originally saw coaching and mentoring as two separate roles. However, as they used our model and understood their role more, and taking into consideration discussions with their trainee, they could see that they were all integral to the role of the SSM.

The research confirms that using a model is a helpful tool for SSMs. It has enabled the mentors to not only structure their meetings ensuring the trainees were coached and mentored with generic skills and subject specialist knowledge, but also given them confidence in their skills for the role. We will continue to encourage our SSMs to use our model and develop this further with future feedback in the next academic year. We now offer our amended model.

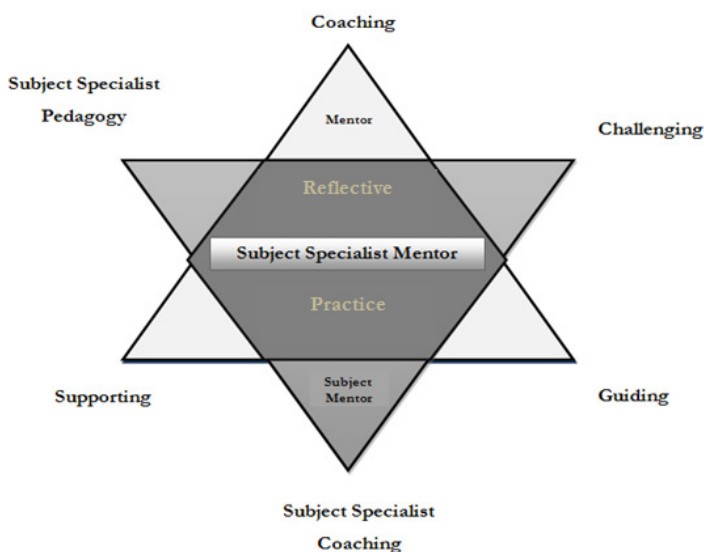


Fig. 5 Amended model.

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