

'Passionate about teaching' – the role of mentors in implementing professional standards

Michael Tedder

University of Exeter
SWCETT

Robert Lawy

University of Exeter

Abstract

This article originated from a qualitative research project that inquired into the impact of the changing requirements of programmes leading to teaching qualifications in the Learning and Skills Sector (LSS). The project was undertaken with the participation of a number of trainees, tutors and managers and used biographical methods to explore the experience of being mentored and the functioning of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) within restructured programmes of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Particular interest was taken in what participants had to say about the subject specialist mentoring that was intended to be a particular feature of new programmes. The authors conclude that there is dissonance between formal structures and trainees' expectations: while programme specifications emphasise the knowledge and skills of mentors, participants in ITE look for more human qualities.

Key words

Mentors; Initial Teacher Education; Standards; Learning and Skills.

Introduction

The article begins with a brief exposition of the policy context within which reforms have been made to programmes of ITE for the LSS and an outline is given of some mentoring theory relevant to practices in the sector. There follows a discussion of findings from a CETT-funded qualitative research project undertaken since the introduction of the reforms. The project sought to gain an understanding of the way in which the new arrangements were working for trainees, tutors and managers, specifically about their perceptions of subject specialist mentoring and the use of ILPs. Here we focus particularly on participants' comments about mentors and the qualities they hope for in mentoring. Some brief conclusions are drawn about the recent changes.

The policy background

Until relatively recently, Teacher Educators in Further Education (FE) had considerable autonomy in the design and implementation of ITE teaching programmes for teachers in FE colleges and the wider Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS). Course outcomes and accreditation requirements were framed by awarding bodies such as City and Guilds and BTEC (now EdExcel) or by universities at degree and postgraduate level but course tutors had extensive control of the content and conduct of their programmes. A change in direction became evident during the early 1990s when there were attempts to produce competence statements of desirable performance for teachers that conformed with the format used for National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). Units of Assessment produced by the Training and Development Lead Body (TDLB) were used to structure non-university programmes. (For a detailed discussion of this development see Chown, 1992; Chown and Last, 1993; Hodkinson, 1992; Hyland, 1994.) During the last decade, that direction of change has continued with repeated reformatting of 'standards' and with 'delivery' of programmes coming under increasing central scrutiny.

In 1999, the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) introduced a different approach to national standards after undertaking consultation with practitioners across the sector. These standards were expected:

1. To inform the design of accredited awards for FE teachers
2. To provide standards to inform professional development activity
3. To assist institution-based activities such as recruitment, appraisal and the identification of training needs (FENTO, 1999: p. 1).

However, an influential survey from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2003) identified great variability in the way the standards were understood and interpreted. In addition, Ofsted was critical of a perceived lack of systematic mentoring and support in the workplace in the development of subject-specific teaching skills:

'The current system of FE teacher training does not provide a satisfactory foundation of professional development for FE teachers at the start of their careers...While the tuition that trainees receive on the taught elements of their courses is generally good, few opportunities are provided for trainees to learn how to teach their specialist subjects, and there is a lack of systematic mentoring and support in the workplace.'

(Ofsted, 2003)

That report led to a recommendation for workplace mentoring of teachers in 'Equipping our Teachers for the Future' (DfES 2004):

‘...an essential aim of the training is that teachers should have the skills of teaching in their own specialist or curriculum area ... Subject specific skills must be acquired in the teachers’ workplace and from vocational or academic experience. Mentoring, either by line managers, subject experts or experienced teachers in related curriculum areas, is essential.’

(DfES, 2004: para 3.6)

The White Paper, ‘Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances’ (DfES, 2006) defined how a new licentiate qualification arrangement should operate for the sector. Full-time staff would need to have Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) while Associate Teacher Learning and Skills (ATLS) would be available for anyone with ‘a teaching role that carries significantly less than the full range of teaching responsibilities ordinarily carried out in a full teaching role’ (DIUS; 2007, page unnumbered).. The new regime, initiated in September 2007, requires trainees to address a minimum core of literacy, numeracy and IT; they are directed to a targeted subject training or pedagogy under the direction of mentors; programmes use devices such as ILPs to plan how targets are to be achieved. All programmes need to be geared to the officially sanctioned statements of national standards as defined by Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK, 2007a; 2007b), the sector skills council.

A new qualification structure has been introduced (Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector Award [PTLLS] followed by Certificate [CTLLS] and Diploma [DTLLS] awards) that are designed to meet the various professional needs of those in different teaching or training situations throughout the sector. The awards are certificated by City and Guilds and EdExcel (the National Awarding Body or ‘NAB’ awards) and replace older established awards. In order to comply with new requirements, higher education institutions that offer qualifications for teachers in the sector - awards such as the Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) or Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) - found it necessary to review their partnerships with colleges (Cullimore, 2006). They also needed to decide whether or not to continue with their awards and, if so, how to incorporate the LLUK standards within programmes and how NAB awards should articulate with them.

The research

Our project comprised a study funded by the local CETT of the impact and effectiveness of mentoring and ILPs within the new training programmes. The research methods comprised semi-structured interviews with a selection of trainees, teachers and managers together with desk research and a literature review. 28 interviews were undertaken in the early months of 2008; the research team collected rich qualitative data from ten trainees, from nine Teacher Educators who fulfil roles as tutors and/or mentors in programmes and also from nine managers, some working in FE colleges and some in other community organisations. All the interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. The approach to data collection and analysis was framed by notions of biographical learning (Chamberlayne et al, 2000; Merrill and West, 2009; Roberts, 2002): we wanted interviewees to go beyond answering narrowly technical questions about their course to convey something of what mentoring had meant for them, not only in their professional formation but in their lives outside education. We wanted to try and understand how engaging in narrative processes within systems of mentoring may offer a meaningful experience for them.

We have discussed elsewhere some of the key themes that emerged from the research, including the achievement of agency among course tutors (Lawy and Tedder, 2009a) and the conflict between different theoretical models of mentoring (Tedder and Lawy, 2009).

Mentoring in FE

Some years before our research there was a significant development project that aspired to make a difference to the quality of learning and teaching in colleges. The initiative was sponsored by the Association of Colleges and FENTO (AoC and FENTO) with resources drawn from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Standards Fund. Published as ‘Mentoring Towards Excellence’ (AoC and FENTO, 2001), the project undertook a broad survey of mentoring practices: there was consultation with 700 learners, 70 teachers and seven college leaders in 29 colleges and the resulting publication focused on identifying and sharing good practices and procedures across the sector. Guidelines and activities were published designed to enable college staff to develop policies and processes that would be effective in improving mentoring. The FENTO standards were seen as central to this process. Among the many recommendations that emerged from the study, one that encapsulated the consensus view was the statement that:

‘Mentoring should be developed and promoted as a supportive and developmental process’.

(AoC and FENTO, 2001: Introductory Booklet, p. 8)

‘Mentoring Towards Excellence’ presumed a consensus that mentoring could make a contribution to improving the quality of teaching and learning and that all teachers in Further Education – full- and part-time as well as agency and supply teachers – would benefit from a mentoring relationship with a fellow professional.

The developmental emphasis is endorsed by organisations like the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), which advocates a model of mentoring with three stages: of exploration, of new understanding, of action planning (Clutterbuck, 2004). Much of the educational literature on mentoring advocates a similar developmental approach. For example, Wallace and Gravells (2005) locate mentoring with other practices in teaching, such as counselling skills and the development of networking. They emphasise the importance of a caring relationship and for mentors to act as a role model. They advocate models of mentoring that are theoretically informed and suggest that a mentee should develop 'personal reflective space' in which a mentor can use a variety of skilled interventions to enable such reflection to take place.

Rhodes et al (2004) relate mentoring on the one hand to coaching but also to peer networks as inherent features of professional practice:

'In essence, both coaching and mentoring are complex activities closely associated with the support of individual learning. Mentoring implies an extended relationship involving additional behaviour such as counselling and professional friendship...Peer-networking implies the facility to work together productively with other colleagues so as to learn from them or with them. Successful networking relationships are at the heart of coaching and mentoring.'

(Rhodes et al, 2004: p. 12)

More recent publications (for example, Keeley-Browne, 2007) have tended to write of mentoring in a more directive way. The model has become one in which a mentor becomes allocated to a trainee to advise on 'the pedagogy of the classroom' and on subject issues. A set of functional responsibilities is identified for the mentor that includes contributing to the final assessment of trainee achievement in the programme. This stance responds to the model implicit in recent Ofsted reports (Ofsted, 2007; 2008; see also Cullimore and Simmons, 2010).

Within our research we were interested to explore in general how the LLUK standards were affecting the provision of Initial Teacher Education and, more specifically, what models of mentoring framed the thinking of those organising the mentors and what trainees thought of the provision made for them (Lawy and Tedder, 2009b; Tedder and Lawy, 2009).

Findings

What quickly emerged from our interviews was that there was no simple understanding of what 'mentoring' meant to our participants, even if they had undertaken some form of mentor training and development or taken part previously in mentoring activities. One complication was that narratives about mentoring might relate to one or more of three types of transition:

- supporting induction into an organisation: it could be into a particular part of a college such as a subject team or a department or school and would involve encouraging familiarity with the resources that are available and with the range of staff who are colleagues
- supporting a novice teacher in the Learning and Skills sector in developing the knowledge, skills and values appropriate for the profession
- supporting someone in meeting the specific demands of a particular subject area; subject-specific mentoring.

Arguably there was a fourth, underpinning, type of transition in that some spoke of personal development when a mentor supports a new teacher in coping with the problems and anxieties that arise from change and facilitates growth in qualities such as self-confidence.

The interviews showed how past experiences were important in structuring ideas about what mentoring could or should offer although accounts of such experiences rarely used terms like mentor or mentoring. We found that most of our participants were able to tell stories of people in their lives who had been inspirational in encouraging interest in a special subject or in the teaching profession and that such stories helped frame their thinking about mentors and mentoring.

Two of our managers had been closely involved in 'Mentoring Towards Excellence' (AoC and FENTO, 2001) and had contributed actively to the policies and practices about mentoring pursued by their respective colleges. Angela had more than 25 years' experience in Further Education and emphasised the importance of relationships and facilitation in mentoring. She articulated the difference between mentoring and coaching; in keeping with theoretical models from the literature she argued that a coach might be expected to be definitive or authoritative in her area of expertise while a mentor would explore options, possibilities and judgement, recognising the contested nature of much professional practice.

Andrew's commitment to mentoring followed many years' experience of teaching in a specific subject area and in teacher education. When interviewed he had a role in college quality management and considered the arrival of a 'proper mentoring system' as 'both overdue and very necessary'. While sympathetic to the ideas of addressing

subject-specific issues through mentoring, he had broad expectations of what a mentor should do that seemed to include a role of advocacy for a trainee within the institution where he or she worked. Such an understanding relates to the notion of trainee teachers as being 'peripheral participants' in a college community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Outlining the guidance he gave when training mentors, Andrew said:

'They had a number of things they had to do including informal classroom observation, being available to the mentee, make sure that they were comfortable in their subjects with the professionalism, make sure they got the development opportunities as they needed...'

Andrew questioned whether all trainees required subject-specific mentoring, noting how serving teachers who had been in post for several years already have considerable experience in dealing with their subject and had extensive opportunities to learn about resources and specific curriculum matters: *'they understand their subject very well...better than actually sometimes they understand teaching and learning.'*

Claire had more than two decades of experience at a third college and responded to our questions with stories of the help she offered to struggling trainees, help in building confidence, in demystifying course demands. Reflecting on her personal experiences of being mentored, she emphasised the importance of having a good personal relationship with a mentor that she contrasted with a line management role:

'...going back to the mentoring, yep you need a buddy. You need that colleague; you need somebody who can say, "Well, that was rubbish wasn't it?" You say, "Yea it was rubbish!" You also need someone to keep you going if, you know, to jolly you along and say, "Ob, keep [going], you know, nearly half-term" sort of thing. Yes you need the professional standards, we need somebody who's going to make a judgement on you and that's my line-manager' [emphasis added].

Claire commented on how discouraging it can be to adopt a mechanical approach to learning:

'I've not got an NVQ background, it's like Greek, you know, all these performance indicators and these scopes...it starts to take, it takes the passion and the fun out of what you're doing, doesn't it, in a way?'

Claire's comment about the importance of 'passion' for learning was echoed in other experienced teachers' comments about learning to teach.

The college managers drew attention to the complexities of the way that mentoring is located within the existing college systems of quality assurance and professional support that help constitute the learning culture of a college (James and Biesta, 2007). Particularly significant was the way that different colleges make use of advanced teachers/practitioners in contrasting ways and this can impact on the provision of mentoring for teacher education courses.

With the trainees and tutors we interviewed, we found that they too were able to talk of inspirational individuals who triggered their interest in teaching and set the standards that they aspired to achieve. However, it was rare that such an individual was available as a mentor.

Two trainees were taking the first year of a part-time PGCE course at different colleges and gave us insights into the working of mentoring for them. Kate has a creative arts background and her appointed mentor was a member of staff in the same college department but someone she perceived as having a different subject specialism (in Media). She found him a nice man and an approachable person but not really a help in the development of her teaching abilities. When asked what she thought contributed to effective learning, Kate recalled teachers who impressed her at school:

'I had ... a couple of art teachers at school, they loved it and they did it, and they lived it and they breathed it and you believed them and I didn't feel like they were standing up there kidding me, and that's really important... geography is not my subject at all, but (the teacher) made it interesting because he loved it and he believed in it and what he wanted to, you know, to talk about it.'

She summed up her ideas with a comment that again used the word 'passion':

'I think it's important to have the knowledge and the background of the subject and if you kind of, you kind of wing certain things... and I think passion and enthusiasm. I mean that's the main thing.'

Ian teaches outdoor education and, like Kate, had someone in the same college department as a mentor. Inspiration for his teaching came originally from his mother:

'... my mum was a teacher and she used to come back, she used to put a lot of hours in and she'd do extra curricular gym clubs and all different things for the schools and – admittedly it was primary but the, the passion that she had for the students and the young people, she really fed off that.'

Ian's mentor taught sports injuries that Ian found to be close enough to his subject area. It was significant that Ian and his mentor taught together and had the opportunity both to plan and evaluate their shared sessions:

'...he gets really, really good grades from Ofsted and I love his teaching style and I've – the personality behind it, the passion that he's got...we do lectures together and we get five, ten minutes after, five, ten minutes before.'

Another positive account of being mentored came from Graham, a trainee starting a Diploma course, a man with extensive experience of the catering industry overseas and locally who had decided he could best use his enthusiasm for teaching about food inside a college. When asked what he thought were the qualities of a good mentor he reflected on his own experience without once referring to subject expertise:

'Well, they've got to be accessible. If you've got a mentor that you can't get hold of it's a very difficult thing. So I'm guessing to be nice but to be honest and straight down the line so you know what you're expected, obviously they can't be a scary person because you wouldn't feel comfortable... I guess that the biggest thing that I'd have to say from [course tutor name] is that she's really, really passionate about teaching and I'm guessing that a mentor has to be passionate about what they do.'

Graham's view of good qualities in a mentor was inspired by his course tutor. When interviewing Graham's course tutor, Gill, it emerged that she had originally qualified in science and had many years' experience in teacher education. She recalled her experience of support from a respected line manager, the head of science:

'I had a really good manager at [my previous college]. I mean a really superb manager who managed me as a teacher in the very best possible way you could ever do. He challenged me, he set me targets, constantly monitored what I was doing, gave me huge amounts of feedback, very detailed feedback about what I was doing and how I could improve, allowed me to use him as a sounding board.'

In her view, the mentor's role in current training schemes is to present a similar challenge and to create high expectations:

'It is about challenging. It's not about being a friend. It's not about placating people and saying, "Yes you're wonderful and you know, how can I help?" It's about challenging...If I tutor people, it's my job to give them the solutions...whereas mentoring is very about quality and about being critical and being, you know, "Have you thought about, what do you mean by that?" or those sort of things. Opening doors but not pushing people through them [laughs].'

From talking to trainees and tutors, therefore, it emerged that some trainees have mentors where an excellent personal relationship had developed and the mentor made a valued contribution to a trainee's personal and professional development in their subject specific role, in their role within their own department or institution, in their professional role. Other trainees, however, had mentors who contributed only partially to such support.

Conclusions

Overall, our project found that colleges were in a state of transition with regard to their mentoring provision in teacher education courses and that issues of policy and practice were emerging that had been anticipated in pilot schemes (see Robinson, 2005). We found contested views about the practicability and desirability of subject-specific mentoring (Tedder and Lawy, 2009). We found substantial differences between colleges in their use of advanced teachers/practitioners and subject learning coaches within their mentoring provision (Lawy and Tedder, 2009b). What was striking in our interview transcripts was the language with which people talked about good teaching and their experiences of professional development. Trainees, tutors and managers construct stories of people who inspired them about teaching and qualities like 'enthusiasm' and 'passion' are prominent in their narratives. Formal programme structures have striven in recent decades to work with technical codifications of teacher performance and there has been limited recognition of the dynamics of personal relationships for professional development. You will search in vain for any reference to 'passion' in the voluminous statements of national standards. We concluded that all the effort and resource expended on defining standards is worthless if it is not grounded in the real-life experiences of those who work in Learning and Skills.

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