

Improving mentoring for part-time trainee teachers in Further Education Colleges in the South West

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Abstract

Mentoring for trainee teachers in the learning and skills sector has taken on a greater significance due to the recent demands of providing subject-specialist support in what is otherwise a generic training programme. This article reports on one of the research projects undertaken on behalf of the Peninsular CETT that were commissioned in order to improve the understanding of and the practice of mentoring in the region. The research focussed on investigating what factors contributed to successful mentoring relationships for part-time trainees who were working in Further Education (FE) colleges. The findings, based on case-study analysis emphasise the importance of personal relationships in the mentoring process, alongside the benefits of frequent and informal meetings based on mutual respect. The findings also highlighted the need for a clear definition and understanding of roles and responsibilities and adequate training and time for mentors. While these points are not surprising they do pose challenges for a system that now demands more formality and has to cover a very wide range of trainees working in different circumstances.

Introduction

The need for improving the mentoring of part-time trainee teachers in the colleges in partnership with the University of Plymouth was driven in part by an internal recognition that the process was not working as well as it should and that practice was inconsistent across the partnership. A strong external driver was the concern from Ofsted about the need to strengthen the subject specialist support for trainees on what are generic teacher training courses in this sector. The introduction of a new teacher training course in September 2007 provided an opportunity to change practice. A range of research and development projects was sponsored by the Peninsula Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (CETT). Most of these were situated in a single college. The project reported here was set up to work across the partnership.

Defining the role of the mentor is not straightforward, there is no strong consensus over this (Kerry and Shelton Mayes, 1995) and the confusion around the exact role makes evaluations of effectiveness difficult (Merriman, 1983; Jacobi, 1991). The greatest difference is between a conceptualisation of the role of the mentor as on the one hand an experienced friend and support (Shea, 1997; Weinstein, 1998) and on the other as a senior colleague who has an assessment role as well as a support role (Clutterbuck, 2001). The complexity of the role of mentor is not to be underestimated (Carruthers, 1993; Mcyntyre, 1996) and because of this, effective mentoring is *'difficult and demanding...and those performing the role need time and training in order to perfect their mentoring skills'* (Nicholls 2006). It is also clear how quickly mentoring as a practice in the FE sector has spread to be currently very extensive and essential (Cunningham, 2005).

The project

Aims and objectives. In September 2007 the Peninsula Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (CETT) sponsored five teacher educators to develop a series of case studies exploring mentoring in Further Education Initial Teacher Training. The objectives were:

1. to gain a picture of current practice with the mentoring of staff employed in five Further Education colleges
2. to identify and share examples of good practice
3. to find common factors that contribute to active and productive mentoring experiences through a meta-analysis of the case studies
4. to identify areas of practice for development
5. to use the findings to improve mentoring across the CETT.

Research Methods. The main data-gathering comprised of interviews with a range of trainees and their mentors. The interviews were between 30-45 minutes in length and were recorded in notes made by the interviewer. These were done separately in order to provide an element of triangulation. In some cases background information, including details of the college's mentoring policies, was gathered as a third point of triangulation.

This research was carried out by five teacher educators in five different colleges across the Peninsula CETT. In order to promote reliability in these circumstances standardisation of practice was encouraged. A common set of questions was agreed for both mentors and mentees as was a common approach to writing up the findings, through discussion between the researchers and project leader. Three students/trainees and their mentors were interviewed in each college. The researchers in each college decided on the most appropriate method of finding the sample. The objectives of the research meant that the students were chosen for their potential for providing a rich source of data.

Therefore, they were to be involved in an *active* mentoring relationship, but not necessarily a successful one. A spread of departments/faculties was sought in each college, but identical samples were not sought from each college because the desire for finding active mentor relationships was more important than exact matching of samples.

Anonymity was guaranteed throughout the project, including in the writing up and reporting.

Methodological Issues. There was one issue relating to the research that has affected the findings and needs to be borne in mind by the reader. It was originally agreed that all the interviews would be with trainees on the pre-September 2007 Cert Ed/PGCE programme because they would be in their second year and have had time to develop a relationship with their mentor and be able to comment on it with some hindsight. However, in the event, finding positive examples from this cohort led some of the researchers to take some or all of their interviewees from the new programme (enrolled September 2007). The mentoring arrangements for this cohort are being implemented in a much more rigorous manner than for the previous cohorts and the relationships would have been quite new (one term in most cases) when the interviews were carried out.

Case-Study Analysis

The fifteen case-studies were written up in a common format using the questions as headings and were analysed for common themes that characterised the factors behind the emergence of good practice. Two case-studies have been included in order to give a flavour of the findings. They have been selected as fairly typical examples that are not too individual or idiosyncratic. It must be noted however that all the cases were different and therefore not too much should be read into this selection. A full account of all the cases can be found on the CETT website - <http://www.peninsulacett.org.uk>.

Case-Study A. This trainee had teaching experience in a variety of contexts before being employed in a more than half time capacity at the college towards the end of the first year of the PGCE/Cert ED. He had subject knowledge and experience but little experience of the Further Education sector. His mentor is also his line manager and she took on the role of explaining how the trainee should do things from the start.

The relationship was described as informal with no specific set times and dates of meetings and no formal record keeping. The meetings were however regular, at least once a week and the manager was available to answer queries at any time. The agenda was driven by both parties depending on the topic.

The trainee has been observed by the mentor as line manager and for the PGCE/Cert ED. The discussions were not much related to subject specialist matters or professional development but mostly concerned administration, classroom management and relationships with other staff in the team.

The relationship was considered successful by the mentee because he liked the mentor as a person and thought she was easy to approach and very helpful. The mentor thought that the trainee was competent and willing to learn and take advice. She also liked the mentee as a person. They both agreed that flexibility and informality were important ingredients in the success of the relationship.

Case-study B. The mentor is a senior colleague and does not line manage the mentee. The mentee / mentor partnership was initiated by the mentee who approached her senior colleague, who works in the same department and teaches on the same courses. The mentor did say that she would have been keen to mentor without being asked. The mentee works on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays and shares the same office as her mentor and line manager. They are also in contact outside of these hours via phone and e-mail.

Both mentor and mentee categorised their meetings as informal, as there were no meetings booked in advance and no formal agenda. They met informally on a regular basis sharing and discussing the issues that naturally arose around each other's practice. Both considered the mentoring partnership as a two-way shared exchange and mutually supportive. The debriefing and feedback after the mentor's observation of her teaching practice focused purely on her progress as a teacher, with particular emphasis on classroom and behaviour management.

The mentor and mentee, although they had received the mentoring pack, had not been keeping a written record of their meetings and points raised or actions to be taken. The mentor, being a more experienced peer in terms of teaching practice, together with having very wide occupational experience, was able to give subject specialist help and guidance. The regular contact through sharing an office with colleagues and teaching the same courses and learners was considered to be a major asset to the mentoring partnership.

The aspect of the partnership that wasn't working well was the lack of record keeping and making the process more formal. The mentor stated that she would have appreciated more formal and explicit guidance on the mentoring role, responsibilities and expectations.

Common Themes

Informal and frequent meetings. This theme was identified in eleven of the case-studies and as such was the most common theme and was strongly emphasised by a range of both mentees and mentors. What mentees valued most

was help and advice when they needed it. This was frequently as a result of a specific issue that had come up in a teaching session, and the mentee wanted help and reassurance immediately. Or, in other cases help with administrative or organisational systems issues was needed quickly. Formal and less frequent meetings cannot fulfil these functions so well and add the potential encumbrance of official paperwork. In at least one case, the mentor manages to provide frequent formal contact with informal content, which is perhaps the ideal, but difficult to achieve.

This theme seems to indicate that much of the mentoring that was occurring was what McIntyre (1996) describes as being: '*At its most basic, involv[ing] a personal relationship which a relative novice is supported by a more experienced peer in coming to terms with a new role*' (Nicholls, 2006: p. 147). It was clear that in at least some of the colleges that the induction process was limited and this mentoring support was filling that void.

Strong relationship between mentor and mentee. In more than half of the cases a very strong factor in the viability and success of the relationship between mentors and their charges was the fact that the two people trusted and respected each other. In some cases the mentees had actively sought out someone who they respected and trusted, even if they had been officially allocated another person. Sometimes it happened by chance. This emphasises the importance of the personal aspects of the mentoring relationship that cannot easily be codified in formal systems.

Close proximity of mentor. This theme is closely related to the first one but was brought out specifically in four of the case-studies and referred to indirectly in four others. Frequent and informal contact was facilitated in these cases by the physical closeness of the working relationship between mentor and mentee. This naturally occurred when the mentor was a colleague or line-manger in the same team.

Mentors need allocation of time to do role. This theme specifically emerged in nine of the case studies, but was implicit in some of the others too. Formal mentoring meetings are difficult to arrange if the mentor and mentee are not given time in which to carry out this meeting. Perhaps this why so many of the relationships were characterised as informal?

Mentors need clear guidance/instructions on role. This only emerged specifically in four of the cases, but again was implicit in the comments of mentors in several of the other cases. Much of what was described in the relationships was not mentoring in the specific context of the teacher training course. Organisational issues and systems were as much a part of the many relationships as any focus on the professional development of the mentee.

Discussion

It is worth noting that each case study presents a unique situation. In terms of practice development, it is clear that colleges need to look at systems to support mentors. Systems need to take into account time for mentors to work with mentees (theme 4) and also training for mentors (theme 5). The lack of a system can potentially lead to a poor mentoring experience for the mentee, although when present it doesn't seem to be identified as a common factor for a productive mentoring experience. The lack of time and training for mentors could easily undermine attempts to improve the quality of mentoring.

However, it is not just systems that need to be in place in order to support deep and productive mentoring relationships. The training needed for mentors should go beyond procedural issues and engage with pedagogical matters too.

In terms of improving mentoring, it is clear from the case studies that the relationship between the mentor and mentee (theme 2) is vital to an effective mentoring experience. When selecting mentors, colleges should consider the capacity of a person to conduct regular informal meetings with the mentee (theme 1), taking into account the physical proximity and potential access to the mentor (theme 3). There are not inconsiderable difficulties in finding suitably qualified (subject expertise and qualified teacher status) mentors for all trainees, and this shortage of suitable candidates could undermine attempts to establish better qualified relationships.

The demands of the new programme which include formal documented meetings and *graded observations* are clearly problematic in terms of the current nature of successful mentor/mentee relationships which are based on mutual trust and respect and often informality.

An important question has emerged from these findings and can be summarised thus:

- How do we maintain the positive aspects of these successful mentoring relationships in terms of informality and personal relationships whilst increasing the formality of the system and making stronger links with the teacher training course?

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Appendix 1 Questions for interviews

Questions to ask the students/trainees

1. What is your work relationship to your mentor (e.g. line manager/in your department/ other college manager/ other)?
2. How often/how long/ at what time do you meet?
3. Would you categorise the meetings as mostly formal or mostly informal? – please explain
4. Is there active record keeping?
5. Do you talk about your professional development? (Including your progress as a teacher – relating to your observed sessions)
6. Who drives the agenda for these meetings?
7. Does your mentor observe you?
8. Do they give you subject specialist help?
9. Do you find the relationship useful? What do you get out of it?
10. What aspects work particularly well for you?
11. What doesn't work so well?
12. What do you think could improve mentoring in this context?
13. Do you have another mentor?
14. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of mentoring for the Cert Ed/PGCE programme?

Questions to ask the mentors

1. How often/how long/ at what time do you meet?
2. Would you categorise the meetings as mostly formal or mostly informal? – please explain
3. Is there active record keeping?
4. Do you talk about the professional development of your mentee? (Including their progress as a teacher – relating to their observed sessions)
5. Who drives the agenda for these meetings?
6. Do you give subject specialist help?
7. Do you think that the relationship is useful?
8. What aspects work particularly well do you think?
9. What do you think doesn't work so well?
10. What do you think could improve mentoring in this context?
11. Do you have other mentees?
12. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of mentoring for the Cert Ed/PGCE programme?