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Metaphors and mentoring: constructing a mentor typology from the perspective of student mentors

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Abstract

Although there is an extensive mentoring literature there is a dearth of literature which addresses questions such as ‘What does it mean to be a mentor?’ or ‘What do mentors do?’ from a mentor perspective (Heirdfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss, 2008). This paper draws on entry and exit surveys and interview data from a qualitative research project, in an Australian university and addresses these questions from the perspective of student mentors engaged in mentoring first year students in their transition to university. The paper begins by contextualising the research within a specific mentor programme and within a research methodology. The paper then presents a mentor typology constructed from the metaphors used by the research participants in examining their experiences as student mentors. This is followed by an examination of the typologies in the mentoring literature.

Key Words: Mentors, metaphor, mentoring, higher education

Introduction

This paper represents the third in a series of discussions drawing on a three year qualitative research project. The general aim of the project was to understand different aspects of the mentoring experience from the perspective of student mentors engaged in an Australian university transition programme. The first, (Scanlon, 2008[a]) used a case-study approach and examined the impact of experience on student mentors’ conceptualisations of mentoring; the second, (Scanlon, 2008[b]) investigated the role theory played in students’ mentoring practice. This final discussion examines students’ understanding of the mentoring experience through their use of metaphors.

The literature identifies substantial conceptual problems associated with mentoring (Colley 2003; Stephenson, 1997; Daloz, 1986; Capstick, 2004; Hall, 2003). For example, Philip (in Hall 2003, p. 3) found a litany of terms associated with mentoring with a range of meanings indicating a diverse set of underlying assumptions regarding the mentor as role model, champion, leader, guide, adviser, counsellor, volunteer, coach, sponsor, protector and preceptor. The conceptualisations are sometimes so broad that they reflect little more than a notion of individuals helping one another (Wilkins in Stephenson 1997, p. 7). There is thus little agreement on the

essence of mentoring though as Colley (2001) notes there has been an exponential growth of the literature which has seen the number of mentoring articles double every 5 years over the last 20 years.

In this research literature, aside from conceptual confusion there are two significant aspects of mentoring which have been largely neglected. The first is identified by Fagenson-Eland, Marks and Amendola (in Russell & Adams, 1997, p. 7) and more recently by Eby and Lockwood (2005, p. 442) and Heirdfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss (2008) who point out that mentoring is examined almost exclusively from the mentee rather than the mentor perspective. The second is 'the broader, metaphorical context' of mentoring identified by Daloz (1986, p. 17). This paper addresses both of these aspects by examining mentoring from the metaphorical perspective of a group of student mentors.

The mentoring context

In Australia mentor programmes supporting the first year transition are ubiquitous. The form of these programmes differs within and across universities. The Australian mentoring context vastly different to that of the UK in that, for example, there is no government supported national mentoring initiative and hence no development of National Mentoring Standards. The programme in which the current research was conducted is situated within a Faculty of Education and Social work and aims at supporting the first year transition to university through group mentoring workshops. At the same time the programme provides the student mentors with valuable pre-service teaching experiences, such as, facilitating classroom learning, writing lesson plans and reflecting on these experiences through an on-going reflective journal. It should also be noted in this context that in Australia teacher education is largely conducted in universities with school experiences frequently delayed until the second or even third year of students' university studies. Mentoring first year students was therefore seen by over 85% of student mentors as one way of gaining early 'classroom-like' experience.

The theoretical framework adopted in research is grounded in the phenomenological work of Alfred Schutz (1964, 1970, 1973). Of particular importance is the Schutzian notion of the way individuals define situations through previous experience and interaction with others. Schutz argues that previous experience is 'sedimented' and codified in a stock of knowledge which acts as a reference schema which individuals use to define new situations (Schutz 1973, p. 6). However, in the case of first year students making the transition to university their previous experiences of other learning contexts, such as the school, does not generally provide a sufficient guide to understanding the new situation of the university (Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007). The reason for this lies in the distinction between 'knowledge about' and 'knowledge of'. In the context of transition to university new students' 'knowledge about' the university is naïve, decontextualised, untested knowledge not verified through actual engagement with the university. This contrasts with 'knowledge of' the university which is contextually tested knowledge consisting of 'trustworthy recipes' which provide more experienced students with routine procedures and ways of interpreting the new situation; it is insider knowledge (Schutz 1964, p. 94).

First year students through the mentor transition programme have the opportunity to access the more experienced student mentors' 'knowledge of' the university. The structure

established to support student knowledge acquisition was a 'group mentoring model' which Ritchie and Genoni (2002, p. 69) suggest is a relatively new concept and one poorly represented in the literature. In this present research the group mentoring took the form of a series of weekly workshops, facilitated by second, third and fourth year student mentors, for first year education students in the first eight weeks of their transition to university. The workshops are organised to provide students, first with academic support through such topics as academic writing, presentation skills and the use of data bases for research, and second with the opportunity to create social networks. The workshops are underpinned by reflective practice which is intended to assist first year students in their initial transition to professional practice through examining critical incidents in their educational experiences, the educational experiences of another generation, educational representations in popular culture and media representations of teaching and learning. The reflections are facilitated by and shared with student mentors. The mentors also keep a reflective journal in which they examine their mentoring experiences in the light of a range of theoretical constructs, such as, phenomenology (Scanlon, 2008[b]).

Research methodology

The results of the research examined here were drawn from the same data-set as Scanlon (2008[a]) which examined the way in which student mentors conceptualisation of mentoring remained consistent over the course of their mentoring experiences. There were 12 student mentors who completed entry and exit surveys as well as two interviews, one in their initial stages of mentoring and one following the completion of the mentor programme. The initial data-set analysis located the role of experience in student conceptualisations of mentoring. What also emerged was the recurring use of metaphors in students' exposition of their mentoring experiences. It is these metaphors which are used here to establish a mentoring typology. The research analysis necessitated the researcher 'bracketing out' presuppositions regarding the nature of mentoring and instead attending to the first order constructs identified and interpreted by the research participants. This is what Schutz (1970, p. 44) referred to as the 'disinterested attitude of the scientific observer'. It is only in this way, Ashworth (1999, pp. 708-709) argues, that the life-world of the participants emerges with clarity from the research.

Mentor typology

Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p.3, 17) argue that the human conceptualisation system, in terms of which we all think and act, is metaphorical in nature. That is, what we experience in everyday life is a matter of metaphor and these metaphors enable us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another. Ortony (1975, p.45) argues that metaphors 'are necessary and not just nice' because they are concise and effective representations of the flow of experience. Metaphors were therefore a useful analytical tool in gaining access to students' conceptualisations of what constituted the experience of mentoring. The metaphors through which students understand their mentoring experiences can be classified as 'ontological metaphors' (Lakoff & Johnson (2003, p.25). That is, they are metaphors used as a way of viewing experience. The metaphors which student mentors employed describe mentoring experiences within a group rather than a one-on-one mentoring context. Nonetheless, it is evident that the mentors did not lose sight of the individuals within the group. In viewing their experiences as mentors the students employed four recurring metaphors - the navigator, the sage, the teacher and the friend.

The Navigator

The mentor as navigator or guide was frequently used by students in examining their roles as mentors to first year students in transition.

The mentor wants to walk along a path with another person and help them on a particular street. Not all streets require a map, but sometimes if the road rules get changed or a new road is developed, people might need some assistance until they can travel that section of the road by themselves. The mentor also might need to double-check the map as well from time to time to ensure the destination is well in sight. [Narelle]

Narelle's description makes extensive use of the navigator metaphor in exploring the mentor process in the evocative terminology of the journey with extensive reference to thoroughfares, maps, road rules and destination. Louise employed the same metaphor but injects an illuminatory dimension when she suggests the navigator '... is a light to guide the way.' Meiling's navigator provides a safe haven for the journey-maker.

A mentor is someone who guides and directs new members of the community, be it an educational community or a social community. They are the first port of call when new members of the community need help or guidance. [Meiling]

Meiling, however, adds that the navigator is 'not a tourist guide who knows what path their mentee shall take'. That is, it is recognised that each mentoring journey is different for each mentee and that as Meiling suggests 'the mentor exists to support the mentee in their own choices.' The journey can also be one of mutual discovery for as Alice proposes the mentor relationship should be 'mutually beneficial and the mentor should continue to learn and develop as the mentoring relationship strengthens.' When the mentor is conceptualised in terms of the navigator it can be argued that this implies a conceptualisation of the mentee as wayfarer.

The Sage

The mentor as sage is the older, wiser, more experienced individual (Cohen, 1995, p. 1) who engenders respect.

A mentor is a trusted person who is always "there" for words of wisdom, to listen and console and to help in providing encouragement and support. I always have this vision of a mentor being an older person with vast, worldly knowledge – although deep down I know this doesn't have to be the case. [Julie]

The sage mentor is supportive and encouraging but not, as Julie recognises, necessarily older in terms of years. Julie and other student mentors noted that there were, after all, first year students who were mature age students older than the mentors but less experienced in terms of the transition to university.

A mentor is someone who you look up to and respect. A mentor is someone who you listen to and trust and someone who plays an integral part in your life. [Rachel]

The mentor as sage not only has ‘vast’ experience but has through experience developed wisdom. As a result the sage engenders both trust and respect from the mentee. This is the mentor who supports and initiates the mentee through, Gloria suggests, imparting knowledge. The mentor when cast as sage implies the mentee as acolyte.

The Teacher

The construction of the mentor as teacher was a recurring metaphor and not unexpected in a pre-service mentoring programme which adopted a group, ‘classroom-like’, mentoring context. The mentor as teacher is closely related to the mentor as sage; however, student mentors did indicate that there was a significant epistemological distinction. The sage implies the possession of wisdom, of a kind of universal knowledge. The teacher, on the other hand, was seen to possess contextually specific knowledge, that is, ‘knowledge about’ specific situations. Kaylee emphasises this contextual specificity when she says the mentor, ‘brings one’s ideas and beliefs of teaching to share and discuss with students.’ Certainly it must be recognised that the group mentoring context and workshop structure emphasised the sharing of the cultural practices of teaching.

The epistemological distinction is further developed by Hannah who distinguished between the personal, experiential knowledge of the mentor and the public knowledge of the teacher which is gained through training. Thus the teacher mentor is according to Lindy ‘an expert in a specialty subject and tutors a student.’ Not only that but according to Gloria mentoring is like teaching although ‘teachers are not only mentors they are far more.’ (Scanlon, 2008[a])

The teacher as metaphor was also found in comments like Sally’s when she made reference to ‘scaffolding’ the mentee’s development in a mutually beneficial learning relationship.

Students will be able to carry out the work themselves eventually – start the foundations and then the student can build their own house [Sally]

Sally highlights the supportive but necessarily transient nature of mentoring when she refers to ‘scaffolding’, as the essence of scaffolding is its temporary nature. Gloria added another dimension to the mentor as teacher when she referred to the disciplinary knowledge-base of mentoring. The mentor as teacher has a corresponding construction of the mentee as student.

The Friend

The mentor as friend was portrayed by Alice in terms of ‘like a pal’ and by Caroline ‘a friend’. This construction implies a more intimate relationship between mentor and mentee because as Alice further explained she felt ‘on the same level’ as the first year mentees with ‘no real barriers’ between herself and the mentees. This relationship is, according to Hannah, less remote, more empathetic as she says the mentor adopts a ‘more laid-back role’. It should be remembered that the majority of mentors were only a few years older than the majority of mentees and therefore for many the mentor as friend was a taken for granted model of support. As a friend Alice suggests, ‘we can help with the trials and tribulations of the mentee’ or as Caroline suggests the mentor ‘plays an integral part in your life’ and is there in times of trouble.

For many mentors the construction of mentor was infused with notions of broader friendship in that they saw their role as facilitating the mentees development of social networks in their transition to university. Sally referred to 'putting on a friendly face' which was further developed by Alice who spoke about mentoring as an 'imitation friendship' - implying a friendship-like relationship.

These then were the four frequently recurring metaphors through which student mentors understood their experiences of mentoring. It is important to note that students did not see these conceptualisations as discrete. Rather students at different times and in different contexts understood their experiences as a mentor through different metaphors. Thus, for example, one situation might elicit a response from the mentor as friend and another a response from the mentor as teacher. In this way student mentors revealed an understanding of the complexity of mentoring as can be seen in Marina's composite construct.

A 'mentor' can generally be classified as a teacher, a trusted friend, a counsellor, a teacher, or someone who is largely more experienced than the 'protégé'. It is their job to guide that person through experiences that they have previously undergone, with the intention of making their experiences easier. This involvement can be major or minor, depending on how significant the needs of the mentee are. [Marina]

The above typology resulted from student mentors' experiences with group mentoring which is a much less frequent model than one-on-one mentoring. How then does this typology compare with other metaphorical representations of mentoring found in the literature based as they are largely on the one-on-one model of mentoring?

Discussion

The metaphor of navigator and their role on the journey is integral to the origin tale of mentor. Awaya, McEwan, Heyler, Linksy, Lum and Wakukawa (2003) argue that in the Odyssey Telemachus, with Mentor as guide, not only embarks on a journey to find his father but also on a journey of self-discovery. In contemporary mentoring practice Awaya *et al* (2003, p. 53) refer to mentors 'piloting' mentees through a maze of day-to-day activities with the mentor as a more seasoned traveller. The Spanish translation of mentor – orientar – is used by Fletcher (2007 p. 2) to signal the guiding function of the mentor. Daloz (1986, p. 27) references anthropologist Joseph Campbell's cross-cultural model of the journey and argues that Mentors greet the traveller as one who has been there before them. It is the first business of the mentor to listen to the dreams of the pilgrim (Daloz 1986, p. 21). Other extensive uses of journeying metaphors found in the literature include references to, mile markers, directions, terrain and destinations (Awaya *et al*, 2003, p. 51).

The sage metaphor is also embedded in the origin myth and Cohen (1995, p. 1), for example, argues the relationship in classic mentoring is 'of an older, wiser, experienced person' influencing a younger protégé. The mentor as sage also appears in Daloz (1986, p. 16) when he likens the mentor to Merlin or a fairy godmother. The 'mentor' as sage is, for him, infused with magic and luminosity, mentors are magicians in tales of transformation. They give us the magic which allows us to enter the darkness: a talisman to protect us from evil spirits, a gem of wise advice, a map and sometimes simply courage (Daloz 1986, p. 17).

The model of the mentor as an older or more experienced individual appears in Russell and Adams (1997, p.2) who argue that traditionally mentoring is seen as an intense interpersonal exchange between a senior, experienced colleague – the mentor, and less inexperienced junior – the protégé. Roberts (2000) similarly refers to mentoring as:

A formalised process whereby a more knowledgeable and experienced person actuates a supportive role to overseeing and encouraging reflection and learning within a less experienced and knowledgeable person. (2000, p. 162)

The mentor as teacher is another version of the more experienced person and is found, for example, in Yamamoto (1988, p. 183) who argues that all teaching worthy of the name contains an element of mentoring. While Cohen and Galbraith (1995, p. 6) refer to the mentor as a wise teacher who ‘accompanies, encourages, instructs, challenges, and even confronts the mentee.’ Others, such as, Schlager, Poirier and Means (in McLellan, 1996) argue differently.

Mentors are distinguished from teachers in that they are less concerned with content coverage and evaluation and more like masters or consultants, reacting to the learner’s situation, relying on experience to model and convey ideas, acting as a resource, and implicitly interweaving technical knowledge and skills with cultural info and values. (1996, p. 249)

What distinguishes the teacher and mentor according to Schlager *et al* is the knowledge-base and this resonates with the teacher/mentor distinction identified by some students in the research. Jarvis (1995, p. 416) argues that the mentor and teacher are different in that the role of the mentor, not the teacher, is ‘an opener of doors.’

One mentor conceptualisation identified by students in the research which appears less frequently in the literature is the mentor as friend. Awaya *et al* (2003, p. 49) refer to equality in the mentoring relationship and quotes Lord Chesterfield’s comment to his son regarding the ‘friendly care and assistance’ of his mentor. Similarly Philip and Hendry (1996, p. 7) include the notion of ‘best friend’ which is defined by reciprocity and equality in their mentor typology. Michael (2008, p. 1) also acknowledges that friendship is one of the characteristics of mentoring. However, Cross (in Brockbank & McGill 2006, p 81), for example, argues that such a model does not exist because mentoring is ‘planned, contrived and one-way’ - the anathema of a friendship.

The composite picture of the mentor identified by Marina is also apparent in the literature, for example, Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson and McKee (1978, p. 97) refer to the mentor as ‘teacher, adviser or sponsor ... it means all of these things and more.’ Wilkin (in Stephenson 1997, p. 7) argues the mentor can be coach, counsellor, teacher and therapist. Clutterbuck (in Brockbank & McGill, 2006, p. 114) recognises the contextual nature of mentoring when he suggests that mentors draw on an appropriate array of models, coaching or counselling, whichever is appropriate to the particular circumstances. Cox (2003, p. 14) emphasises that mentors bring to each relationship a broad range of life experiences upon which they draw. Four different styles of mentoring, namely, the good parent, learning facilitator, career guidance provider and social worker were identified by Ford (in Hall 2003, p. 7) who further argues that in practice the roles overlap. Conway (in Stephenson, 1997, p. 51) suggests, ‘Each mentor and each mentoring relationship is, and should be, different from any other in the way it progresses.’ It is

therefore about 'multiple relationships' (Barnett, 2008, p. 9) and Wildman, Magliaro, Niles, and Niles (1992, p. 212) found in their study that mentors 'created a comprehensive array of ways to provide support ... They became teachers, leaders, guides and role models...'. Fletcher (2007 p. 10) acknowledges the 'dynamic and living relationship' that is both coaching and mentoring.

Conclusion

A number of interesting findings emerge from this research. One is the way in which the typology created from a group mentoring situation accords with the typologies found in the literature grounded in one-on-one mentoring. This is significant because it indicates that group mentoring need not lose sight of the individuals within the group. The mentors in the current research were able to identify individual needs and address these needs in a group situation. Thus, the mentor recognises that each journey is different even within the same group context. The context must be taken into account as all of the mentors were pre-service teachers who were encouraged to focus on individual needs with a group context.

Another finding which emerges from the first is the persistent use of the metaphor of the mentor as teacher. This is not unexpected in a context where all mentors were pre-service teachers in a university-based education programme. This was further reinforced by the classroom-like structure of the mentor programme which mimicked teacher-student school interaction. Yet another finding is that all of the student mentors in the research found mentoring to be a positive experience as reflected in their use of affirmative metaphors. This might be explained in part by the fact that mentoring is widely recognised in the literature as providing professional satisfaction to mentors (Michael 2008, p. 4) and peer mentoring as being one of the more successful interventions in ensuring student retention (Terrion, 2007, p.42) and hence the positive impact on mentors. It should be remembered that the mentors were all volunteers and that all student mentors gave as their prime motives for engaging in mentoring as supporting others and contributing to their own professional development.

Finally, the research indicates that whatever mentoring is it is a highly complex activity. An activity in which mentors construct their identity through situated interaction with mentees. As students metaphorically conceptualise themselves as mentors at the same time it can be argued they also construct mentees so that, for example, the navigator might view the mentee as a wayfarer, the sage the acolyte, the teacher the student and the friend the friend. There are claims that mentoring should be more clearly defined but Wildman *et al* (1992, p. 212) question whether or not we should attempt to define mentoring because as Gladstone (cited in Garvey 1994, p. 19) suggests mentoring is 'as idiosyncratic as the people involved'. It was never intended that the typology identified in this research be generalised to other contexts. However, it would be a useful addition to our understanding of the mentor experience to examine the applicability of the typology in educational and other settings.

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