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# Mentoring in the Lifelong Learning Sector: a critical heuristic account

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## Abstract

This paper explores a heuristic (*'allowing people to learn for themselves'* [Allen, 2004: p. 654]) mentoring case involving an Advanced Practitioner (AP) tasked with the role of mentoring a trainee PGCE teacher who had received a grade 4 (unsatisfactory) decision of his teaching by the college quality assurance system. The paper outlines the relevant theories and frameworks of mentoring which were considered at the time, those which seemed to emerge quite naturally, albeit in skeletal form, and the way in which reflective practice was found to be the key to unlocking the mentor/mentee relationship in profound and critical ways.

## Key words

Mentoring; Heuristics; Trainee Teacher; Reflective Practice.

## Introduction

This case study emerged and developed during the author's mentoring role as an AP which brought together his alleged or assumed tacit body of teaching and learning knowledge, situated attentional skills (Allen and Luntley, 2007), rudimentary counselling training, natural pastoral approach to mentoring and his almost blind devotion to the discipline of reflective practice as opposed to drawing on a vast arsenal of mentoring skills already in place (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

The mentoring took place at ABC college, a medium-sized general Further Education college in North West England with a well-balanced curriculum offer, strong links with both local industry and schools and a healthy 14-19 curriculum which, at the time of the study (November 2005 to March 2006), included a drive to embrace school links provision across as wide a range of course provision as possible. The Quality Improvement team at ABC enjoyed the services of eight APs, including this author, whose various duties included conducting graded observations of teaching and learning, and mentoring 'failing' staff graded as 3 or 4 in their teaching.

This study is limited in that the emerging framework and methodologies came together in response to the particular nuances of both the trainee/mentee (hereafter referred to as Tom) and the 'Public Services' school link group he received the grade 4 with and cannot be assumed to work effectively elsewhere in other situations or contexts. Aside from the three hours per week school link group, Tom was teaching solely full-time Public Service groups and was Wing Commander of the local RAF Volunteer Reserve (Training) unit.

Whilst the case study is particularly narrow in focus and findings, the author acknowledges the considerable mentor development work of CETTs (Centres for Excellence in Teacher Training) at the national level, for example Derrick (2008), Hardman (2008) and Spain (2008) et al.

## Theoretical underpinning

The college's mentoring provision for failing teachers at the time relied on a somewhat milk-and-water, mentee-driven methodology that located the onus for development squarely with the mentees and revolved around mentees' self-evaluation (Jones and Rees, 2002) of their confidence as listed on a checklist of pedagogical behaviours. Whilst needs analysis draws popular support, Brookfield (1995) suggests that the efficacy of such an approach is often an assumption, includes setting '*unattainable standards*' (p. 20), often serves the wrong interests and '*ignores pedagogic reality*' (p. 21). The existing framework also relied entirely on self-acknowledgement of the reasons for grades 3 or 4 being awarded and on a five hour (maximum) mentoring relationship that ought not to be perceived by the mentee as being in any way intrusive. The banality of the framework inspired this author to be proactive in developing an AP mentoring function whereby the quality of teaching and learning could be improved by deliberate means to the benefit of learners, tutors and the organisation (Drucker, 1989) and was informed by reading for his MA.

There is widespread literature that paints mentoring in a positive and emancipatory light typified by Clutterbuck (2001) who suggests that mentoring draws on the primary approaches of coaching, counselling, networking and guiding, in which he affords a special status to the reflective model or '*personal reflective space (PRS)*' (p. 23), which he closely allies with the counselling model as, '*When you engage in similar dialogue with a mentor, you are in effect inviting them to join in your PRS*' (ibid.). The implied cosiness and comfort of learning at the mentor's largesse is immediately problematised by the thorny reliance on reflection, which seems to have been over-worked as Jarvis (2005, p. 8) posits: '*The term has become so widely and inconsistently used that it has to some extent been devalued*' and which Maynard and

Furlong (1995, p. 16) suggest is often misunderstood, 'Trainees today are constantly urged to reflect, though it is not always made explicit what reflection means or what they should be reflecting on'.

Although the literature reveals little focus on specific trains of thought in reflection, with the exception of Brookfield (1995), since any taught session and context is likely to differ from the next, the majority of commentators seem to be at one in the use of a stretching, challenging and critical approach (Parsloe, 1992; Clutterbuck, 2001; and Cunningham, 2005, et al) whereby, 'The effective mentor therefore takes you down the path from analysis, through understanding and insight to plans for action in a faster, more thorough manner' (Clutterbuck, 2001: p. 24). Axiomatic of this approach is Freire's 'epistemological relationship to reality' (Shor, 1993: p. 31) in which the teacher, through critical and almost Socratic problematising, both engages with the learners' (see mentees') culture and draws them away from it in such a way as to promote detached, objective thinking: 'With dialogic reflection among their peers, they gain some critical distance on their condition and can consider how to transform them' (ibid.).

Although Freire's work related to Latin American learners, Hodkinson et al (2004, p. 6) offer the notion that a mentored teacher paradoxically becomes a learner: 'What applies to the students also applies to the tutors'. Likewise, when mentor and mentee are both teachers they can also be considered as peers as justified by Falchikov (2001, p. 5): 'Potential development may be realised under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers', with Brockbank's (1994) notion of the mentoring role highlighting the comfort of such a relationship, '...as nearer that of friend, confidante, counsellor or parent figure who is non-directive and non-judgemental' (Brockbank, 1994, quoted in Brockbank and McGill, 1998: p. 253).

Whilst acknowledging Vroom's dated assertion (Vroom, 1964) that the mentor's instrumentality (the more I put into him, the more I'll get out) is juxtaposed against the mentee's expectancy (he believes that if he emulates the mentor then he'll be free), there is a literature that cautions that, given the mentee's subtle and complex motivation, instrumental mentoring can be ineffective: 'The formal and mandatory nature of the process often results in both the mentor and mentee simply "going through the motion" without really learning from the process' (Whittaker and Cartwright, 2000: p. 63).

More promising for the proactive direction of the case study was Dewey's seminal but relevant belief that, 'Example is notoriously more potent than precept' (Dewey, 1916: p. 21), a notion which sits well with Egan's (1990) skilled helping model where the mentor might do something useful on behalf of the mentee, despite Jaques' (1991) cautionary concern that the AP might be placed in a difficult risk-taking situation. Mindful of Hopkins' (1985) belief that, 'We need to produce theory that is applicable to classrooms as well as within them' (p. 106) and Bloomer and James' (2001) assertion that, 'Research is integral to, not adjunct to, practice' (p. 5), this author modified Gannaway's (1976) rudimentary framework for evaluating Tom's teaching practice and identifying areas for development.

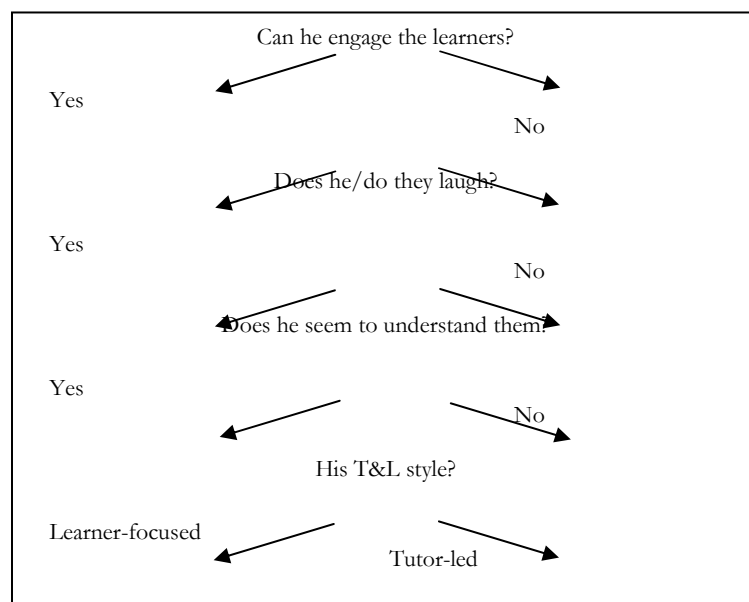


Fig. 1. Informal observation checklist of tutor and learner inter-relationship. (After Gannaway, 1976, cited in Hammersley, et al, 2001: p. 74)

### The proposed mentoring process

The intended process of mentoring Tom was that the mentor (this author) would informally observe Tom with the same group, identify key causes for the award of grade 4 and plan a more effective subsequent session. The next three hour session would be taught by the mentor using strategies appropriate for the group; the next would be taught by the mentor with Tom carrying out the conclusion; the next would be taught by the mentor with Tom

teaching the last 30 minutes and so on. Over five or six sessions the mentor would gradually relinquish control until he was again an informal observer with Tom replicating the mentor's methods. Immediately following each observation, both Tom and the mentor evaluated the session on a 'first thoughts' basis with Tom then left for four days to reflect, for which he opted to use Schön's (1987) model of reflection-on-action, before both met again for one hour where the mentor used a counselling approach to Freire's model to draw out Tom's perspectives and understanding of key issues in the three student-related aspects of the session: engagement with the learning activities and resources; general learner behaviour; and achievement of objectives (including generation of portfolio evidence). At all times Tom was required to arrive at his own conclusions to the key issues.

### **The actual mentoring**

Despite some highly effective avoidance strategies, Tom was finally cornered by his Curriculum Manager with the message that his mentor wished to teach his class for him. This approach was gleaned from Egan's TACTIC model (1990), unique in the literature, where Egan suggests that the mentor should do something on behalf of the mentee. Likewise, the offer or intention seemed to sit well with Dewey's (1916) notion that leading by example is more effective than that of advising and guiding that was prevalent in the literature. This proactive off-line approach by the mentor sought to break the institutional model at ABC, gain mentee trust as Megginson (1979) had promised and immediately establish the collaborative relationship espoused by Falchikov (2001) and Brookfield (1986) since Tom had to teach the topics to the mentor. Thus, the reflective meetings, whilst overwhelmingly reflective in content, were quickly established as planning meetings so that the mentee might feel more involved and less under scrutiny and where the perceived power relations might be less problematic.

At the first meeting (12 December 2005) the mentor focused on establishing Tom's perspectives on his and his learners' dispositions (Robbins, 2000) and his views on the value and process of reflection, rather than centre on the informal observation and how the mentor intended to teach the following session. Valuable data emerged about his biography, as influential as Brookfield (1995) had described, which revealed a strict upbringing and his part-time role in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (Training), a situation singularly at odds with the disaffected school link class who, during the informal observation, were identified as being atypical of those reluctant to be 'controlled' and identified him as having only the sixth of Caplan's (1964) seven characteristics of coping strategies – acceptance of lack of control. Similarly notable at this meeting was Tom's need for affiliation, as outlined by Herzberg et al (1959), in which he clearly wanted to be accepted by his colleagues as an equal.

The relationship distinctly and unexpectedly developed into the apprenticeship model at the first mentor-led session (15 December 2005) with Tom happy to sit back and 'learn' whilst the mentor had expected his intervention at key points since he seemed an impetuous type who knew the group better than the interloper. Whilst the session had been immediately hailed 'a revelation' by Tom, where he had witnessed an entirely contrasting teaching style and level of learner engagement and achievement, his initial evaluation could not appreciate why the mentor achieved what his approach failed to achieve and echoed Tarrant's (2000) belief that competence is problematic. He was left to reflect on it over the weekend (the mentor subscribed to Maynard and Furlong's [1995] belief that a suitable period of reflection should be given) until the following meeting (19 December 2005), held in Tom's staffroom where he was given a higher chair to boost his sense of security, when he had clear ideas about the differences in results. However, Tom had no understanding of the cultural dispositions of his learners, whom he perceived as ambassadors of an alien culture, and the literature proved worthless in pointing a way forward since the theorists seem to assume that 'one just knows' and Tom clearly did not.

In drawing on the principles of the apprenticeship model, the mentor gave anecdotal evidence of his own Year 11 Motor Vehicle class, particularly with regard to the dispositions and motivation of those from the PRU (Pupil Referral Unit), and how those aspects were managed in class. Tom was given an open invitation to peer observe the mentor with that class; an offer that was never taken up. Tom was left to identify parallels between the mentor's and his own class over the Christmas break and to research behaviour management techniques, again, something he chose not to do.

The second mentor-led session (5 January 2006) employed a different set of teaching and learning strategies particularly aimed at addressing disaffected behaviour (the four ringleaders were never put together, small groups were disestablished and re-established after every task and ringleaders were tasked with summary presentations to the whole group etc.) and Tom was left to conclude the session and to reflect on the underlying causes of improved behaviour.

At the following planning meeting (9 January 2006) Freirean-based counselling worked particularly well to draw out Tom's understanding of the improved behaviour and engagement yet he clearly could not relate to his learners or their culture. The mentor's attempt to explore the triangulated relationship between Tom's three programmes, their

different motivational forces and his authoritative, almost stentorian/parade ground style with all groups was largely ineffective. Here, Tom could not appreciate the impact of his teaching style on schoolchildren – a lack of awareness that remained a thorn in the mentor's side throughout the mentoring relationship.

The third mentor-led session (19 January 2006) was devised to elicit the Year 11 group's aspirations, both post-16 and leisure-related, and was fruitful in identifying differences in personal and cultural dispositions between Year 11 and, say, Air Cadets. Rather than build on this, Tom taught the third objective in the final 30 minutes by barking instructions in the 'enough of that – now it's time to do some work' vein and signalled half an hour of behavioural mayhem, which the mentor was happy to be a spectator to since Tom had clearly missed the point.

The subsequent planning session (23 January 2006) was a two-edged sword for the mentor where, on one hand, it was easy for the mentor to apply Clutterbuck's (2001) approach of leading through analysis, understanding and insight, since there was a clear division between mentor- and mentee-led sections of the session and corresponding learner behaviour and achievement, whilst on the other hand there was a clear message for the mentor to share his intentions before the taught session rather than 'wait and see then reflect on it'. With hindsight, this author believes that this was a pivotal stage in the relationship. He had wrongly assumed that the mentee's reflective practice was sufficiently developed, that both naturally reflected in the same way, made the same time for reflection and that Tom had sufficient prior knowledge to relate to, features that had gone unnoticed in the literature and to which the mentor had not given due credence. Hence, it was agreed that, given that mentor and mentee now had a suitable armoury of teaching and learning strategies already trialled with the group, planning of activities and assessments in subsequent whole sessions would be collaborative. Similarly pivotal in the relationship at this meeting was the Freirean questioning that sought, but failed, to identify the unsuitability of the mentee's authoritarian style – Tom just could not see that he was allowed to have more than one style, that a more 'gentle' and user-friendly style was simply an addition to his teaching toolkit and that a fearsome style only worked with those learners mature enough to appreciate it.

The fourth taught session (26 January 2006) saw the mentee effectively teach the last hour in a learner-centred style during which time he had no need to reprimand learners and threaten them with a 'beating'.

The following planning session (30 January 2006) varied from the norm in that Tom had received notification of graded re-observation despite the mentor's monthly progress reports, which noted that he was not yet ready for re-observation. The session made productive use of the reflective model to have Tom plan the entire next session himself (with the mentor acting as a Learning Support Worker – a concession negotiated between the mentor and the identified observer) drawing on his revised toolkit, established through the apprenticeship model and aimed at planning for competency. The observed session (2 February 2006) was graded as 3 and would have been 2 had Tom engaged three of the ringleaders better.

The following planning session (6 February 2006) focused on relating the observer comments to Tom's teaching toolkit, which he acknowledged could have been better employed, and left him to research strategies for punctuality and variety in portfolio evidence in readiness for the planning meeting on 27 February 2006. Having done so, Tom suggested that punctuality could be improved through lateness being deducted from time in the gym (his carrot-and-stick reward for good effort in class in the last 30 minutes of each session) and that photographic evidence of flip charts produced by learners, during presentations, could complement the portfolio evidence.

The fifth session (2 March 2006) saw Tom teach two hours, following the mentor's one hour, effectively and productively with the next planning session (6 March 2006) used to utilise the competency model in drawing out Tom's thoughts about his own development. An informal observation was planned for 9 March 2006 at which Tom was considered by this author to be no longer in need of mentoring support and a report submitted to that effect.

## **Conclusion**

Tom was not re-observed after the mentoring relationship, as he should have been, until his team was audited in October 2006. As part of the audit he was observed twice and was given a grade 1 for each session. Amid the resulting euphoria, Tom volunteered all observation reports for his two years teaching which showed that he was observed 12 months prior to the grade 4 and had been given a grade 5 under the previous grade system. Apparently he had been subsequently mentored using the existing formal model, the efficacy of which was rightly questioned by this author. Paradoxically, whilst the Freirean/heuristic model worked well with Tom, it was neither adopted or developed further by ABC because it took five times longer than was permitted, a decision that, this author suggests, sits uneasily with ABC's Investors in People status.

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