

Understanding the Mentoring Experience: Learning and Developing Together

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This research was triggered by a new pilot professional programme for early childhood students and supported by a small funding grant from ADPU. It follows the development of a mentoring programme for a group of Early Childhood students on a particular programme. Given the opportunity to receive Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) alongside their undergraduate degree a small number of early childhood students were allocated a 'mentor' who had recently achieved EYPS. Mentor support for the student candidates had been written into the programme delivery in recognition of the fact that achievement of EYPS required candidates to demonstrate ability in professional practice, leadership and reflection for improvement.

A range of approaches, including action research (informed amendments) informed by focus group discussions and individual feedback were used to collect qualitative understandings and data on the development, progress and initial impact of the new mentoring programme. The intention was to test and amend the model for future practice. All mentors were required to attend a postgraduate module on Understanding Mentoring in Early Childhood (MEDD4155) for quality assurance and standardisation reasons. Participants in the research were mentors, students and tutors. The mentors held EYPS and, in some cases, were also employers, managers and supervisors of EYPS.

The researcher presented at the L&T Conference (June 2010) how both the concept of mentoring and potential of a fixed approach to a new programme for quality assurance purposes were challenged by 'foggy' concepts and broad, but personal definitions of mentoring implemented largely dependent on context. 'Mentoring' is often a value laden term that can be defined in a wide range of ways from 'counselling' at one end of the spectrum to skills based 'coaching' at the other (Robins, 2006). An initial tutor developed model of mentoring based on experience on the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) (NCSL 2004), and reading of such as Egan's 'Skilled Helper' (Egan 2002) and Clutterbuck's mentor as counsellor (Clutterbuck 2004) had emerged as a model of mentor as sounding board and active listener, prompting deep reflection in the student candidate. This model required the student candidate to be active in approaching the mentor for support, and in desiring to work through key critical issues and incidents. It also required the mentor to take a 'back seat', responding to the student candidates identified and expressed needs and negotiating the pattern of mentoring rather than 'driving forward' the process.

In practice this model was challenged and adapted as some unexpected approaches developed according to mentors prior experiences and current context were found to be highly effective. The research is not yet completed but key findings to date indicate that undergraduate students with little life experience are wary of 'controlling the mentoring process' and look to the mentors for very concrete 'coached' experiences in initial contact sessions. In contrast the more mature and experienced mentees were keen to use their mentors for a more 'counselled' approach to reflection on practice. This has led to a new mentoring programme model which encourages mentors to initially structure the student support and adopt a proactive role, but then to actively step back and ensure the mentee takes the lead in the relationship as their self-direction skills grow and develop.

Mentors who are employers and already hold EYPS had very high early expectations of their mentees (EYPS candidates) at an early stage in their studies. Through dialogue between mentors, lecturers and students this expectation was managed to a greater understanding of the nature of the 'journey' for relatively inexperienced undergraduates who were able to progress to high levels of practice with support.

The two lecturers (I was initially supported by Kate Fowler) also had high early expectations of the mentees in proposing a mentoring model in which mentees would lead the way, asking for relevant tailored support according to their personal development plan needs. This model, when used with undergraduates led to something of a vacuum in which neither mentee or mentor made contact and mentees became afraid of asking for help. A more structured contact requirement has now been built into the programme and mentors continue to be supported in developing the value based practice of the initial model but recognise that structure and skills based coaching may be the 'tools' to attain that ideal over a longer development period.

This is clearly an area for further research to create the optimal qualitative structure for relationship building in order to encourage students to access the support moving to reflect on action at a higher level with intrinsic motivation and control. Perhaps we should acknowledge the differentiated needs of individuals in a dialogic relationship and that mentoring identities are not static but dynamic and evolving processes that are reciprocally influenced by experiences (Ragins 2009, cited in Morgan Roberts and Dutton, 2009).

This research project is ongoing to July 2010. Meanwhile, the author welcomes any contact relating to the nature of mentoring programmes offered for professional courses in HE.

References

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