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Mentoring

Angi Malderez

Introduction

This chapter begins by considering similarities and differences between mentors, supervisors and others who help teachers learn and develop. Drawing on the work of many in the field, conditions needed for mentoring to be effective are discussed. Finally a view of what mentoring is, what mentors are and what they do is presented.

Scope and definitions

Terminological confusions

One school has a teacher called a 'mentor' who is responsible for students from university-based initial teacher preparation programmes during their placements in the school. Another school has a teacher called a 'supervisor' who has a similar job description. In two further schools, two people both have the title 'mentor' and are charged with 'looking after' trainees on school placement and yet engage in very different day to day practices in their work places and in relation to their mentees. One education system has ‘professional mentors’, ‘subject mentors’, and an ‘ITT’ (Initial Teacher Training) coordinator involved with the learning of a student teacher in a school; in another system there is a single ‘mentor’ or ‘supervisor’. There is a certain amount of terminological confusion in the field.

Many (e.g. Bailey 2006) note this terminological confusion. It seems to result in part from different historical views of the process of teacher learning and the roles of others in supporting that process. The role-title 'supervisor' in teacher education, it could be argued, is a left-over from a view of learning teaching as a straightforward process of practising to 'do it right', with the supervisor assessing through observation whether it was 'done right' or not, passing on their assessment and giving the trainee advice on what to improve and how to do better next time. However, much of what makes for good teaching is not observable and views of teacher learning have shifted to include constructivist (e.g. Richardson 1997), socio-cultural (e.g. Lave & Wenger 1991) and cognitive skill theory (e.g. Tomlinson 1995) perspectives. In addition to developing classroom skills, student language teachers need to be helped to participate in a professional community, become willing to investigate themselves and their teaching, become better at noticing (Mason 2002) - a crucial underpinning skill for investigations as well as responsive teaching- and develop complex, insightful and ‘robust reasoning’ (Johnson 1999). A different approach and correspondingly a new role-title was needed. The role of the 'personal' in teachers' professional lives and careers (Day 2004, Hobson et al 2006), may have influenced the choice of the role-title 'mentor', signalling as it does for many, the personally supportive aspect of the role.[1]

So far, in an attempt to define terms, mentors and supervisors have been contrasted. Another useful contrast is between mentors and other teachers of teachers (ToTs). ToTs may be called ‘tutors’, ‘trainers’ or ‘teacher educators’, for example, and their identity is more likely to be ‘language teacher trainer’ or ‘university lecturer’ than ‘language teacher’ (see Wright, this volume). ToTs usually work with groups of learners in specific 'learning spaces' (training room, lecture theatre) and often in buildings and institutions other than schools. Mentors, on the other hand, work one-to-one, usually in the mentee’s workplace, and are full and current members of the language teacher community the mentee is joining.

A view on what mentoring is

This chapter sees a mentoring process as being supportive of the transformation or development of the mentee and of their acceptance into a professional community. A supervisory process, on the other hand, is seen as more concerned with the maintenance of standards within an organisation or system. Having said that, many who retain the role-title ‘supervisor’ and who write on current practices in ‘supervision’ (e.g. Gebhard 1990, and others cited by Bailey, this volume) describe aims, purposes and practices which are more similar to those of mentoring as defined here.

It is this process of one-to-one, work place-based, contingent and personally appropriate support for the *person* during their professional acclimatisation or integration, learning, growth and development, which is referred to as mentoring in this chapter. In brief, therefore, mentoring of those engaged in becoming or developing as language teachers is situated and largely work place-based and deals with the realities of the particular – the particular school, class, child, and teacher, within particular contexts.

Overview

Colley (2002:272) describes a ‘rose-tinted aura of celebration’ that usually surrounds abstract discussions of mentoring, and argues for the need to get beyond this and find out what actually happens. Such a body of work is now beginning to emerge.

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[1] Some seem to see mentoring as referring only or mainly to this personal support role and overall guidance responsibility. In the UK, for example, the expression 'mentoring and coaching' is current (see e.g. Centre for Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) -cpd@curee.co.uk). Thus referring to mentoring *and* coaching suggests that mentoring may not involve the mentor in coaching. Others, including myself, would see coaching (of noticing, of learning from experiences - 'reflecting' - or of the whole complex open skill of teaching), as not only included in but at the heart of mentoring in teacher education.

Conditions for effective mentoring

Experience and investigations of the reality of mentoring in teacher education (however conceived) have indicated that, first of all, mentoring needs to occur within supportive systems. An education system which is supportive of mentoring is one, for example, which provides mentors with sufficient time to mentor, as well as to learn and develop as mentors (e.g. Lee and Feng, 2007), as well as recognition in the form of increased salary and/or career advancement . Policy decisions are, however, played out by individuals working under pressure of competing demands. At the level of the school community, for example, the school head and every member of a senior management system need(s) to be convinced of the value of mentoring to the whole school in order to protect the time allocated for it. Studies have shown, (e.g. McNally et al 1997), that when all school staff are supportive of both the mentor and the trainee and of the place and role of a focus on learning teaching (as well as on all the other curriculum subjects) within the school, it can also make a positive difference to student teachers' experience.[2] On the other hand, where other people surrounding the mentee are perceived as 'stressors', 'restrictors', 'alienators', 'disempowerers', or 'controllers' there may be a negative effect on professional development (Elmajdob 2004).

In initial teacher preparation, mentoring often occurs within a partnership between a licence-giving institution (university or college) and the school. Within these different institutions, there is a need for all to be clear on the different roles each performs in respect of student teachers' learning. When this is not clear in a particular partnership, or when it is unclear to the individuals involved, support for the individual student teacher will be less effective (Brooks 2000, Chapel 2003, Bullough and Draper 2004). Being clear on roles also implies a shared understanding of the vision of the programme and the principles and theories of language teacher learning behind its design, as well as time together to develop such shared understandings (Malderez 2004, Hobson et al 2006 b). Some programmes once used the term 'co-trainer' (Malderez & Bodoczky 1999), and others advocate the use of 'co-tutor' when discussing school-based mentors (Pachler and Field 2001) in order to emphasise this need for shared vision and responsibility.

It is not only the teachers of teachers involved in the programme who need to be clear about their roles. The mentee, also, needs to understand and accept their 'learner' role, often at a time when, in their efforts to transform themselves from student to teacher, their main focus is on their developing identity as teachers (Edwards 1997, Carver and Katz 2004).

Specific issues in language teacher mentoring

So far we have discussed mentoring for (student) teacher learning at a general level, partly because, as Brown notes "much of the recent literature on mentoring has focussed on generic issues" (2001:69). Some writing is, however, beginning to emerge about subject or phase-specific mentoring (e.g. Brown 2001, Gray 2001, Jarvis et al 2001, Hudson 2004). Brown (2001) writing about language teacher mentoring, discusses the clashes between a mentor, who taught language in 'traditional' ways, and the mentee whose approach to teaching was more 'communicative'. This raises issues for mentor selection and/or mentor preparation, as well as educational reform: when changes in pedagogical approach are advocated it is not enough only to train new teachers in these. A further issue of specific relevance to language teacher mentoring is the question of which language (target or other shared world language- usually the mother tongue) will be used in mentoring discussions. The main advantages of using the target language put forward by language teacher mentors with whom I have worked have largely related to opportunities for proficiency development and maintenance for both mentor and mentee. Reported difficulties associated with target language use in mentoring discussions centred on vulnerability and power issues for either mentor or mentee, or other members of school staff, especially in contexts where the main or only widely accepted criterion of a good language teacher remains their own personal language proficiency (see Kamhi-Stein, this volume).

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[2] Titles relating to setting up mentoring systems at school level include e.g. Portner 2001

Mentor preparation and development opportunities

In addition to any updating in subject-specific pedagogy that may be needed (which may require considerable time if a whole new language teaching approach is also to be adopted by mentors-to-be), mentors need opportunities for preparation for their new role. Like any form of teaching, mentoring, as many have suggested, (e.g. Furlong & Maynard 1995), needs to be built on a clear understanding of the learning processes it is intended to support. Therefore the provision of adequate support for mentors to acquire the additional knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for the role is essential. Some authors suggest the preparation of teachers-becoming-mentors needs to be experientially-based (Malderez & Bodoczky 1999, Garvey and Alred 2000) or dialogic (Orland-Barack 2001, Pitton 2006). The support also needs to provide the conditions for 'mentor vulnerability' to transform into mentor confidence, if mentees are not going to need to expend valuable and scarce energy 'managing the mentors' (Maynard 2000). Time is also needed for mentors to develop a 'language with which to think and talk about teaching', as one language teacher mentor expressed it (Malderez & Bodoczky 1999, see also Hedgcock, this volume), as well as a language of mentoring (Orland-Barack 2001). For inservice mentor development and support a story or case-based pedagogy has been advocated (Gray 2001, Zeek et al 2001, Orland-Barack 2002, Malderez & Wedell 2007).

Benefits of mentoring

In addition to contributing to supportive conditions for student teacher learning, effective mentoring can also benefit the mentors and the education system.

It would seem that mentoring benefits mentors in a number of ways (Malderez & Bodoczky 1997). In a review of studies on the impact of mentoring on the mentors, Huling and Resta (2001) conclude "the benefits mentors derive from mentoring may be of equal, or even greater, importance than those experienced by novice teachers".

In systems where teacher retention is an issue, mentoring may be a helpful strategy. For example, Smith and Ingersoll found that "when beginning teachers were provided with mentors from the same subject field" and had collaborated with other teachers, they were “less likely to move to other schools and less likely to leave the teaching occupation after their first year of teaching” (2004:681, see also Farrell, this volume). Finally, and increasingly, inservice mentoring is seen as a valuable strategy in educational reform contexts (Wedell 2003). However, as Feiman-Nemser notes, “If mentoring is to function as a strategy of reform, it must be linked to a [*shared*] vision of good teaching, guided by an understanding of teacher learning, and supported by a professional culture that favors collaboration and inquiry”. (Feiman-Nemser, 1996:1, my insertion).

Current Approaches and Practices

What mentors are and are not

Mentors aim to train or develop their mentee's professional thinking skills (on, for, and in action), and support mentees in aspects of the processes of professional decision-making or learning.

According to Malderez & Bodoczky (1999) mentors are : **models** of a way of teaching, but more importantly of 'being a teacher' in the context; **acculturators** enabling the mentee to become fully integrated into a specific context and community; **supporters** of the mentee as a person during the often emotionally-charged process of transformation that the learning can require; champions or **sponsors** of their mentee in terms of doing everything they can to ensure both the mentee’s acceptance into the professional community and the availability of optimal conditions for learning; and finally **educators** – in the sense of scaffolding (Wood et al.1976) the processes of mentee learning for becoming or being a teacher, for teaching and for learning teaching.

In a paper in the Educational Researcher, House (1991) discusses a view of educational research from a realist perspective and suggests a dimension to the notion of 'validity' which encompasses, “the validity with which teachers and other practitioners draw conclusions for themselves on the basis of their experience" (1991:9). He further asserts that, "unfortunately, in the search for general laws, not much attention has been paid to improving particular teachers' concrete inferences directly" (op cit). This is a principal aim of the mentoring process: to support teachers in drawing, and getting better at drawing, 'conclusions for themselves on the basis of their experience'. Mentoring therefore fully takes into account, legitimises and ‘hears’ research findings which have long reported teachers’ perceptions that they 'learn best from experience' (see e.g. research from Lortie (1975) to Hobson et al 2006).

Mentors are not therefore assessors, advisors, or trainers in the most usually accepted senses, although they will of course assess the mentee’s teaching in order to diagnose needs and decide how best to proceed. In mentoring, however, as opposed to more supervisory approaches, these assessments are not disclosed to the mentee or anyone else (although the interpersonal context may make this possible in later stages of the relationship). Rather they serve as triggers for the mentor’s thinking, decision-making and planning. Nor will mentors, in this view, want to give any ‘advice’ in the sense of telling mentees what they should do or think, nor train the mentee for classroom behaviours which are considered by the mentor to be ‘correct’ or ‘good’ (although they may coach, or arrange for coaching if requested by the mentee).

Modelling responsiveness to learner needs, a mentor may choose to adopt more ‘directive ’style (Freeman 1989, and see Bailey this volume) during early stages of a mentoring process, and particularly in initial teacher preparation, when learner-teachers are often particularly keen to access the practical knowledge and wisdom of their mentors. This can be a challenge for mentors, particularly for beginning mentors who may not easily be able to articulate such knowledge, and some authors (e.g.Meijer at al 2002) suggest strategies mentees might employ to access this knowledge.

So, what exactly do mentors, in this view of mentoring, do?

What mentors do

Mentors provide two kinds of help. The first is ‘help’ in an ordinary sense, that is, a mentor may offer to do things *for* the mentee, such as get materials copied in order to calm a busy and stressed mentee, or ask another teacher if their mentee might observe them, or provide the listening ear so often needed during the initial teacher preparation process (Hobson et al 2006 b). The second kind of help is the educationally supportive process of scaffolding the learning of the core skills of professional learning, thinking and action: noticing, learning from experience, and informed planning and preparation. In this second kind of ‘help’ it will usually not be appropriate to do things *for* the mentee (such as assess or decide), as it is the mentee who must not only learn to teach (better) but also learn to review and assess their work independently.

All too often student teachers have difficulties in seeing the practical relevance of the ‘theory’ they are asked to learn (Hobson et al 2006 a). A mentor who helps a mentee recall or suggests the use of a particular theoretical lens, or conceptual tool, to consider or plan for an aspect of their teaching can do much to help close any perceived ‘theory-practice’ gap. A further mentoring aim is, therefore, to assist the mentee in linking and seeing the relevance of various kinds of knowledge derived from various sources (for example, codified knowledge from books or studies, intuitive and often wordless knowledge derived from experience, skilled knowledge which may or may not be consciously held), during the process of supporting the development of noticing, and professional learning, thinking and planning skills (Yost et al 2000).

In order to do all this, first and foremost mentors need to spend time listening to the mentee talk about their teaching, and through judicious prompts guide the mentee, in ‘thinking aloud’ investigations which lead to the mentee’s making of informed conclusions about what to do next for their pupils’ and their own learning, with the mentor providing information, ideas and options as necessary[3]. This enables the mentee to gain practice in, and eventually automatise, the informed professional thinking processes that underpin flexible teaching of the kind that is responsive to both pupil needs and changing contextual realities.

Observing the mentee teaching is not, in this view, as central a mentor practice as in some approaches. When it occurs, what the mentor does with what they have noticed will be visibly different from what assessors do. For example, in a post lesson discussion, a mentor might support the mentee’s recall of what happened by offering additional descriptive observations to ‘complete a picture’(a necessary initial step in a process of re-viewing, or ‘seeing again’). They might also offer such descriptive (rather than evaluative or judgemental) observations when the mentee is searching for possible interpretations of events or details they did notice. Alternatively, a mentor might use the contrast between their own observations and the way a mentee describes and talks about the same lesson to assess the mentee’s ‘noticing skill development needs’, and/or be open to assessing their own in this regard. What a mentor, in this view, will be striving *not* to need to do is ‘give feedback’, in the sense of telling the mentee how they have interpreted what they observed and the judgements and conclusions they have come to as a result of those interpretations. Strictly speaking, feedback can only come from the receivers of an action (in this case the pupils taught by the mentee) and it will be the mentor’s job to help their mentee notice and become better at noticing that feedback.[4] The mentor will also support the mentee in observing other teachers, and in noticing aspects of the range of often easy-seeming and fluent expert practice such teachers display.

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[3] For further detail on this view and process see Malderez and Wedell 2007

So much for a view on what mentors are and what they do ‘in theory’. In reality, of course, mentors vary in how they view the role and whether they do in fact think and behave as described above (Wang & Odell 2002).

Issues and Directions

In view of current perspectives on language teacher education discussed above and elsewhere in this volume, and despite the challenges for the work of mentors, mentoring is becoming established in language teacher education: I have been fortunate to work with mentors who support language teacher learning in many parts of the world, from Hungary and Romania to Sri Lanka, and Chile to Latvia . Potentially, school-based mentoring has a unique and important contribution to make to language teacher learning, in particular to the development of noticing skills, professional thinking and learning from experience, as well as to mentees’ integration of knowledges of various kinds. However, if its potential is to be realised, and its additional benefits accrued, attention must be paid to ensuring that the conditions in which mentoring occurs are as fully supportive as possible.

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Further Reading

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[4] The term ‘give feedback’ when used in relation to post-lesson discussions has come to encompass a wide range of actual practices, from ‘mentor’-delivered judgements to more collaborative discussions. I have however found that, as a term, it can ‘get in the way’ of understanding mentoring, suggesting as it does that the *main* purpose of post-lesson discussions is for the mentor to do the ‘giving’ (talking/transmitting).

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Biodata

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