Remission and recognition - the two Rs of mentoring: listening to the mentors of trainee teachers

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Abstract
The task of mentoring trainee teachers in the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS) has long been an informal process. With the introduction of the 2007 teaching reforms (DfES, 2007) mentoring has assumed a new importance. Whilst recognising that this Higher Education Institution (HEI) was keen to implement changes, it perhaps did so in haste and without allowing the process to be evaluated. This led to tension between the mentor and the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) provider or teaching organisation. This research examined the perceptions of the mentor and listened to suggestions for improvement. From these discussions it would seem that mentors are being asked to coach as well as mentor trainee teachers. The main findings also show that whilst the employing organisation's attitude, as perceived by the mentors, seems to have changed little since Hankey's (2004) research paper, mentors' attitudes toward mentoring seem to be more positive. It concludes that remission and recognition of the additional work done by mentors are powerful motivators for their engagement in mentoring activities. It further suggests that a title of mentor-coach would better match the job to be done.

Introduction and background
The Ofsted (2009) annual report suggests that the quality of mentoring in ITT of Further Education (FE) teachers was, whilst improved from 2004, still not developed enough. This article aims to examine the current state of mentoring across one HEI and its partner colleges and proposes actions for further improvement. It examines mentors' experiences, perceptions and constructs of mentoring in-service Cert Ed/PGCE trainees in the LLS. It will also examine the perceived effectiveness of the mentor training programme.

Background
According to the Institute for Learning (IfL, 2009), mentoring of trainee teachers is seen as the cornerstone of professional teacher development. As such, Teacher Educators are required to ensure that not only do all trainees have a named mentor upon enrolment but also the mentoring of trainees conforms to an accepted level. However, as Butcher (2002) points out, it is not without its problems. The Ofsted report on initial training of FE teachers (2009) judged the provision of mentoring was '*variable [in quality]...too informal and reliant on goodwill*' (Ofsted, 2009: p. 12). This was the catalyst for a review of mentoring and the subsequent research initiated in March 2009.

The primary strategy used by this HEI for improving trainee teacher practice attainment centres around mentors and tutors observing trainees teaching, grading the observation and giving developmental feedback. This is complemented with regular meetings between tutors or mentors and trainees to discuss their teaching practice.

All mentors are required to undertake a mentor training package, known as Base Line Training (BLT). This package consists of three parts. **Part one** is the collection of the mentors' personal details. **Part two** requires the mentor to watch an online video of a teacher in action and complete a teaching observation form. The mentor is then given feedback on this. **Part three** is a teaching observation with their trainee with the mentor coordinator observing. The mentor training package aims to ensure that mentors are competent at conducting teaching observations and providing effective feedback to trainees. Effective feedback would include areas for improvement and strengths. This feedback forms part of a trainee's individual development plan.

An evaluation research questionnaire was used to gather data from the mentors. Initially questionnaires were used to identify mentors' perceptions of mentoring and possibly support the initial assertion that there are indeed examples of variable standards of mentoring across the provision. 150 questionnaires were sent out and 75 were returned representing a response rate of 50%. This was followed up by interviewing six mentors to help understand these differences. To provide further or fine-grain detail this was triangulated through reference to individual mentor notes and personal experiences of dealing with the mentors.

Short review of literature on mentoring
Mentoring is a term often used indiscriminately to mean a variety of things. It is this multiplicity of uses and definitions that can cause a lot of confusion (Brockbank and McGill, 2006: p. 1). For instance Clutterbuck (2004: p. 12) has collated a variety of definitions that are not only based upon each individual author's perceived definition but there is also a correlation

with the geographical region of origin, for example the United States of America or Europe and the business that they are involved in.

Eliahoo (2009: pp. 65-67) argues that implementing a mentoring scheme is complicated and goes further to suggest that the then DfES policy toward mentoring was opaque and used the terms of subject knowledge and pedagogy interchangeably. There is also the difficulty of implementing a mentoring policy based around the relative uncomplicated schools sector within the complex LLS; a point made by Crawley (2005). It is against a complicated and sometimes ill-defined backdrop that mentoring is enacted. If mentoring has manifold definitions and is enacted in a multiplicity of contexts it would be better to re-examine what mentors are actually being asked to do and pose the question "is mentoring the best way to support trainees' practice development?"

The IfL (2009) suggest that trainee teachers require support in the workplace in two distinct areas: subject knowledge and pedagogy development. Within this HEI, the former is usually achieved through self-directed and guided study or through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities and the latter is via lesson observations and feedback with specific and targeted action plans. The definitions offered by Clutterbuck (2004: p. 12) would seem to quite neatly fit the subject knowledge development. However, the findings from the research for this article and following informal discussions with mentors show it is subject pedagogy development that causes the mentors problems.

Many mentors are happy to discuss teaching and subject knowledge informally. However, the formal lesson observation and subsequent judgement does put pressure on the relationship as acknowledged by Cullimore and Simmons (2008) and Klasen (2002). The idea that mentoring is a mutually beneficial relationship becomes somewhat lost when mentors have to make a judgement of Pass/Fail on a teaching observation. Therefore it is arguable that a coaching role would be more suitable for the development of subject pedagogy.

Pask and Joy (2007) and Parsloe (1992) suggest that coaching is based upon a subtly different premise to that of mentoring. Mentoring can be seen as a nurturing relationship gently pulling the trainee along, whereas coaching is a directive relationship that pushes the trainee. Judgements are made on progress and achievement with specific actions and targets for improvement. This approach is being actively promoted and used by the Teacher Development Agency (TDA) (2008; 2009) for mentors in the compulsory learning sector.

So, the arena in which mentors are being asked to carry out the task is complicated and places a lot of pressure on mentors to comply (Eliahoo, 2009). Also there is the further complication of mentors' own values and beliefs and thus the quality of mentoring is dependent upon many factors. Figure 1 shows the drivers of good and bad mentoring and was developed by Shobrook (2009) and is based upon the work done by Hertzberg (1987), Erying (2008) and Fagenson-Eland et al (1997). Although 'good' and 'bad' could be seen as subjective terms, in this case they are taken to mean the degree in which the mentor supports the development of the trainee teachers' practice.
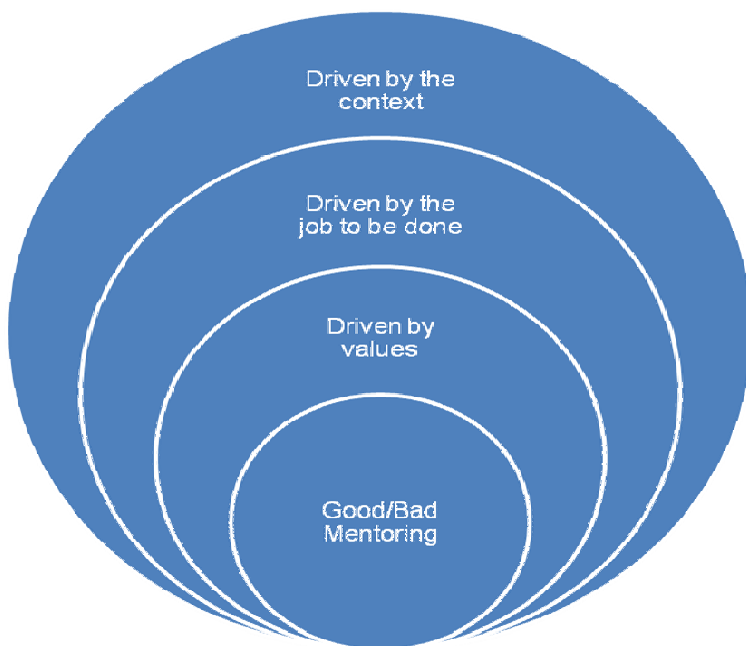

Fig. 1 Some of the drivers for good and bad mentoring, adapted from Shobrook 2009: p. 33.

The following is an examination of the reality of mentoring as perceived by mentors. The next section is an empirical examination of the mentors' perception of mentoring trainees on the Cert Ed/PGCE teacher training course.

Methodology

Data collection

The data was collected using an evaluation questionnaire and then interviewing selected individuals using a semi-structured interview approach to allow them to tell their story. This was supplemented with analysis of the mentor database. In total, 150 questionnaires were sent out and 75 were returned. This represents a return rate of 50%. From the responses in the questionnaires six mentors were chosen to be interviewed.

Evaluation research questionnaire

The evaluation questionnaire used two separate methods of collecting and recording data; the relatively simple Likert self-scoring and free text to allow an element of explanation. The Likert scale was used primarily for collecting mentor profile data as well as other self-scoring information. The free text allowed amplification and other relevant information to be submitted. The questionnaire was developed using field notes and listening to trainees' and mentors' issues. The notion of coaching was not included within the questionnaire. During informal conversations with mentors the title or role of coaching was not mentioned or discussed. Therefore, to include reference to coaching might add confusion.

The semi-structured interview

Six respondents were selected and provided an equal gender split and represented a variety of viewpoints from across the LLS as well as attitudes towards mentoring. They are referred to as Mentors A-F. Table 1 gives a profile of each mentor. They came from a variety of teaching contexts: FE, Work Based Learning (WBL), health, offender education and uniformed public service. Three were what I would consider good mentors inasmuch as they were overtly keen to complete the mentor training and had a good rapport with their trainees - confirmed whilst I conducted a paired observation with them. The remaining three in the main had not completed the mentor training and had made specific comments about the lack of training, information and mentoring in general.

Table 1: Profile of the interviewed mentors

Mentor A	Aged 30-39, female, manager, working for a private training provider
Mentor B	Aged 50-59, male, lecturer, Further Education college
Mentor C	Aged 20-29, male, section leader, Further Education college
Mentor D	Aged 50-59, male, head trainer, uniformed public service
Mentor E	Aged 40-49, female, clinical trainer, National Health Service
Mentor F	Aged 30-35, female, training manager, prison education

Findings

The data from the questionnaire and interviews were collated and then analysed to distil out any themes, patterns or trends. Below is an overview of the main quantitative data findings from the 75 questionnaires:

- mentors were typically between 40-59 years old (*n=53 or 71%*)
- 55% were female, 45% were male
- there was an even split between 0-8, 9-15, 16-24 and 25+ years teaching experience (*26%, 27%, 23%, 24% respectively*)
- the majority came from FE (*n=57 or 76%*)
- 64% did not have a mentor when they went through training and of this group (*n=48*)
- Of this 64%, 90% say it was not available to them (*n=43*).

What this summary does not show is the finer detail of the data returned and analysed. From the data analysis I can conclude that female mentors are likely to have an average of 17 years' teaching experience. Male mentors are likely to have 12 years experience. The majority of mentors will be working within FE. The gender of teachers nationally in the PCET area is split around 55% female to 45% male (Utting, 2006).

60% of questionnaire respondents said that they did not have a mentor when they went through their teacher training with the most common reason being, to paraphrase, '*did not have access to one or it was not available*'. Upon further investigation it seems that those who worked in FE were less likely to have been supported by a mentor whilst they were trainee teachers. Therefore, this could indicate that at an institutional level, mentoring is not a priority within FE. Additionally, many respondents who did have a mentor said that their mentor was always too busy. This could indicate a lack of commitment on behalf of the mentor or a failure of the organisation to allocate sufficient time to this important activity.

However, of those that did have a mentor (*n=25*), 76% (*n=19*) found that the relationship did help develop their teaching and/or academic practice and self-confidence. Mentor C, during the interview when recalling their ITT course, felt that the relationship with their mentor was *"really useful...they helped through the bad bits as well...good to discuss things off-line so to speak"*.

Data from the questionnaire suggests that within the FE setting the main topics for discussion between the mentor and trainee were teaching practice followed by the academic requirement of the Cert Ed/PGCE course. However, in WBL the main topic was academic assignments followed by practice development. A lack of time to conduct mentoring was a common theme in both the returns and at interview.

After completing mentor training all respondents felt confident or better in their mentoring role, with 74% (*n=55*) of mentors feeling 'reasonably confident' or better and 27% (*n=20*) feeling 'very confident'. Moreover, 74% (*n=55*) felt that their mentoring ability had got better in some form since they started mentoring their trainee. It was an interesting point to note that nearly all of those that reported the most change were female.

One mentor who worked within a prison setting felt it was necessary to include the following statement to aid clarification:
> *"The paired [mentor] observation gave me a chance to evaluate my own practice in this quite isolated environment in which I work. It also gave me confidence that my observational technique and feedback methods were sound."*
> (Questionnaire Mentor F)

Another mentor working in a health setting responded in her questionnaire
> *"I felt the feedback from my paired observation and from completion of my first teaching observation proforma was very valuable."*
> (Questionnaire Mentor E)

So, the paired mentor observation element seems to be an indicator as to what could be the effective part of BLT. Therefore, from this, it would seem that the mentor training and support has been effective and this was partly due to the support given to mentors.

Evaluation questionnaire and semi-structured interview qualitative findings
When asked "Why have you chosen to be a mentor?", by far the most popular response in the questionnaire (>60%) was, to paraphrase, "*to help a colleague develop their teaching*" or "*I was chosen by my trainee*". One mentor when interviewed suggested that he liked to:
> *"Throw myself in...do as much as I can to help a colleague...I felt I could do a good job and I would willingly commit time to it."*
> (Interview Mentor D)

Another questionnaire reply that was of particular interest was:
> *"After being mentored myself and valuing the support this person provided, I wanted to put back into the system by helping a trainee lecturer and helping others develop."*
> (Questionnaire Mentor A)

When interviewed, Mentor A was asked to place a value on this desire to mentor, he replied:
> *"A very strong desire to do it* [mentoring] *as I had such a good mentor...I wanted to emulate this with mine* [mentee]."
> (Interview Mentor A)

When asked at interview why she wanted to be a mentor, Mentor E said "*I was chosen*". The tone and body language of this reply suggested that they would not have willingly put themselves forward. However, Mentor B did reply in quite forthright terms within his questionnaire with:
> *"Put it this way if I knew in September what was involved, I would never have accepted this arduous, thankless, unappreciated, unrecognised and unpaid role…on the other hand my mentee has been a colleague for nearly 20 years so out of a sense of loyalty I am continuing with it but never again."*
> (Questionnaire Mentor B)

His reply suggests that he did not become a mentor out of commitment to his employing organisation but rather to help a colleague. This does reinforce Clutterbuck's (2004) suggestion that mentors enter into the relationship because they want to help a colleague.

In response to the question "What impact do you feel have had on your mentee?" by far (>70%) the most common reply has been that they have experienced a change for the better in their mentee's teaching practice. The most common theme was that a trainee enjoyed the opportunity to discuss ideas in a safe environment. I feel that the following direct quote from the questionnaire encapsulates this idea:
> *"Having someone to talk to openly and freely about their practice has helped my mentee develop in confidence and have the ability to challenge points and ask questions which support his personal and professional development."*
> (Questionnaire Mentor C)

It must be borne in mind that this is the mentor's perception of the experience, and may not be what the mentee has actually experienced.

As a part of the observation process and subsequent discussion often mentors are faced with questions that make them stop and think about their own practice. Jackson (1992: p. 7) calls this a *'pedagogical stammer'*. He further suggests that it can re-invigorate and have a positive impact upon the mentors' own practice.

In response to the question "How do you think the BLT can be improved?", a common theme that emerged from the questionnaire was *"less bureaucracy"* and *"more recognition of existing teaching observation skills"*. Additionally, in one reply Mentor B raised some other important issues as well:

> *"By simplifying the paperwork…by reducing the huge volume of descriptors prescribing what constitutes good teaching* [reference to the LLUK (2007) professional standards]…*by reducing the mentor handbook…by reducing the commitment required of a mentor."*

> (Questionnaire Mentor B)

Bureaucracy and paperwork is an area of tension for many mentors. The mentoring system implemented across the HEI and the wider partnership was part of a recovery process following an unsatisfactory Ofsted inspection in 2007. As part of this process it was felt that a physical evidence-based approach would be the best way to demonstrate the improvement in mentoring at the subsequent re-inspection. The professional standards referred to by Mentor B are the new LLUK (2007) professional standards under which all trainee teachers' observations are conducted. However, when I met with the respondent he was unaware that the teaching standards had changed in 2007. This would indicate to me that there is a professional development need and his employing organisation may not be keeping their teaching staff up to date.

When I asked a mentor about the time his employer, an FE organisation, allowed him to carry out his mentoring role he replied *"I get one hour per week to carry out mentoring"* (Interview Mentor C). I suggested that this seemed more than most mentors are allocated within FE (based on informal conversations with mentors across the partnerships). He tempered the point by saying *"yeah but as an SL* [section leader] *I don't actually get an hour as other stuff gets in the way"*. Therefore, organisational support should actually mean exactly that and not lip service in its simplest form. Saying that a teaching organisation supports staff development doesn't always translate into something recognisable as 'support'.

The online observation was also an area of which many mentors were critical, with issues such as internet access and finding suitable sound reproduction being the main criticisms. Some mentors said that the online video observation was a very isolating experience. Having to sit down and watch a 45-minute teaching session and then write comments about it without the opportunity to discuss it with someone was de-motivating. But when the video was used as a group teaching tool it was very effective and mentors engaged in critical dialogue with each other. Feedback from these sessions suggested that they found it a very positive experience. This then creates the case that mentors also need support and an opportunity to discuss ideas and exchange experiences.

In response to the question "How do you feel mentoring can be made better in terms of your organisation?" the overwhelming reply was more time and recognition, a point well made by Hankey (2004). From the returned questionnaire most respondents suggest that the role of mentoring should have some remission time attached to it to recognise the time given over to it. Even the most positive mentors suggest the following *"More time allotted to team leaders for mentoring sessions"* (Questionnaire Mentor C) and *"More time given to support mentees and provide positive sessions of discussion"* (Interview Mentor E); all suggestions that I would call honourable and aimed at improving the mentoring experience. However, the following questionnaire reply seems to be centred around the needs of the mentor:

> *"It should be timetabled, it should be paid, it should be done by volunteers, it should be appreciated."*

> (Questionnaire Mentor B)

Of the 75 returned questionnaires, only three made a direct suggestion that they should be paid to undertake a mentoring role. This underlines Hertzberg's (1987) notion of motivation as not always financially driven, but recognition is a powerful motivator. A point made by Mentor B's final comment of "it should be appreciated" and would suggest that mentoring is not valued by the organisation.

Almost all respondents found that the paired observation with the mentee's tutor or the mentor coordinator was a great help and gave them confidence when undertaking teaching observations. The questionnaire replies from the selected six mentors were examined in particular. They ranged from:

> *"This was beneficial as I became more confident that I knew what the university was looking for in its observation reports."*

> (Questionnaire Mentor D)

> *"No improvements needed – an excellent experience"*

> (Questionnaire Mentor F)

> *"It was particularly helpful to have a chance to meet before and after the session for detailed and fairly lengthy discussions."*

> (Questionnaire Mentor E)

All the way through to:

"*Not happened yet…this role (of being a mentor) is like so many trends in education in the last ten years or so…it amounts to a signifier which, when deciphered, amounts to saying: we don't trust you.*"

(Questionnaire Mentor B)

However, there was one response that is worthy of inclusion. This is a verbatim quote from the questionnaire return:

"*The deprofessionalisation of teaching is tantamount to a couple of trends in the 21ˢᵗ century…firstly there is the proletarianisation* [sic] *of the vocation so that it is deskilled, devalued and destabilised…secondly there is the McDonaldisation of education which means that the whole experience is made uniform, standardised, bland and insipid…thirdly the practitioners are encouraged to believe that if they follow thee proscribed*[sic] *procedure they can teach anything to anybody…individuality is to be discouraged…charismatic teaching is to be discouraged…spontaneity is to be discouraged…and finally there is the insistence championed by John Nash and The New Right that only quantifiable data is authentic so everything is measurable or it does not exist…all of these elements are discernible in the new postgraduate teaching qualification and in the new mentoring role.*"

(Questionnaire Mentor B)

Whilst I believe this does not represent the strength of feeling across the mentors with this HEI, it is an indicator of how some mentors may feel. Mentor B's critical stance may become more widespread especially in the current economic climate and proposed cuts in education spending.

Conclusion

The findings from the questionnaire data suggest that mentoring is undertaken by the majority of mentors willingly. Mentors can see the real tangible benefits to trainee development and will try and do a good job. The main source of tension seems to be at the organisation level. An organisational commitment to providing remission and recognising mentoring would lead to better mentor engagement.

It has been shown that mentors need mentoring as well. Having a dedicated mentor support role has proved to be most beneficial to trainees' practice development. It provides a focal point for mentors to ask questions and make suggestions for improvement. As a result of the research many suggestions have been incorporated for the 09/10 academic year. Early indications suggest they are well received and effective.

Although only briefly mentioned, the idea of mentor-coach is, I believe, the future direction and requires more research. There will be a need for additional training in coaching techniques including feedback and action planning. A mentor-coach approach for developing new and experienced staff is a very attractive proposition.

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