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Making mentoring work to create quality outcomes in the professional learning experience of pre- service teachers.

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Abstract

Quality learning for pre-service teachers in a changing educational landscape is highly dependent on the professional learning experience, the context for connecting the learner and the learning, the building of competence and confidence and the creation of teacher identity. Mentoring is used as an intervention strategy to grow such quality workplace learning outcomes, but to be successful, mentoring needs to be well informed by a clear understanding of the targeted learners and how they learn, the knowledge and social capital required in this professional context and an agreed position and process to meet the needs of a dynamic and changing workplace culture. This paper is designed to unpack the critical qualities of successful mentoring in an adult learning context and establishes a professional learning plan to guide and support the mentoring relationship. The learning plan presents aspects of observation, the giving and receiving of feedback and the collection of evidence and making of judgements that inform the pre-service teacher of their current position within the key learning areas. The learning plan provides a clear and transparent structure and space for reflective discourse. This discourse enables questioning, understanding, improvement and shared meaning by both the mentor and the pre-service teacher. Mentoring, if well informed is a potential conduit for performance enhancement, from the pre-service teacher to the broader learning community; an opportunity for universities to be responsive to current and future demands of the profession; and a platform for change and continuous improvement.

Introduction

How to effectively prepare the next generation of teachers for the workplace is a complex matter. Stakeholders invested in the creation of the next generation of teachers such as teacher educators and teacher mentors must look to the future, the changing nature of society and the needs of the current workplace as well as new ways of ‘doing’. In brief, we must respect, yet build upon the understandings and expectations of today’s teachers and today’s workplace. Ewing, Lowrie & Higgs (2009) acknowledge these challenges as they state that the “value of the workplace as a key site for learning lies in the learning opportunities the workplace provides. In particular, learning in the workplace is contextulised and consequential, rather than [being] isolated from reality” (p. 27). A clear sense of the purpose, goals and expectations of mentoring as a professional learning strategy requires shared ownership between preservice teacher and teacher mentor to ensure congruence in the growth and development of the preservice teacher. But what is the most effective

mentoring model that will make this happen? Mentoring is complex and is about an open dialogue and critical conversation. Mentoring is an interface of theory and practice in a real world setting and a relational infrastructure for building valid and authentic assessment of the pre-service teachers' competence. Shared meaning and an open and transparent process that aligns the pre-service teacher, the teacher mentor, the professional learning context and university staff – lecturers, tutors and professional learning liaisons are critical. Collaborative relationships are the key and mentoring “can create real, relevant and meaningful relationships to induct pre-service teachers into the teaching world but it has to be thoughtfully constructed within collaborative relationships” (Top of the Class: Report of the Inquiry into Teacher Education , 2007, p.72).

Preparing pre-service teachers for learning success is about developing personal vision, stimulating ambition and growing the teacher ‘they aspire to be’, which can motivate the pre-service teacher as a learner to learn. In this way, mentoring can be utilised as a “tool of engagement within which the learner actively constructs meaning from the learning which is context driven, socially mediated and centred in the real world” (Beutal & Spooner-Lane, 2009, p. 1). Mentoring relationships do not just happen, they need a clearly defined structure: they are about meshing the individual; the social dynamics and the organisational culture; and determining what are the perceived affordances and constraints in the use of mentoring as a professional learning model. The professional learning model of mentoring requires careful consideration of personal qualities, adult learning, developmental stages of the professional learning experience, the changing nature of the mentoring relationship and the dynamics of the organisational context. The mentoring relationship must be planned, measured and monitored and provide a win-win for the mentor, the mentee and the learning partners to ensure sustainable relationships.

A rich variety of personal and educational experiences are embedded within these relationships which be fostered by learning through observing, enacting, questioning and the giving and receiving of feedback. However, a collaborative and transparent framework is required to ensure this happens. The imperative to critically examine the mentoring relationship has also increased more recently due to changes in teacher accreditation and greater use of teaching standards to accredit courses and employ

teachers. This is a positive change as the professional standards “contribute to the professionalization of teaching and raise the status of the profession. The standards can also be used as the basis for a professional accountability model, helping to ensure that teachers can demonstrate appropriate levels of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement” (AITSL, 2012, p 6). These standards are the benchmarks against which we judge the pre-service teacher’s performance in the professional learning experience. The standards provide an agreed platform for shared meaning on what is quality teaching across different stages of teacher development as they move from graduate, to proficient, highly accomplished and leading teachers. Each stage of the standard reflects the increasing levels of knowledge, practice and professional engagement of teachers.

Understanding the expectations of a pre-service teacher at the graduate level enables the mentor to facilitate constructive and authentic dialogue which is aligned to the professional standard level. These standards make explicit, what is required to be a performing teacher at the graduate level and the standards then inform an agreed platform for consistent judgement of teachers.

Effective mentoring relationships, may however, lead beyond the current professional teaching standards to an examination of the process which will challenge mentors to do things differently and, “to raise the bar, be change responsive and future focused” (Productivity Commission, 2012, p 137). If mentoring is to remain a central component of the professional learning of preservice teachers, then the outcomes of the process need to be examined to determine strategies that most effectively build learning success for preservice teachers. The outcomes that can be achieved by a clearly developed professional learning strategy are:

1. Quality pre-service teacher performance - the individual dimension which is focused on building professional capacity and potential.
2. Clearly defined teacher mentor guidelines - the systemic dimension which is focused on consistency, customisation and relationships that will grow potential.
3. Collection of data to inform program development - the university teaching and learning dimension which is grounded in the needs of the workplace.

This strategy will further reinforce the need for cogent, consistent processes in the professional learning experience of pre-service teachers that is currently driven by a collaborative learning community. Collaborative relationships are critical to an effective professional learning experience that adequately aligns the learning context with the workplace reality. Collaborative relationships such as mentoring must be built around shared practice that provide a basis for a consistent, sustained and valued interaction between teacher educators and professional teachers in the field. This process will assist in the ongoing development of quality teachers by ensuring a valid, reliable, flexible and fair approach to workplace learning that is transparent, accessible and owned by all stakeholders. Underpinning this bigger picture is a clear understanding of the mentoring process within the adult learning context and how that process informs the actions that foster professional learning of teachers.

Mentoring

A successful mentor has the ability to cultivate an affirming environment; communicate in a way that empowers the learner to learn; role model desired approaches; encourage independence; and mentor at a level at which the pre-service teacher is ready to learn.

Mentoring is seen as a tool of engagement within which the learner actively constructs meaning from the learning which is context driven, socially mediated and centred in the real world. This mentoring model links effectively with constructivist learning theories.

“Constructivist learning theories adopt a more learner-centred approach to pedagogical practice. Learners are seen as active agents in their own learning not merely recipients of others peoples’ knowledge. Constructivists conceptualise learners as participants, contributors and elaborators of knowledge, which is always socially mediated – learners change the world as the world changes them.”(Chappel, 2003, p.3) It is now to be seen in a more professional and strategic way grounded in clearly defined structures and support frameworks nurturing the notion ‘of inventing ourselves or reinventing ourselves.’

The mentoring relationship according to Portner (2008) has four critical functions within the professional experience of the pre-service teacher:

- “Relating – mentors build and maintain relationships with mentees based on mutual trust, respect and professionalism;

- Assessing – mentors gather and diagnose data about their mentees’ ways of teaching and learning which enables them to determine their current competence and confidence and help them meet their professional needs;
- Coaching –mentors share relevant experiences and strategies to help improve the pre-service teachers’ performance;
- Guiding – mentors wean their mentees away from dependence by guiding them through the process of reflecting on decisions and actions for themselves” (p. 13).

The staged development of the pre-service teacher, from a first to final professional learning experience, requires the nature of the relationship between the teacher mentor and the pre-service teacher to change. Knowing the pre-service teacher, knowing their needs will inform customisation of the experience to meet pedagogical, personal and employment outcomes and determine the relationship required to best fit the person right here, right now. These activities can also change the relationship, for example “as soon as assessment becomes a task of the mentor, changes in the relationship may occur – it can move from one of trust and openness, risk taking and empowerment to compliance and conformity, reproduction of the status quo, lowered expectations and commitment to practice” (Mitchell, Reilly & Logue, 2009, p.4). This highlights the need for a robust structure within which the mentoring relationship can be negotiated to best achieve the desired outcomes for the pre-service teacher in their teaching and learning cycle. Mentoring works through the learning layers from; social learning theory – interacting with & observing others, being instructed and challenged ‘watch & listen with me’; to experiential learning theory – learning new information through doing the doing in a context that is known ‘work with me’; to humanist learning theory - personalisation of the learning to the individual’s own learning environment ‘guide me’ (Pascarella, 1998, p. 235).

Mentoring – Preservice Teacher Perspectives

To gain insights into preservice teachers’ perceptions of mentoring, students in the first semester 2012 Graduate Diploma in Education responded to Discussion Board triggers while on their first professional learning experience. This forum provided an opportunity for linking with peers and processing the learning experience in a context outside the school environment. The trigger for collecting and identifying key themes relevant to this research was: *Describe your relationship with your*

teacher mentor – what did it look like, sound like and feel like? What impact did this relationship have on your professional learning experience?

The data collected from these responses revealed the need to look closely at what makes and what can diffuse a quality learning relationship. This relationship is complex and is about individual social/emotional dimensions, teaching and learning, being part of a team, and communicating and connecting with other stakeholders and the school culture. Preservice teachers and teacher mentors are adult learners with different personal characteristics, learning styles, values, beliefs and work and life experiences. It is recognised that professional learning has many layers from analysing and reflecting on the preservice teachers' performance, validating and moderating assessment decisions and being responsive and adaptive to the identified needs of preservice teachers as adult learners. The stages that need to be considered in this imposed, and not selected, relationship were identified by the preservice teachers as follows:

- Establishing the relationship through a 'getting to know you' process that involves sharing information in terms of interests, goals, values, etc.;
- Establishing shared agreement on how 'we will work together' – expectations, giving and receiving feedback, the school culture, etc.;
- Identifying specific learning needs, setting goals and thinking through strategies to make them happen; and
- Continuously reflecting on where the relationship is and where it needs to be.

Mentoring may not be a tool of transformation, challenge or change within all contexts for all participants and being such a qualitative and highly personalised experience the outcomes can be difficult to measure. This is not an incidental process it requires thoughtful design and implementation. "Mentors perceive their roles in different ways, emphasising aspects to do with listening, enabling, organising, trouble -shooting, supporting or teaching, acting as a friend, a colleague or a parent-figure" (Young *et al*, 2005, p. 170). The pre-service teacher is engaged in inquiry based learning which involves observing, reflecting and collaborative dialogue which informs the next steps in planning and doing. This is then the basis upon which evidence is collected to guide improvement and measure the impact of the professional learning experience. This assessment process, which is so much about high quality feedback will provide the opportunity for the pre-service teacher to actively engage with the teacher mentor in developing an action plan - goal setting and identification of strategies to achieve

these goals. This approach will re-position the pre-service teacher to enable continuous improvement in specific teaching and learning domains. Alignment of the operational reality with the university's vision for aspiring teachers will be achieved through a thoughtfully constructed process and partnership. From research conducted by Hudson (2009,p.323) "the university's role was considered important for devising frameworks and protocols and presenting ways to form professional relationships and deliver feedback with clear roles and guidelines."

Adult Learning

In an adult learning context, there are many layers to the mentoring relationship which can make or break the opportunity for critical dialogue: for example, the relationship may be seen as hierarchical between the preservice teacher and the teacher mentor based on knowledge, work and life experience; the learning position of the preservice teacher can be quite variable from 'yes I want to be a teacher' to, 'I am still processing if this is the right choice for me'. The preservice teacher is placed in a forced relationship and the expectation is that a preservice teacher will accept responsibility for his or her own growth and development. These factors can impact powerfully on the learning conversations shared by adult learners. "While mentors must have an intimate knowledge and understanding of teaching and teaching practices, mentoring is different from classroom teaching and requires a new set of skills that include knowing how to help and support adults so as to facilitate their learning" (Rhodes et al, 2004, p. 51). Any learning experience needs specific goals and a clearly defined purpose which is focused on growing the individual, developing the human capital and perhaps transforming the workplace culture. We are in a changing socio-cultural landscape which will impact on personal teacher identity and will be more effectively embraced if there is a co-construction of knowledge, attitudes and beliefs by all stakeholders.

As the demographics of preservice teachers change, there is a potential for increased socio-cultural divides between the preservice teacher and their teacher mentor.

Hargreaves (2001, p. 1061) describes emotional geographies as the "spacial and experiential patterns of closeness and/or distance in human interactions and relationships that help create, configure and colour the feelings and emotions we experience about ourselves, our world and each other." Recognition and acceptance of difference can inform 'ways to bridge the gaps' as opposed to 'creating a great

divide'. This is about being change responsive and Stevenson (2005) speaks of the Four Laws of Change, "change always comes from within the individual, the group or the organisation; change requires a clear vision – a reason to change; change is accompanied by personal insight or a group awareness that is shared; and now a new beginning – new mindsets, attitudes and belief systems" (Reiss, 2009, p.144).

When teacher mentors and preservice teachers are engaged in a professional learning relationship there may be different mindsets - two sides to the coin that are intuitively enacted upon. From a study designed to build a conceptual framework for lifelong learning, the concept of 'Learning to Live Together' was identified as the pillar for social engagement and interface that fosters action and reflection, but there can be challenges in the way this is enacted. In the words of Stifung (2008, p. 9):

- Changing and growing, versus being 'stuck' and static
- Making meaning, versus cannot analyse data or extrapolate
- Curious and critical, versus being passive and taking things at face value
- Creative versus rule-bound, doesn't add or build upon
- Self-motivated and collaborative versus isolated and dependent
- Strategic versus lacking vision, can't decide what is important
- Resilient versus fragile and easily discouraged.

Stifung (2008) has identified the challenges that may facilitate or impede this relationship from the perspectives of both preservice teachers and teacher mentors in this very personal, situational and purpose-driven adult learning environment. It is therefore imperative to provide a clear picture of adult learning for all stakeholders to inform a productive learning relationship that empowers the processing and constructing of meaning in this professional learning context. Knowles et al present the following six points to inform quality adult learning experiences:

1. The need to know. Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it.
2. The learner's self-concept. Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives.
3. The role of the learners' experiences. Adults come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from youths.
4. Readiness to learn. Adults become ready to learn those things they need to

- know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations.
5. Orientation to learning. Adults learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and attitudes most effectively when they are presented in the context of application to real-life situations.
 6. Motivation. While adults are responsive to some external motivators (better jobs, promotions, higher salaries, and the like), the most potent motivators are internal pressures (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life, and the like” (Knowles et al, 1998, p. 64).

There are individual and situational differences in how adult learners learn, but in summary what this is saying is that adult learners want a reason to learn, to own the learning experience, have a meaningful learning context and achieve outcomes from the learning that will make a difference to them. This learning experience should also recognize changing demographics and capture the current and future generation of learners. This is effectively addressed by McCrindle (2012, p.121) in “The four R’s” for engaging learners in the education industry:

“Real – not only must our communication style be credible, but we must be credible also; relevant – what we are communicating has to fall within the persons’ areas of interest; responsive - communication should interest, instruct, involve and inspire; and be relational – create an environment that is conducive to engaging the head, the hands and the heart.” This knowledge can contribute to a thoughtfully constructed relationship between the teacher mentor and the preservice teacher that will diffuse this notion of a dichotomy of roles by providing a transparent platform in this eclectic professional learning space.

Conclusion: Informed Actions to Grow Professional Learning

We need to look closely at a professional learning plan which considers personalisation and partnerships that empower mentoring to facilitate quality outcomes and grow the human capital within a changing organisational context. This has informed the concept of a mentoring platform that will diffuse difference and engender shared intent and facilitate the creation of a landscape that will enable more consistent outcomes for all stakeholders – reciprocal learning.

This platform will:

- Provide induction and training of teacher mentors which will guide the thinking and action of the teacher mentor and build consistency in the relationship;
- Provide a mentoring model for this relationship which includes high quality feedback, engaging in critical conversations, identification of learning goals and development of action plans and reporting strategies;
- Provide online mentoring modules which include products & processes that will ensure valid, reliable, flexible and fair outcomes for the preservice teacher for example observation and feedback tools;
- Create a learning community which connects the preservice teacher, the university, the schools, teacher mentors and on-site learning coordinators for example reference groups;
- Provide a mentor for the teacher mentor;
- Provide on- line learning circles for mentors to connect with other mentors & university professional learning liaisons;and
- Collect data from all professional learning stakeholders to continuously improve this professional learning platform.

This will enable all stakeholders to actively construct the knowledge, own the learning and use critical reflection to identify learning needs and enhance workforce development for the future. Partners inform practice – strong partnerships ‘add value’ to the system, to the preservice teacher, to the teacher mentor, to the university. The literature on educational change reinforces the view “that both restructuring (changing the rules, roles, responsibilities and relationships) and re-culturing (changing the shared beliefs, customs, attitudes and expectations) are necessary for successful education reform” (LeCornu, 2010, p. 197). This further reinforces the importance of mentoring in enabling a pre-service teacher to change his or her work practices, personal beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. It is about being responsive to the changing culture and being willing to change. We all need a guide to make this happen.

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