

Mentoring to Become a Teacher: Sue's Story

When Sue first decided she wanted to be a teacher, it was the realisation of something she had felt since her teens. She had always been someone who would help other people and often found she could explain things where others had been unsuccessful. Early in her career with the Health Service, Sue had arrived at a 'career fork', where she was told by her department manager that she could aim for either teaching or managing as the next stage. She chose teaching, deciding that although this might restrict access to higher salaries in the future, job satisfaction was more important to her.

In the years preceding her Initial Teacher Training (ITT), Sue worked part time as a voluntary trainer and part time in her clinical role as a paramedic. She established a reputation for being an exciting and interesting trainer, trying out new ideas, sometimes doing so blindly and often attempting things that didn't work, but always moving forward and learning from her experiences as a teacher.

When Sue began her ITT, she found she was well ahead of most of her fellow students in experience. She readily understood the concepts taught and on occasions became frustrated that the teachers didn't seem to have her appreciation of what happened in the 'real world'. It was at this time that Sue joined up with her mentor, Roy. Roy was an experienced teacher working full time as a paramedic instructor, with a deserved reputation as an engaging and highly motivational teacher. He had accumulated a wide range of experience in his working life and had taught in many demanding situations. This experience, coupled with a natural ability to tell stories, meant Roy was often in demand as a teacher and mentor. At that time, when mentors were not formally allocated to ITT students, Sue and Roy effectively found each other through their common approach to teaching. Sue was naturally attracted to Roy's style of teaching and Roy saw that 'something extra' in her. What they both did for their learners had to be of the highest standard; 'satisfactory' wasn't good enough. They soon formed a friendship as well as a mentor-mentee relationship. There was no contact between Roy and Sue's line manager, largely due to the informal nature of the arrangement.

Roy had mentored other trainee teachers before but they had generally been inexperienced and with basic, often predictable development needs. With Sue, Roy had a mentee who was 'straining at the leash'; continually developing new ideas and seeking new ways to engage and excite learners. Yet she could also experience debilitating self-doubt. There was no need for an agenda, or even a specific purpose for their meetings. Sometimes it was just two people sharing thoughts and feelings to allow an 'emotional re-fuelling'. On occasions, Roy would observe Sue's teaching sessions. Their successful relationship meant that Sue was very sensitive to criticism from Roy, although she was also aware that he was encouraging her to reach higher standards than many other ITT students. She realised this was a great complement, despite the resultant hard effort required by her.

Sue was and still is regularly inspired to try out new ideas for teaching and learning with her students, but in the past she often did not have the confidence to go ahead with these ideas alone. She would take an idea to Roy, who would ask her why she wanted to do it; why it would help the students; what would the benefit be, calmly yet persistently encouraging Sue to explain and justify what she wanted to do in her own words. He would appear to give her permission to try out new ideas, but he actually encouraged Sue to go through a process of critical examination of her instincts and ideas before putting them into practice. Gradually, Sue found she would arrive at the answers to these questions in anticipation of Roy asking them. By the time Sue qualified as a teacher, she realised she needed this 'permission' less and less and was becoming much more confident. She had developed an inner dialogue, which she still uses today. She occasionally has doubts, but asks herself: 'What would Roy have said?', although the question is really: 'What would Roy have *asked me?*'

Sometimes, Sue would complain to Roy about an uninspiring teacher on her ITT course. He would encourage her to see the good in that person, to put herself in their shoes before judging them. Sue recalls that Roy's support wasn't always comfortable and easy; if she tired or lost motivation, Roy would not let her give in, encouraging her to maintain her own high standards. She remembers once feeling unwell and suggesting she ran a teaching session which placed fewer demands on her. Roy told her that as long as she went into the classroom, students wouldn't care if she was dying; she had to give them something of value. Today, on the rare occasions that Sue is tempted to do something below her own standards, she remembers Roy's words and keeps her standards high – she describes it as 'being true to myself and to Roy'.

Sue claims one of the best things about having a mentor was that she was able to talk through things which would have been difficult to discuss in group settings. She describes talking through areas of personal difficulty such as feeling nervous teaching a group of experienced learners. Instead of questioning at length, Roy sensed her need and shared his feelings in similar situations and the strategies he had used to overcome them. In this way, fears and anxieties were brought to the surface and together they would work out a way forward. Sue remembers Roy seemed to know exactly when 'counselling mode' was not appropriate during a mentoring session. She says there were some occasions when Roy simply knew about something which would be of great help to her and gave her the information. She remarks; 'Even Socrates gave advice sometimes!'

Sue always enjoyed the status the role of teacher brought (much preferring this to 'trainer' then in common use) and saw it as different to that of a manager in that it required an 'art', as well as a high level of expertise, which set it aside from management. She says she also appreciates the neutrality teachers and trainers have among the workforce, representing no particular tier, yet at times communicating with everyone. Even so, it is frustrating for Sue to find there is often little reward or encouragement for teachers to become really good at their jobs. She has learned the importance of first rate mentoring in providing the emotional lift and support that is so often missing from line managers. Although Sue is now separated geographically from

Roy and hasn't seen him for several years, his encouragement and belief in her is still part of what motivates her. There came a time after qualifying as a teacher that Sue had a new manager, who criticised and undermined almost everything she did. In her words, it almost caused her to 'go under'. It was only then that Sue realised the full extent of what Roy had done for her; her self-belief had turned her into so complete a teacher that no single person could erode her sense of worth. The manager in question did not succeed in doing so.

Although she has long since quit smoking, Sue fondly remembers the short chats she and Roy would grab in the time it took them to finish a cigarette. This was long enough to share a doubt, discuss an idea, ask a question and receive encouragement to try a new technique. Sue mentors others now and she always offers her mentees a drink, knowing that even if they don't have much time, something good almost always comes from the time it takes to drink a cup of tea.

Entering teaching in the NHS is a natural career path due to the large amount of teaching and learning it undertakes; all staff are trained either directly or in partnership with Further Education/Higher Education. Sue feels the NHS should have a larger teaching role in the community too. Sue has no regrets; she believes that for her, teaching was definitely the right career choice. She considers herself fortunate always to have worked with good colleagues and, with the one exception, good managers. Would she have liked to continue with Roy in a mentoring or life coaching role? Sue says great as that period was, she needed to go out on her own, without a safety net, and be able to make the occasional mistake.

Roy says that in mentoring Sue he gained a tremendous amount of satisfaction seeing her develop into a complete teacher while keeping all the characteristics which made her so original. He believes they suited each other well, although not everyone would have been comfortable mentoring someone as naturally innovative as Sue. Sometimes she would ask things that would make Roy question his own beliefs and teaching methods and he says their meetings almost always contained something unexpected or interesting. Roy feels mentoring provides a tremendous amount of personal satisfaction as trainees gain experience and confidence. Best of all, he says, is mentoring someone who you believe will go on to inspire a new generation of learners with fresh ideas.

When Sue mentors other trainee teachers she is aware of how Roy's thoughtful approach has influenced her in the way she goes about it. Sometimes when she is with a trainee, she says it is as almost as though she can feel Roy looking over her shoulder. In answer to the question 'What is the one piece of advice from your mentor that sticks out in your mind?', Sue smiles and says it was 'However busy you are, always leave time for a beer!'

Nick Napper, Musgrove Park Hospital

Note: The views in this case study are those of the author(s).