

The Mentoring Experience of Trainees Working in Non-FE Organisations

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Background

- Description of, and policies relating to, City of Bristol College are of no relevance to this report as it considers trainees whose teaching placements are in non FE organisations.
- The non FE organisations that we work with on a regular basis include national public organisations, charitable organisations and public services. A variety of these organisations are included here.

Project Aims: to develop case studies considering the experiences of trainees working in non FE organisations.

Description of Project as Undertaken

The original intention of this project was to establish links with mentors in non FE organisations and to identify, through a case study process, guidelines for best practice. A second project, being undertaken by colleagues at City of Bristol College, to develop a mentor training programme accessible through Blackboard (our Virtual Learning Environment), was to be used as a support system for mentors working and supporting trainees in external, non FE organisations.

The findings of this report would be further supported through a concurrent project to identify best practice through the investigation of the experience of trainees with teaching practice at City of Bristol College.

The importance of the role of the mentor had already been emphasised to the trainees at interview and all successful applicants were aware of the requirements within the new programme and had identified mentors at the start of the first term.

In the first instance a data base was created to ensure that all trainees on the programme had identified a named mentor to support them through the process. Trainees practicing in non FE organisations were then selected and asked to participate in the study. The

experience of these trainees and their mentors was then recorded in the case studies below. To maintain confidentiality names have not been used.

Outcomes/Findings

Case Study 1: This trainee is an experienced teacher and has worked in the organisation for a number of years. He often acts as 'mentor' himself, although they have only started using this term since he enrolled on the programme. The organisation is run very efficiently and staff development and training is taken seriously and given a high profile. The system, already in place, consists of regular observations of teaching sessions to ensure that the organisation's high standards are being maintained. There is also a strong pattern of student evaluation which is scrutinised to ensure that uniformly high standards are achieved.

This trainee was able to give details of a mentor at interview as this system was already in place. Although this is a hierarchical relationship, the mentor is not the line manager of the trainee so there is an opportunity for frank discussion. The relationship is not totally trainee driven as there are planned observations throughout the year. However, the trainee does feel able to ask for support although does not necessarily feel that he needs it. The mentor is well qualified in the subject specialist area and also holds a Cert Ed.

Records are kept (and can be tracked over several years) however, these tend to identify good practice on the part of the trainee rather than record a dialogue between the trainee and the mentor.

Both mentor and trainee consider this to be a positive experience although there is little evidence to suggest that the trainee's participation in the Cert Ed programme has altered the relationship from the one that already existed. The main criterion for success here appears to be the strong and positive working relationship between the two colleagues, rather than any professional development on the part of the trainee.

Case Study 2: This trainee works for a public service organisation. He is very experienced in his vocational area and has now moved from practice to training, within the same organisation. Again, this trainee was able to identify his mentor at interview as the system was already in place. However, again, although the term of mentor is being used, the systems in place are not necessarily there to support the trainee – they are more effective in ensuring the quality of provision of the organisation. Observations are planned at the convenience of the mentor rather than to support the trainee. Records that are kept are to satisfy external scrutiny rather than to maintain a record of the continuing development of the trainee. However, on an informal basis, this trainee is very satisfied with the level of support he receives. There is an opportunity for discussion at any time and ad hoc meetings are taking place although these were not being recorded as they were not a requirement of the organisation.

The new requirements of the Cert Ed programme is having an impact on this relationship as both mentor and trainee now recognise the need for this relationship to change to encompass the more traditional role of mentorship. The mentor holds a Cert Ed and is supportive. There is a genuine desire to help the trainee and appreciation of the problems faced by a new teacher. Lack of time has been identified as the main barrier to more regular, formal meetings although these are now taking place.

Case Study 3: This trainee works for a public service organisation and is one of the more experienced teacher/trainers in the organisation. The line manager, who is not a teacher/trainer, had been identified as the mentor although this was clearly not satisfactory. It soon became apparent that the line manager was not supportive of the trainee's participation on the Cert Ed programme and that there may even have been some resentment of it. The appraisal system in place required the line manager to undertake observations to ensure that the trainee was performing to a high standard, although it was argued that this could not be effectively monitored as the line manager had no direct teaching/training experience. It would be difficult for this trainee to ask for support from someone who had no experience of teaching.

Re-organisation within the organisation has rectified this to an extent as the trainee now works in a more traditional training department and therefore has access to a line manager that, at the very least, has teaching experience. However this has highlighted the need for clarity around the responsibilities of the mentor. On paper, in the original situation, this trainee could have appeared to be receiving the support of a mentor although this clearly would not have been the case. The possibility of being asked to leave the programme as a consequence of not having a mentor in place may have deterred this trainee from making me aware of the problems. The current mentor is very supportive and far more aware of the needs of the trainee although there is still an element of mentorship being part of their managerial role and consequently a potentially compromised relationship.

Discussion

The ideal appears to be based on the School NQT model where staff are identified as having both the personality and the experience required to undertake such an activity. Mentorship has a high profile within the school community and there are very clear guidelines of roles and responsibilities. Recent initiatives have continued to develop this theme as FENTO, OFSTED and LLUK have added their voices to the growing demand for a strong mentoring programme in PCET initial teacher training. (Hankey, 2004).

Whilst the problems of transferring a school based model to a Further Education environment are evident enough, there is the additional problem of the Cert Ed trainee whose practice takes place within non FE organisations. This is even further removed from the school based model. The case studies above reflect many similarities between the experiences of trainees in organisations where a business model is favoured.

- In all cases the mentor/trainee relationship would have existed to an extent anyway (although it may have had a different name) and was not as a consequence of the trainee enrolling on the Cert Ed/PGCE programme.
- All trainees claimed that the relationship was a positive one. All mentors (eventually) were more experienced teachers who were able to offer advice and support on day to day teaching issues.
- Lack of time to develop the process was a major negative factor in all cases.
- The only records kept were those required by the organisation and all have seen the paperwork required for the new programme as an additional burden to already heavy workloads.
- The trainees, on being required to identify a mentor for the programme, had readily identified a key figure in their organisation that they were already involved with who was in fact more a part of the organisation's quality assurance process than a mentor. The practicalities of working with someone who already had time allocated for observations and related activities seems to have been more attractive to the trainees than seeking out a member of their team who would possibly be more appropriate to act in the role of mentor but who would not necessarily have either the time or the support within the organisation to do so.

Although we were all using the same language, it soon became evident that our meanings were quite different. Hierarchical and micro political issues arise here, as well as issues surrounding the training of those prepared to act as mentor on the difference between being responsible for monitoring another person's development within an organisation and being part of the teacher training process.

Considering the Maynard and Furlong model (1993, 78 – 83) the mentors that took part in this study could most closely (and somewhat generously) be identified as operating within the apprenticeship or competency models where what the trainees interviewed said that they most required was the reflective model - the least likely to occur.

Recommendations for Peninsula CETT

It has become increasingly evident that we need to be far more specific about the role and responsibilities of the mentor at interview and beyond. Weight has been added to this by similar findings in the project looking at traditional FE trainees.

- It would be useful if successful applicants were given mentor information packs *at interview* to take to their mentors so that their mentors can register and be approved before the programme begins.

- The profile of, and training for, mentors need to be highlighted. The introduction of the training package for mentors through the VLE has taken longer than anticipated but it is hoped that this will be in place for the new academic year. Training sessions on how to use the training package will need to be in place!
- Mentor co-ordinators have been appointed at City of Bristol College. A key part of their role is to support mentors and trainees working in non FE organisations with training, advice and guidance. They are emphasising that this is a triadic relationship between the trainee the tutor and the mentor, and helping to develop the link between tutors and mentors.

Comments below from Mentor Co-ordinator working with Cert Ed/PGCE programme:

- Peninsula CETT have produced a handbook for mentors with exemplar forms for recording meetings and a document to sign accepting responsibility for the post.
- We don't know how non CoBC personnel will be able to access the VLE yet - this is something we are working on.
- We aim to offer a one day intensive training course for mentors (both within CoBC and external organisations). In addition, we are going to hold focus group meetings and visit mentors in the workplace.

It will be interesting to revisit this issue in the next academic year in order to monitor the effectiveness of these initiatives.

List of References

Hankey J. (2004) 'The Good, the Bad and Other Considerations', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 9 (389 – 400) 12.

Maynard, T. and Furlong J (1993) *Learning to teach and models of mentoring* cited in Armitage A., Bryant R., Dunnill R., Renwick M., Hayes D., Hudson A., Kent J. and Lawes S. (2003) *Teaching and Training in Post-Compulsory Education*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.