Mentoring the mentors: a critical reflection of the process of designing and supporting mentor training for post-compulsory sector teaching mentors

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Background and rationale

The University of Wolverhampton's PGCE for PCE (post-compulsory education) and Certificate in Education PCE are thriving and dynamic pre and in-service routes to qualified teacher status. Currently there are 120 full-time students and 750 fte students across 10 partner franchise colleges in the Black Country, Shropshire, Birmingham and Solihull region. In September 2004, 2 additional partner colleges will offer teacher education in collaboration with the University. Partnership, capacity building and human investment in the region's post-compulsory sector are the key guiding principles that underpin these collaborative developments. Each pre or in-service student registered is allocated an observer who assesses his or her teaching practice. Prior to September 2002 the observer's title was that of work-based assessor. However, the PCE team felt that the role undertaken and the responsibilities inherent in the support and observation of the development of teaching practice were diminished somewhat by the use of this rather technical label. The title 'Teaching Mentor' was adopted in September 2002. This research reflects the PCE team's attempts to ensure that the shift was not simply semantic, but instead may be seen to be ahead of sectoral developments in its focus upon the individuals who mentor new or unqualified teachers and upon their education and training needs. Traditionally, the University has been responsible for the training and development of those mentors supporting new pre-service teachers following the full-time PGCE route whereas the Certificate in Education teaching mentors have been supported by the individual franchise centres. Increasingly over the development of this project, the team members have become aware of the ongoing need for flexible support for in-service teaching mentors as the formal training within partner institutions is mixed.

The role and support needs of the teaching mentor in the further education sector is a topical and increasingly pressing issue for teacher educators and employers as the sector struggles to meet government targets for qualified staff. Following the recent initial Ofsted inspection and report upon teacher education (HMI 2003) in HEIs and college providers, the DfES (2003) recommendations focus upon the need for effective mentoring of teaching practice. Although established as an accepted practice in initial teacher training, in the PGCE for schools and in the business sector, the mentor role within the post-compulsory sector still remains semi-structured without a formulated mentor training and qualification framework that is supported and recognised as meaningful staff development.

Further education, positioned at the intersection of education and business is a fascinating case study that requires a hybrid-mentoring model drawn from theorists and practitioners in both sectors. It is not sufficient to simplistically and uncritically adopt mentoring models and approaches from other sectors and then attempt to squeeze the diversity of post-compulsory mentors into this applied model. The sector is a complex and multi-layered dynamic education system which requires dynamic and responsive staff development. To

date, much mentoring practice within the sector is 'off' rather than on-line in nature and therefore may be hidden within timetabling and quality audits. The informal, 'good will' model, which it may be argued has been the norm, silences and negates the need for appropriate training and support. It is hoped that this study will continue the process of consciousness raising and capacity building that is so needed to support the work of mentors in the post-compulsory sector.

This innovative approach to supporting mentor training sought to start from where the mentors were, rather than rigidly impose the model used for training mentors for other educational sectors. Inspection and audit cultures were clearly driving the need for trained and qualified teaching mentors. However, as described above, in many institutions mentoring is a good will activity and the project team were fully aware that many mentors had no further time or it could be argued, desire, to follow accreditation. As the existing accreditation framework was the National Qualification Framework Level 4, the challenge was to create a flexible and responsive training model and materials that would encourage individual mentors to continue on to the Postgraduate Certificate in Mentoring. Previously, the mentoring qualification had been offered as part of a suite of masters level modules. It was the team's intention to promote the mentor training and accreditation as a stand alone worthwhile personal and professional development activity and as a gateway into postgraduate study. The mentor training pack and materials were also planned to be independent of the L4 module allowing individual mentors flexible access to support. It was the project's primary intention to create and supply a mentor pack to all PGCE mentors, ideally through a formal training session or one-to-one meeting and to aim to cascade the pack and the support philosophy behind it through collaborative links and college visits.

As recent FE practitioners, the project team were aware of the demands placed upon FE professionals and in all interactions sought to be supportive of the mentoring context. The development of materials needed to reflect the specificity of the role as well as the more generalist approaches to mentoring theory and practice. Material development was focussed upon interactive classroom-based and individual activity.

The innovation

Teacher education in HEIs and partnership colleges prepares to face Ofsted inspections in the academic year 2004-5 following a critical initial inspection (HMI 176/03) and DfES response. The crucial role of the mentor in teacher education was identified as a key development area as "few trainees receive effective mentoring in the workplace, and their progress is inhibited by insufficient observation and feedback on their teaching", with the recommendation that HEIs "ensure the provision of workplace mentoring to support trainees in developing the necessary skills to teach their specialist subjects" (HMI 176/03) Within this context the work of the PCE team and this project may be seen to be innovative.

The project team simultaneously piloted on-site delivery at the University targeted specifically at post-compulsory sector colleagues, with scheduled off-site training sessions. The on-site sessions were timed over a 3-month period to accommodate the phased needs of the mentor role and 4 iterations were timetabled in order to support late identification of mentors.

The longitudinal aim of this project was to identify and produce a model of support and development for teaching mentors in partnership Further Education colleges in collaboration with sector colleagues. Previously, the mentor training needs and accreditation for these colleagues would have been subsumed within a generalist L4 module. The objectives were to research methods for recognising the support needs of the identified group; to draw up models of support and pilot their use in three colleges and to develop the most successful model for use with all teaching mentor cohort and to monitor its success. The projected outcome was a 'Teacher Mentor' pack and a 'support pack' for University tutors. This project's focus was to relocate the quality emphasis upon the needs of the mentors rather than the needs of their mentees.

The emphasis upon a flexible delivery model stretched the current delivery practices within the School of Education. The project's focus upon 'mentoring the mentors' insisted that contact needed to be sustained through email, telephone and off-site tutorials as well as through traditional face-to-face delivery. The team developed a package of 3 twilight sessions, 5-8pm. The first session was compulsory for all mentors of PGCE students. The content covered the University and qualification requirements, the completion of observation and tutorial paperwork and quality procedures. The second and third sessions contained the theoretical and practical content of the mentoring qualification.

The project team worked closely to align the PGCE mentor role requirements and the wider L4 accreditation requirements in order to 'sell' and embed the professional development package within the PGCE mentor role. This mapping exercise of mentor role and module requirements aimed to focus the participants and to allay fears. Fears expressed included the ability to undertake both the role and the essayist needs of the master's module. The link between the theory and practices of mentoring were embedded within the activities undertaken during the first session. It was important to the project team to theorise the practice of mentoring and to challenge mentors' perceptions and expectations from the first meeting. It was hoped that the dual-delivery, personalised approach to mentor training would encourage mentors to continue with the non-compulsory accreditation.

The outcomes

Working with a model that was flexible and we hoped dynamic, the project team engaged in dialogue at institutional and individual levels. A training needs' analysis undertaken in 2002-3 suggested that mentors felt distant from the University and that this literal and symbolic space was an inhibiting factor in their access opportunities for training and accreditation. The original project plan was to include colleagues from within the sector to support and train the new cohorts of mentors. This 'bridging' approach it was hoped would promote access and belonging to a mentor community. However, this proved to be logistically impossible as the individuals identified originally were unable to commit the time to the project. As collaboration was key, the project team continued to seek collegial input. This was not possible and represents a flaw in the initial project design. It is however indicative of much partnership work. There were modifications to the original project plan as a result of a number of factors. We were unable to pilot the models in September 2003 as mentors were not identified by partnership colleges until after this date and FE colleagues were unable or unwilling to attend a workshop prior to September. Discussions with colleges indicated that three short staged workshops would more effectively meet the training and support needs of the mentors. We felt it was important that the previously unlinked practical induction into the role and the academic development and reflection through the MA modules were more closely linked. We hoped that the combined 3-session on-site delivery model would fulfil these requirements. This model mirrored the current University provision for mentors in the compulsory sector.

To date four cohorts (36 individuals) have undergone mentor training on-site at the University, a further 90 mentors have received part 1 of the training in their own institutions and a cohort of a further 50 are undertaking the workshops and observation activities leading to accreditation.

Interim findings

The flexible and responsive integrated model practiced by the delivery team appears to be a highly effective model for teaching mentor training. The participation figures are encouraging although it is too soon to evaluate the effectiveness of the on-site delivery model being piloted this academic year and the pilot will continue for a further year. What seems clear is that the training model adopted in the primary and secondary sectors cannot

simply be transferred and overlaid onto the FE sector. The implications for staffing future training and support of the mentor cohort are problematic as the culture within the partnership colleges favours delivery within their own institution over staff attendance at the University. This preferred model requires individualised sessions at geographically dispersed partner sites. Clearly this model is hugely inefficient in timetabling hours for University staff. However, it has proved to be hugely successful in collaboration and partnership-building leading onto further bespoke provision.

Sectoral developments in teacher education are pushing heavily for systemised training for mentors of new or unqualified staff. The flexible model piloted has identified and met the training needs of many more mentors during the project period than in previous years. The University's response to the DfES recommendations would also suggest that mentor training is further advanced at the University of Wolverhampton than at other teacher education providers. The creation of a support pack and on-line materials has been very favourably received by the teaching mentor cohort and exemplar documents have been adopted by partnership institutions as common practice. Material development is ongoing in response to mentor feedback.

The research suggests that an approach based upon Woodd's (2001) mentoring styles model would support the development of reflective mentoring practice and skills in the teaching mentor cohort. Woodd's research into mentoring new staff offers a continuum model. This model may be usefully condensed and adapted to reflect the identified roles and needs of the mentors. The PGCE teaching mentor cohort, unlike Woodd's cohort, has to fulfil the three stages identified: buddy, organiser and facilitator, within a condensed period of time. Use of this model has helped in the induction activities by identifying and exploring discursively the 'buddy' role. Feedback and evaluation from participants in the training sessions suggests that the discursive space created is key to the success of the mentoring process. This finding is replicated in both on and off-site delivery. Making time for mentors and their vital role is a status raising activity and an ongoing challenge for the project team.

The development of materials – a mentor pack and an interactive lesson planner have supported the 'organiser' stage and current developments by the project team will further extend the support for this stage. Movement onto the postgraduate mentoring modules and into the 'facilitator' stage is more difficult. The transition from required training to accreditation is the key challenge for the continuation of the project. Mentor induction, observation of practice and certification can therefore be seen as stages on the continuum.

Evaluation to date

The piloted on-site training model had a disappointing response in the first 2 cohorts with only 9 attendees. Of the 9 only 3 opted to continue with the training and accreditation route. However, the 3rd cohort attracted 13 mentors. This suggests that colleagues and institutions are becoming more receptive to this mode of delivery.

The following conclusions have been proposed:

a) Teaching mentor staff appear to fall into 3 categories

    i. Staff who are interested in development but are unable or unwilling to attend the early evening sessions offered at the University.

    ii. Staff who are interested in development and who attend the 3 workshops.

    iii. Staff who are interested in being teaching mentors but are not certain if they require further training to improve their performance.

Woodd's (2001) continuum model demonstrates the need for the sector, the University and the individuals to recognise the different developmental skills required in each new mentoring encounter. The use of packs has ensured the consistency of administrative

functions as all mentors receive a detailed break down of their roles and responsibilities within the Teaching Mentor Guide.

Lessons from the workshops

The first workshop should continue to concentrate upon the handbook, roles and responsibilities and the standardisation of observation practice. The workshops should be a mix of question and answers, idea storming, discussion and skill development. Materials should be summaries of case studies, needs identification and awareness of the mentor process and its potential for personal development. The teaching mentor handbook was produced by adapting the approach and materials used for secondary NQTs. This aligns to the requirements of Ofsted and the recent DfES consultation document on teacher education. The lead lecturer has taken part in a series of training sessions to develop expertise in the design and development of interactive materials. The materials produced to support planning have been favourably received.

Future Developments

The on-site delivery model has been adapted for the next academic year. With an Ofsted inspection scheduled for February 2005 the need for appropriately trained and supported teaching mentors is increasing. Sessions planned are targeted at specific groups of mentors both in terms of experience and location. On-site university sessions will focus upon new mentors and those supporting PGCE students following the skills routes (literacy, numeracy and ESOL). Off-site sessions held by the project team will target the north and south of the placement region to encourage access. Material development is ongoing.

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