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Building bridges: enhancing mentoring skills, knowledge and practice through an online course

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Abstract

This paper outlines the rationale for an open online course for teachers, Enhance your Mentoring Skills, aimed at addressing the UK National Mentor Standards (2016), and describes how this was put into practice. The professional needs of school-based mentors and how these were met in the design for learning are examined alongside a consideration of the efficacy of the curriculum and associated pedagogy of the course. Drawing on the evaluations of 73 teachers who have completed the course in 2017 and their contributions to individual and communal learning activities the paper develops an impression of mentoring practice that represents mentors' theories-in-use. Teachers' accounts of the value of the course suggest considerable effect on their levels of confidence and some evidence of impact on their mentoring practice. However, findings also indicate that participants' understandings of their mentoring role lacks a clearly defined model for mentoring relationships and that mentors welcome greater opportunity to reflect on their practice and to share this with others discursively. The paper discusses the extent to which the course offers a bridge between mentors' wishes and intentions and how they are realised in practice. Recommendations for future iterations of the course are made, with proposals to develop this case study further, as an instrumental form of theory building (Stake, 1995), in order to better understand how mentors understand and develop their practice.

Introduction and context

The National Standards for school-based initial teacher training (DfE, 2016) were developed in response to the Carter Review (2015) with the aim of facilitating greater coherence and consistency in the practice of school-based mentors in order to support the training and development of trainee teachers. The standards were seen as a key catalyst for raising the profile of mentoring within educational settings to ensure that support is offered to those embarking on careers, as well as those within the early years of their professional development. While the typical format of professional development for mentors is face-to-face meetings the development of web-based technology has seen a greater range of opportunities for mentors. The Enhance your Mentoring Skills open online course is one model for this.

Problematising the professional development of school-based mentors

The literature recognises the important transitional phase of beginning to teach as a complex stage of teacher learning (Avalos, 2011). The emphasis on mentoring as an important factor in teachers' professional development (Hobson et al., 2009) is underlined by what mentors bring to the induction process, and also how they contribute to the identity formation of beginning teachers (Devos, 2010). Threaded through the experience that teachers derive from their practice is the knowledge of what professionalism explicitly 'looks like'; an understanding of how to apply professional values, attitudes and behaviours appropriately; a skill set that enables them to fulfil their roles; and finally attributes that are agreed upon as underpinning all professions. This is a development model of mentoring (Furlong and Maynard, 1995).

In the autumn of 2016 the Sheffield Institute of Education (SIOE) reviewed the mentor training provided across all four phases of teacher education and found the focus of activity to be primarily on the mechanics and documentation of mentoring trainee and newly qualified teachers. Typically, mentor training takes the form of half-day meetings, focusing on quality assurance and operational and procedural processes and know-how. A focus group of 50 senior mentor coordinators in November 2016 expressed the need for 'materials that 'de-mystify the standards so that they don't become overwhelming' and help for mentees to match practice to standards, suggesting that mentees look for both a supportive mentoring relationship and practical advice for teaching practice (Hobson, 2016).

Following this review the SIOE agreed to support mentors' professional learning through the development of a free open education resource for mentors (<https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/mentorshooc> see Figure 1). This, is in concert with the aims of the Mentor Standards (DfE, 2016) to contribute to the building of a culture of coaching and mentoring in schools, in which 'the standards have a resonance beyond the training period and into teachers' early professional development where high-quality mentoring and coaching are just as valuable' (DfE, 2016, p. 3).

Enhance your Mentoring Skills

Developed through teacher education partnerships and school networks

Sheffield Hallam University Sheffield Institute of Education

For all mentors in an educational context, including school mentors, and senior mentor coordinators

Mentoring

E-Learning

An open online course (SHOOC)

Home Achievement Course Team Curriculum E-Learning Enrol FAQ News

Figure 1: Web banner for online course blog

The course objectives (see Table 2 below) included developing familiarity with and understanding of the mentor standards and the associated competences; and the critical reflection on mentors' own mentoring practice. To date 730 teachers have registered for the course. Prior mentoring experience ranged from none to greatly experienced senior mentors with responsibility for overseeing and

moderating the work of other mentors. Significantly 41% of those registering on the course had had no previous mentor training.

A design for professional learning

The curriculum of the course was mapped to the standards and involves the completion of 5 workbooks, estimated to take 25 hours to complete in total. These are shown in Table 1 along with the relevant standard and indicative activities. Delivered online via an online e-portfolio tool, Pebbledpad, each workbook comprises: a video introduction and outline of the workbook topic; a reader on the workbook topic; a set of case studies related to the topic; a set of individual, and some communal, online activities (e-tivities) to be completed by the participant (including reflections and discussion of the case studies and the reader in relation to the participant’s own mentoring practice); and a self-evaluation against the standard covered in the workbook. In addition, a one-hour, live webinar (recorded) was run each workbook by the workbook leader from the team, some of which had invited speakers. There was an option for participants to work towards Open Badges and a Certificate of Completion, as a reward and recognition pathway, for those who successfully completed the workbooks.

Table 1: Course structure of workbooks, mentor standards and exemplar focus

Workbook	Mentor Standard (overview)	Focus (indicative content)
1. Introduction and Induction.	Overview of course and materials.	<i>What are the advantages and drawbacks of being a mentor?</i>
2. Modelling & Developing Professional Relationships.	Standard 1. Personal Qualities: Establish trusting relationships, modelling high standards of practice, and empathising with the challenges a mentee faces.	<i>What strategies do you use to create a good working relationship with mentees?</i> Case Study 1: dealing with unprofessional mentee.
3. Developing Mentees’ Professionalism.	Standard 3. Professionalism. Induct the mentee into professional norms and values, helping them to understand the importance of the role and responsibilities of teachers in society.	<i>What do mentees find difficult about developing professional values, knowledge and skills?</i> Case Study 2: Mentors talking about supporting mentees to be professional.
4. Supporting & Guiding Mentees and Mentors.	Standard 2. Teaching: Support mentees to develop their teaching practice in order to set high expectations and to meet the needs of all learners.	<i>How can you use reflection on critical incidents to help the mentee progress?</i> Case Study 3: Giving feedback and discussing critical incidents
5. Mentees and Professional Development.	Standard 4. Self-development and working in partnership. Develop own professional knowledge, skills and understanding and invest time in developing a good working relationship within partnerships.	<i>Consider CPD that works for you and plan future CPD</i> Case Study 4: becoming a mentor and the stages to becoming a senior mentor.

Completing workbooks involves a combination of ‘closed’ individual activities (reflections and self-evaluations) that can only be seen by course tutors when the mentor chose to submit the workbook online; and ‘open’ communal activities shared in ‘open’ spaces online that everybody could see. For example, shared online activities (e-tivities) for workbook 4 included an online forum discussion around participants’ experience of giving difficult feedback; contributions to an ‘Answer Garden’ (‘How do you know good teaching when you see it?’); a Tweetchat around ‘What part can mentors play in developing teaching quality and effectiveness?’ prompted by a blogpost on the topic; and a Top Tips Padlet on giving feedback on teaching observations. Together these contributions are an indication of the participating mentors’ understanding of the mentoring process and collectively they provide rich accounts of how this is enacted in practice.

Evaluation: making sense of what mentors say about mentoring

The SHOOC created space to think in a metacognitive way, to challenge established ideas and assumptions about mentoring, and then to be able to use this learning to impact directly on subsequent mentoring practices, something highly valued by participants: ‘the opportunity to reflect on what mentoring is, why we do it and how we do it, has been invaluable in boosting my confidence and in helping me move forward in my role’ (secondary mentor). The extent to which course objectives were met is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: How course objectives were met

Course Objective	Degree to which met
Identify the mentor standards and understand their relevance and application to mentoring practice.	Confidence levels were improved in all standards, with clear indications to which standards need to further addressed. Many reported not knowing the standards and how the course helped.
Understand the set of knowledge and skills that constitute competence in mentoring and how these can be developed.	Improved confidence in all areas with the need to challenge mentees highlighted by mentors themselves. Clearer understanding of differences between coaching and mentoring are emergent.
Reflect critically on your own mentoring practice and understand how to identify gaps and weaknesses in your current practice and that of others and to use this knowledge to improve mentoring practice.	Strong insights evidenced into mentor’s current practice and plans developed to develop this further. Self-reflections were powerful means of identifying gaps and needs.
Participate effectively in professional communities of mentors in order to share individual professional practice and to draw from the practice of others.	Mentors reported the value of sharing practice in the forums and seeing others’ contributions to communal activities.

Evaluations and comments from the 3 iterations of the SHOOC to date indicate what the participants think they need to develop their mentoring practice, summarised here:

- a space/opportunity to be able to reflect deeply
- a collaborative community where ideas can be shared and developed
- a structure for learning and access to expertise

- a variety of activities to engage with, including case studies which provide context
- differentiation to meet the needs of all participants including: flexibility about when to engage, freedom to choose what elements to engage with and limited deadlines
- links to Continuous Professional Development/appraisal targets within school
- a chance to be able to apply the tips from the course to current mentoring roles

Findings also indicate that participants' understandings of their mentoring role lacks a clearly defined model for mentoring relationships and that mentors welcome greater opportunity to reflect on their practice and to share this with others discursively.

Discussion

The ability to network, to share, reflect upon and learn from other's experiences is key to any form of learning and is essential if this learning is to have impact on professional practice. The cumulative approach to learning through experience is linked to the notion of teacher growth that is constituted through the evolving practices of the teacher, which are iteratively refined through a process of 'enaction and reflection' (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002: p955). Enaction, in these terms, distinguishes a form of teacher activity that involves the putting into action of a new idea or a new belief or a newly encountered practice. The form of 'reflection in the SHOOC aspires to Dewey's ideal of "active, persistent and careful consideration" (Dewey, 1910/1991 p. 6) but further exploration of how teachers modify and change their practice as a result of mentoring is needed.

Teachers are often influenced by established repertoires of practice that produce embedded and reinforced assumptions about what works in teaching and learning. Mentors, as experienced teachers, are subject to this influence and are at risk of reproducing the models that appear to work for them. The common-sense understanding of what works in practice, acting as mental maps or schemas that guide practice and its development, involves the idea of theories-in-use (Argyris and Schön, 1974) that teachers apply everyday in their practice. Teachers often espouse the principles of their practice without understanding or fully articulating or clarifying the concepts and constructs that underlie and underpin them. Further development of a framework for understanding and modelling how teachers develop their mentoring practice and how this affects that of mentees, is required.

Note: The positive feedback on the value of the open online course has encouraged us to run it again and registration opens on 1st June 2018 (<https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/mentorshooc>).

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