

Seeing and framing teacher mentoring through the lens of knowledge practices

Richard Pountney, Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University

r.p.pountney@shu.ac.uk, @dead_of_night

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Abstract

In this paper I draw on empirical work I have been involved in since 2016, involving over 1200 teacher mentors, to discuss a key issue that has arisen – the professional knowledge required to mentor effectively. This work includes the development of a curriculum for training school-based mentors of trainee and newly qualified teachers, *Enhance your Mentoring Skills*, delivered regionally across South Yorkshire (Pountney and Grasmeyer, 2018), as well as nationally for mentors of mid-career teachers on the Chartered Teacher programme of the Chartered College of Teaching. I begin by discussing briefly what is known about teachers' mentoring practices, and understandings of what constitutes professional knowledge. Next, I discuss the nature of mentor teachers' learning for practice, and the difficulties inherent in articulating this to themselves, and to others. I illustrate this with examples, to show how the problem can be differentiated in two dimensions of meaning: the first is closeness to context (semantic gravity) and the second is the degree of conceptual complexity (semantic density). Finally, I discuss the need for a specialised language for mentoring and how this can promote the professional status of mentors, as well as building knowledge about, and for, effective mentoring practice.

Introduction

The importance of mentoring in teachers' professional development is well recognised (Hobson et al., 2009) and was singled out for 'needing much greater status and recognition' by the Carter Review (2015) of initial teacher education in England, leading to the development of the national standards for school-based mentors (DfE, 2016). The urgency to respond to this is heightened by calls in the Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019) for 'fully trained mentors'. However, there is a considerable variation in the quality of training programmes, with a predominant emphasis on induction (Ingersoll and Strong, 2011), leading to claims that mentoring is 'a practice which is ill-defined, poorly conceptualized and weakly theorized' (Colley, 2003, p.13). While the material arrangements for mentoring, and how they vary greatly between schools, affects the practical conditions for mentoring, it is the socio-political ones that can shape the relationships between mentors and mentees. As important, however, are the different meanings of 'mentoring' and how they are 'interpreted and justified' (Kemmis et al., 2014, p.155) that, combined with the material and socio-

political, constitute mentoring as a form of social practice. What mentors do, what they say and how they relate is informed by these meanings and how they emerge and are sustained in practice. This meanings perspective on mentoring knowledge (the know that and know how) is informed by the extensive fieldwork in my research.

The link between teaching and mentoring

The calls within the field to identify the knowledge base for teaching (and mentoring) highlight the importance of mentoring in a teaching career. Often overlooked here is the notion that teachers in mentoring contexts are themselves learners, in which they 'struggle to maintain their confidence in an ever-shifting, demanding, and new professional role' (Hall et al., 2008, p.330). Evaluations of the Enhance your Mentoring Skills course (see <https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/mentorshooc>) show considerable gains in mentors' confidence levels in knowledge and skills resulting from the development of a curriculum mapped to the mentor standards (Pountney and Grasmeyer, 2018). This is a form of professional learning that is underpinned by a developmental model of mentoring (Furlong and Maynard, 1995). We need to examine what is being developed and how.

Knowledge for mentoring and how it develops

A relatively unchallenged rationale for how teachers learn to teach is the idea of being 'in practice', in which student teachers acquire practical knowledge or the know-how of professional knowledge by iterative involvement in planning, teaching and review. Experience as the bridge to practice knowledge is central here, and the assumption that by being exposed to novel situations teachers will develop practical wisdom, characterised as the tacit know how held by experts. The parallel with how mentors develop their practice is striking, with many respondents in our research reporting learning to mentor 'on the job', and far too often with minimal teaching experience themselves. While many teachers in our research cite the value of thinking and talking about their own practice in order to guide that of the mentee, this often relies on a form of 'making sense' of practice, much of which takes a 'common sense' form of explanation of action that otherwise remains tacit.

Collins (2011) challenges the notion of tacit knowledge, suggesting that it is possible to differentiate between what can, and what cannot, be made explicit. When mentors make judgements on what is and what is not good practice for example, they apply a form of tacit understanding of practice that they are called upon to articulate to the mentee in feedback, and/or in a written report. Points for improvement arising from this evaluation are a synthesis of the mentor's expertise, realised in a form that the mentee can interpret as shown in this excerpt of a typical exchange below:

Table 1: Exchange 1 - between mentor and mentee (excerpts)

Process / Stage	Exchange
1. Describe what happened	<p>Mentor: <i>'We are going to talk about your last lesson, what I would like to do is go through what you think happened, talk about your strengths and talk your areas of development. ..., how did you think the students made progress, is it the progress you expected, and what is your resumé of what happened?'</i></p> <p>Mentee: <i>'I don't think it went particularly well, and I don't think the class made as much progress as I would like ... I feel they are very low in confidence, they are low ability and I feel I didn't properly scaffold, and for that reason I think I am a little bit disappointed'</i></p> <p><i>[mentor asks what went well]</i></p>
2. Ask about a critical incident and responds to mentee's analysis	<p>Mentee: <i>'When they didn't understand some of them did ask questions and say 'Miss, can you explain a little bit more...'</i></p> <p><i>[mentor confirms her version of what she saw and the challenging nature of the class]</i></p> <p>Mentor: <i>'The thing I was especially impressed with was that, although the lesson didn't go according to plan you actually noticed that and tried to deal with it. I really liked that you picked up that the students were struggling [shows the mentee the lesson materials] ... and I feel that they were a little confused by the language ... what do you think happened after that? '</i></p>
3. Direct the mentee towards future action	<p>Mentee: <i>'As soon as you left the room, I thought the words were far, far too difficult, and if I go back to the start of the lesson, I don't think I got out of them what the idea of [topic] was. Which was what the lesson was supposed to be about'</i></p>
4. Action-plan changes to practice	<p>Mentor: <i>'I think you are right, there was quite a lot of confusion around the wording ... so if you were going to teach the lesson again what could you do to make progress'</i></p>
5. Follow up to check and confirm targets	<p><i>[Mentee articulates what she would do differently]</i></p> <p><i>[Mentor and mentee meet later to confirm actions]</i></p>

Leaving aside the dialogic tactics that the mentor skilfully uses to direct the mentee to examine her own practice, notable in Exchange 1 is the closeness to context, and the practicalities of practice. Maton (2013) refers to this as a strong form of *semantic gravity*,

(SG - the relative context dependency of meaning). The mentee talks about her concrete actions, how the class asked questions, and her preparation. The mentor introduces various concepts including 'progress', and the 'language' of the lesson. One analysis of this point in the exchange is a weakening of the semantic gravity (becoming more abstract) and a strengthening of what Maton conceptualises as semantic density (SD - the relative complexity of meanings). For example, the notion of 'progress' is dense and abstracted because it references not only the pupils' learning but has inferences of monitoring and testing of their work. In this sense, the mentor's use of the word 'progress' is quite vague and circumspect (it is mainly tacit) and its broader inferences may be lost on the mentee. Now compare this to Exchange 2, below, between a senior mentor and a group of mentors talking about how to stretch and challenge mentees:

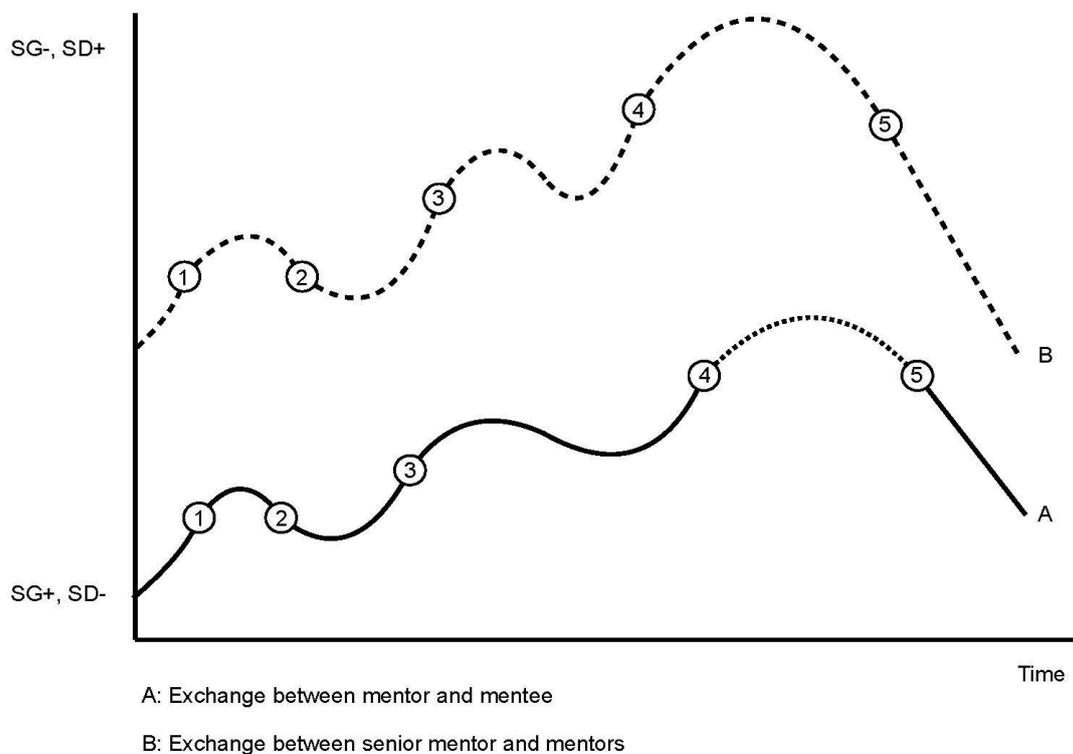
Table 2: Exchange 2 - between senior mentor and mentors (excerpts)

Process / Stage	Exchange
1. Introduce the problem	<p>Senior mentor: <i>'So with strategies to stretch and challenge, it needs that planning at the beginning ...'</i></p>
2. Elaborate the problem, drawing on specific instances	<p>Mentor 1: <i>'With the boys' attainment, actually speaking to the mentee first, and finding out what their opinion is, and what strategies work ...so they have a clear idea of where they are starting from ...'</i></p>
3. Abstract and model the problem	<p>Mentor 2: <i>'Starting from the perspective that the trainee is potentially a talented future teacher, because of the systems of protocols that you as a mentor, and as a school are in action, if you then want to stretch and challenge them, by taking the shackles off, doesn't make sense at all ... our role changes from being from a driver and director to being a facilitator in the acting out, they are now the doer, in the complete sense, but it is that unconscious behind the scenes, pulling of the strings ... and we need to protect them'</i></p>
4. Elaborate the model using specialised language (metaphor)	<p>Mentor 3: <i>'For me personally its putting them in the driving seat ... to be actually, the thinker and the doer and the deliverer, because that's the reality of what we do every day... and it can be stabilisers on, or stabilisers off, and that's where we come in, in our own judgement, but that has had the biggest impact, and you can tell a lot about a teacher's capacity if they can do the juggling with many things. We are often the 'mayor' of our</i></p>

5. Return to problem and action plan	<i>classrooms, that's where the practice is, and that's where the majority of their learning is ...'</i> Senior Mentor: <i>'So what I am hearing is, push them out of that comfort zone, and saying to them, look you can be even better tomorrow than you are today'</i>
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In Exchange 2 we can observe a less-gradual decrease in semantic gravity (the conversation becomes more abstract and further from context more quickly) and a steeper increase in semantic density (there is a more rapid rise in the complexity of the language used), before the senior mentor brings it back to concrete practice - what to say and what they ask mentees to do (significant here, also, is that the senior mentor does not re-articulate the key ideas as tangible concepts). I have plotted these two exchanges on a timeline as 'semantic waves' in Figure 1 below. The solid line A shows Exchange 1 and the dashed line B indicates Exchange 2, and the numbers on the lines refer to the process/stages in the appropriate tables above. For example, point 3 on line A shows the semantic coding of when the mentor directs the mentee towards future action. And point 3 on line B is where the mentor abstracts the problem and models it for the other mentors.

Figure 1: Semantic coding of mentoring practice in exchanges between senior mentor, mentor and mentee



This mapping shows only a broad impression of how semantic gravity and density vary in these exchanges, and space does not allow close analysis in this working paper. In our ongoing research (Grasmeder and Pountney, forthcoming) we are making a more detailed analysis across a large data set of such exchanges. However, these semantic profiles highlight important differences and shifts in meanings used in both instances. Exchange 1 is closer to practice and context, and the meanings generated are less abstract. The mentors in Exchange 2 start with context (albeit further from context and with more complexity than Exchange 1) and they quickly begin abstraction into a model of mentoring (the curve is steeper and semantic density is stronger).

Note however, that at its most dense and abstract (i.e. the elaboration of the model of mentoring by mentor 3) the language used is metaphorical – e.g. the *stabilisers* (the mentee learning to ride), being a *mayor* (mentee in charge of the classroom), *juggling* (having to multitask). This reliance on metaphor is more than a rhetorical technique: the words chosen stand for, and do not merely replace, conceptual understandings, that are otherwise tacit. What, then, are the specialised concepts, inferences and language that teacher mentors use, and how might this specialisation of language assist mentoring practice?

Towards a specialised language and knowledge base for teacher mentors

Few would argue that to discuss things well requires a level of language and a conceptual grasp of the subject, and that to exchange ideas on complex ideas such as practice involves giving accounts and receiving and interpreting explanations of practice from others. However, it becomes clear in analysing the accounts of teachers, both in the act of mentoring and in talking and reflecting on their mentoring practice, that the knowledge base for these mentoring practices is unclear. Therefore, I argue that, contrary to what the literature on relational and therapeutic mentoring might suggest, teachers as mentors need more specialised language (and conceptual knowledge) not less. This goes beyond understanding what mentors mean when they talk about practice. It raises the question of what meanings mentors have access to, and how these meanings shape their understandings of their practice. But most importantly, specialised professional knowledge (know that and know how) of and for mentoring enables mentors to imagine how their practice can be different – in other words it is powerful knowledge.

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Sheffield Hallam University

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POUNTNEY, Richard <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5672-0811>>

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