

Peer Mentoring in FE Teacher Education Project

University of Ulster :: School of Education



NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Mú Nuad

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Section 1

Introduction

Teacher education for vocational tutors has, traditionally, presented dilemmas in relation to supporting teachers across a wide and constantly evolving range of vocational subject areas. The introduction of peer mentorship provides opportunities for early career and experienced educators to share knowledge and skills they have acquired in vocational teaching with colleagues (Ehrich et al, 2004). Experienced staff can share much valued experience with younger or new staff, who are given the opportunity to observe alternative and experienced teaching practices as a result of the mentoring experience. This has been proven to increase staff confidence both socially and professionally. In addition, this project has found, that peer mentoring can support senior teachers to continue their own professional development through the opportunities of observation with newer members of staff.

This is supported by research into knowledge creation organisations which suggests that a peer mentor training course increases perceived levels of peer mentor knowledge and skills and higher perceived levels of knowledge creation and sharing (Bryant, 2005). Vocational colleges, North and South are tasked with the development of enterprise and business as priorities through up skilling (DELNI, 2010) and IVEC, (2009). In addition IVEC notes that ‘the number of adult learners that Vocational Education Committees [in ROI] cater to annually exceeds the total number of graduate and undergraduate students currently in third level education’.

The nature of vocational education dictates that vocational teachers will, usually, have entered teaching from a business background from which they may have

gained much of value in terms of vocational knowledge but may face significant challenges in adjusting to a new identity as an educator (Viskovic and Robson, 2001). This is especially the case as vocational teachers, usually; enter service prior to undertaking teacher education as opposed to school teachers who are trained before they commence teaching.

For this reason colleges are often faced with challenges insofar as their student intake will consist of a range of students who have very diverse needs. Consequently, deficiencies in teaching will, inevitably, lead to poor retention and poor rates of achievement. One outcome will be that colleges will experience financial penalties. This can, however, also mean that students, who did not achieve in schools may experience further disadvantage, may lose the opportunity to develop their potential and will be at risk of becoming marginalized within a society where accredited knowledge and skills are an essential requirement for employment and, ultimately, social inclusion (McAleavy et al, 2004, McAleavy et al 2005).

The peer mentorship approach introduced in this project addresses these issues through the establishment of a North/South partnership designed to enable participating HEIs (Ulster and NUI, Maynooth) and the two Colleges (Cavan Institute and Belfast Metropolitan College) to identify the needs of vocational peer mentors and work together to share experiences and values with the aim of establishing a sustainable and permanent peer mentorship programme. Such a partnership study has proved essential for North, South cooperation.

Much research (Lin, 2010, Mitchell, et al., 2009) points to the need for active and informed mentoring if performance is to be improved, with the direct implication that the recruitment and appropriateness of the mentoring arrangements themselves may impact on the success or otherwise of the outcomes. Equally the research serves as a caution against what might be perceived as a complacent view that the sharing of pedagogy and reflection will necessarily develop as a result of the new, existing or emerging professional relationships per se. The evidence is that structured support and scaffolding is required if

vocational teachers are to successfully address the significant challenges posed by their broad range of students.

This project, has, therefore, been concerned with the development of a structured and formal peer mentorship programme that will offer added value to colleges enabling them to fulfil their increasingly complex missions and serve to enhance the levels of knowledge and skills of vocational teachers through the sharing of expertise in the analysis of practice and the encouragement of reflective approaches as an embedded aspect of the tutor role. With this in mind, the project group of peer mentors consisted of six members of staff from Cavan Institute and three members of staff from Belfast Metropolitan College. See table below for breakdown of peer mentors

CAVAN STAFF	
Lecturer 1	Health and Welfare Early Years Subjects
Lecturer 2	Accounting and Business
Lecturer 3	Counselling
Lecturer 4	Business Studies
Lecturer 5	ICT and Business
Lecturer 6	Business and Enterprise
BELFAST METROPOLITAN COLLEGE	
Lecturer 1	ICT and Graphics
Lecturer 2	Construction and Engineering

Lecturer 3	Essential Skills Numeracy and Literacy
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The process of exchange was planned with the co-operation of the two managements from each Institute/College. . Peer mentors were paired for areas such as behaviour management issues, resource issues, teaching experience and future development plans in key subject areas such as construction. Cavan Institute staff travelled to Belfast and completed their peer mentoring on several campus sites and, in exchange, Belfast Metropolitan staff travelled to Cavan and completed their peer mentoring on the main Institute site. Both exchange visits were conducted over several days.

Peer mentors were afforded the opportunity to meet and discuss with management in both Institute/College and meet with other members of teaching staff other than the staff members they were observing, this was to offer all peer mentors an opportunity to investigate the similarities and differences within the structure of each organisation and to compare with their own organisation.

Rationale

The previous SCOTENS project established a forum for exploring the needs of the sector, North and South and offered opportunities for wider developments including the establishment of a forum for post compulsory education and the provision of advanced learning methodologies for providers to take cognisance off, in the future (O'Hagan and McAleavy, 2009)

Aim

The project aim was to pilot a specialised model of mentorship in collaboration with FE partners North and South.

Mentorship is a form of workforce development supportive of shared learning and the development of improvements through cooperative experiences and exchange of ideas.

The project explored a model of peer mentoring in support of Cavan FE teachers and Belfast FE teachers, through the formalised certification of mentors at Ulster in support of the formation of a community of practice across boundaries.

Objectives

- To study the value of mentorship as a model of teacher education within the workplace.
- To examine the skills of the peer mentor.
- To develop North South forums for future peer exchange and cooperation.
- To investigate the use of technology in support of collaborative learning and the formation of communities of practice for workplace teacher education.
- To formalise the training of mentors within the workplace in support of teacher education North and South.

Section 2

Methodology

The collection of data is vital to the success of any good research project. If not conducted in the most effective manner crucial learning experiences can be lost. Therefore, it is imperative that an appropriate method of data collection is employed. The project team decided that the method of focus groups and face to face interviews would be best employed for the collation of data for this particular research project.

This qualitative research was collated through two focus group sessions and interviews with the peer mentor group involved in this project. Focus groups are a good source of data collection when the group members have various interests in common and the key issues of concern are common to the groups (Williams and Katz, 2001). A semi structured focus group session was planned with a series of questions, created to probe for learning.

The method of using focus groups as a means for data collection has become attractive to researchers in the field of education and is increasingly used in this area of research, (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1998). The literature on focus groups offer many definitions to best describe what they are and the role they play in research, (Parker and Tritter, 2006) and what is apparent from the literature is that “a focus group is a gathering of individuals brought together to discuss an issue which they have an opinion on”.

The venue, setting and the preparation all lend themselves to the success of the session, so it was felt by the project team that they should conduct the focus group sessions and interviews in a neutral venue away from the colleges and universities. The procedure followed assured that members felt secure and confident that whatever they disclosed would remain confidential. This ensured that sessions involved open discussion and, on occasion debate, regarding the topic/s raised and all members were encouraged to participate as part of the research for this project. (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

Focus groups are a good source of data collection because of their nature i.e. the dynamic of the group is the same dynamic found at social gatherings where the members interact in a spontaneous manner (Breen, 2006). The focus groups had the advantages of being similar to an interview, with semi structured questions, except that it was an interview with more than one person at the same time (Morgan, 1988). The responses from one person can ignite a response from another person within the group. The information gained from the focus group session took the form of narratives concerned with real life professional experiences reiterated during the session, conversations between different members and/or opinions formed by the members within the focus groups. This data is rich in realness i.e. the information is taken from actual situations and occurrences (Ashar and Lane, 1991; Glitz, 1998).

The Face-to-Face Interview as a Method of Data Collection:

Face-to-Face interviews can be time consuming but they do reap valuable information for research purposes, (Stewart and Cash, 2000). We felt this was a constructive method for data collection and would ensure a good response rate compared to that of questionnaires.

The advantage of using this method is the opportunity for the interviewer to focus the questions and probe further or responses against a given target.

The Focus Group

The project team conducted two focus groups for the collection of data. Each group consisted of 4 peer mentors. There was a blend of teaching backgrounds, teaching experience, cross college and years of experience as a mentor, this ensured a good mixture that encouraged open discussion. Five semi-structured questions were created to address key areas of interest for this project and are further discuss in the findings and recommendations for the future sections of this report.

The focus group and interviews were video recorded for dissemination among the project team which enabled clarification and accuracy with write-up of the report.

Face to Face Interviews

The peer mentors were interviewed face to face to increase validity of the findings and to offer individuals the opportunity to speak freely and widely about their experience on the mentoring programme. This offered the project team further insight into the success and areas for development of the mentoring programme.

Section 3

Programme Design

The needs of the mentee are at the heart of the mentoring role and, therefore, formed the basis of the programme design. The peer mentors used classroom observations to validate good practice and to highlight and recognise areas for improvement/development.

A variety of teaching and learning methods were employed in the design and delivery of the peer mentoring programme to create an innovative learning experience for the peer mentors:

- **Observations**
- **Reflective Diaries**
- **Student Digital Stories**
- **Key Lectures**

Observations – as part of the certification process peer mentors observed two lessons being delivered in their exchange colleges. The mentees were from a variety of subject backgrounds designed to offer the peer mentors diversity and challenge in their role as mentor. It was felt to be beneficial for the peer mentor to observe colleagues from a different subject background as that of their own. This was to give the mentor an inside view of classroom practice in as different a setting as possible to see the transferability of the mentoring skills, (Cunningham, 2005). A student quote highlighted the importance of this venture, *“my background is business studies and one of my mentees was from a catering background, seeing teaching and learning strategies being*

employed similar to the ones I use proved to me I was doing a good job in my own teaching”.

The observations were supported by peer mentor observation documentation. Peer mentors observed the lesson in their exchange college and completed the observation reports. The peer mentor arranged a meeting with their mentee to offer verbal feedback and to exchange the documentation. The completed report then aided the peer mentor in their reflection of their role as mentor, (DfES, 2004). ***“I thought my most difficult observation would be the one that the mentee has areas for development and improvement, infact it was the observation that had it all working well, how did I support this mentee in progressing when I couldn’t find any improvement needs. I discuss this with the UU teaching team and it became clear that our journey of teaching is never over. There is no such thing as the prefect lesson because even when we get it right we can always get it better”.***

Reflective Diaries – The peer mentor maintained reflective diaries of their journey on the mentorship programme, (LLUKni, 2009). The reflections were a combination of classroom observations, own classroom practice and the theory behind the mentoring role, (Wallace and Gravells, 2006). An example of a peer mentor reflections highlighted the success and further need for the use of reflective diaries ***“I never kept a reflective diary of my teaching before so at first I thought it would be difficult but coming to class and learning about the different models, theory behind my role and how to observe has strengthened my own practice. I see the benefit of keeping a reflective diary when I looked back over my inputs I could recognise my own growth in confidence in the role I had undertaken as a mentor”.*** Reflection on practice is prevalent in teacher training programmes as a means to aid the growth and development of teaching and learning skills so with this view

reflection was employed to aid the growth and development of mentoring skills of the peer mentors, (Cunningham, 2005).

Student Digital Stories –

The use of role-play was embedded in the mentoring programme and peer mentors were instructed to create their own scenario of 'real' mentor/mentee feedback meetings to enact during the role-play activity. This ensured ownership over the process of role-play by the peer mentor and offered them an opportunity for peer input into their management of the situation; this enabled the peer mentor to self-assess their own conduct of the feedback session by having the comparison of their peers.

The power of the reflective practice was witnessed on the recordings. Models of mentorship were explored and employed during the role play activity, with peers giving structured feedback on the skills of the mentor. Peer assessment enabled the peer mentors to validate the skills of their colleagues and the skills of themselves. ***“I can readily see my own development with my mentoring skills, I now know what I am observing in the lesson and how to give feedback to my mentee that is meaningful and usable for their development”***. Another mentor reflected, ***“By observing colleagues/mentees I feel my own teaching has improved the attention I gave to my mentee’s lesson planning and teaching and learning strategies means I now give to my own lessons as well”***.

Key Lectures – Key lectures were conducted to implement theory into practice within the role of mentor. Key to the skills and techniques necessary to be an effective mentor is the ability to embed LLUKni Standards and GTCni competences as it ensured the mentees were being guided in their teaching

practice on the same standards they were addressing within the initial teacher training course at UU. The LLUKni Standards and GTCni competences were dissected and reviewed within each observed lesson by the mentor and feedback was offered using the domain headings. This was made possible by the introduction of key face to face lectures within the mentoring programme. The lectures were workshop focused and encouraged the peer mentors to discuss and shared experiences, practice and problem solving techniques. ***“When I first became a mentor I thought it was only a matter of observing a colleague in practice and giving general feedback. When we began to look at the LLUKni Standards and GTCni competences the feedback became more structured and focused. Mentees were being told how they met the standards and together with the help of the mentor formed a plan on how to fix their problem areas”. “I had never heard of the standards and it took me a while to understand how they worked and what I was looking for in the observation. Now I know what I am looking for I can offer my mentee more. When I look back at my reports I feel I could have given my mentees better advice”.***

The use of mentoring models was employed to train the peer mentors in how to structure the mentor/mentee relationship. Again, these were disseminated during the key lectures and followed up on the reflective diary work. The notion of the mentoring journey having a beginning, middle and end was embedded from the beginning of the UU mentoring programme, (Albrecht, 2005). The peer mentors were trained using a framework requiring that every role has a beginning, that the importance of starting any venture with clear ground rules is noted, that expectations on both parts (mentor and mentee) are understood and that, following an exchange of ideas, goals will be set for the future.

Acquired skills in listening, questioning and guiding came to the fore of the UU mentoring programme. *“I thought I was the one who should be doing all the talking because I had to inform the mentee of where he/she needed to improve or where he/she was depicting good practice. I learnt through the mentoring programme that I should be the one doing the listening. The mentee has to discover, with my help, their own good practice and how to make it better and the practice that requires a bit of work”.*

Section 4

Findings

A variety of methods were employed to gather feedback from the peer mentors regarding their mentorship journey. The findings are listed under the five following headings:

1. The value of mentorship as a model of teacher education within the workplace

- 1.1 Increases teacher confidence and builds self esteem.
- 1.2 Encourages mentors/teachers to open classroom doors and sharing good practice.
- 1.3 Increases willingness to seek support.
- 1.4 Supports willingness to change and continue to reflect/self assess own practice and support others in doing same.
- 1.5 Offers opportunity for retention of knowledge beyond the tenure of teachers.

2. The Skills of the Peer Mentor

- 2.1 Supports collaborative learning, offering opportunity for the establishment of Community of Practice.
- 2.2 Raises awareness of good practice and shared standards.
- 2.3 Supports staff in developing own scholarship as leaders of the future.
- 2.4 Increases awareness of team working skills, challenges and outlook with teaching and learning.
- 2.5 Assists colleges and individual teachers to continue professional development as a lifelong learning professional objective.

3. Development of North South Forums for future peer exchange and cooperation

- 3.1 Leads to increased recognition of globalised education through networking and learning, encouraging participation in projects.

4. The Use of Technology for Mentoring

- 4.1 Provides opportunities for the safe introduction of new technologies and strategies.

- 4.2 Offers opportunities for social networking and continued engagement with discussions about good practice in teaching and learning.

5. Importance of Accredited and Structured Training for Mentors

- 5.1 Enhances and validates teaching values, challenges and strategies.
- 5.2 Provides knowledge capital for College Managers (acting as peer mentors), informing them of staff attributes, skills and needs.

The above five areas are further elaborated upon in the following sections to clarify learning for the peer mentor.

Peer/Colleague Learning – The peer mentor recorded the peer/colleague learning as ‘invaluable’. The variety of observed classroom practice established a ‘real’ sense of learning. Matching of mentor/mentee was wider than subject identification and was a true reflection of peer mentorship – matching for teaching experience, areas for development, behaviour management and teaching and learning methodologies.

Value of Observations – The observations were seen as ‘supportive’ and ‘informative’. The peer mentors recorded the experience of observing colleagues in their classroom as ‘progressive’ and ‘developmental’ not only for the mentee but for their own acquisition of essential mentoring skills. Observations are where the peer mentor identified their ‘real’ growth in their mentorship role, (Stephens,1996). Pre mentorship course and post mentorship course

observations were used for comparison by a minority of the peer mentors but where used the reflection was very powerful, (Rose and Rukstalis, 2008).

Exchange Experience – Peer mentors recorded their experience of observing colleagues in their own colleges as ‘good practice’ for whole college staff development, (Wallace and Gravells, 2006), but were insistent that all mentors should be ‘trained’ and ‘qualified’ before taking on the role of mentor, (Stephens, 1996). The peer exchange between Cavan mentors and Belfast Mentors was seen as very beneficial as it enabled cross border colleges to identify similar difficulties which is common to North and South colleges such as “lack of resources, discipline/behaviour management issues, retention and recruitment”.

Impact on Practice – Within the reflections of the peer mentors the impact on practice was seen as the main developmental of both mentors and mentees. Mentors recorded ‘seeing’ and ‘being part of the solution’ in the growth of their peer mentees, (Gabel-Dunk and Craft, 2004). They found their ‘advice’ and ‘guidance’ being implemented effectively in ongoing lessons they were observing with their mentees, (Wallace and Gravells, 2006). The areas the peer mentors identified with the peer mentee requiring ‘further work’ were developed with professional exchange of communication from the mentors. The peer mentors reflected on the mentoring experiences and how these had impacted on their own practice. ***“I saw some great, new and innovative teaching and learning strategies, things I could see myself being able to use in my lessons. This is where I found my mentoring role as beneficial to me also”.***

Section 5

Conclusion and Recommendations

The project has found many important aspects of peer mentorship that add value to the experience of the early career and the senior teacher in Colleges of FE both North and South. The overall outcomes offer opportunities for the utilisation of social networking for the sharing of good practice. Several key additional research outcomes have been found, including the increased confidence of all participating staff, the additional benefits of North- South cooperation for the College managers and the impact of such initiatives on the individual, and the strategic vision of the College for the future.

In conclusion, the researchers suggest the following key recommendations:

1. The introduction of an accredited training scheme to be considered for peer mentors as part of Teacher Education programmes in the Post Compulsory sector, for early career development.
2. Experienced staff in Colleges should have the opportunity to become peer mentors, thereby capturing the important knowledge capital of staff and making effective use of experiential teaching for the improvement of early career teachers. This will also offer continued professional development for experienced staff.
3. Peer mentoring schemes should be considered as part of quality enhancement strategies for all colleges North and South of Ireland.
4. When recruiting peer mentors, it is important to recognise their attributes and the college needs in order to promote creative and innovative strategies for teaching and learning.

5. Peer mentorship may add value to staff development and/or human resource policies, as part of a developmental support system within the College.

6. Exchange programmes that are funded, as part of a mentoring scheme, should be mapped to teacher research targets/projects and outcomes. This would offer opportunities for future scholarship and leadership across sectors and regions.

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