

## Mentoring in the lifelong learning sector: implementation or improvisation?

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### Background

The provision of mentoring for trainee teachers in the learning and skills sector has grown in political as well as pedagogical importance over the last few years (Wallace and Gravells, 2007). Positioned by Ofsted as a means to enhance the learning and teaching of subject-specific pedagogies, mentoring has thus become an object of assessment and audit within the teacher education curriculum. Mentors are required to provide support to trainee teachers – in this relationship, referred to as mentees – in a number of ways such as professional conversations, sharing of resources, support in learning about the workplace, and most crucially, the observation of teaching practice. These processes are usually captured within an individual learning plan or personal development plan, and these in turn are usually included in a portfolio that forms part of the summative assessment of the teacher-training programme (Ingleby and Hunt, 2008; Orr, 2008; Thompson et al., 2009). That is to say, the mentoring relationship becomes an object for assessment within the teacher-training curriculum. Mentors' observations of mentees' teaching are high stakes assessment (Knight, 2006). They tend to be implemented on a pass/fail basis, and without a successful observation, the mentee cannot complete their qualification and thus cannot gain their license to practice. Increasingly, the Ofsted common inspection framework is used to provide a grading mechanism for these observations. As such, if confidence in the assessment decision made by mentors is to be assumed (that is, if the validity of the assessment decision is to be deemed to be adequate), then certain assumptions need to be made in turn as to the fitness of the mentor to undertake the role.

Further complexities arise on consideration of the role of the mentor and, specifically, the reasons why people choose to be mentors and the professional support or training that they receive to carry out this role. As mentors are expected to support the development of trainees' subject-specific pedagogies, it might be expected that there would be close alignment between mentor and mentee subject specialisms, qualifications and areas of expertise. This is not necessarily the case. In addition, it might be expected that because the mentor is involved in a high stakes assessment decision, appropriate professional development would be in some senses required. This is also not always the case. Overall, the mentor-mentee relationship appears to be characterised by localism, improvisation and ad-hocery, rather than a rigorous, benchmarked, transferable curricular process. This is not to deny that the process has value. In fact, many mentors and mentees develop useful, practicable and sustainable working relationships. Many others do not.

### Research Questions

Therefore, the broader professional capacities and development needs of mentors need to be addressed. But these issues raise a number of problems. Mentor training is patchy at best: voluntary, inadequately funded, and difficult to fit into the busy working lives of college lecturers (who may be more or less willing to take on the role). More generally, how can mentoring, widely perceived as an informal, developmental process, be successfully reconciled with the discourses of quality assurance and audit that the use of the Ofsted framework imply? (Shore and Wright, 2000). To what extent is the mentoring process affected by the implementation of formal, summative assessment procedures more generally? Can the complexities of learning in the learning and skills workplace be adequately captured within a mentor observation that forms part of a summative assessment portfolio? (Tummons, 2008).

The paper aims to explore three key issues: firstly, the ways in which mentors and mentees define and understand their roles; secondly, the extent to which both mentors and mentees find worth or value within their professional relationship; and thirdly, the processes by which these invariably informal relationships are formalised and then presented for assessment, audit and inspection.

## Methods

This paper, drawing on research carried out as part of a small-scale project funded by ESCalate, attempts to explore the effectiveness of the mentoring of trainee teachers within the learning and skills sector. It rests on two bodies of data: firstly, data collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews from mentors and mentees in a network of further education colleges in the North of England; secondly, data collected through the documentary analysis of the forms and reports that are produced by the mentoring process, and that find their way into mentees' portfolios of assessment (Kvale 2007; Rapley, 2007).

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## Frame

This paper draws on social practice accounts of participation and learning, in particular the work of Bourdieu, and Wenger. Mentors and mentees are conceptualised as members of particular communities of practice, adopting mentor or mentee identities that are mediated by various cultural scripts that come both from the organisation within which they work (the workplace practice of colleges), and from outside (the requirements for the ITT course; Ofsted). As such, data analysis rests on a social epistemology and ontology, and is local and relativist. This paper presents its findings as a case study (Stake, 2005), that nonetheless is verifiable in terms of reference to other research (Alasuutari, 1995).

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