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Mentoring as a means of building confidence in adult learners: Increasing the impact of reminiscence training

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Background

The author has worked for Norfolk County Council Adult Education's Health and Wellbeing for Older People Team for the past nine years, seeking to widen participation in lifelong learning for people in the last stages of life. In that time she has written and developed courses for training care workers to run reminiscence activities with older people living in residential and nursing homes. Reminiscence is a social and creative activity which can be used to facilitate communication with older people with various levels of cognitive impairment, and has been shown to provide opportunities for learning until the end of life (Housden, 2007).

Evaluation of the impact of these courses during 2008-09, indicated that a large proportion of care workers found it difficult to implement the reminiscence skills when they returned to the workplace.

With funding from a Research Development Fellowship Award sponsored by LSIS and IfL and overseen by the University of Sunderland Centre of Excellence in Teacher Training (SUNCETT), the author and her colleagues explored ways of increasing the impact of reminiscence training for care workers through a mentoring scheme involving partnership working with experienced reminiscence tutors in the workplace.

Research Questions

The research aimed to explore an approach to reminiscence training which would improve its impact within the workplace. The objectives were to identify successful factors and processes in reminiscence mentoring and to design a reminiscence training programme which incorporated these successful factors in post-training mentoring. The key research questions were therefore 1) "In what ways does mentoring of newly trained reminiscence workers enable them to put their skills into practice more effectively in the workplace?" and 2) "What elements of mentoring in this context are experienced as most helpful by mentors and mentees?" These questions were felt to be of wider importance to training delivered to adults working in the health and social care sector, particularly in the light of feedback received by the author at a conference on implementing the National Dementia Strategy (Department of Health, 2009) in September 2009, which had suggested that the education sector faced a significant challenge in delivering training which changed behaviour in the workplace and therefore had a real impact on the wellbeing of older people.

Methods

Six past students who had received no support following their reminiscence training were interviewed in order to establish some insight into the difficulties faced in the workplace by newly qualified reminiscence workers. These insights were then used to inform subsequent training of mentors.

Six experienced reminiscence workers were provided with training in mentoring which focused on establishing rapport with mentees, listening to mentees needs, building confidence and setting realistic goals. This approach to mentoring was based on the work of Lois Zachary (2000), and a three hour mentoring course appropriate for use in health and social care settings was designed by the author incorporating her knowledge of residential and nursing home culture.

Each mentor was then matched to either one or two mentees, with partnerships based largely on geographical proximity, for convenience. Mentoring partners met for four sessions over a six week period, after which mentors and mentees were interviewed by the author. Interviews were recorded with the participants' permission, and the recordings were then transcribed. Codes were used in all transcripts of interviews with mentors, mentees and past students in order to protect the anonymity of participants and the older people with whom they worked.

Frame

A total of 21 interview transcripts were analysed using thematic coding (6 past students - P1-P6; six mentors - M1-M6; and nine mentees - S1-S9). In the latter part of the research, the focus was on the interview transcripts of mentors and mentees, which were read repeatedly until no further codes or themes could be discerned (following an approach described by Mason, 2002).

Research findings

The mentors found that their most important roles were as follows:

- 1) Effective **communication** was essential in supporting student reminiscence workers in the initial stages of their work. The need for effective communication applied to: overcoming barriers in the workplace by communicating with colleagues and providing a range of ways and times for students to communicate e.g. Telephone, e-mail, face-to-face and online.
- 2) A second important role of the mentor was in building up the **confidence** of mentees. Confidence was necessary to:
 - Run reminiscence sessions in the workplace
 - Be open about difficulties and discuss ways of overcoming barriers
 - Approach managers and colleagues for co-operation and support.
- 3) Lastly, a significant finding from the research was the need for continuity of support. All six past students and some of the mentees and mentors expressed the view that an online resource, including a forum for discussing problems in reminiscence, would be useful and encouraging to them in their work. The author was therefore given the time and resources to set up such a resource on Norfolk Adult Education's Virtual Learning Environment, which uses Moodle software. This will be in place by May 2010 and will include a range of ideas for promoting reminiscence activities and running groups with older people, as well as facilities for Forum contact with colleagues, with the aim of both sharing good practice and taking a collaborative approach to overcoming barriers. In view of the geographical spread of students this online resource appears to provide an appropriate solution which avoids travel, and is cost-effective to implement.

In future, all students undertaking reminiscence training will be provided with five sessions of mentoring following completion of their course. Three of these will take place on a fortnightly basis immediately after the course, with a further session at three months post-training and again at six months post-training. There will also be concurrent support available via the online reminiscence resource page on Moodle. This model for reminiscence mentoring is based entirely on the feedback received by mentees and mentors, and is also likely to be a useful model of practice for other health and social care training. However, further research will be necessary to check whether the mentoring programme is having the desired impact. In addition, the effectiveness of the online reminiscence resources and Forums will need to be evaluated over the coming year.

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