SPECIAL SECTION

How Can a Mentor Support Experiential Learning?

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring is an emancipatory act. Although the term ‘mentor’ has been appropriated in some professions to include notions of assessment, the pure conception of mentoring is to encourage personal growth. Within this framework a trusted mentor can be a key person to help reflection. The mentor can help by encouraging questioning of the governing variable(s), support the mentee in their journey from the known into uncharted territory, and focus on learning opportunities.

KEYWORDS

experience, learning, mentoring, reflection thresholds

The young dealer had been so proud of his job in the City. The way he had spotted gaps in the market and been fleet of foot to make small, but profitable trades. Then the bad day came. He made a big mistake. His company was going to be £1m worse off.

He hung his head as he went in to confess and to hand in his resignation. His manager listened to the sorry tale.

“What is in that envelope you are holding?” she eventually asked the young man.

“It’s my resignation” came the reply “I know you won’t want me around after this”

“Of course I will” retorted the manager “do you think I am going to waste the million pounds I have just spent training you”.

(Anon)

ADULT LEARNING HAPPENS most powerfully through reflection. Reflection is a metacognitive state where we analyse and direct our thinking. We can reflect on our own, with a significant other or in a group. A mentor can be an appropriate significant other who can provide honest guidance, support and challenge at the right moments for

their mentee. This article argues that the true mentor does not have to be a 'supervisor', and should not be a line manager or an assessor. (Various organisations and professions have appropriated the term 'mentor' and applied it in these ways). The quality of a relationship which is voluntarily entered into and where there is already a positive regard on both sides can provide a profound learning experience (for both sides).

It has been argued that learning from experience is the distinguishing element between pedagogy and andragogy (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998). The adult learner comes with a richer variety of experience than the child and thus within any group of adults the richest resource they have is themselves. This resource can have negative as well as positive influences; they may have constructed their world in a way which militates against new ideas. They may have developed presuppositions and mental constructs which close their minds. The skill of challenging and the willingness to be challenged become increasingly important for the adult.

For Knowles et al. (1998), 'pedagogy' refers to a more transmission-based learning appropriate for children where 'the teacher knows best'. Andragogy is a model of discovery learning where the individual is motivated to learn *because* of their experience. They want to understand why they are learning. This is why failure – one's own or (more easily) observing the failure of others – can be a powerful trigger for learning.

What is learning?

Learning can take place in different contexts and for different reasons. The focus of this article is 'emancipatory learning' (Rogers 1986) which refers to self-understanding, awareness and transformation of the cultural and personal presuppositions that are always with us and affect the way we act. Recent research suggests that the effective learner constructs their own 'arch of knowledge', and to do this they research, reflect, ask questions and work to fit their own jigsaw of the situation together.

Prosser and Trigwell (1999) refer to the 'presage-process-product model of student learning' (p 12) and say that the student's perceptions of the learning and teaching context are an interaction between their previous experiences of learning and teaching, and the learning and teaching context itself. They recommend adopting a constructivist perspective and say that 'in any act of learning and teaching prior experiences, perceptions, approaches and outcomes are simultaneously present, although in some contexts one or more of these aspects may be more to the foreground of awareness' (p14).

For the purposes of this article I am defining 'learning' as a transformative experience - an experience which enables the learner to approach their world in a different and more positive way and which changes (or transforms) the learner in its wake. Mezirow (1991) refers to this as 'a meaning perspective' (p 46) and reminds us that the sociologist Erving Goffman used the term 'frame' to refer to a shared definition of a situation that organizes and governs social interaction. 'Reframing' has been used as a way of demonstrating that this shared definition can be developed.

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Some people learn from experience easily, and some find it more difficult. I would argue that it helps if we can understand the concepts that some people might find particularly difficult. Meyer and Land (2002) refer to these as ‘threshold concepts’. Threshold concepts’ (such as ‘opportunity cost’ for the economist, ‘pain’ for the medical student or ‘cultural interpretation’ for the theologian) act as ‘portals’ to understanding the subject. According to Meyer and colleagues a threshold concept may possess a number of characteristics, it is likely to be (a) integrative, in that it exposes the previously hidden interrelatedness of something: (b) transformative so that, once understood, it produces a significant shift in the perception of the subject: (c) potentially irreversible, that is, once acquired, it is likely to permanently alter the individual’s perspective (d) potentially troublesome. (Meyer & Shanahan 2003 p 4). For example trainee medical doctors pass through a threshold when they realise that ‘pain’ is a major source of information and begin to analyse it as such, rather than to perceive it as discomfort. The threshold that they pass through is similar to the thresholds that we all pass through when we begin to learn from experience rather than repeat experience.

The concept of learning from practice is about questioning the governing variable rather than looking at the action itself. Argyris and Schon 1974 call this double- (as opposed to single-) loop learning. This all implies that we will only internalize our learning when we are given opportunity to reflect on experience.

There is a general acceptance amongst constructivists that reflection on practice is a ‘good thing’. Jenny Moon (1999) argues that it is a higher order meta-cognitive activity. Reflection, however, has its critics. Alan Bleakly (2000) argues that reflective thinking is too much like the confessional. He says that reflexive writing can be “dominated by a discourse of personalistic humanism and the personal confessional genre, with attendant internal contradictions, such as unreflexive accounts of personal “discovery” and “growth” (p11). Bleakly highlights both one of the strengths and the weaknesses of reflective writing – that it accesses tacit knowledge. This is the most profound and powerful type of knowledge, but there is the need to seek input as well.

Reflective writing can follow the patterns shown in Figures 1 and 2. Cowan (1998) has adapted Kolb’s famous learning cycle to suggest that the learner moves from ‘experience’ through ‘reflection’, to ‘generalizing’ and ‘testing’. He observes that key concepts of the learning cycle are continuously adapted, so below is another adaptation which takes into account some of the criticisms of earlier versions (Race 2005).

Figure 1: Flow chart for reflection

Figure 2: Kolb's Learning Cycle
Source: Cowan (1998 p 34)

The importance of journeying from the known is highlighted by Carl Rogers (1967):

I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning. ... Such self-discovered learning, truth that has been personally appropriated and assimilated in experience, cannot be directly communicated to another ... When I try to teach, as I do sometimes, I am appalled by the results, which seem a little more than inconsequential, because sometimes the teaching seems to succeed. When this happens, I find that the results are damaging. It seems to cause the individual to distrust his own experience, and to stifle significant learning. Hence I have come to feel that the outcomes of teaching are either unimportant or hurtful.

As a consequence, I realise that I am only interested in being a learner ... I find that one of the best, but most difficult ways for me to learn, is to drop my own defensiveness, at least temporarily, and to try to understand the way in which (the other person's experience) seems and feels to them." (pp. 276–277)

But we need to be aware that non-directive therapy (or teaching) can never totally live up to its name. As the therapist (teacher) chooses the questions he or she asks, so the facilitator has an influence over the type of knowledge base to be covered.

What types of experiences can we learn from?

This paper starts from the same point of view as Jarvis, Holford, and Griffin (1998) when they suggest that experience is the foundation of, and stimulus for, learning. They describe it as 'the experience through which individuals become themselves.' (p. 46) They argue that this experience may be either primary or secondary, either actual or recalled, either real or artificial. We can learn from other people's experiences and from the stories they tell as well.

We don't *have* to learn from experience. Arguably real failure is the failure to learn from experience, the repeating of a negative pattern, leading the unexamined life. To prevent this we have to make ourselves (or be encouraged to) reflect, to test assumptions and to consider other points of view.

The role of the mentor in learning from experience

The mentor is a non-judgemental adviser. Morton-Cooper and Palmer (2000) see it as building upon Rogers' belief that self experience and self-discovery are important facets

of learning. Learning involves acknowledging that adults can move from being dependent to being self-directed, accumulate experiences and create a biography from which they can learn and can change from needing to acquire knowledge and being subject-centred to becoming more performance-centred, resulting in the application of experience and the development of sound critical thinking abilities.

Thus mentoring is a non-judgemental, developmental relationship entered into voluntarily by both sides (Morton 2000). A mentor is not necessarily a trained counsellor or therapist (although they can be) but they are respected by their mentee and the mentee perceives the mentor as experienced, successful at their job and a good role model.

It is frequently claimed that mentoring is the most effective way of passing on knowledge. It ought to be: it is one-to-one and has all the dimensions of creating learning situations in a trusting environment. Two people who have elected to work together should be able to experiment with developing knowledge and explaining complex issues in a language that both understand.

A mentor can be primary or secondary (Kram 1985 p 23, Freeman 1998). The secondary mentor has much more of a businesslike relationship with their mentee. They concentrate on providing support for career development. They can suggest projects, help to solve work-based problems, provide coaching where they have particular skills and might actively promote their mentee where they think it could be helpful.

The primary mentor can provide a more profound experience. When an emotional bond is developed the mentee is deemed to have a primary mentor. The strength of the primary mentor is that by spending time with the mentee they are providing acceptance and confirmation that the mentee is worthwhile and this leads to personal empowerment. By being a role model they are offering an alternative to the mentee's previous experiences of learning and, if they are skilled in enabling learning, they can help the mentee to learn from a variety of life experiences as well as planning and rehearsing future encounters. During a lifetime, the fortunate mentee may have several mentors, each bringing knowledge, skills and experience relevant to the particular circumstances that the mentee is facing at that particular time.

Secondary mentors are obviously easier to find, and are often provided within an organisational setting. Sometimes a relationship would start with more functional, secondary mentoring expectations, and go on to become fundamental for both parties.

What do the mentor and mentee gain?

The mentee obviously benefits from this relationship when it is at its most productive. They learn where to spend their time most effectively, they can learn how to cope with organisations more productively and get more job satisfaction. (Murray and Owen 1991).

Most mentors undertake this work without seeking or expecting payment. Mentors do gain considerable benefits however. They enjoy keeping in touch with grassroots feelings and experiences, many feel a sense of parental pride; they learn from the relationship, too, and can become more effective managers and supervisors as a result.

When is mentoring most beneficial?

Critical incidents can provide rich food for reflection, but often past experiences can be used as a gateway to reveal more about present concerns. The experienced mentor will spot such opportunities to open doors and reveal trends or illuminate blind spots (Egan 2002). Mentoring is used to help mentees into a new role or organisation, to fast-track their development, to develop cross-cultural awareness, to aid coping with managing

change, to help manage the conflict between the professional role, patient autonomy and organisational demands, to help manage the cloak of defence against emotion and to help those who are seeking explanations of their own perceived inadequacy. (Morton-Cooper and Palmer 2000). However it is worth emphasising that mentoring is for the well, not for the sick.

Some organisations now have sophisticated mentoring programmes and staff who devise the guidelines for the scheme and manage the applications and 'matching' process. But it does not need to be that sophisticated: Many mentoring relationships are less formal. Some are based on co-mentoring where people of roughly equal status have an agreement whereby they can 'book' time with each other.

Whatever the life of the mentoring relationship (and Kram mentioned 5 years as a possible average, but 2 years currently seems the norm) there does need to be an agreement that at any time either party can instigate a 'no fault divorce'. This underlines the voluntary nature of the relationship and reinforces its positive power. Other areas worth discussing in the early stages are mutual expectations about confidentiality, frequency of meetings, the purpose of the relationship and what the mentee wants to learn.

What do you want to learn?

This is the most powerful question that the mentor can pose to the mentee (Herman and Mandell 2004). I recommend that every mentor asks that question at each meeting and every mentee prepares themselves to answer that same question before the meeting.

Therapists will be alive to the power of the reflected question, but mentoring does not have to be non-directive. Providing the mentor is self-aware and the mentee is prepared to be critically reflective, appropriate self-disclosure can be helpful ('when I faced that problem, what I found was really going on was...'). Other skills that the mentor will use will be giving feedback, counselling, influencing and coaching. In the language of Heron (2001), the skilled mentor may want to explore their abilities to make competent interventions within the six categories (prescriptive, informative, confronting, cathartic, catalytic and supportive), but it is not the purpose of this article to suggest that an effective mentor has to master these skills.

Whilst most mentors will rely largely upon skills of questioning, reflecting and summarising, Freeman (1998) came up with a series of questions I call 'mentoring by rote'. These were devised in response to a plea from General Practitioners in the UK for help in creating an 'easy to use' mentoring schema. In the UK, family doctors often work in teams, but are essentially self-employed, and there is an isolation inherent in the role of the practitioner faced with a series of individual clients.

Freeman suggests that a useful mentoring experience can be had by intelligently adapting her proposed questions under six different headings: the professional self; future hopes; social self; personal self; educational experience and future plans. If all these skills above are combined with an ability to recognise threshold concepts in therapeutic relationships and the willingness to work towards reframing old problems in a way that suggests a new direction, the mentor has a rich menu to choose from.

Separating

The mentoring relationship usually ends at some point, because it was appropriate to a set of needs and the skills, knowledge and position that the mentor had at the time.

Sometimes there is a problem with the ending, an unaware mentor can 'cling on' and the mentee can experience a sensation of wanting to escape and reclaim their life. Regular reviews are necessary to establish when the formal mentoring relationship

should close. Then a friendship or working relationship might continue, but it would be different. It is easier to mark the separation by meeting in a different place, or agreeing to do something different at a final session.

In how many ways ... can it go wrong?

The quality of the relationship is more important than whether the relationship is formal or informal. (Clutterbuck and Ragins 2002 p 45)

The uncritical mentee faced with an untrained mentor who is burdened with a lack of self-awareness can be a problem. Berglass (2002) has shown how some coaches 'gain a Svengali-like hold over both the executives they train and the CEO's they report to' (p91).

Darling (1985) coined the term 'toxic mentors' and these include avoiders, destroyers and criticisers. Egoists could be added to the list.

Some rather dated studies of sexuality in mentoring relationships suggest that heterosexual males can abuse the mentoring relationship, and these studies are currently being updated. Nonetheless, common sense tells us that there are some boundaries which should not be crossed by the mentor.

Because mentors are not necessarily trained psychotherapists, they may need to be particularly aware of the dangers of mentoring over issues that they have not fully resolved themselves.

The way forward

Mentoring is only one way of learning from practice, but it is a powerful way. A relationship that is one to one, where the meaning of the words exchanged can be tested and refined and where the language is directly appropriate to the mentee can lead to the most effective transmission of and creation of knowledge and experience.

The matching of mentor to mentee can be an imperative of geography and an accident of time. The joy of the mentoring relationship is that it can be informal and it can be initiated by either the mentor or the mentee. It can be a short or a long relationship. It can be for two people within the same organisation or not. In mentoring we want growth, challenge and achievement, for both parties. It should be enjoyable and life-enhancing. I hope it is for you.

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