

## **Networks of support: examining the role of mentoring in supporting new lecturers to develop their teaching practices**

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Mentors are commonly used to support newcomers to a workplace in developing the technical, interpersonal and political skills and competences integral to their professional practice (Ragins and Cotton, 1999). With respect to teaching qualifications for new lecturers, teaching mentors have an important role to play in contextualising the general, theoretical and practice-based principles of these courses. Knight and Trowler (1999) identify mentors as providing an individualised experience for new lecturers, particularly when they are located in the environment in which professional learning will occur. From this perspective, mentoring assists in the management of the multiple demands placed on new lecturers and, therefore, it is reasonable to envisage mentors as integral in promoting professional learning. However, this area has received limited attention from researchers and educational developers, with some questioning the reasons for the paucity of research in this area (e.g. Adcroft and Taylor, 2009; Barkham, 2005). Where studies have taken place they tend to concentrate on the perspectives of one of these groups (either the mentor or mentee (e.g. Adcroft and Taylor, 2009; Barkham, 2005)) and nor do they consider other sources of guidance or support (e.g. peers, friends) that may be drawn upon as a new lecturer learns about their role and responsibilities. In this paper we examine data gathered as part of a longitudinal study that followed 13 new lecturers, and their mentors, through their first year of university teaching. We offer much needed insights into factors such as mentor choice, roles and responsibilities of mentors and mentees, and also wider support networks which new lecturers interact within the first year of as lecturers.

### **Methodology**

The data we report on were collected as part of a wider study to investigate how new lecturers from a UK University reconciled the competing imperatives of their role, with respect to the knowledge, experiences and learning they were expected to negotiate. As part of this work we were interested in examining the support, both

formal (e.g. mentors) and informal (peers, colleagues etc.), lecturers drew upon and how this shaped their practice.

Qualitative data were collected using a combination of methods over the duration of the research project. All new lecturers at the study university are required to complete a postgraduate teaching qualification as part of their probation.

Participants were purposefully selected to represent the disciplinary and professional profile of the whole cohort. Data were collected at two points in the academic year; initially following the induction period of the postgraduate programme, and then again at the end of the teaching year. The initial phase of data collection was split into a one-hour teaching observation, completed using a semi-structured observation protocol, which was then followed up with an in-depth interview.

At stage two the new lecturers were asked to bring a critical incident from the reflective logs they kept as part of the programme to be discussed during the second in-depth interview. They were advised to select a critical incident that had made them stop and think about their practice, exploring why this was important, what they learnt from it and how it perhaps helped them think about their practice.

Data were gathered from the mentors half way through the academic year. Using a semi-structured interview protocol we gained further insights into the emerging practices of the new lecturers, background to the teaching practices of participant's schools, school support for participants and their experiences of mentoring.

All data were analysed thematically using the constant comparative approach.

## ***Findings***

### ***Mentor choice***

Factors such as the choice of a mentor and mentor's experience as lecturers emerged as impacting on mentoring relationships and in turn on professional learning. The significance of mentor choice was somewhat underplayed, particularly with respect to the guidance new lecturers received in selecting a mentor. Our data demonstrate that the choice of a mentor has a considerable impact on the support received, with factors such as the mentors' (physical) proximity, their experience and knowledge of a schools' practices and procedures determining the guidance they are able to provide for their mentee.

### ***Shaping expectations***

Both parties accepted their role as either a mentor or mentee uncritically. Most adopted an informal approach to mentoring with limited discussion or goal setting to structure their relationship. Consequently relationships were variable, ranging from mentors and mentees working collaboratively in what they viewed as productive relationships, to those where the mentor was removed from the process with the implicit expectation that the mentee would be in touch if necessary.

### ***Conceptions of mentoring***

Following on from the lack of discussion regarding expectations of the mentoring relationship, it was not surprising to observe differing conceptions of mentoring. Most mentors perceived mentoring as uni-directional, an additional role to be accommodated alongside busy workloads. These factors lead to the emergence of situations whereby either mentees wanted to convey a perception of coping or, alternatively, of mentors assuming that unless they had evidence to the contrary their mentee was successfully performing their role. This clearly impacted again on the quality of mentoring relationships, and could also lead to a reliance on other forms of support.

### ***Wider networks of support***

Wider support networks, including peers from the postgraduate teaching qualification, former colleagues and friends represented an important source of support. Regular interactions within these networks assisted new lecturers to develop a sense of belonging. However, we need to be mindful of contribution they make to professional learning. Particularly with respect to the different learning opportunities available to them, and provide mechanisms to meaningfully engage with them.

### ***Provisional conclusions***

Mentors represented an important source of support, however, issues surrounding the duration and maintenance of mentoring relationships emerged which may have resulted from a lack of clarity over the expectations both parties held. Careful framing of mentoring relationships at the time mentors are selected and relationships form is necessary, and mechanism should be introduced to ensure this occurs.

### **References**

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