293 Enhancing University mentoring practice through Activity Theory analysis of the lived experiences of Learning and Teaching mentors.

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Increased emphasis has been placed on mentoring in educational development to enhance the quality of University Learning and Teaching. However, there is little research exploring L&T Mentors' experiences. This study, by a cross-University team investigating LTM experiences, is underpinned by Cultural Historical Activity Theory. CHAT provides a framework for collaborative research to change thinking and practice through identification and understanding contradictions in 'Activity Systems'. The mentoring AS was collaboratively mapped and used to survey LTM. Data analysis surfaced typical patterns of experience and revealed mentors experienced contradictions with both sociocultural and structural aspects within the AS. Commitment to reflective practice and collegiality motivate LTM and conflicts with perceptions that L&T mentoring is not valued or rewarded by academic leaders who prioritise research. Exploring contradictions enable us to collaboratively develop interventions rooted in academics' lived experiences. We will reflect on the 'expansive learning' promoted by researcher engagement with CHAT.

Full paper

Findings from a collaborative research project underpinned by Cultural Historical Activity system Theory (CHAT)1-3 are presented in this paper. Research was undertaken in an UK University by an inter- disciplinary group of academic developers who aimed to better understand the experiences of Learning and Teaching Mentors (LTM) in order to improve the support available and recognition for mentoring, and ultimately enhance mentoring to support learning and teaching.

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Increased emphasis has been placed on mentoring in educational development as this has been shown to enhance the quality of University learning and teaching, by contributing to both expanding the knowledge and understanding for teaching from programmes for University teachers and also facilitating the transfer of that knowledge to the pedagogic practice of University teachers4-6.

In contrast, there is little research exploring the experiences of LTM, including the motivations and values underpinning engagement with mentoring, whether support is effective or if the role of mentor is perceived as valued activity.

CHAT has been used in higher education to facilitate collaborative research to identify and address educational challenges7-11 but has not been used to investigate the experiences of LTM. CHAT is a theory of 'expansive learning' and transformation through collaborative reflection on contradictions within 'Activity Systems'1, focussed on socially situated learning through engaging in everyday tasks - in this case the experiences of LTM.

Activity systems comprise six interconnected elements which were collaboratively defined for the activity system for learning and teaching mentoring as follows, with effective support for and recognition of LTM defined as the 'outcome' (also see Figure 1).

- The Subject: LTM
- The Object: effective mentoring to support learning and teaching
- The Community: who and how they support LTM
- Tools and Resources: that support LTM and mentoring
- Rules: that govern learning and teaching mentoring
- Division of labour: for LTM

The activity system for LTM informed development of a survey containing both quantitative questions (e.g. Have you been allocated a workload for mentoring?) and free response questions (e.g. What have been the most difficult aspects of being a mentor?). Educational developers in academic departments and professional services distributed the survey across the Institute.

Qualitative data analysis focussed on surfacing typical patterns of experience and identifying contradictions and tensions between elements of the activity system, within and between departments, as the basis for collaborative discussion and proposals for change to the way LTM are supported and recognised across the Institute.

An iterative analytical approach was adopted[12], investigators moved back-and-forth between data and the CHAT framework. Theme-codes were initially distilled from qualitative responses, clustered into over-arching categories and both theme-codes and categories were organised around the nodes of the activity system for support of LTM (Figure 1).

Findings support previous research on the value of informal learning in departmental communities[13] and critical reflection on practice[14] but this paper will focus on the tensions and contractions experienced by LTM- 'the subject' of the activity system- stemming from inconsistent support:

"Initially: 0 preparation, 0 support, 0 recognition. Since [name] started to coordinate this, I attended a mentor training workshop and I know we are supposed to get.. workload hours (although that is on trust as there isn't even a line in the workload spreadsheet)."

A perceived lack of value or reward for LTM activity:

"Valued by whom? Senior leadership do not value anything other than a 4* publication."

"This is not recognised or rewarded at any level. This is a constant source of frustration and upset… Without the teaching focussed people, the University could not function!"

and contradictions between the intrinsic ethos of collegiality and commitment to reflective practice as motivations underpinning engagement with mentoring
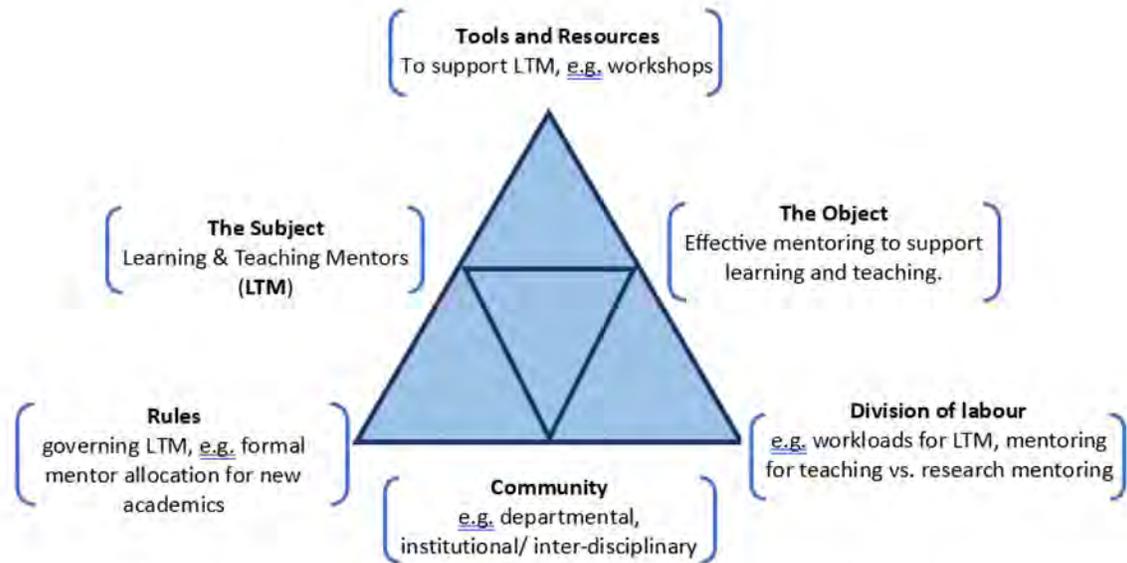
"I enjoy talking to people about teaching methods. It helps me to reflect on my own teaching and to consider different practices."

and the challenges reported by experienced mentors surrounding support of new staff who prioritise research over teaching

"….Unfortunately many… new staff have been appointed due to their research track record. For these mentees engagement with teaching, trying to develop practice in this area, is.. a distraction.. from research.. For example, the only Q my current mentee has asked is what the minimum hours of teaching they 'need' to do to 'get' a FHEA. … This is pretty soul destroying stuff."

Adopting a CHAT research framework committed investigators to exploring potential for 'transformative agency'. Our collective understanding of how LTM experiences were shaped by contradictions impacting on the activity systems for learning and teaching mentoring motivated collaborative work to develop better support and recognition mechanisms

Fig.1: L&T Mentoring Activity System

Tools and Resources
To support LTM, e.g. workshops

The Subject
Learning & Teaching Mentors
(LTM)

The Object
Effective mentoring to support
learning and teaching.

Rules
governing LTM, e.g. formal
mentor allocation for new
academics

Community
e.g. departmental,
institutional/ inter-disciplinary

Division of labour
e.g. workloads for LTM, mentoring
for teaching vs. research mentoring

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