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Enabling access to effective mentor support: evaluation of mentoring modules to inform blended learning design.

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This is the Final Report to the Westminster Centre of Excellence in Teaching Training in the Lifelong Learning Sector.

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Enabling Access to Effective Mentor Support FINAL REPORT

Evaluation of mentoring modules to inform blended learning design

Key words

Mentoring, Blended learning, CPD, supporting mentors

Summary

With the drive for professionalisation of the workforce and 30 hours CPD, time issues are coming evermore to the fore. Using technology to maximise productivity within the time constraints, more and more institutions are turning on e-learning. However, it is also recognised that e-learning is not necessarily the most appropriate way for effective learning to occur and that blended models might be better.

Context

The face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring programme was developed by the consortium leader for six FE colleges which deliver the HEI-validated DTLLS. The development of the programme was a response to research undertaken by the consortium leader into the needs and practices of mentors and mentees within the area.

During the 2008/9 academic year, the Level 7 module was delivered face-to-face with one participant each from five FE colleges. During the course, one student withdrew when she no longer had a mentee. All the mentors were involved in ITT support; some new to mentoring, others more advanced and one also delivered ITT. Subject specialisms included ICT, construction, beauty and ESOL. The course was delivered over the academic year with students coming together for nine input sessions of three hours each.

Simultaneously, the Westminster Partnership CETT was piloting a threshold blended learning mentoring module and starting to develop a Level 7 course. With the consortium partners being members of the CETT, it was decided to adapt validated modules rather than write new ones. However, due to the nature of mentoring, discussion ensued as to the best method of teaching mentoring and whether Level 7 could be done using blended learning. The research engages with the debate.

Aims and objectives

'Evaluation is the systematic collection of descriptive and judgmental information necessary to make effective training decisions related to the selection, adoption, value and modification of various instructional (developmental) activities. [It] helps us to reach conclusions about past events and/or to arrive at lessons for the future' (Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2007 p295). This quote from Klasen and Clutterbuck is their introduction to evaluating mentoring programmes and thus seems appropriate for assessing the success of a face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring programme in order to inform the development of a blended learning Level 7 Mentoring programme.

Although mentoring has been around from ancient times, it has taken on a new significance in recent years generally and more specifically in post compulsory teacher training (PCET) where it is now a government requirement. In initial teacher training (ITT), mentoring is seen as the primary element for the development of subject specific pedagogy as most PCET courses are generic. Much has been written on mentoring in the sector, allowing this paper to focus on a specific module designed for mentors involved in ITT.

Blended learning, put simply, is a mix between traditional face-to-face teaching and the use of electronic forms of delivery, including on-line. The realisation that on-line learning is not the best solution for the teaching of all subjects and the need for personal contact by both the deliverer of training and the recipients led to the development of the blended methodology which recognises too, that some elements of learning can be done without physical teacher input.

The question this paper is concerned with is: can mentoring be taught effectively on-line or through a blended learning model?

Mentoring, in its widest sense, is a very personal subject, involving relationships which can be tricky, both personally and institutionally. Exposing one's thoughts, opinions and feelings on-line to people who are not known brings a whole range of issues to the fore, which can be more easily dealt with face-to-face; for example, discussing practices whilst maintaining mentee/mentor confidentiality with a view to getting advice and evaluating institutional support systems. There is a perception that sensitive information can be more carefully managed and controlled in person than on-line. With this in mind, as well as the need to offer more flexible training to better meet the needs of today's time-pressurised teachers and mentors, the research and development of the blended learning module has taken shape.

Strategies

This project has at its base, three main strands: firstly, an evaluation of the face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring programme; secondly, an investigation into blended learning methodology drawing on another LSIS funded mentoring project within the CETT and thirdly, a review of current literature on both mentoring and e-learning pedagogies, the latter supporting the recommendations and conclusions drawn from the first two activities.

The evaluation of the face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring programme was conducted through participatory observation and a focus group. Participatory observation, as with all methods of research has its positives and negatives, and in this case, the positives far outweigh the negatives, whilst also enabling the researcher to engage in their own continuous professional development. Not working towards the qualification, however, removed any interest in promoting the programme for self-gain. Being a participant, without letting the other participants know about the research aspect, from the start of the course, enabled the researcher to be accepted into the group without any difficulty. This was aided by the fact that the researcher was also a practising mentor. To overcome the ethical issue of having misled participants, the researcher made known at the start of the evaluation that she had had a double role, that of participant and evaluator. Setting the research in context and explaining the need for not letting them know earlier enabled participants to give informed verbal consent before undertaking the evaluation. Having participated fully in the sessions including the sharing of sensitive personal experiences, as well as having the support of the course leader and knowing one of the participants professionally, helped reassure participants that their disclosures would be dealt with appropriately.

At the end of the course, feedback was obtained through a focus group which included the course leader who had delivered most of the sessions. Although it was acknowledged that the presence of the course leader in the focus group could skew the participants' responses, the general feeling was that as the course had been successful, this would not pose a problem. Further, grounding the group responses in the need to inform the blended learning module development and future delivery of the face-to-face version, as professional educationalists and mentors, enabled critical reflective feedback to take place and for points to be clarified or further explored as appropriate.

As the report from the comparative mentoring programme is due at the same time that this report is due, an informal interview was conducted with the lead researcher. Having been involved in the production of the initial research bid for the project allowed specific areas of the research findings to be explored generally and in relation to the blended learning mentoring module. This was further aided by one of the participants on the face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring programme also being the IT champion for the college conducting the research.

Literature appropriate to the scope of the research was sourced through various experts in mentoring and blended learning and a web search.

Outcomes and Impact & Learning points

The face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring Programme

The Level 7 Mentoring programme was developed by the consortium leader for six FE colleges which deliver the HEI-validated DTLLS. The development of the module was a response to research undertaken by the consortium leader into the needs and practices of mentors and mentees within the area.

During the 2008/9 academic year, the Level 7 Mentoring programme was delivered face-to-face with one participant each from five FE colleges, excluding the researcher. During the course, one student withdrew when she no longer had a mentee. All the mentors were involved in ITT support; some new to mentoring, others more advanced and one also delivered ITT. Subject specialisms included ICT, construction, beauty and ESOL.

The course was delivered over the academic year with participants coming together for nine input sessions of three hours each. The sessions were front- and end-loaded, taking place every week for six weeks (November to December) with the final three sessions taking place in March. This allowed for participants to mentor and reflect on what they had covered during the sessions in order to complete the assignments, which were due in early June. The final sessions looked at ending the mentor relationship and problems which had arisen during the preceding few months, as well as clarification of assessment requirements and an evaluation of the course.

The programme covered what mentoring in the lifelong learning sector is and its development from industry practises into education as well as the differences with school mentoring; common issues participants' face and how to deal with them, including the setting of ground rules and boundaries to protect both the mentor and the mentee. Linked to this was the 'architecture' of mentoring – how institutions support or should support mentoring and then how to end the relationship. Running throughout the delivery was time to reflect and deal with concerns, the 'dark side', and also to focus on positives. For these discussions it was accepted that 'Chatham House Rules' applied to ensure confidentiality of both the mentee and the institution.

Participants were given a handbook and materials during each session. These were also placed on the university's VLE, Blackboard, to which all participants and tutors had access. There were two lecturers who taught on the course and three tutors, including the two lecturers, to support the participants.

Experiences

Participants found the course 'of real value'. Most importantly they felt more confident in their role as mentors and what was expected of them. Although institutional pressures still militated against best practice on occasion, they felt better able to deal with it. Generally, it was agreed that the programme enabled the mentor to improve their performance and because of the assessment element, forced them to challenge

their mentee more who in turn developed their practice further. More detailed comments can be found in the appendix.

After the delivery of the course, when participants handed in their assignments, comments were made about the huge amount of coursework the module entailed. Further, to address concerns that it was difficult to incorporate the theory into very practically based assessments, it was suggested that assignment briefs be altered to enable the theory and reflection to dominate with the practical aspects forming the support documentation in appendices which should help reduce the workload.

Concerning the actual delivery of the programme and the content, this was found to be suitable although having a double session on the architecture of mentoring with no assessment attached to it, seemed disproportionate considering the coverage of aspects which were assessed. The suggestion was that either the architecture aspect be covered in one session or be incorporated into an assessment, as it was felt to be important in understanding the institutional response to mentoring.

Thoughts on a blended learning module

Participants were initially hesitant to suggest aspects of the course to be delivered on-line as face-to-face delivery enabled a sharing of issues beyond the content of the session, as one participant noted 'It's almost as much of a networking as a teaching opportunity'. The support and feeling of 'I'm not alone' was a strong advantage for keeping face-to-face sessions. A big concern was the management of sensitive issues. Even in a face-to-face setting, people are reluctant to be the first to speak. This is made more difficult in on-line communications. In face-to-face delivery there is the opportunity for a 'quiet chat over coffee' which cannot happen on-line. Further, aspects such as questioning techniques need to be practical and hands-on with activities such as role-play. This cannot be done remotely.

However, it was recognised that perhaps some aspects could be done more remotely and without initial lecturer input, for example, the architecture of mentoring and other more theoretical elements. These could then form the basis of a face-to-face session which would focus on application rather than content input. It would be important for participants to first meet each other face-to-face before embarking on the remote elements as this would help break down the potential barrier of e-communications as participants would have 'a feel' for the other participants.

Other concerns regarding a blended learning model were around typing skills and synchronisation. A person's confidence and adeptness at typing would determine the extent to which they contributed and could easily result in some participants withdrawing due to frustration. Synchronising access for group collaboration and participation might also pose a problem. It was felt that consideration needed to be given to holding on-line group discussions as timing could present difficulties.

As a result of the discussion, it was felt that rather than the participants identifying the aspects of the programme they had attended to be developed on-line, it would be more appropriate to show them the draft out-line of the proposed blended learning module and for them to comment on it using their experiences. The outcome was:

Session	Mode of delivery	Comment
1	Face to face	
2	Face to face best On-line possible	If use made of podcasts and information fed into a forum
3	On-line Face to face	Theories can be done on-line But not critical incidents
4	Face to face	
5	Mix	Values and beliefs are easier to manage face to face
6	Mix	There is a lot behind the session which is not linked to an assignment
7	Face to face	Problems
8	On-line	Hypothetical discussion
9	Face to face	Have to have cake (celebration and closure)

The comparative project: Support for ITT students through a blended mentoring/ coaching model & other projects

At the same time as the face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring programme was being delivered, one of the consortium colleges was trialling a blended learning approach to mentor and coach students undertaking their ITT to become more independent academically. As the college was using a blended approach, including small group, one-to-one and on-line teaching, it was felt that lessons from their experience could be applied to the development of the blended learning Level 7 Mentoring programme.

There had been a face-to-face academic writing course during the summer which formed the first phase of the research funded by the CETT. However, due to the sourcing of funding for the second phase, there was a gap which meant that motivation levels and commitment by students decreased. This accords with comments by participants on the face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring programme that the gap between some of the sessions was too wide and that they would prefer to have shorter, more frequent sessions.

Another aspect was student need. When students identify that they need help, they need it immediately for a specific purpose, eg the completion of an assignment with an imminent deadline. Due to pressures of work and study, students do not see the point in taking time to develop skills as this time is not easily available and if it is, more pressing activities fill its place. This was particularly prevalent amongst students with lower ability or weak skills. Students prefer face-to-face as they feel more able to ask for help. For those on the face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring programme, the equivalent was identified through their value of the opportunity to discuss aspects of the course with other participants or the lecturer either before or during sessions or 'over a quiet cup of coffee'. This was also an overriding concern in their comments about the co-ordination and synchronisation of on-line discussion in the blended-learning version. In the same way that weaker students are not likely to ask for assistance in front of others and prefer one-to-one assistance in developing their skill, so the participants on the face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring programme acknowledged that being the first to contribute information or ask a question is difficult enough in the presence of others, but more so when one does not know the other participants.

It was also found that where on-line materials are built into class delivery, students are more likely to use them on their own, as they are aware the materials are there and can see how they link to the course or student's needs. The materials have also got to be right for the student and they need to know where to start as they do not

have time to work through materials which will not lead them directly to achieving their goal. Although materials for the face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring programme were put onto Blackboard as the programme progressed, participants did not make use of them as they were given the same resources in paper form during the sessions and Blackboard had not been integrated into the delivery of the face-to-face programme. There was therefore no incentive or motivation for participants to access the VLE. In addition, despite a discussion forum having been created, participants found it quicker and easier to either phone, email or ask the lecturer during a session than access the forum.

An inherent theme in both studies as well as others, indicate that human interaction is important, particularly when people feel vulnerable for whatever reason. In the face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring programme, this is seen through the reluctance to discuss content such as critical incidents, values and beliefs on-line. Whilst in the second, it is regarding ability such as asking for help with aspects of academic writing. This is perhaps linked to fears of committing something to writing which cannot then be changed and which can be misinterpreted.

The importance of time is another inherent theme to emerge from the above. Pragmatically, speaking or talking through a point is quicker than writing it down and then waiting for a response, particularly if one does not have the ability to type quickly. This is of particular concern when clarity of understanding is required. In such circumstances 'real-time' communication is needed. If this can be achieved through an on-line discussion forum, such as 'chat', participants may make greater use of it however this is, as noted above, then dependent on the participant's speed of typing and ability to manipulate technology.

There are however, areas that people would be more comfortable doing on-line or on their own as this can be done at more convenient times and at their own speed. As identified above, these aspects revolve around reading theories and models which form the basis of sharing and discussion.

The main findings from the studies above resonate with Davies' (2004) investigation into peer e-mentoring. Points of particular interest are:

1. 'The concepts of mentoring and the way in which the process of remediation in the different modes of communication (i.e. synchronous and asynchronous, online and classroom) can influence the mentoring process and shape how students perceive their mentors.' For the two current studies, this is seen in the participants' preference to engage in certain activities face-to-face rather than using technology. Davies' study differentiates between the types of input a student has when undertaking a programme of study, ie academic input and tutorial or personal/motivational input. These have two distinctively different natures and can be undertaken by a variety of specialists, for example, the academic aspect can and will be undertaken by the lecturer or subject specialist, whereas the personal, tutorial or motivational aspects can be supported by peers, mentors, counsellors etc. Analysing the types of activity that the Level 7 Mentors and the ITT students prefer to do face-to-face, it is the latter, namely the tutorial and motivational support rather than the initial academic, such as theory, which can be done on-line. Having said this, participants felt it was important that the work done on-line should form the basis of a face-to-face session with lecturer support to develop understanding and application.
2. '[...] e-learning can be an isolating experience and [mentees] would appreciate contact with a more experienced student (Graff et al. 2003). The limitations of using the scheme were various and identified as being

impersonal, difficult to assess ability of mentor, limits to mentors knowledge, difficulty in explaining exactly what the problem was and lack of face-to-face contact. When questioned on how it could be improved, respondents agreed that the main areas of focus were to introduce face-to-face sessions, install pictures of the mentors with a short biography, initiate regular virtual classrooms or chat rooms and introduce a FAQ section.' This resonates with the experience and comments of the Level 7 Mentoring programme participants who saw the need for 'knowing' who their fellow participants were before embarking on electronic communications and the continued requirement for face-to-face sessions to enforce and develop on what had been learnt from on-line materials.

There were however, some noticeable differences between Davies' findings and those of the current study. These include:

1. '[Hamilton and Scandura ...] argue that e-mentoring permits greater flexibility, especially in the areas of creating and sustaining relationships, offering greater convenience and widening access to a greater body of knowledge via a diverse range of mentors. Hawkrige (2003, p.22) corroborates this with his research at the Open University, where he discovered that "the new technology benefits distant learners of many kinds" – helping them to reach out for assistance whilst sustaining the learning experience. What is apparent from the literature is that e-mentoring is more than just 'support on a computer'; it encourages performance support, knowledge management and more importantly dissemination of information. E-learning involves not only access to training materials but also offers the teacher opportunities to manage learning in a coherent and concise manner – providing direction over both content and administration (Pearson, 2001). The same can be argued for e-mentoring and research on PAL–Online, where it not only provided support, but afforded e-moderators the opportunity to be proactive and monitor participation in all areas of student involvement.' The difference to that of the current studies can perhaps be explained by the fact that Davies' participants chose to participate on-line rather than face-to-face and covered a wide geographical area. Participants on the face-to-face Level 7 Mentoring programme and the comparative study are likely to continue their relationship using various means of communication, both face-to-face and electronic depending on the circumstances. It should also be noted that the geographical range that these participants came from was small, although the saving of travel time was acknowledged through the recognition that certain aspects could be done remotely or on-line at times more convenient to the individual.
2. 'The key distinction between mentoring online (e-mentoring) and traditional mentoring (t-mentoring) is highlighted by Hamilton and Scandura (2003, p.388) who believe that the foundation of mentor-protégé relationship, the 'face-time' between these key actors is transformed and the relationship "rests on a different type of interaction than that found in traditional mentoring". This transformation creates a unique environment where participants experience reduced levels of social cues, allowing greater opportunities for women and minorities to interact enabling "leaner communication channels that allow for more direct information transfer" (Hamilton and Scandura 2003, p.389).' This finding provides an interesting point of reflection, particularly as women predominated on the Level 7 Mentoring programme and the 'minority male' did not disagree with their experiences. Rather than identify specific groups who might feel more comfortable using technology for communication of sensitive issues, consideration should be given to minorities in general who feel less restricted

by communicating anonymously. Pedagogically, this links with differentiation and individual's preferred learning styles.

Conclusions

What is apparent from the eLearning study conducted by Slater (2005) is that marketing of e-courses and programmes is crucial to ensure retention and achievement. Prospective participants or students need to know what will be required of them before embarking on a course to ensure their motivation and needs are met. Thus, if they are not comfortable communicating with strangers about sensitive issues on-line, they will choose to do a face-to-face course than an on-line one. The same will accord for a blended learning module.

The eLearning (eL) study continues that 'it is vital to be clear on what is to be achieved and why. The answer should not be referenced to eL but to management and learning objectives and to finance.' In other words, the aim of the programme should dictate the method of delivery, not the other way around. In identifying how the aims can be best met given financial and increasing time constraints, the following identified by the eLearning study (pp15-16) should be considered:

- 'Making (specific) courses more cost effective: costing methodology is advancing and this could include making less use of expensive materials or travel, cutting face to face involvement, deskilling tutoring requirements, or improving tutor performance
- Making courses more learner centred: this includes extending the availability of learning opportunities in time and space, offering diagnostic testing to help identify learning deficits and/or then material to address them, and extending opportunities for learners to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes
- Improving the management and organisation of courses for quality and other purposes: this includes identifying and maintaining standards, building in QA reporting, disintermediating administrators, and improving monitoring of learner progress with a view to identifying those at risk of dropping out and taking appropriate actions
- Improving the assessment environment: this includes reminding learners of impending activities or deadlines, offering formative assessment and good feedback cost effectively, and improving the match between learning outcomes and assessment.'

'It is important to develop the pedagogy, including models for support resources and their utilisation. It pays dividends in terms of learner understanding and utility. Content should be capable of being reworked each time through a course, as with traditional learning. It is more effective to concentrate on making available as widely as possible those facilities provided by eL which allow learner interaction and enhanced quality processes. As a result of the development of eL in an institution or department, one would expect major reworking of assessment, increased learner centred techniques, more choice in demonstrating achievement of outcomes (e.g. through an ePortfolio), and more collaborative learning options based on a wider set of supporting resources.'

Applying this to the development of the blended learning Level 7 Mentoring programme, it will be important to embed blended methods of assessment into the programme to encourage and motivate participants to engage with the materials on-line and allow for different forms of communication to take place, eg telephonic, email, on-line forum, face-to-face during group sessions, etc. In addition, and perhaps, most importantly, will be the marketing of the blended learning module to

ensure that prospective students are clear regarding the nature of the programme and how issues such as confidentiality will be maintained given the inherent nature of the programme.

Next steps

Continue developing the blended learning Level 7 Mentoring module, ensuring that marketing is given the profile it deserves. The report findings will also be forwarded to the consortium leader of the face-to-face module to further inform course improvements and to the comparative research institution to inform their blended learning mentoring/coaching module.

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Appendix – feedback on face-to-face Level 7 module

The focus group conducted during the last session of the programme elicited the following comments.

Objectives and structure of the module

- Participants knew the format and deadlines. In fact they got more than they had anticipated, for example information on the mentoring organisation and change.
- Mentee knew mentor was on the course, although not at the start. They saw things become more formal
- The course makes the mentee work harder
- It upped my practice which had a knock-on effect: I had to make sure the 'T's were crossed, therefore she had to work harder
- Teacher trainee – saw the impact of assessment
- Sessions of two hours duration more frequently would be welcomed otherwise you 'go off ball'
- The gap in teaching made sense as it gave time to reflect, although perhaps this could be reduced slightly to prevent 'going off the boil'

- Some books were only 1 week loan; need a broader range of books.
- Putting the practical experience into a theoretical context with rather limited books has been difficult. It feels like a huge step from teacher training (from level 4 to level 7; I need to go to 4,5,6 then 7).
- The handout on the style of Reflective writing helped as you could see what was expected
- The order of outcomes was not a problem
- Exemplars – were not a problem as you could submit a draft
- There were concerns about phrasing at the bottom of the sheet and confusion over the boxes: does a cross mean it is ok or should it be a tick; it was clear when nothing was ticked
- A session explaining the difference between Levels 6 & 7 is needed.

Most valuable

- Think more
- Teaching practice / looking at self
- Feedback
- Clearer understanding of relationship
- Forced to read journal articles
- Advantages of making trainees independent and getting them to come to their own decisions
- It's almost as much of a networking as a teaching opportunity.

Suggested improvements

- Assignment deadlines did not make sense - one a week. The first one was too soon.
- The assignments seemed to jump around with no recap before.
- Some sessions were quite heavy.
- Mentoring architecture – could be combined. This was not directly related to assignments – session input therefore seemed disproportionate.
- Mentors need more hours/time to mentor.
- Mentors need more support, for example an external mentor who has a problem with a mentee – you learn to deal with this by default.

The assignments have not been straightforward – because of the level, you have less guidelines; trying to interpret what is expected but because of what's going on in my life, less time

Concerns the module raised concerning own or institutional practice

- Other staff, not just ITT or BME need mentoring (or buddy system) – includes those new to the organisation.
- Staff should be able to ask for a mentor if they want to change subject specialism eg a bricklayer wanting to move to IT. Systems are needed within institutions to manage the transition.
- Raising profile of mentors – currently they have no value.
- It is easy to do nothing as a mentor in some institutions.
- The expectations for the given number of hours – not being given the structure, knowing one's rights and responsibilities.
- Hidden agendas: new teachers versus experienced teachers; managing expectations of mentee and mentor
- Mentoring is outside normal working hours but you don't get paid for it.
- Institution needs to do more 'selling'
- Many Advanced Practitioners are doing mentoring but the difference is not clear. It's a good idea though.
- Mentors are 'thrown into the ring'.

The module's impact on practice

- Knowing the difference between a mentor and a coach.
- Realisation that all need mentoring.
- It's pushed me and I've pushed my mentee.
- Listening, coaxing, encouraging more; handing over responsibility to mentee
- Like formality – feel more comfortable; make sure paperwork is in place – think of what mentee wants out of the relationship, deal with goal change.
- Roles: important for mentee to understand their role; make this clear from the outset.
- Values/beliefs have changed – how I think about doing things, why I'm doing them, the way they are.
- I observe the class now, not just the teacher
- Look at feedback: helped develop
- Changed approach, softer, more encouraging
- Permission to take time out through phrases such as 'let me think about that'.
- Confidence, empowering as I'm doing what I should be doing.