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What works and in what ways? The contributions of mentoring towards diversity, progression and achievement

Jones, IR

What Works and in What Ways? The Contributions of Mentoring Towards Diversity, Progression and Achievement

Iain Jones
I.R.Jones@salford.ac.uk
Education Development Unit

Abstract

In this paper I use three case studies to illustrate how peer mentoring has been developed and organised at the University. and, in turn, how these specific examples of practice have contributed to diversity, progression and achievement. However, I also use these case studies to raise questions about the impact of developments in peer mentoring on the learning of the mentors and mentees, and of the organisation, and the implications of learning through mentoring for the development of policy on widening participation. I want to suggest that whist these specific examples have 'worked' in their contributions towards diversity, progression and achievement – the intended policy outcomes- there is another no less interesting dimension of ' what works' and that is the role of the mentors and mentees as policy actors. In the final section of the paper I will reflect on this and the extent to which the learners engaged in mentoring – whether as mentors or mentees – are policy actors helping to shape policy rather than the passive objects of that policy.

Dimensions and Uses of Mentoring

Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm (2003) review the literature on mentoring and provide a case study on the uses of mentoring in business management and a variety of its uses in mentoring with young people. Whereas Roberts (2000a, 2000b) emphasises the personal relationship between mentor and mentee, Colley et al (2003) also review the inter-relationship between the formal and informal styles of mentoring in various institutional settings and locations and within government education policies.

In contrast with Colley et al (2003) the case studies of mentoring within the University are examples of peer mentoring. Their stated purpose was either to enhance diversity and progression into the University (Case Study 1: Citizens And Learners As Mentors, 2001-03, and Case Study 2: Mentoring On Line In Europe, 2003-05) or to support progression and achievement within the University (Case Study 3: Information Systems Institute, 2003-04). The following section of the paper will initially describe how these specific examples of practice have been developed and organised and their relationship with notions of diversity, progression and achievement. I then follow Colley et al (2003), in reviewing the impact of peer mentoring on the learning of the mentors and mentees, exploring the relationship between these specific examples of mentoring and their institutional settings within the University and the implications of learning through mentoring for the development of policy on widening participation.

Case Study 1: Citizens and Learners As Mentors: CALAM 2001-03 European Commission Socrates Grundtvig European Co-operation Project

Diversity and Progression into the University

1. Aims and Objectives

a. To develop, implement and evaluate an innovative programme of information, advice and guidance for adult learners through a partnership between four Universities (UK, Czech Republic, Lithuania and Sweden) and networks with informal education and voluntary and community sectors within these respective countries.

b. To build on the experience of adult learners who acted as mentors and role models to other adult learners returning to learning and evaluate the impact of mentoring on the academic achievement and personal development of the mentor and mentee.

c. To compare and contrast partnerships between formal and informal education providers and the value of mentoring in working with adult learners in different European settings.

2. Target Groups

The project was designed to benefit economically or socially disadvantaged groups of unemployed adults within specific locations in each partner country. Although the target groups varied between partner countries the outputs were intended to be transferable between the different target groups. In Sweden, the general target group were adults aged 25+ with little formal education; in Lithuania, the target group were adult learners in rural areas, but also women returning to learning, specifically unemployed adults who lived in distant regions of Lithuania and finally, in the UK and the Czech Republic, the project addressed the needs of women and men, over 25, who were returning to education, training, and work.

3. Processes of Mentoring

The mentors in the UK were 2nd year students on the Foundation Degree in

Community Governance. They were mentoring 1st year students on the same Foundation Degree. All students are part time and they work for either local authorities or the voluntary and community sector in the North West of England.

An initial mentoring training programme and a training pack were developed, implemented and evaluated. Mentors planned and delivered combinations of individual and group mentoring sessions supported by paper and web-based learning materials, Further training and support sessions were provided by a Development Officer in each respective country.

2003-05 European Commission
Socrates Grundtvig 1
European Co-operation Project

Mentoring On-Line In Europe: MOLIE
Diversity and Progression into the University/ 2

1. Aims and Objectives
The project will develop new forms of mentoring and promote and facilitate access to learning across the existing partnership (2001-03 CALAM project) and through the inclusion of new partners, from two new countries, both involved in other Grundtvig 2001-03 European Co-operation projects.

a. To develop, evaluate, and disseminate specific forms of e-mentoring through synchronous email and discussion lists on the Project intranet.

b. To develop a project website to disseminate the findings from the Project.

c. To organise a workshop in each partner country for all mentors participating in the Project to evaluate their experiences as adult learners.

d. To organise a conference, led by mentors, using a Participatory Evaluation Model that emphasises mentors' voices and experiences, and to disseminate their experiences through case studies to local, regional, and national networks.

2 Target Groups
Refugees whose existing qualifications are not recognised.

Women returning to learning who are community activists but whose knowledge and skills have not been formally accredited.

Young people in the 16-25 age group who are at risk of social marginalisation.

3. Processes of Mentoring to be Used
The mentors in the UK are adult learners who are studying in higher or further education at either the University or a College in Greater Manchester.

The other European partners in the project are from higher, further, and adult education, in the formal and non-formal sectors, and aim to share their knowledge of being involved in improving access to learning through co-operation in local networks. They will do this by developing, evaluating, and disseminating shared trans-European outputs using existing and new forms of mentoring underpinned by a participatory evaluation model.

Four mentors, from each of the six partner countries, will each work with four mentees from these target

groups. Their direct experiences of mentoring will be disseminated to a project network in each country based on a core membership of three other organisations per country and then extended through workshops, conferences and a project website.

2003-04 Widening Participation Funded Project in Information Systems Institute:
Mentoring for Progression and Achievement within the University

1. Aims and Objectives
In the bid submitted for institutional widening participation funding retention was presented as the motive in the application by the Information Systems Institute (ISI). The stated aim was to reduce the problem of dropout and contribute towards retention by introducing a paid mentoring system.

Specific Benefits

a. If the schemes result in five less students dropping out in Year 1, they will have paid for themselves in terms of increased LEA and tuition fees in following years.

b. Reductions in the dropout rate will improve the University's showing in various league tables etc and attract government approbation of the University's policies and practice

c. Reductions in the dropout rate will smooth the delivery of first year modules, particularly those involving teamwork

d. Given that a disproportionate number of students that fail in the first year are from poor backgrounds, an increase in the retention rate will have a direct impact on widening participation.

2. Target Groups

7 Information Systems Institute graduates (or final year undergraduates) assist first year students in adapting to a higher education environment and the demands of an undergraduate programme of study. Each mentor to work with approximately 20 Year 1 undergraduates during each semester in 2003-04.

3. Processes of Mentoring Used

a. Students will have a supplementary point of contact and informed advice in the case of problems.

b. The students will receive the benefits of advice from mentors who have already experienced the same undergraduate programme.

Mentoring and Diversity, Progression and Achievement

The three case studies of mentoring within the University are all examples of peer mentoring. Their stated purpose is either to enhance diversity and progression into the University (Case Study 1: Citizens And Learners As Mentors, 2001-03, and Case Study 2: Mentoring On Line In Europe, 2003-05) or to support progression and achievement within the University (Case Study 3: Information Systems Institute, 2003-04). The following section of the paper describes how these specific examples of practice relate to notions of diversity, progression and achievement.

The purpose of the funding received from the European Commission and the Grundtvig 1 stream of Socrates funding for CALAM was to develop resources that could be disseminated and then used by other adult educators in Europe. As such the priority was to develop resource

material to support mentoring in different European settings. The CALAM final report (2004) listed what the partners in the two-year project had produced:

■ Accredited training programme

■ Mentoring training pack

■ Comparative analysis of mentoring methods: notes and minutes of trans-national meetings

■ Comparative analysis of mentoring methods: formative evaluation methods and examples of findings

■ Comparative analysis of mentoring methods: examples of articles by mentors

■ Meetings and seminars: examples of summative evaluations

■ Examples of papers on mentoring given by project members at European conferences on Lifelong Learning

■ Report by external evaluator of CALAM.

In the UK, the mentors and mentees were students on the Foundation Degree in Community Governance at the University of Salford. The specific pilot Foundation Degree is a partnership between the University, local and sub-regional Colleges of Further Education, and local authorities in the North West. Within the University, two Schools and the Education Development Unit, have contributed to the development of the pilot. Foundation Degrees are of particular interest for a variety of reasons. Firstly, they can be read as an example of the tensions within lifelong learning policy and practice in the UK. Secondly, an emphasis on employability is coupled with attempts to define and conceptualise the wider benefits of learning (Griffin, 2000; Preece and Houghton, 2000;

and Schuller, 2000). Thirdly, the rhetorical emphasis on how the Foundation Degree is 'new', 'innovative', and based on 'partnership' can also be read as one, in a series of developments, that are presented in terms of the ' discourse of modernisation' (Clarke et al 2000; Newman, 2000).

Whereas the focus of the CALAM project was diversity and progression into the University the prime emphasis of the ISI peer mentoring project was on retention of 1st year undergraduate students within the University. The interim report on the scheme (2004) summarised the activities that were designed to meet the stated outcomes of:

■ Students to benefit from having a first point of contact and in the case of problems, informed advice.

■ Students to benefit from advice and guidance provided by peers who have experienced the same undergraduate programme.

■ Identification of students whose non-attendance is becoming a cause for concern.

■ Once non-attendance has been identified, mentors can take action, personal tutors and year tutor to improve the situation.

The targets and planned activities for Semester 1 (2003-04) were:

■ All students to have a one-to-one meeting with their Mentor within Semester 1 period (early October – early February).

■ Any student requiring further advice/guidance/assistance to meet with their Mentor for a second time

■ Attendance tracked of all Year 1 students.

■ Problems arising from non-attendance to be forwarded to Year Tutor and Personal Tutor for further action.

The interim report summarised progress against these targets. By the end of January 2004, 98 student mentees out of a possible 132 had engaged in a 'one-to-one meeting' with their chosen mentor. Of the 34 students not seen, approximately 10 had a meeting scheduled for early February. The remaining 24 had either to confirm a date/time for a meeting with their mentor or choose a mentor and arrange a date/time for a meeting.

The findings in the final report from ISI (2004) summarised the processes of mentoring that had been developed and made recommendations on possible improvements. The Project Co-ordinator held a final mentor evaluation meeting in June 2004 and the following extract from her report summarises the issues raised:

■ The Year 1 Student Reps speaking on behalf of all Year 1 felt that the scheme was highly beneficial and should continue. They made two formal recommendations: (i) that the scheme be embedded in the teaching timetable and have dedicated date/time slots for meetings; (ii) that Year 3 students act as mentors only in Semester 1 and that Year 2 take over in Semester 2. It was felt that this would relieve Year 3 student mentors of additional workloads during the dissertation writing-up period.

■ With regard to item (i) above, the Mentors agreed that this was needed and that should a new bid be accepted, the scheme be embedded in the weekly teaching timetable.

■ With regard to item (ii) above, Year 3 Mentors were strongly against the suggestion of using Year 2 as mentors in Semester 2. They felt that Year 2 would not have the appropriate experience or relevant skills to act as mentors.

They also indicated that if Mentor-Mentee meetings were timetabled (as recommended), then this would relieve a lot of stress and reduce time emailing/telephoning students.

■ The Mentors felt the scheme should be mandatory and not optional as it is now.

■ The Mentors made a formal recommendation that the maximum number of mentees any one mentor should have is 10.

■ The Mentor team recommended that the number of meetings per semester with the Scheme Co-ordinator be increased from one to two.

■ Mentors firmly believed that formal training should be given prior to conducting any mentoring work. This should be supplemented by supporting documentation.

This is one way of looking at how these specific peer mentoring projects have contributed towards diversity, progression and achievement. If I were to analyse the outcomes of the mentoring projects in terms of quantifiable measures, for example, who is recruited or how many students are retained, or simplistic qualitative measures of satisfaction of mentors and mentees (important as these are from the point of view of evaluation) my research would only relate to institutional concerns and intended policy outcomes.

However, I am also interested in placing the specific mentoring projects within a critical setting. I want to question the social and institutional power relationships within which mentoring is developed. An emphasis on research on policy as opposed to research for policy (Ozga, 2000) has enabled me to construct a larger policy picture and locate the

specific policy development within a wider theoretical context.

Individual and Group Learning through Mentoring

I want to build on the description of the case studies and raise questions about the impact of developments in peer mentoring on the learning of the mentors who worked on the CALAM project.

In two sets of focus groups the six mentors who worked on the CALAM project collectively traced the inter-relationships between their learning on the Foundation Degree in Community Governance, learning in their workplaces, and learning through their engagements in community action. Focus groups are appropriate to research on policy (as opposed to research for policy) because they 'enable researchers to examine people's different perspectives as they operate within a social network' (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999:5, see also Merrill, 2002).

The learners as mentors engaged in each stage of the development of the CALAM project; recruitment, training, activity, and shared their learning through national and trans-national meetings. They worked to support and signpost the next cohort of learners who progressed onto the Foundation Degree.

When the mentors reflected on their experiences of CALAM they referred to the contrast between their work role within the local authority and being a mentor:

I might go to a lot of meetings, but I tend to be there minuting meetings and not actually making a contribution so from that point of view, you know, it's developing my skills, and my confidence, as well as coming here (mentor review meeting).

Another learner reflected on her role as a mentor and what she was learning from others within the mentoring project:

I think that by being a mentor and being on even something like this where you meet as a group I think that we pick up a lot of skills, we share skills and exchange.

When they reflected on their participation in the CALAM project, mentors referred to a wider perception of policy through firstly, understanding the expectations and needs of learners who were active in the voluntary sector and secondly, understanding what other learners which they had mentored were saying to them:

I listen to people and I'm working on the surface level of what they are telling me, but I think that with this you will find people are telling you something deeper of their own.

The mentors are developing an understanding of the complexities of the policy process and of their roles within it. If their reflection on their knowledge of this social world started with what Schutz (1932) called a 'stream of experience' then through processes of 'typification' they have built up meaning. Through the focus groups a series of individual experiences have been shared and participants have collectively constructed "classes of experience through similarity" (Craib, 1984:85). They have begun the process of building up what Schutz called 'meaning contexts' and these form part of their 'stocks of knowledge'.

Interpreting a Policy in Which They are Participants

Participation in socio-institutional and cultural processes is complex and the attributes have been developed by these adult learners through their experiences at a specific point in their learning careers. By reflecting on their own shared experiences of learning within the focus groups they have engaged in their *own conscious identification of the activity as significant learning or training (and) the retrospective recognition of both (1) a new significant form of knowledge, understanding or skill, and (2) the process of acquisition (Livingstone, 2001: 4, my emphasis).*

I want to suggest that whist these specific examples of peer mentoring have 'worked' in their contributions towards diversity, progression and achievement – the intended policy outcomes- there is another no less interesting dimension of ' what works' and that is the role of the mentors and mentees as policy actors. In the final section of the paper I have reflected on this and the extent to which the learners engaged in mentoring – whether as mentors or mentees – are policy actors helping to shape policy rather than the passive objects of that policy.

My research findings reflect Merrifield's work (2001) that summarised several assumptions about the nature of learning. Firstly, that 'Learning is social even though it occurs within an individual. It takes place in specific social contexts that shape what is learned, by whom and in what ways' (2001:8). Secondly, learning is shaped by external factors but also by factors that are intrinsic to a particular group- what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as engagement with and in communities of practice. Thirdly, the notion of 'apprenticeship' emphasises for Lave and Wenger the process of developing participation through communities of practice. Merrifield concludes 'research on socially situated learning suggests we must view learning as a developmental process, a process not just of proficiency at a skill but of engagement in a community' (2001:12)

Conclusions

In this paper, I have used case studies of peer mentoring at the University to describe relationships between these practices and diversity, progression and achievement. However, I have also argued that research on policy, rather than research for policy, should explore why understanding learners' experiences, and their reflections on them, are essential in being able to understand other dimensions of their roles as learners. By extending the notions of voice to a conception of adult learners as active agents research can seek to understand the capacity of learners to shape policy compared with another notion of them as empty vessels who are passive objects of a policy.

I want to conclude by emphasising one aspect of the implications of the iterative process of evaluation, evidence and policy. Ozga (2000:42) argues that

If policy is understood as the closed preserve of the formal government apparatus of policy making, then it follows that the social science project will make little impact. If, however, we understand policy as involving negotiation, contestation and a struggle between competing groups, as a process rather than output, then we can see that the social science project may indeed act as a resource

The challenge she poses is to ensure that if educational policy is a focus of research, practitioners should be encouraged to engage with policy research and, in turn, develop or enhance their critical and reflexive approach (2000:8). The multiple meanings of policy inform the

horizontal dimension with its emphasis on negotiation and ambiguity. In developing a critical and reflexive approach to policy analysis and evaluation, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers may wish to re-evaluate their conception of what constitutes ' informed opinion'.

Acknowledgements

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