

Conditions for professional learning

Presentation of Dr. Jaap van Lakerveld, PLATO University of Leiden, NL /
Dietlind Fischer, Comenius-Institut Muenster, Germany

Conference "Partnership and mentoring in teacher education" in Bled/ Slovenia
September 22-24, 2005

Introduction

This presentation consists of two related parts. It is my pleasure to present the first part to you. In this first part I will give an overview of how the definitions and theories of learning have changed in the last decades and how this affects the nowadays views on Professional learning. After this overview I will become a bit more specific by sharing some ideas with you on how schools could try to promote professional learning among teachers. At the end of my presentation I stress the importance of the people that facilitate the learning processes we try to establish. That is where mentoring pops up as a concept. That at the same time is the moment for me to hand over the microphone to my colleague Dietlind Fischer. She will present the second part of this lecture in which she will elaborate further on this concept of mentoring and on the ways in which mentoring can contribute to the professional learning and development of teachers and teacher trainees.

Trends in Learning

During the last decades of the last century and the beginning of this millennium a number of changes occurred in the way learning was perceived by psychologists of learning. Consecutive theories over the last decades show a profound shift of focus

Until the mid sixties the dominant approach was behaviourism, in which the learner was seen as a black box that only showed reactions to external stimuli and that learned through processes of classical and operant conditioning. Drills, programmed instruction, punishment and reward strategies were core elements in approaches based on this theoretical view.

Cognitivism followed as a reaction. It focused on the internal processes much more. Problem solving, critical thinking, and motivation became fashionable concepts. Behaviourism suddenly was thought to be superficial and neglecting what is most characteristic for the human individual: the intellect. In the times of cognitivism theories were developed that compare the human mind with a personal computer, having a working memory, a long term memory, processing data, storing them, retrieving them and connecting them with other subsystems of knowledge inside the brain. Yet people felt the human mind is more than a computer. The cognitive move in the American learning

psychology made these theories come closer to the approaches that had been dominant for decades already in the Soviet Union. There, psychologists such as Vygotsky, Galperin, and Davidov had developed cognitive theories of learning referred to as constructivism. The fusion that was made possible by the end of the cold war, between the cognitive movement in the western world and the Soviet ideas, became known as neo-constructivism, in which learning was seen as an active process in which knowledge is created by a person rather than absorbed. Social constructivism in addition to constructivism acknowledges the importance of the role of others and of the dialogue with them in exploring, explaining, and validating one's own knowledge.

The computer metaphor chosen by the cognitivists expanded since the invention of Internet, when suddenly one began to see the importance of learning beyond individuals. That is where connectivism was launched as a concept. Learning is all it ever was but there is an added dimension, that of being able to find the right sources, contacts and networks to solve the problems one is facing. Thus adding data, concepts and strategies to one's own competences as well as to collectively shared bodies of knowledge. Learning has extended its boundaries beyond the individual ever since. Knowledge productivity; knowledge management in learning organizations have become common concepts. Learning is perceived as something that covers individual, group and organizational levels at the same time and in mutual interaction.

Learning by now has accumulated into a multilevel differentiated concept that no longer can be understood from one theoretical perspective. As in so many areas of modern or post modern society we entered an era of eclecticism, in which learning is believed to be a bit of everything and in which education has become a complex social process in which distinctions between who teaches and who learns have faded; in which learning has become a matter of opportunities, activities, environments and contacts rather than of books, of being taught and being lectured. In modern schools both teachers and students learn. In this presentation I will focus on what it takes to stimulate and/or allow teachers to learn.

What is it that makes teachers learn?

The main implication of the trends described is the fact that apparently it is important to establish a context that triggers learning processes among teachers. So what would be the key elements to be included in such an environment? First of all, for learning it is important to be motivated. Motivation is both a condition for learning as well as a potential result. It is like someone throwing a disk, the more he turns the more he adds to his potential energy to cover a distance. The initial drive that makes the disk circulate, adds to the chance that the disk gets further.

Apart from the motivation it is crucial that opportunities are available that allow people to learn. These opportunities provide the learners with chances to learn. Variety of experiences, challenges, activities, sources, media, tools etc. are part of these opportunities.

Ongoing practices and events in a learning environment provide learners with experiences that are the vehicle of learning. The learning experience is more effective, when the learner is actively directing his, or her own experience. Learning may better be active. Self initiated learning with self directed activities and self chosen outcomes proves to be more effective, than imposed learning activities with outcomes determined by others.

The more learning is done together with others, the better the process of exploring, defining, explaining validating en sharing ones understanding of concepts works. This co-operation interiorises the learning outcomes better and makes them more easily applicable.

Interaction with others allows for peer feedback that adds to the refinement of understanding and for the elaboration of shared ideas.

Learning also benefits from focused feedback on ones progress and outputs. At the same time the learning will be enhanced, once this feedback adds a sense of progress. Nothing works better than a sense of success.

How to create a learning environment for teachers

If this is what learning requires, the next question is what is that leaders, managers or other actors can do to create such environment for teachers. How can a school provide a trainee, a beginning teacher or whomever with a powerful learning environment?

An important element to do so is to make the learning process explicit. It must be put on the agenda instead of keeping it implicit. The staff or the section must be aware of the learning goals it tries to accomplish.

The second thing to establish is a motivating environment. This means that learning must be made possible, made worthwhile, made rewarding and made public. Important people must show their support and their enthusiasm. Learning must add to ones sense of feeling appreciated, ones sense of self esteem.

For that purpose one needs to know what to do. Clear goals and results aimed for, make the learning more focused and add to the learners chances of success. Acquiring success demands an adequate infrastructure. Computers, books, documents, journals, means of communication, libraries, etc, are part of an adequate infrastructure.

An environment alone does not suffice. It is activities, clear tasks and assignments that make people move effectively through such an environment. It is also vital that the learner has a sense of safety and security. Fear of failure is an important obstacle in learning processes. Overcoming such obstacles enhances the chances people will learn effectively.

Once people feel safe and aware of the direction in which they will have to develop, the conditions are fulfilled to engage in communication with other learners. That communication adds to the exploration, understanding and validation of ones self created knowledge and competences. Getting feedback on the progress made is of crucial importance for the further development; of the initial motivation, and of continuing planning for further learning.

Learning in different circles

Learning is something that takes place in various circles. Originally learning was thought of as something individual, later on it was believed to be important to think of learning as interactive, again more sophisticated is the thought that learning happens in various circles at various levels. Teacher trainees learn from and with each other. Teachers learn in groups or networks of various kinds such as, within their section, their school team, special task groups, or in their professional or personal networks of whatever kinds. International co-operation offers opportunities for reflection. As such it provides learners with new perspectives on situations thus far taken for granted.

How effective the learning environment will be, depends on:

The learning environment for teachers in schools depends on the school culture. The school culture often assumes that teachers to know things rather than to be searching for new knowledge. On the other hand schools, actually these are the more effective schools, may offer teachers or trainees chances to develop new knowledge, to engage in to action learning and action research in order to extend their knowledge. Learning and searching for new knowledge appears to be providing a more stimulating environment for students as well. That is much more effective than schools that radiate an atmosphere of "knowing it all" and "being right all the time". A culture of curiosity and a need for discovery provide learners with a more stimulating learning environment, than cultures that are based on pre defined expertise and traditional truths.

Learning requires an organisation structure that offers opportunities to signal, absorb, produce, enrich and apply knowledge, to share that knowledge, and to re-think and revise it if needed. Documentation centres, archives, administrative tools, data bases, are sources of data that support learning. Learning is not only internal, but also something beyond the school or the direct environment in which the learner operates. This is an often neglected part of the learning environment. It is seldom considered something for which the organisation is held responsible. Yet in literature we see an increased interest in Human and Social Capital approaches in which learning is seen as a process that is beneficial to both ones personal and professional life. At the same time this is considered synergetic. This means that personal learning beyond the organisation is supportive to the interests of the organisation i.e. the school, while at the same time professional learning adds to the quality of ones personal life and perspective.

Learning is a process that will not be successful just by itself. It is important that such processes are facilitated. Money, funds, legislation, and other conditions are required. At the same time the school management must take measures to make schools a learning place to the extent to which the means allow them to do so. It demands of the school leaders and managers that they will make the professional learning of teachers an explicit goal of their organizations. Many of the things mentioned will have to be realized to turn the school into a learning place for teachers. The most crucial factor in establishing the right learning climate however will always be people involved. They will be the ones that

matter. This is what brings us to the core of today's issue: the issue of what it is that people can do to make trainees, teachers and other staff learn and thus add to their sense of well being, professional efficacy and as a consequence to the quality of schools and education. Dietlind Fischer will explain in her presentation how mentors may play a part in creating such kind of learning environments. People help people learn; Mentors help teachers learn: mentors matter!

What it takes to make mentors matter, will be further elaborated by Dietlind Fischer.

II.

My experience comes from reviewing several research studies predominantly from the United States and the United Kingdom, but also from a cooperative European project MINT. Within this project we asked several experts for descriptive case studies. They had to describe the setting of mentoring within the system of teacher education, the role and task of the mentors and the mentees, and how mentors are supported to become good mentors. Ten case studies from different countries were the basis for comparisons. By interpreting what has been described and demonstrated we tried to elaborate certain issues and emerging features. This is the background I am referring to.

Mentoring – to start with a definition – is in general a learning partnership between two persons within an institutional learning environment. The partnership is limited to a certain amount of time, aiming at mutual professional empowerment to ease processes of induction and transition. Mentoring takes place not only within internships of student teachers or within initial teacher training, but also within the professional career of experienced teachers.

The personal relationship between two persons: this does not mean that it is only a matter of personal character or chemistry, but a matter of forming each other a learning environment.

Keeping this in mind I am going to explain the guiding questions from which we looked at the case studies:

1. How can a person – the mentee - learn to become a good teacher?
2. Which conditions promote the learning environment for mentees?
3. How can mentors support the professional learning of somebody else?
4. What do mentors need to care for a supportive relationship?
5. Which conditions within a school promote an empowering mentorship?

We did not merely look at skills, knowledge, and attitudes of a “good” mentor. Being a good mentor is a matter of personal traits and competences, of course, but also a matter of

contextual factors: conditions, strategies, processes, and consequences. These contextual factors can be described like the *layers of an onion* around the professional development of the mentee.

1. Focussing the **mentee** some conditions or pre-requisites form a challenging as well as supporting learning environment:
 - *Motivating* pre-requisites like a basic commitment to schooling and teaching, a strong trust in one's own competences, and positive learning experiences
 - *Previous experiences* by promising access to knowledge, skills, and attitudes which are relevant to teaching in the classroom, being aware of models and examples, being able to refer to cases of teaching and learning, and a basic friendliness to errors,
 - *Opportunities for reflection* by means of time and space which allow getting and giving substantial feedback to one's performance, getting advice and suggestions for further development.

2. Focussing the **mentor** he/she can act like a model of a "reflective practitioner", creating actions and forming conditions under which the mentee might be able to grow:
 - *Motivation* may expand by defining goals of the partnership, by identifying certain needs of learning and by opening positive perspectives of a learning process.
 - *Opportunities for learning* are opened by clarifying criteria of a good teaching practice, by guidance, counseling, and modeling the professional role of the novice teacher, and by taking over leadership in a development process.
 - The mentor should be able to *organize feedback*: by means of active listening and multidimensional perspectives on the teaching performance. These strategies of communication are crucial competences.

3. From the **in-service perspective** of teacher education one has to question from where or how a mentor will be able to care for such learning conditions. The *expectations* on a good mentor are ambitious and very often overburdening. Under which conditions can one develop to be a good mentor?
 - There should be a *personal interest* in the task of mentoring a colleague.
 - This interest should be accompanied by a *commitment to a cooperative partnership*.
 - *Time and room* for mentoring should be an accessible resource.
 - Connections to other mentors are pre-requisite to reflection on the mentoring itself. *Networking* with other mentors helps to develop this professional branch of a teacher's role and
 - to develop *standards for "good" and effective mentoring*.

4. Within the **system of teacher education** mentoring should be a policy framed by conditions which contribute to the learning environment of the mentorship:
- approval for the mentoring teacher in terms of social, financial, or status related appreciation
 - formal extra time for mentoring
 - embedded in the institutional policy (of the school, of the teacher education institute)
 - feedback from a professional learning community
 - mentoring to become a relevant factor of the professional career.

Becoming a “good” qualified mentor within the context of teacher education and lifelong professional learning means

- to understand oneself as a teacher educator
- to be an experienced classroom teacher
- who is able to reflect on one’s action knowledge,
- to develop one’s own professional attitudes and knowledge
- referring to professional standards (goals, content) of teacher education
- to contribute to integrative theoretical and practical views on teaching practice
- beyond the mere demonstration of good classroom practice.

Shifting perspectives of further development

It is remarkable that in every description of mentoring practice a developmental perspective came in view: one describes how a certain situation is and in which way it should develop further. The developmental aspect was the most surprising, however well founded reasoning for shifts and changes:

- from classroom practice to school development,
- from mentee/ novice teacher connection to cooperative school teams,
- from an informal relationship to a professional qualification,
- from an individual task to a school policy,
- from supportive enhancement to modeling the professional development
- from focusing the novice teacher to empowering the whole staff of a school
- from performance of a traditional teaching practice to an innovative school development process.

The learning environment of “good mentoring” can be described in terms of **institutional organization**. We could figure three or four different types:

- (1) Within institutions of initial teacher education the mentor-mentee relationship is placed in short-term internships of teacher students. The mentee's experiences are in major interest, not the competences of a mentor.
- (2) In some cases there is an intermediate institution which organizes the practical experiences of teacher students or novice teachers. This system is aware of selecting mentors from which the students can gain the best profit.
- (3) Some systems look closer at the schools which provide opportunities for practical experiences. Mentoring is regarded as a relevant part of the school policy, and an exchange between mentors is institutionalized.
- (4) The more single schools are autonomous, the more they themselves are responsible for staff development. The internal system of mentor-mentee relationships is accompanied by supervisors and trainers within a school, but there are networks organized between mentors, supervisors, and trainers between different schools. This system apparently is integrating at its best the developmental aspects of mentoring novice teachers, training, staff development and quality assurance.

Mentors matter – in many different aspects of innovative school development.

The learning process between two people, but within a learning environment to be created by themselves and others.

Dietlind Fischer
Comenius-Institut
Schreiberstr. 12
D-48149 Muenster/ Germany

Dr. Jaap van Lakerveld
PLATO
University of Leiden