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Standard based 3-level mentoring in teacher education



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Summary

A mentor has the duty to design and construct a relationship where learning can efficiently take place. A model has been developed which differentiates 3 different levels of action: (a) practical doing, (b) scientific and practical background theory, (c) Professional self. Along with these three levels there are 3 corresponding conversational models: (aa) Feedback, (bb) Reflexive practical conversation and (cc) coaching. The purpose of this procedure is to focus on differing developmental impulses concerning the three levels.

Initial Position

How does one become a good teacher? There are two main reasons why this question is not easy to answer. Therefore mentoring is necessary for teachers.

The first reason lies in the very nature of educational relationships. If you bring your car to the garage for repairs in the morning, you can return in the evening and see the mechanic's success. Contrarily, pedagogical success is rarely tangible. Educational influence and learning in school takes its form in practical relationships. Anyone who has something to do with youth knows that in teaching and education success cannot be assured. Educational and practical goals can only be approximately reached (Combe, 1997, S. 10). One can even claim that the more important the goal, the less exact the success. This is what distinguishes swimming lessons from moral education. It is for this reason that teachers can rarely spontaneously answer the question: Of what part of your career are you most proud of?

Science cannot explain which skills good teachers are proud of. This is the second point that supports the use of mentoring. Practical experience does not allow scientific theory to determine it. What pedagogical authors such as Schleiermacher (1983, S. 434) or Herbart (1964) have long considered true about the relationship between theory and practical experience is now currently being confirmed (Bourdieu, 1992, S. 101; Schön, 1987, S. 26). The professional knowledge of teachers is tied to experience, is active and is situation specific (Carter, 1990, S. 307). Job specific scientific knowledge can, in certain circumstances, have influence on one's actions, but not determine them. The dream that a teacher's actions can be academically instilled is just that.

These two reasons make teaching difficult. You can agree upon standards. But when you observe teachers actions, the result never will be perfect. Therefore it is evident that student teachers are made aware that they should get in contact with others to discuss difficult situations. If possible, learning should be reflexive, situated and interactive. A socially based foundation is for this reason very important. Mentoring¹ is one possibility.

¹ Mentor (or Mentos) comes from Greek Mythology. He was a friend to Odysseus and took care of his son Telemach during his journeys. Mentos became both an emotional and intellectual guide to the youth. In this role he became the module for the modern term mentoring. (Strasser & Schliesselberger, 2000, S. 13).

Explanation of a diverse mentoring model

A corresponding modal should take into account the expounded structural openness of pedagogical actions. At the same time there must be possibilities to set educational standards in problem solving situations together. In diagram 1 the so called 3 level mentoring modal is presented. It is based upon these basic assumptions.

First, the three different levels of mentoring will be presented. These three levels are based on three different perspectives on how actions can be considered (compare Handal, G; Lauvas P, 1987, S 28).

The first level is concerned with the concrete and visible performance of one's actions. Here the visible part of "knowing how" is important (Ryle, 1969) since direct observation is possible. "Knowing how" is the preliminary stage of doing. This first level is connected with the visible performance of "knowing how", but also with multiple pieces of background knowledge (compare Herzog 1995, S. 261).

The second level concerns this back ground knowledge. This knowledge integrates various forms of knowledge. It is propositional, for example as knowledge in educational science or to a limited extent as subjective theory (Wahl, 1991, S. 188f). This knowledge is for the most part accessible through doing and not learned in a book (Herzog, 1995, S. 262). It is a part of "knowing how" and for this reason it is only possible to separate it analytically. Ryle (1969, S. 26 ff) differentiates the "knowing how" from "knowing that". Observations made on these two levels can lead to compatible observation standards which include background knowledge and practical doing (Oser, 1997).

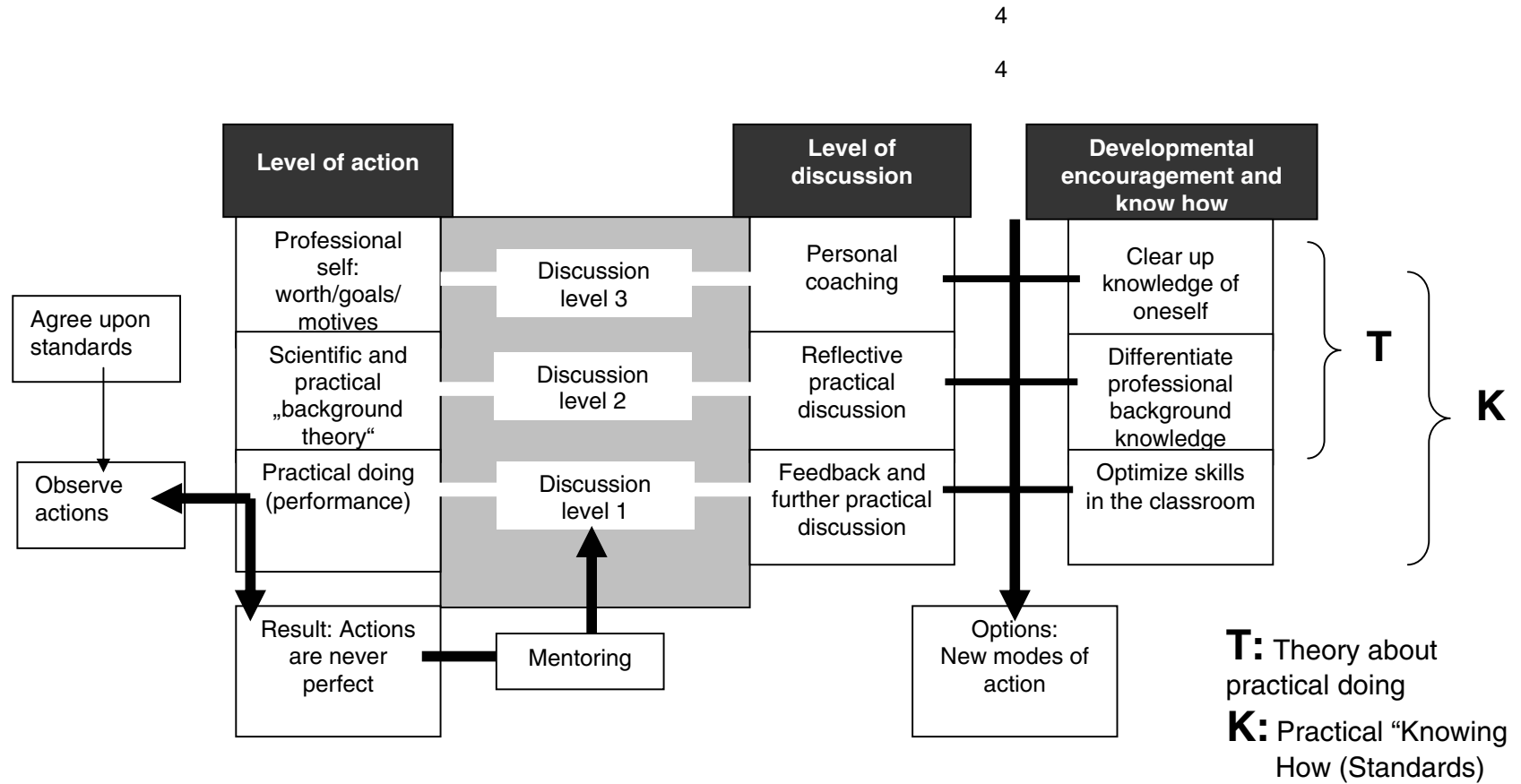


Diagram 1: 3-Level –Mentoring modal (3LM)

The third level concerns the occupational self conception of teachers. Since their actions never assure success, teachers often experience disappointment. Therefore a teacher's self worth is constantly being challenged. With this method teachers set goals for themselves and not for their pupils. The goals are the object of self awareness. In accordance with Bauer (1998, S. 344) there is understood to be a consciousness that directs personal developmental tasks. Teachers are challenged to plan their development concerning their profession. This personal level, as shown in the following example, is not to be separated from their actions taken while teaching.

A student teacher tried to encourage their class to participate in group work. He is fed up and says that he will avoid such cooperative work in the future. This experience can be discussed using the 3 levels.

Level 1, taking concrete measures: It could be further examined, whether compatible performance standards can be met. (Ex. Clearness of instructions, whether the task is suited for cooperative learning, etc.)

Level 2, background knowledge: Here, for instance, it would be good to clear up what pre-requisites for cooperative learning the class can and cannot offer and further with which point of views cooperative learning is compatible and not compatible with.

Level 3, occupational self conception²: Here it would be good to discuss possible disappointments that the student could encounter, to ask him about his ideals and goals and to search for strategies which could serve him to arrange short and middle term successes which up to this point have failed.

All in all, qualifications in the 3 level method become more general (s.Treml, 2000, S. 115). Using the first level concrete skills will be worked on. Using the second level, one is confronted with invisible yet regulated pre-requisites for one's behavior which can exist regardless of the concrete situation. Finally, concerning the third level, qualifications in the form of beliefs, superior goals and abilities are called upon. These can stabilize themselves over the long run.

Choosing a discussion method when mentoring

It must be clear to the mentor which level of action they want to focus on during the discussion. Each level of action has a corresponding discussion method (understood as a specific encouragement mood). For instance the first level as "feedback – extended practical discussion", the second level as "reflexive practical discussion". Developmental tasks are accompanied on the third level through coaching. Levels 1 and 2 determine a further treatment since explanative knowledge or the knowledge of the rules, contrary to practical doing, must first be transformed into "knowing how". Level 3 concerns the character of the teacher. Therefore it is clear that on this level there is an entirely different discussion logic being used than in a discussion about standardized occupational knowledge.

Which discussion method to use is not something to be simply decided upon. Mentors are encouraged to test whether their observations are relevant to the various discussion levels. Before they start a discussion they should make a list of important observations and to which level they correspond. The way in which they lead the discussion should be based upon this classification. This means: a group of events will be mentioned during the feedback stage and will not be further discussed. Together the mentor and student will

² This terminology used by Bauer (1998) is not very precise. He was open to the idea of developmental tasks which concern people as human beings and not individual qualifications.

try and find an explanation for other events. In some circumstances the personal directional level must be approached through coaching. In the mentoring process it is important that the levels used in the various discussion types should be rotated and not be mixed for no reason. Only in this way can the different development levels be deliberately focused upon.

An explanation of the discussion levels in 3-Level–Mentoring (3LM)

The goal of a mentor, in all 3 levels, is to encourage the development of professional skills. Their influence in the 3 levels differentiates themselves as follows:

Level 1: A response or feedback given for concrete perceivable classroom behavior

Practical efficient rules account as a scale of quality. Actions are observed through an instrumental perspective. What is successful and what not? A means to an end rational serves as a guide. Basic skills which are perceivable differentiate themselves as closed or open according to the context (Tomlinson, 1998, S.15). Closed skills have little context. They are algorithmically described and learned (example: to hold a comprehensible small speech). Open, complex skills have more context (ex.: putting group work adequately in place). The corresponding discussion form orients itself on prevailing feedback rules, including those which are adapted for educational means (s. Antons, 1996). The way one enters into the discussion returns to the central concern of practical effectiveness. Good examples are the following:

"I found your following measures to be very effective..."

"The students probably could have learned the lesson better, when you..."

In normal cases the amount of positive feedback is higher than tips given in order to optimize the teacher's behavior. Because of the unsure results of a teacher's educational efforts, prospective teachers are given supportive tips concerning the impact of their actions. Confirmative statements are decisive for their self-assessment and most of all for their self efficiency (Hertramp & Herrmann, 1999). Self-efficiency is a basic theoretical approach for success in feedback discussion.

Level 2: Explanation of background knowledge through reflective practical discussion.

The reference point of level 2 is knowledge which is separate from the activity at hand. This base knowledge can come from various sources (vgl. Schulman, 1986, 1987). It concerns even nomological knowledge of scientific disciplines as well as professional knowledge of competent teachers. The corresponding reflective discussion depends on the agreement on the explanative knowledge. Reflection should lead to the differentiation of background knowledge. It has proved itself to be practical to structure such discussions as following:

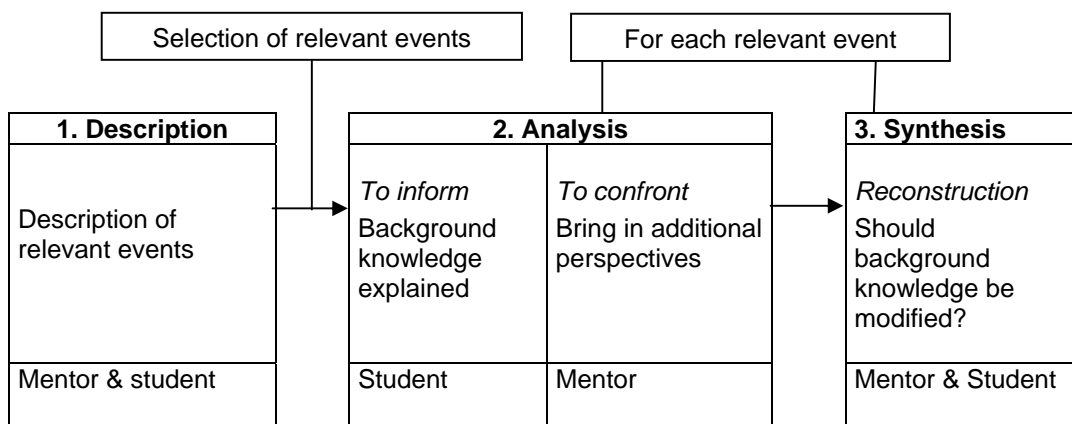


Diagram 2: Phases of reflective practical discussion

To start out, perceived realities from both parties are described. The mentor then gives impulses towards the personal explanation of the background knowledge (ex.: What assumptions did you make towards any previous knowledge the students may have had?). The remarks made by the mentor are meant to inspire and may or may not be considered by the student. An appropriate system of discussion categories is worked upon (s. Niggli, 2001). The theoretical paradigm known as “conceptual change” works as a guide (Posner et al., 1982). According to the situational requirements, the student progressively allows the mentor to have more influence. : “emotional acceptance” – “encouragement” – “acceptance of background knowledge” – “cause for inquiry” – “offering of information” – “giving directions” – “overcoming problematic situations”. As demanded the reality of the situation is examined and together new background knowledge is generated. In the final phase, background knowledge is therefore newly structured. (ex.: Are there things that you now see differently than you did at the beginning of our discussion?). Conceptual change has now taken place.

Level 3: The way of approaching one’s occupational self through character oriented coaching.

Discussion done in the form of coaching encourages self understanding. This self-reflection has a diagnostic function. This should not lead to a focus on inadequacies. Subjectivity is more important than evaluation. Meaning:

- understanding oneself as an ongoing project and to act accordingly
- to reflect on one’s actions and learning process

This process can not happen when one concentrates only on one’s self, others must also be included otherwise the conflict only with oneself becomes the focal point (Geissler, 1996, S. 259f.). Mentors have therefore a very important role to play. This awareness process is structured in two looping sequences (Furter, 2000). Starting from the present, questions are asked concerning the problem at hand. Then a loop is formed by going into the past in order to understand the causes of the situation. The path reverts back to the person being coached. They are the ones responsible for making decisions.

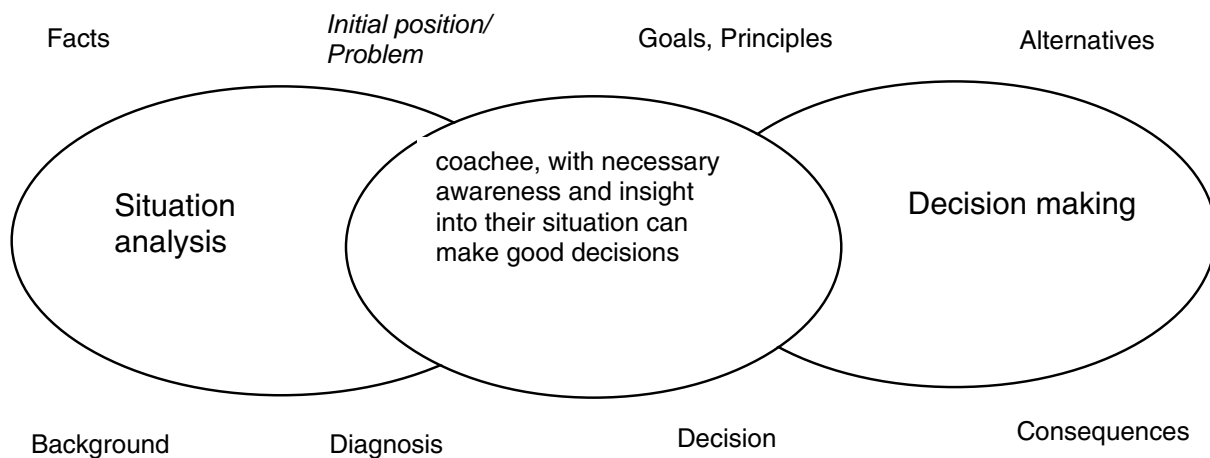


Diagram 3: The cognitive process in coaching (Furter 2000)

The following loop in which decision making takes place starts with goals and principles set up by the person being coached. They answer the question: What would future situations look like and what would be the consequences? The path turns back on the student who finally must make a decision. The job of the coach is to lead the student through these loops and structure the various phases. The most important tool the coach has is the questioning technique which uses only open questions. This technique is rather non-direct.

Besides this behavior there is a difference between a coaching situation and an advisory situation which has its roots in a therapeutic process. The autonomy of the client is limited in a professional educational culture. A publicly financed education is oriented towards certain professional educational standards and quality specifications.

Pre-requisite for essential developmental encouragement

Reflection is concentrated mostly on both "T"(theory)-levels of the action taken (s. Diagram 1, understood as practical theory about myself and about professional knowledge). A primarily analytical reflection would not be sufficient for professional development. Knowing how "K" stands for all 3 levels of action, therefore: action and reflection. Mentoring must also generate security. Therefore positive feedback on successful actions is fundamental. Action and reflection in the mentoring process should collude. Finally, options are formulated which not only change background knowledge but practical doing as well into a skill. Supported through the experiences which have been worked through and processed, new and realistic goals will be set. This newly acquired knowledge can only become practical when first used in a teaching environment. Professional development takes place after analyzing or dissecting ones imperfections. When this process is not only perceivable, but also seen as an on going project than one's confidence is also raised. This newly found confidence is a motivator to keep working. Both the mentor and student have influence on this process in that through feedback it is appropriated, through reflection it is differentiated and through coaching it is guided.

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