

A case of mentoring within pre-service teacher education

Nadine Engels

1. Setting within the teacher education system/ organisation

The mentoring relationship described in this case study takes place in the context of initial teacher education at university level within the Free University of Brussels. Students take the teacher education course after a masters degree. The case described here involves students and a mentor with a masters degree in Roman languages (French & Italian or Spanish or Portuguese). The case is not illustrative for teacher education at the universities (contexts and curricula – and therefore roles of mentors – differ) and not illustrative for teacher education at this university either (Roman languages department pays a lot of attention to the selection and training of mentors while others do not).

For supervising, counselling, coaching and assessment related to the teaching practice in the teacher education curriculum at this university, several parties are involved:

- a supervisor¹ from the institution – subject and subject methodology specialist – who organizes the teaching practice, and visits the student 2 to 3 times in the school to observe, give feedback, and in the end assess;
- a counsellor at the institution who brings together learning groups – 3 to 4 students – to reflect once a week on their experiences in teaching practice. The learning groups work together during ten weeks in sessions of one and an half hour. The students decide which experiences they bring into the learning group. The counsellor monitors the process and stimulates the group to make the experience explicit, asks questions to deepen their understanding of the experience, and encourages them to find solutions, new approaches to the problems they were confronted with in teaching practice. The counsellor also switches to meta-reflection mode from time to time to make students aware of the process of reflection. Towards the end of the ten weeks students should be able to monitor the process of learning from their experiences, through reflection, themselves;
- a mentor: the classroom teacher who's class the student teacher is taking over and who is responsible for coaching the student teacher in a 1-1 relationship. After a few lessons taught by the student and observed by the mentor, both of them negotiate the objectives of the coaching, and set priorities. Before each of the following lessons, they decide on the aspects to focus on. The mentor observes the aspects of teaching they agreed on and during the debriefing mirrors the student's and pupils' behaviour. The mentor also writes feedback reports for the student and the supervisor.

Although different types of mentoring are involved here, this description will focus on the role of the last mentioned who works in 'a learning partnership of two persons' as described in the case format instructions.

This case is written from the point of view of the responsible for the team of counsellors and at the same time one of the trainers of the mentors involved.

¹ Supervision has different meanings in several national contexts. In the context of this description it is used more or less in the traditional English meaning of superintendence, while in Flanders, the Netherlands, Germany the term is often used referring to a method of counselling, closer to the description of the task of the counsellor as described above.

2. Roles and tasks of a mentor

The mentors in the teacher training for Roman languages are recruited by the supervisor, who tries to build a strong network of mentors. The mentors are selected from those teachers who attended the supervisor's in-service courses, who were recommended by the pedagogical advisors, or motivated ex-students with a good profile. Those ex-students for instance, join the mentor network after a few years of practice, attend the mentor meetings at the university (once or twice a year) for a while (without having a student to coach), and then – after a short training – are involved as mentors. This is a rather informal procedure, but one which allows the supervisor to select mentors carefully. Though her selection criteria might not be very explicit, she has them. She selects teachers who are motivated, known as good teachers, interested in further professional development, prepared to engage in the mentors network, prepared to take responsibility for the social task to introduce student teachers into the teaching profession.

In the context of teacher education, mentors are paid an almost symbolic amount of money by the Free University of Brussels. To pay the mentors is a strictly institutional decision. Some may pay more, many other institutions do not pay mentors at all. Mentoring in the context of teacher education is considered as a social duty each generation of teachers has towards the next. The statement that one is recognised by a teacher training institution as a mentor might be taken into account if the teacher tries to postulate for a better position, but it has no official status.

Until now, being a mentor for students in teacher education is something you do on top of your job.

The tasks of the mentors in this case are

- being observed and discuss their actions afterwards with the student;
- instruct the students about the subjects and goals for the lessons they have to teach;
- inform the students on the features of the pupils and groups they have to teach;
- to encourage students to experiment with methods and approaches;
- review and give feedback on the schemes/preparations of the lessons beforehand;
- observe lessons with pre-structured observation forms;
- analyse the first lessons together with the students: make an inventory of the strengths and weaknesses they both agree on, analyse the relations between the identified problems in order to find the central problem(s), negotiate the objectives for the coaching, discuss in which order they will work on them
- coaching:
 1. pre-observation conferencing: discuss the objective to work on during the lesson (the student explains how s/he will try to improve aspects related to this objective) and agree on the procedures (*what* to observe exactly; what to expect from each other during the debriefing),
 2. nonjudgmental observation of aspects agreed on,
 3. post-observation conferencing: student looks back on lesson, mentor fills in the picture with his/her observations when necessary, they evaluate together and discuss possible improvements for the same problem or select another objective for the next lesson;
- write feedback for the student on the observation report;
- report to the supervisor about the progress of the student.

In the scheme of this teacher education course, the roles and responsibilities of those assisting the student in learning in and from practice are clearly defined. The counsellors focus in the first place on the personal learning in becoming a professional, help the student teacher to

become aware of his/her professional behaviour and the beliefs, emotions, personal habits and convictions on which it is based and promote learning through reflection on action. They do not visit the students in the school and do not observe lessons, though the student might bring a videotape of a lesson to the learning group and the counsellor might choose to work with it with the method of stimulated recall. However, the counsellor will not assess the teaching competences but he will assess the student's competences in professional learning. Making the student conscious of his teaching behaviour and underpinning cognition should facilitate the task of the mentor, who is supposed to be more focused on task performance and work more goal oriented compared with the counsellors who work person oriented. Both mentors and supervisors focus on teaching competences, but the latter's task involves appraisal and assessment.

3. Roles and tasks of the mentee

The mentee is in this context expected to take responsibility for his/her learning. This is quite obvious for the learning group activities, since it is the student who decides on the learning content (by selecting the experiences s/he wants to bring in the group as learning material) and who has to take gradually more responsibility for his/her and his/her colleagues learning process. It might be less obvious in the mentor – mentee relationship. Just like many student teachers tend, subconsciously, to copy certain role models during their first teaching experiences, mentors tend to copy mentor models. The impact of modelling is very strong and the traditional mentor in teacher training tended to act as 'the one who knows it all' in a relation to 'the one who has to learn it all'. This putted the mentee in a subordinate position, trying to comply with the advice and demands of the mentor. Compliance often resulted in superficial changes in students' teaching behaviour (for the sake of the mentor) without much long term effect on their later teaching.

The supervisor in this case encourages the mentors to give the students more responsibility for their learning. Mentees are supposed to take an active role in identifying their strengths and weaknesses, in setting learning goals for themselves, in finding alternative approaches to teaching. Mentees are supposed to write a reflection report after each lesson.

4. Supporting structures in the professional context

The core group of mentors in Roman Languages teacher education has been trained about 5 years ago in an intensive 'train the trainer' in service project. The focus was both on new methods for language teaching (updating – new approaches in foreign language teaching) and on counselling and coaching techniques (mentor role).

When new mentors join the network, an intensive training day on counselling and coaching is organised for them (a 'starters package'). In an experiential approach topics related to the mentor's tasks are discussed and certain aspects are trained. (E.g. observation, how to use observation material in post-observation conferencing with the student, how to select and negotiate learning goals, how to structure and stimulate students' reflection on action in post-observation conferencing.)

Each year the mentor network and the supervisor have meetings (one or two days a year). The purposes of these meetings are to keep the mentors informed about developments in the teacher education curriculum, to discuss new approaches in foreign language teaching, to discuss standards students have to meet, to develop materials together (e.g. forms for preparation of lessons, for evaluation, observation, ...), to reflect on problematic issues of mentoring (suggested by one or more mentors), to provide continuing professional development related to mentoring.

The fact that the mentors in this case are considered and treated as full partners in the process of developing a powerful learning environment for the student teachers, is probably an important factor for the success of these meetings.

A decisive factor to start the training of supervisors and mentors in teacher education at this university, were the results of a research project within the own teacher training on the effects – or rather non-effects – of mentoring by experienced teachers who had not been trained as mentors (Van Looy, 1991²). The effects of the interventions of mentors - mainly criticizing, judging, advising – on the teaching behaviour of the student-teachers were negligible. Besides, there was little difference between the style and contents of the interventions of mentors and supervisors visiting the student teachers in the classroom. On the basis of this study, the department choose for a model with complementary roles as described in paragraphs 1 and 2.

Since being a mentor has the status of volunteer work, there is no official benchmarking. However, as explained in paragraph 2, the supervisor in this case has her own criteria for the selection of mentors.

5. Theory and research to models of mentoring

It's hard to give “a” definition of good mentoring. A definition depends on the context of professional development in which mentoring is embedded and the tasks of the mentor within that context. In an earlier study on induction support for beginning teachers (Engels, e.a., 2003, pp. 14-15)³, we described the profile of a good mentor as follows:

“He must be able to plan, organise and negotiate; he should have a positive attitude towards his profession and be one who is trusted by his colleagues; he must have enough professional knowledge to be able to understand and frame his own and beginning teachers’ experiences; he has to be able to create a climate of openness and trust, and to value the beginning teacher’s qualities; and he has to master the skills for coaching and counselling. This involves a strong commitment from the mentor’s side. The quality of the relationship between the mentor and the beginning teacher is important. Working together in an open problem solving approach increases the confidence of the beginning teaching.

Recommendations

- 1) *The mentors are considered as good and experienced teachers in their school.*
- 2) *They can communicate their philosophy on education and teaching.*
- 3) *They can take initiatives and are efficient organisers.*
- 4) *They are interested in coaching.*
- 5) *They are enthusiastic, patient, flexible.*
- 6) *Empathy, acceptance of the other and genuineness are part of their basic attitude.*
- 7) *They are open to other opinions and ideas and good listening skills.*
- 8) *They can link theory and practice*
- 9) *They can analyse and reflect on their own approach to teaching.*
- 10) *They discuss the beginning teacher’s experiences and concerns in problem solving approach and stimulate systematic reflection.*
- 11) *They are aware of recent developments in education.*

² Van Looy, L. (1991). Studie van de efficiëntie van de nabespreking op het lesgeefgedrag van aanstaande leraren lichamelijke opvoeding, gemeten met de Academic Learning Time for Physical education., Vrije Universiteit Brussel: proefschrift

³ Engels, N. e.a. (2003). Induction support for beginning teachers. Recommendations for policy makers, school management and mentors., Brochure issued as a result of a Comenius project

12) They have recent information on initial teacher training programmes.

13) They are trained in coaching and counselling, which involves competencies in adult learning.”

Within an experiential learning approach of teachers professional development, most of the features described are generic for mentoring in different contexts. Within the context of this case ‘modelling teaching and general classroom management combined with explanation on the thoughts and beliefs behind their decisions, and analysis and discussion of their own practice’, ‘negotiating learning goals with students’, ‘giving student teachers opportunities for experiments with innovative ideas’ might be added to the list.