

Researching with mentors

Enhancing mentor autonomy and leadership skills

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Inclusive research

Over the past year I have been researching **with** and not just **on** or **about** mentors. Primarily during training sessions, but also on school visits where time is dedicated to subject-related discussions between tutor(s), the mentor(s) and other colleagues if appropriate, the aim has been to increase mentors' autonomy and their leadership skills. This joint approach to MFL teacher education provides an opportunity to share leadership skills and do collaborative research.

Developing the community of practice

The training partnership provides an overarching framework for an ongoing subject dialogue ranging from ways of teaching MFL to its survival as a valuable and robust part of the curriculum. This partnership comprises tutors, mentors and, as main beneficiaries, the students, and forms an integral part of our community of practice. The students provide the focus for collaborative learning for mentors and tutors to take a lead in undertaking joint lesson observations, evaluation and reflection. Some mentors have stood out in our training sessions as natural leaders and, building on their ability, mentor sessions changed from training largely based on HEI tutor input to meetings in which different mentors took a lead. During these meetings, I observed instances of peer-coaching and leadership skills and decided to record some of the training meetings, initially for my own research purposes.

My analysis of the transcripts of

a small group of mentors revealed ways in which mentor leadership manifests itself and how mentors and tutors were learning from each other.

I decided, as a follow-up, to discuss some of the recorded material with mentors, thus sharing the practitioner research. I present a snapshot of one of my transcripts below in which mentors and a tutor discuss a student teacher's first attempts at teaching, while exchanging practical solutions to issues affecting the student's progress.

Students teaching: Snakes and ladders



Watching children enjoy old-fashioned board games such as snakes and ladders and tiddlywinks, in an after-school club at a local primary school, the snakes and ladder concept reminded me of student teachers beginning their first teaching practice in school. Students often experience and focus perhaps rather too much on snakes, i.e. what they perceive as unsuccessful first attempts. This often leaves them struggling to get on the ladders of confidence to build successful experiences. A noticeable preoccupation with class management issues on the part of the students may resonate with other colleagues' experiences. Snakes and ladders is used in the following transcript of a session as a metaphor representing early attempts at teaching:

Mentor 1: [1] Tina*, my student, is trying really hard, maybe too hard. She wants everything to be [2] right and so far has had one really good lesson and one not-so-great lesson and all she [3] focuses on is the one that didn't go well.

Jane Jones (JJ): [4] Oh yes, the 'snake' and not the 'ladder'. So what happened?

Mentor 1: [5] She was trying to cover too much and she was getting frustrated as the class wouldn't be [6] quiet for very long and she didn't cover half of what she wanted. She also has had a lot [7] of boyfriend problems recently and she has talked to me about this.

JJ: [8] What was the successful lesson like?

Mentor 1: [9] She did a PowerPoint presentation about the school system in Germany for Year 10. They liked [10] that.

JJ: [11] Mmm, I see. A different kind of lesson. What do colleagues think?

Mentor 2: [12] I think Tina has to learn to separate personal issues from those to do with training [13] and deal with them separately. I accept that they sometimes have personal issues that [14] have an impact on their lessons and things and I am happy to talk to them about this [15], but I also think they have to focus on their lessons and how to evaluate them [16] constructively. In my weekly session I always start by asking them to identify the three best [17] parts of the lesson, even in a lesson that, in my opinion, wasn't so good. I can prompt [18] them if I have to.

Mentor 3: [19] That's a good idea, better than you just asking them to identify the strengths and [20] weaknesses of the lesson

Mentor 2: [21] You can then go to the three things they can improve or do differently. I never do more [22] than three so as not to completely destroy their confidence. You can always pick up on [23] other issues another time.

There was lively discussion about other students and strategies that could be used. At a later point in the session, an experienced mentor took charge of the direction of the session:

Mentor 2: [24] I talk about other strategies and other sorts of body language and identifying [25] individuals, the sort of comments you can make to restore order, graded threats, [26] changing activity, that kind of thing. I don't think they are aware of the range of [27] possible strategies.

JJ: [28] That's great, could you please sum up for us the key issues of our discussion?

Mentor 1: [29] Can I suggest something else? Could we each reflect privately on what are the key [30] issues for us and then share them?

JJ: [31] [a bit taken aback] Excellent idea. Let's do that [general murmur of approval. All write busily and for longer than expected.]

*The student's name was changed to protect their identity.

Mentor leadership

Participants at this training session focus on the student teacher's progress, and, at the same time, experience different kinds of teacher learning as the discourse develops. Mentor 2 (12–18) comments show reflection separating the student's personal issues from constructive lesson evaluation. She then outlines the details of her concept of lesson evaluation (21–23). Mentor 1 compares this to other approaches and acknowledges her colleague's professional knowledge. This interaction not only reveals peer-coaching, but also the mutual respect the mentors show towards each other as experienced practitioners.

An instance of leadership occurs when Mentor 2 takes the lead (24–25) and opens the discussion about further strategies. Mentor 1 leads with her suggestion to share ownership of planning and set targets for future sessions. My (the tutor's) initial reaction of being 'a bit taken aback' was a result of mentors perhaps somewhat unexpectedly taking the lead. A willingness to listen to each other and to exchange good practice and professional knowledge based on mutual respect are the cornerstones of this training partnership. It is this basis which enables tutor and mentors to develop a consensus of clear messages and targets that can be conveyed to the student teachers to build up their confidence. Mentor training sessions conducted on this basis of shared leadership, peer-coaching and exchange of professional knowledge can create opportunities for a more constructive dialogue and for practitioners to research their own practice.

Teach languages in England

Regional seminars for Foreign Language Assistants

While many Foreign Language Assistants head home at the end of the year having notched up an interesting experience in the UK, many others are keen to explore other options – to develop their teaching experience and qualifications, and to work in the UK as fully qualified teachers of languages. CILT is keen to encourage them to do this, as it is an excellent way of boosting the number of experienced native-speaker teachers in our language classrooms.

We will again be holding a series of information seminars for Foreign Language Assistants. They are run in conjunction with ITT providers in each of the English regions at the higher education institutions listed below.

The seminar content will include: what it's like to be a teacher in England, the various routes into teaching, and presentations from current trainees who have made the transition from Foreign Language Assistant to trainee teacher. Content is tailored to an audience of native speakers.

One of our participants last year told us: 'It's very useful to get information in a more personal way and to ask questions to well-informed people'.

2006 programme

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6 Feb	Nottingham University
8 Feb	Newcastle University
9 Feb	Liverpool Hope University
15 Feb	Exeter University
21 Feb	Leeds University
23 Feb	Kings College London
24 Feb	Birmingham University
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All sessions will run from 14.00–16.30.	

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