Abstract

This paper reports on the perceptions of stakeholders in three Further Education (FE) establishments in South Wales regarding the role of mentoring. For this study the main emphasis will revolve around one specific stakeholder only – the teaching staff. FE can be somewhat confusing to those outside the sector (Pring, 1995) but is it less so for those within the sector? Hence what FE means to these stakeholders and the role of colleges in today’s society will be investigated.

Mentoring as a concept is not new and can be traced back to ancient times through Greek literature. However, mentoring at the moment appears to be a favourite topical policy and has become the subject of intense academic study and experimentation (Clutterbuck, 2000). It is currently being implemented and used across all educational sectors: from peer mentoring in schools to aid problems with bullying, to professional development for teachers, management and support staff. Mentoring concepts, roles, processes and procedure will be discussed and how these sit within an FE environment. Thus, the perceptions of staff on how mentoring is used and the roles seen to operate in reality within FE, will be revealed.

The research methods employed for this study are mainly qualitative although some quantitative data is produced. Overall the data is presented as case studies (Gillham, 2000; De Vaus, 2001) in order that comparisons can be made. The instruments used to gather data revolve around individual semi-structured interviews using opportunistic sampling methods. Patterns and themes originating from the data will be analysed (Boyatzis, 1998) and from this evaluation, conclusions and recommendations proposed.

It was anticipated that this small investigation would reveal that mentoring within FE could be seen at both informal and formal levels. Mentoring as a training tool for new employees would be seen mainly in the management structure of the establishment and would be less visible in other layers. Expectations were that staff would still see the mentoring role as an important part of ‘good teaching’ (Wallace and Gravells, 2005). The expected perceptions of staff regarding the role of FE in today’s society, would be that it still remains all things to all people and that the management of constant change are big issues within the sector. Preliminary results indicate that this is indeed true. Initial results also indicate that the more formal mentoring roles through the likes of tutoring/mentoring students (via pastoral care), as well as mentoring trainee teachers, is becoming less desirable as workloads for staff in FE increase. These mentoring elements are not given high enough credence by
management and FE policy makers. Hence, this leaves teaching staff struggling not only with heavy workloads but their own professionalism; plus the perceptions of what constitutes a good teacher and their role in society.

Some limitations to this study are natural (Creswell, 2005). This is a small project and indeed a ‘work-in-progress’ research project; data gathered over a number of years may prove more beneficial. Further studies involving other stakeholders would be revealing and aid the holistic vision of mentoring activities and perceptions in FE to date. It is hoped that further work will enable these aspects of research to be covered at a later date. However it is anticipated that these initial research findings will prove useful: adding to the debate and evaluation of mentoring within education as a whole. This paper goes some way in addressing and highlighting issues relevant in FE today. Thus, recommendations to promote and enhance mentoring in the field will be suggested.

**Key Words**: Mentoring, Further Education (FE), Teaching Roles, Stakeholders Perceptions, Educational Policy, Management of Change.

**Introduction**

‘To some, mentoring is a new and highly effective means of identifying and developing high-flyers: to others it is a means of speeding and facilitating the induction of young people in general. It can also be seen as an effective door to middle and senior management… Finally, some people see it as a dangerous process that can amplify favouritism and exclusive networks within the corporation’ (Clutterbuck, 2000, P.1).

Mentoring is not a new concept or practice; it can be traced back to Greek mythology with the story of Mentor in Homer’s Odyssey. Thus, the word ‘mentor’ has become synonymous with trusted advisor, friend, teacher and wise person. Student, learner, protégé and mentee are terms used for the other side of the coin/relationship. Mentoring at the moment appears to be a favourite topical policy and has become the subject of intense academic study and experimentation (Clutterbuck, 2000). It is currently being implemented and used across all educational sectors: from peer mentoring in schools to aid problems with bullying, to professional development for teachers, management and support staff.

However, the definition of mentoring is hard to pin down. Many people continue to confuse mentoring with related concepts such as coaching and counselling. This perhaps is understandable when many similar skills are evident in all these roles. Confusion exists to the actual role or practice of mentoring due to the fact that the concept has evolved differently in North America to the rest of Europe. In North America the term protégé and not mentee is used to describe a mentor relationship where the learner is younger, less powerful and naïve who is guided by an older,
senior and more powerful individual. The main aim is one of sponsorship and advice on making the right career moves.

In Europe the mentor may not necessarily be senior or more powerful than the learner or mentee but have the appropriate experience relevant to the mentee’s needs. Learning and development through self management (together with mutual learning) is encouraged rather than sponsorship.

Mentoring is defined as a process which supports learning and development and thus performance improvements, either for an individual, team or business (Sutton Regeneration Partnership, 1999). Other definitions state its purpose is to support and encourage people to manage their own learning in order that they maximize their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be (Parsloe and Wray, 2000). Another definition explains that mentoring is off-line help by one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking (Megginson and Clutterbuck, 1995).

Mentoring, used as a process in education between teachers and students to aid development, can also be used between members of staff to aid one another within their working environment. Thus, used as an employee training tool. In this use mentoring can be seen as a scheme to improve organisational effectiveness through increased motivation, supporting change, improving staff retention, better recruitment and increased overall learning and training. Indeed research suggests that individuals, who hold roles as mentors advance more rapidly in an organisation, earn higher salaries, have a favourable work attitude and are more retainable (Allen and Eby, 2004)

The role of a mentor is to assist the mentee in making the appropriate transition, action or decision – but not to do the work for them. Even if a very informal approach is taken to mentoring, an important aspect will be developing the mentee’s personal (and professional) development. This can be achieved through a plan; a personal development plan. However, it must be remembered that it is the mentee who is in control of this and has ownership, not the mentor.

Patience and active listening is required by the mentor to ensure a mentoring relationship which can be supportive, positive, flexible, reflective, confidential and two-way. There are various models of mentoring but almost all will incorporate the following elements: establish learning needs and set up a Personal Development Plan; start the learning process by enabling the mentee to become an independent learner; the mentor facilitates the achievement of learning objectives and evaluate the success of the relationship. A successful mentoring scheme must consider matching the right mentor to the mentee, give appropriate training, and provide management support plus time and appropriate resources. Indeed O’Connor and Laidlaw (2006, p. 46) reminds us that: ‘The matching of mentor to mentee is one of the most important parts of a mentoring programme but can also be one of the most problematic’.

Mentoring relationships are usually voluntary and trust- based but can also be formal or informal arrangements. Both parties often share very personal thoughts and feelings. Mentor and mentee must therefore protect each others reputation by respecting the confidentiality and privacy of the meeting.
Most of the literature on mentoring seems to focus on mentoring within a business environment and the benefits associated with this for the organisation. Literature on mentoring in FE is mainly found as articles in journals. Normally based on research within FE colleges they can provide a useful insight into current issues about mentoring. Research also suggests some gender differences in the mentoring role in that male mentors reported providing more career mentoring where as female mentors more psychosocial mentoring (Allen and Eby, 2004). Woodd (2001) argues that different individuals would perceive and interpret the role of mentoring differently from one another. Also, the level of skills would differ in each individual (for example communications), depending upon their subject background.

FE has always been dynamic in its educational approach and pro-active rather than re-active regarding change (Pring, 1995). This has been a natural necessity in an ever changing social and industrial environment and is even more important with competition from bodies such as training agencies, schools expanding their curriculum to include vocational qualifications and post-16 provision, and the necessity of responding to a changing economy.

FE colleges are now at the heart of the drive to meet the skills and productivity challenge of the economy. This can be seen in report such as the Leitch report (2006) and to some degree the Webb report (2007) which centred on the role of FE in Wales. However, with the economic climate being in recession, change is again on the agenda as outlined by the Innovation, University, Science and Skills Committee.

‘Lord Leitch published his review of skills two years ago, in December 2006. It set out ambitious targets for ‘up-skilling’ the UK population which government adopted enthusiastically. But since then the economic climate has worsened, and our evidence was taken at a time when the thrust of skills policy was already under review... Re-skilling, rather than up-skilling, is increasingly becoming the norm and it is our view that targets and the government allocation of resources must change to reflect that’ (Innovation, University, Science and Skills Committee, 2009; P. 3).

Study Design and Methodology

As this study is about the perceptions of FE staff regarding mentoring, the methodology which needed to be adopted would be qualitative. However, as with all research, some quantitative data would naturally occur and be collected. In social sciences a main contender for gathering qualitative data is the interview; which can be done via telephone, video-conferencing or electronic links, or through face-to-face personal contact (Cohen, 2007). Consideration regarding format is also required: formal versus in-formal, structured versus un-structured, group versus individual (Bell, 1999).

After some deliberation it was decided that individual, face-to-face, semi formal, semi-structured interviews would be used as the data gathering instrument for this
small research project. This would allow for probing vague or interesting answers from interviewees, ensuring the collection of potentially rich qualitative data for analysis.

The interviews were designed with approximately 18 questions in total, although due to their semi-formal structure this would vary slightly due to the effects of probing various responses, an advantage the interview has over questionnaires (Bell, 1999). The questions posed consisted of 8 at the beginning of the interview which were closed in style whilst the latter 10 would be open.

The sampling method used for this study was opportunistic, in that individuals known would be approached to ask for co-operation and involvement in the research. This was completed by telephone initially. All three individuals approached gave their consent and were in fact interviewed within a three week time scale during March/April 2009. The interviews were taped, after gaining permission, and then transcribed. The interviewees consisted of two females and one male FE staff member and all three were from different colleges in South East Wales; although it should be noted that gender is not an issue under investigation at this time. All three interviewees are full-time members of staff in their respective colleges but do all have different curriculum and subject backgrounds. The three interviewees will be presented as case studies (Case Study A, B and C), representing as they do, different FE colleges in the South East Wales area (Gillham, 2000; De Vaus, 2001).

The analysis methods employed used identifying key words or terms and examining patterns in the data collected (Boyatzis, 1998). This was completed manually with coloured pens and highlighters although a word search on Word was used initially. A number of computer software packages are available to aid in the analysis task, but training is usually a requirement. Due to time constraints this was not completed. However, analysis by hand allows the researcher to be ‘close to the material’, which can be useful and relevant for small scale research projects (Creswell, 2005, p.234). However, as Boyatzis (1998, p.161) discovered: ‘… thematic analysis is not easy to use… it typically takes more time and energy than quantitative techniques’. Key words were highlighted to form categories which then formed the emergent themes. Interview data comparison and layered analysis (Bardsley, 2006 – now Oti) will be used for future reports but will not form part of this paper. The three main themes are as follows and will be used to present the case study findings.

1) The role of FE today (what roles do the interviewees see in their own workplace).

2) The use of mentoring in FE (as experienced by the interviewee, and whether it is formal or informal).

3) The implications of effective mentoring (the effects that mentoring can or may have on a number of factors).

It was expected that this small investigation would reveal that mentoring by FE staff is seen at both informal and formal levels in their own establishments. Mentoring as a training tool for new employees would be seen mainly in the management structure of the establishment and would be less visible in other layers. However, staff would still see the mentoring role as an important part ‘of good teaching’ (Wallace and Gravells,
The expected perceptions of staff regarding the role of FE in today’s society, would be that it still remains all things to all people and that the management of constant change are big issues within the sector. Also anticipated is that the more formal mentoring roles through the likes of tutoring/mentoring students (via pastoral care), as well as mentoring trainee teachers, is becoming less desirable as workloads for staff in FE increase.

Limitations

The major limitation surrounding this study is the small number of Case Study representatives. Greater numbers from each of the three FE colleges would bring greater validity and perhaps greater credibility to the results. Also this study has examined the perceptions of one stakeholder only – teaching staff. Contributions from other stakeholders would also prove useful. Nevertheless, the contributions made from the three interviewees are worthwhile and relevant, although care is needed about generalisation overall. It is hoped that future years will bring additional contributions, and therefore greater data, to illuminate various mentoring issues.

Another research flaw could be the use of just one research instrument when gathering data (the interview), as triangulation is not apparent. However, as stated earlier this was a small study and therefore some of these limitations are naturally inherent.

Opportunistic sampling also has some negative connotations in that the respondents are generally known to the interviewer. This could have what is called ‘the halo effect’ (Creswell, 2005) because respondents may want to please and thus provide answers they feel the research/interviewer may want to hear.

Also, these factors aside, it is still important to note that there is always an element of subjectivity in any analysis of qualitative data. Nevertheless, efforts have been made to ensure little or no bias and that all limitations are kept to a minimum in order to ensure this study is as reliable and valid as possible. More data gathered over a period of time will hopefully reveal further elements but this small study can aid and contribute to the discussion regarding mentoring generally.

Findings

Case Study A – is male in gender and represents a very large FE establishment which is made up of a number of campuses, covering a wide and diverse geographical area of South East Wales. Case Study B – is female from a smaller FE establishment comprising of two small satellites or campuses. Case Study C – is another female from the smallest establishment of the three colleges, although there is very little
difference in reality between Case Study B and C regarding size. Case Study C appeared to have greater knowledge on the subject of mentoring in general, recently finishing a dissertation on this topic for her educational degree.

Theme 1: The role of FE today

There were some minor differences in opinion regarding the role of FE. Case study A saw the ‘diverse role as being problematic’ with ‘beaurocracy and paper/pen pushing having doubled or even trebled’ in recent years. Case study A was most indignant of the huge amount of data and audit trails gathered by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG). What was the point of all this data gathering; what were the politicians and ‘the WAG doing with all the data collected?’ Case study B saw the role of FE as being primarily one of ‘getting students ready for work’ with less emphasis on entry to HE, particularly in her curriculum area. Case study C relayed something similar seeing the role of FE as being linked with the economy and skills development. Indeed case study B and C discussed the use of teaching assistants and technicians and the role of qualified teachers in the sector; and thus the divide between lower and higher qualified staff levels. All three case studies related, to some degree, the political nature surrounding the role of FE today. Case study A, perhaps more than any other, highlighting the use of FE as a social control tool by government. Overall there was some consistency in that all three case studies agreed FE was all things to all people but perceived the main role of FE today being one of training and skilling the potential workforce.

Theme 2: The use of mentoring in FE

Case Study A had the greatest personal experience having the longest period in education. However, both case study B and C had experience of mentoring students in a variety of ways with C and A having experience of mentoring trainee teachers within their working environment. Case study B appeared the most nervous not fully realising what the term mentoring meant until later in the interview, being more familiar with the term coaching or tutoring; but later realising her role covered a great deal of mentoring. Thus, some confusion between different terminologies is evident. All three case studies saw the role of mentoring as being both formal and informal: formal through the role of class tutor (monitoring attendance, pastoral care etc) and informal through helping other staff and students (academic and social support and advice). Only case study A saw mentoring as a potential organisational tool; ‘management are about to bring it in to support new management posts’. Thus, it can be deduced that staff mentoring is not a very visible tool.

Interestingly, all three case studies agreed that mentoring played a vital part of the teacher’s role. Yet all perceived this role as being squeezed by other demands made on teachers. In particular managing the constant change FE has experienced over the last few decades, plus the collection of evidence for student achievement or data gathering for WAG audit trails or other external bodies such as examination/ awarding bodies. Case study A highlighted this as an important issue, identifying that there is some overlap between this and the first theme above. Pastoral care and the formal mentoring role being squeezed so that it becomes a less important function of
teaching yet so important is it that teachers still mentor informally. This leads on to the third theme – implications.

Theme 3: The implications of effective mentoring

As stated above in theme 2, all three case studies identified mentoring as being an important teaching role. Indeed case study A highlights the decline in mentoring generally and believes this to be an important issue. If social cohesion is a political aim then mentoring students effectively to become active members of society will therefore be a requirement for FE. Hence, case study A sees the mentoring role as becoming more important and not less so, as seems to be the case in reality.

Indeed all three case studies perceived the role of mentoring as being squeezed by other demands made by external influences and factors. Time is required for effective mentoring. This has a cost implication and impacts on funding. Time to mentor and therefore funding is perceived as being the main implication if FE is to have effective mentoring for both students and staff. Indeed effective mentoring can aid staff cope and manage ‘the constant change FE has experienced and is likely to continue to experience’ case study A.

Unfortunately with the financial climate of today it seems unlikely that greater funding for this issue will be on the horizon soon. Yet mentoring students regarding their career and future prospects, social, medical and personal problems brings great rewards; enabling progression and academic or vocational achievement which is a vital part of the teaching role, as perceived by all research participants. Staff mentoring can be a useful organisational tool, reducing the costs of staff development yet being more effective in the long term.

It should be noted that these are preliminary findings only and greater analysis of the data collected will continue and may reveal additional information. Nevertheless, the results to date indicate that initial research expectations were indeed correct.

Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

‘Mentoring skills are implicit in what we think of as ‘good teaching’” (Wallace and Gravells, 2005, P. 104).

Study results indicate that mentoring within FE is seen to operate at both an informal and formal level. Informal mentoring can be seen through vehicles such as friendships and professional networking both within the organisation and outside. However, formal mentoring is perhaps most prominent through arrangements for example regarding mentors for trainee teachers and student class tutors.
Teachers in FE perceive part of their role as the tutoring/mentoring and pastoral care of their students. Thus mentoring has a high priority both formally and informally. Some students may come to a teacher for aid and support because they feel a greater rapport with that person rather than the mentor/tutor allocated to them; hence informal mentoring will also occur. As highlighted by the study results, more and more tutorial time is being eaten up with documentation and other recording mechanisms required (for example with evidence collection of key skills). Thus, the formal role of student mentor and tutor is being eroded in FE colleges in many cases. However, many teachers cannot relinquish the important role of student mentor and hence individual workloads are increasing.

Results from the study demonstrate little or no formal employee staff mentoring in FE, but where it is potentially visible and seen to operate is within the staff management structures of the college. These mentoring systems aid newly appointed managers and quite often a ‘shadow’ period will be formulated. This is where a newly appointed manager and existing managers pending leaving will work together enabling the less experienced or newly appointed member to settle into the role, gaining knowledge and experience prior to taking full ownership of that role. At ‘chalk’ level the process seems mainly informal. Many new teaching members of staff face a ‘sink or swim’ environment purely due to the workload pressures faced by FE staff generally. This is seen in another mentoring role; that of mentor to teacher trainees in the post compulsory sector. Indeed many new mentors in FE do not attend the training days provided by their local University regarding teacher training mentoring. However, it must be remembered that formal mentoring is time consuming and if this is just an additional element to be covered by staff with no remission of teaching duties, then it is a role which will not be taken seriously, or with any pleasure.

Naturally not all FE establishments are the same and some may well be better than others regarding mentoring issues. But many staff do face the same dilemmas regarding their workloads and this in itself can become a major barrier to staff taking on formal mentoring roles. Informal mentoring can and does exist but again can vary tremendously from college to college, department to department and staff room to staff room.

Continuous professional development (CPD) is now a hot topic in the world of FE and is seen by some managers as a cheaper alternative to staff development. However, according to Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002) short courses used for staff development purposes are not effective and are forgotten by more than three-quarters of staff within a month of the time of the training. Soft skills and emotional intelligence are becoming more important, particularly in a leadership role, and has added to the interest in mentoring as a concept and development strategy. Greater emphasis on mentoring throughout an establishment may be pursued by FE management, especially if seen as a cost saving exercise, but again, implementation may prove to be more difficult.

‘There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that formal training of mentors and mentees has been an important component of a number of successful mentoring programmes’ (O’Connor and Laidlaw, 2006, P. 46).
FE sits within the post-compulsory sector of education, which is sometimes referred to as the Learning and Skills sector, or Lifelong Learning sector and has been the focus of much policy activity and intervention in recent years. While it is often defined as all the provision available after the age of 16 years (excluding Universities), it has increasingly been seen to include some 14+ age group provision.

FE is a dynamic and evolving component of education. Hence, mentoring one would anticipate being a priority in the minds of management within FE. Unfortunately this does not appear to be the case, at least at the moment. Heavy workloads and continuous change in one shape or another ensures that in this environment it’s a case of ‘sink or swim’ for many new staff, teacher trainees and students. With more and more time in tutorials being utilised for formal evidence gathering for key skills or for OCN units or some other documentation procedure, less is being completed by teachers in the role as mentor. Mentoring generally in FE is an area which deserves more research. Staff training and allowing mentoring time is important, as this will surely aid social cohesion allowing students to progress and fulfil their potential.

Briefly recapping, the main conclusions of this study are as follows:

- Expectations of the study were proved right in the findings of this research.
- FE is seen in the main, to have a focus on training and skilling the potential workforce.
- Mentoring is perceived as an important part of teaching; but is seen to be lost or in decline, with data gathering exercises being prevalent.
- Informal and formal mentoring is evident in FE, although informal mentoring is on the rise due to workload pressures.
- Formal student mentoring is taken up with paperwork and is thus not real mentoring – beaurocracy being seen to rise substantially in the sector.
- Formal staff mentoring is not seen generally, although management in some FE establishments are slowly introducing mentoring as an organisational tool for new managers.
- Potential divide between lower and higher qualified staff levels i.e. qualified teachers and those being used as teaching assistants and technicians.

Three main recommendations arising from this study are: greater funding for the mentoring role, training staff to become effective mentors to other staff as this would provide an effective but cheaper form of staff development, and using mentoring to enable social cohesion allowing students to integrate fully into society and reach their full potential.

- Funding - time is required for effective mentoring.
- Mentor training - used as an effective but cheaper form of continuous staff development (CPD).
- Mentoring students effectively - vital for social cohesion and enabling others to integrate fully into society and reach their potential.
These preliminary results indicate that the more formal mentoring roles through the likes of tutoring/mentoring students (via pastoral care), as well as mentoring trainee teachers, is becoming less desirable as workloads for staff in FE increase. These mentoring elements are not given high enough credence by management and FE policy makers. Hence, this leaves teaching staff struggling, not only with heavy workloads, but the perceptions of what makes a good teacher and their role in society. The recommendations above not only make good sense but with greater funding can produce positive results for all; for students, staff and politicians as social cohesion through mentoring will enable a productive and vibrant economy.

Debbie Andolo (2007) in the Guardian newspaper provides an article heading that spells it out: ‘When you need someone to lean on: Young people at risk of dropping out of further education benefit from mentoring support system’.

More research in this area is needed. It is hoped that policy makers and FE management will investigate further the benefits of funding an effective mentoring scheme in FE. Time no doubt will tell.

References


