Mentoring: The Journey of New Eyes

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A real voyage of discovery consists
not of seeking new landscapes
but of seeing through new eyes.
Marcel Proust (as cited by Koo, 2002, Conclusions for now section, para.1)

This critical review of literature on mentoring encompasses print and online books and journals from the mid-nineties on. While by no means comprehensive, the literature surveyed was adequate to indicate how the field of mentoring in education stands today. My particular focus, in response to my needs and goals as an educator, was on mentoring to facilitate the professional growth of teachers in-service, meaning those I would describe as mature professionals. The words of Proust (above) encapsulate what I see as the challenge for these teachers in the present times of change: how to see and enact their practice through new eyes to enhance learning for their students, themselves, and their community. In assisting teachers to move through a perceptual and shape-shifting process that will see new landscapes like learning communities emerge, the literature demonstrates that mentoring as a tool – particularly in its latest incarnations – has promise.

The work that best represented the role that mentoring might play in our new professional and educational futures was that of Hargreaves and Fullan (2000). I will use their journal article as the organising framework for this review, situating other works with respect to it. Hargreaves and Fullan refer to four evolutionary “ages” of professionalism, and link in associated approaches to mentoring. A personal caveat here is that these ages should not necessarily be seen as sequential in a linear way, even given Hargreaves and Fullan’s timelining. There could be differentials in progress and development across various peoples, organizations, and cultures, making ages co-existent.

Pre-professional Age

This refers to the early “factory-like system of mass education” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000, The pre-professional age section, para.1) where teachers learned to be teachers by imitation from an early age. Mentoring was reduced to a pat on the back or a few words of encouragement, most likely from superiors who judged good practice in others as being just like their own.

In what Ehrich and Hansford (1999) describe as traditional mentoring, there was a system of elitist patronage in the corporate world that created “hmosocial reproduction” (after Kanter, 1977). The problem/solution, depending on viewpoint, was that good and approved ways of operating were passed on to a new generation who would faithfully reproduce them. Mentoring in this age thus was not seen as a tool of professional growth.

Autonomous Professional Age

The 1960s onwards saw an increase in teacher pre-service preparation time, in salaries, and hence, in status. With increasing professionalism came increased autonomy and individualism, leading to an inhibition of innovation because of teacher isolation. Teaching was private, and teachers talked little with each other about their practices. Hargreaves and Fullan (2000, The age of the autonomous professional section, para.2) suggest that “pedagogy stagnated as teachers were reluctant or unable to stand out from their colleagues.” Helping relationships such as mentoring were confined to new teacher inductions, as only the novice and the incompetent were deemed in need.

While teacher professionalism has “moved on” in some areas since then, the trend of mentoring being used principally in induction has continued to present times, at least in my contexts within an Australian state education system. Some of the works consulted, from here and overseas, focused on mentoring relationships between student or beginning teachers and experienced teachers.

Fairbanks, Freedman and Kahn (2000) report on studies in which student teachers feel that cooperating teachers have power over them. It would seem, in my perception, that autonomous teachers would feel a need to protect their domain of expertise and thus would carefully control others’ access to and use of it. With shades of traditional mentoring thus present, Fairbanks et al. (2000, para.2) lament that “mentor teachers have often been viewed as
impeding student teachers' professional growth rather than as promoting it.” In a project they conducted in which student and experienced teachers explored the characteristics of more effective mentoring, three areas of support and challenge were established: helping student teachers to survive their beginning teaching experiences and to define their teaching lives; building relationships based on dialogue and reflection; and building professional partnerships. The identification of the latter two areas, in particular, demonstrates that the mentoring of student and beginning teachers can also “move on” from a quick orientation to a more substantial and ongoing helping relationship that extends out into the community, a point which will be taken up later in describing Hargreaves and Fullan's (2000) last professional age.

The need for teachers to be less protective of their best practices in mentoring new teachers is reinforced by McNally and Martin’s (1998, Introduction section, para.3) comments that few mentors “played the role of agent provocateur where they challenged the novice teacher’s ideas and images of teaching. They appeared to be more comfortable with establishing a relationship based on active listening and support” (after Elliott & Calderhead, 1993). In not critically examining the practices of both the mentor and mentee, an acceptance of the status quo is modelled, again bringing shades of the cultural transmission that featured in traditional mentoring. I suspect that as new teachers become experienced teachers, they may continue in this vein and become good supporters but poor challengers of their own students, a characteristic found in teachers in one state education system in Australia (The Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study, 2001)

Clearly, the mentoring of student and novice teachers is valuable in initial professional growth, and hopefully mentors have moved beyond the autonomous professional stage. That said, the role that mentoring might play with regard to the larger sphere of educational reform and change is limited if its practice is confined to induction.

**Collegial Professional Age**

Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) relate that the mid-1980s saw individual teacher autonomy becoming unsustainable in the face of the increasing complexity of schooling. Responses to challenges were uncoordinated and based only on individual knowledge and skill. The pressure was growing to create collaborative cultures of common purpose. The time was ripe for ongoing learning cultures to emerge to replace episodic and individualised staff development. Hargreaves and Fullan point out that the implications for initial teacher education, ongoing professional learning, and mentoring were that teachers would learn to teach in new ways, that professional learning would be seen as a continuous process and as the responsibility of both individuals and institutions, that professional learning could be in-house or course-based, and that it meant working and learning with other teachers, and that such learning would be framed and informed by professional standards of practice.

The advent of teachers working continuously and together highlights the necessity of applying andragogical rather than pedagogical practices in mentoring. Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson (1998) suggest adult learning should take cognizance of learners’ motivation and needs to know; of learners’ self-conceptions as people responsible for their own decisions and directions; of their past experiences and of their readiness to learn and apply their learning to life situations. Thus, the metering-out of master-to-apprentice transmissions of traditional mentoring needed to be replaced with a model that was more collegial and with a high degree of mutuality to encompass adult learning needs. However, in most works portraying early collegial models of mentoring, the usual association cited was of a more expert mentor with a less expert mentee (Bell, 1996; Cohen, 1995; Hays, Gerber, & Minichiello, 1999; Lacey, 1999; Rosenbach, 1999). That said, the expectation was that both parties in the partnership (Cohen, 1995) would be authentic and considerate of each other, for example, with regard to “accurate empathy” (Goodwyn, 1997) and stages of adult development (Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall, 1998), and that both would benefit in some way (Goodwyn, 1997; Hays et al., 1999; Rosenbach, 1999). Rather than being about “power over”, the concern was “about personal power, not expert or role power” (Bell, 1996).

In my contexts within a state education system, teacher collaboration occurs on a superficial level, as for example, in planning a unit of work and in developing school policies, but there is as yet little of what could be termed professional helping relationships through mentoring. In other words, there is little structured or sustained co-examination and co-exploration of professional practice with a view to continuous improvement. In most collegiality, there are lingering shades of the closeted autonomous professional not wanting – or perhaps not conscious of the need - to see with new eyes, but on the other hand, with the advances in communication technologies, there are increasing opportunities in a time-poor profession to engage in deep conversations. To sink or swim as a professional in the new millennium, teachers may need to reconsider the parameters not only of their practice, but of their professionalism. In that, mentoring has yet a role to play.
Fourth Professional Age

As the boundaries that comprise society in the new millennium are in continuous flux, so too are the social geographies of professional learning. Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) suggest that there is an emerging age of postmodern professionalism where professional learning is becoming both wider, for example, through networks and community, and deeper, for example, through engaging in research and reform. They ask if this age will bring positive new partnerships and note that mentoring is “embedded and embroiled” in these developments – for the idea is dawning that “all teachers are more effective when they can learn from and be supported by a strong community of colleagues” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000, Challenges in the new millennium section, para.1).

In seeking to position mentoring as integral to teaching and professional learning, Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) are provocative:

We ask not what the needs and issues of mentoring are in general but how we might challenge and extend the role of the mentor in a world where the very nature of teaching is undergoing profound changes. What are the challenges to mentoring at the beginning of a new millennium? (Challenges in the new millennium section, para.2)

They go on to outline key areas of change that will drive the debate on mentoring issues in postmodern education. First, they propose the term “mentor, not tormentor” to indicate that the traditional model of expert passing on craft knowledge to a novice should be replaced by a problem-solving model in which, following Cochran-Smith and Paris (1995), “new and experienced teachers work on and inquire into the problems of teaching and learning in a situation where everyone acknowledges that teaching is inherently difficult and even ‘experts’ do not have easy answers” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000, Mentors, not tormentors section, para.3). An example of this is the Australian National Schools Network’s (Wickert, 2003) promotion of the Center on the Organization and Restructuring of Schools (CORS) protocols to help teachers get to the “heart of teaching” with productive, non-judgmental conversations about the quality of their work and their students’ work (Newmann & Associates, 1996). Teachers together work at solving problems of practice with a view to improving student outcomes. Second, Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) advocate mentoring that provides strong emotional support for all teachers in these times of rapid change that erode confidence and engender anxiety and insecurity about competence. To continue with the same example, teachers involved in conversations guided by the structure of protocols can put aside traits of autonomy in learning such that they can talk cooperatively and productively about improving their practices while feeling safe at the same time. As communities of practice (Wenger, 2002), such conversations are owned by the participants and act as a buffer to mandated changes that can threaten to enshroud them. Further, Hargreaves and Fullan note that teachers’ professional practice should extend from the classroom into the community, and that mentoring should help teachers learn how to work “out there” in productive partnership with other adults such as parents to enhance students’ learning. Teachers accustomed to using protocols in examining students’ work, for instance, could invite parents to participate as partners in conversations aimed at supporting students to improved achievement, such that the concept of deep learning applies not only to students, but teachers, parents, and the wider community. Mentoring could be extended into partnerships with universities, human service agencies, and professional associations in developing networks of mutual challenge and support.

A considerable portion of the more recent literature on mentoring describes approaches and initiatives that reflect Hargreaves and Fullan’s (2000) changes. In promoting professional development schools, Darling-Hammond (1998, New strategies for teacher learning section, para.5) sets the challenge that the professional teacher is “one who learns from teaching rather than as one who has finished learning how to teach.” She refers to the “rub between theory and practice” (after Miller & Silvernail, 1994) where teachers can work together on questions arising from real contexts. Fibkins (2002) puts forward a “catch-22” situation where the lack of a mentoring program could lead to a lack of proactivity and thus to a constant and debilitating stream of problems that take up time that could be used more suitably if teachers were better equipped to solve problems together. Mentoring in professional development schools and other settings could be a proactive and productive investment for teachers to learn together to problematize their practice and address the “rub”.

A co-mentoring project (Sytsma, 2004c) in a university setting has provided one such opportunity for another teacher and myself to work at the rub of theory and practice. While my partner was a young and accomplished music teacher and I was a senior teacher in education, we found we had much we could learn from and with each other about how theory and practice worked in our lives. While we came from very different theoretical and practical contexts, as students of learning we were able to talk about the both macro- and micro-issues in teaching. The exercise of revealing our ways of working to another made us both more aware and critical of what we thought and did as teachers. Further, proactively working together on problems of practice brought greater insight and more innovative solutions. Each of us took away shared and individual learnings to help us improve our respective practices. For example, my principle learning as a mature teacher was that “I needed to re-align myself and develop ‘new eyes’ so that I could better appreciate what others saw and work from those perspectives instead of my own agendas. A singular vision was not needed where complexity thrived” (Sytsma, 2004c, p.12). Clearly, I too had to make the personal transition from autonomous to collegial teacher.
Hine, Clarke, and Power (2000) echo Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) in noting that mentoring should provide opportunities to repersonalise education (Bond, 1999). Indeed, Fletcher (2000, p.1-2) calls for mentoring that “is concerned with continuing personal as well as professional development and not just continuing professional development. In the process, personal and professional values come under scrutiny and are subject to change.” She refers to Hale (1999) in explaining that “mentoring unblocks ways to change by increasing self-confidence, self-belief and action orientation by building interpersonal relationships” (Fletcher, 2000, p.6). Mentoring that supports teachers’ personal emotions and relationships is likely to be based on conversations characterized by (a) explicit and regular attention to each individual’s development and to increasing awareness of where he or she is at (b) respect and accurate empathy for each other (c) an expectation of learning and a willingness to experiment and express feelings of both doubt and support, and (d) explicit attention to evaluating actions (Goodwyn, 1997). In the emotional security of such personalized mentoring, teachers may be more willing to engage in the risk taking and conscious learning that metacognitive reflection (Hine, 2000) on practices involves.

A recent study I conducted (Sytsma, 2004a) demonstrates such repersonalising of collegial learning through an online project to explore the changing meaning of leading in learning. A group of five educational leaders, including myself as facilitator, made “the journey of new eyes” over five months of email dialogue by cooperatively examining what change meant to us in our inner, more personal dimensions as well as our outer, public, and more structural workplace dimensions. Our developing personal and professional relationships featured the emotional bonding and risk taking that Goodwyn (1997) and Hine (2000) refer to. To one participant, the process of mentoring each other was described as being:

Like diving into the surf for the first wave of the summer…
a bit uncomfortable at first,
a shock of awareness of my whole being,
bracing … a thrilling reminder of my whole self
a sudden sharp sense of forgotten parts. (Peter in Sytsma, 2004a, p.150)

For this participant, the shock of being able to reveal his whole self and to participate fully in a conversation of changing meaning brought new ways of looking at his personal and professional landscapes. For another, “the words are the tip of the iceberg but being in this group provides the stick for a lot of fairy floss in me that otherwise would float off and melt” (Jenny in Sytsma, 2004a, p.150). For a further participant, “at times it became a self help group in which we shared ourselves with each other. That was probably it at its richest” (Doug in Sytsma, 2004a, p.230). In line with Fletcher’s (2000) call for personal and professional development that scrutinises values, the participants of this study trusted each other to a degree that we were able to give value and meaning to the changes that occurred within ourselves as we practised as leaders in the educational community. With a sure foundation of shared respect and belonging, we emerged as stronger and more effective leaders of change in our respective settings. This mutual empowerment was a far cry from the kinds of relationships that characterised earlier mentoring. Now, forms of mutual mentoring such as this project exemplify what Hargreaves and Fullan’s (2000) fourth professional age is about.

**Mentoring in the New Age**

Over the progress of Hargreaves and Fullan’s (2000) “ages of professionalism”, it might be observed that the imbalance of power in traditional mentoring is being replaced with a balancing that sees mentoring emerge as a truly mutual helping relationship, as in the project above. This expands the boundaries within which mentoring can occur and the pool of practitioners in which helping relationships can arise. The “out there” and the “in here” are meeting in cross-institutional mentoring partnerships described as “collegial”, “collaborative”, or “co-mentoring” (Butcher & Prest, 1999; Kochan & Trimble, 2000; Mullen, 2000). Partners develop the new eyes that Proust (in Koo, 2002, Conclusions for now section, para.1) wrote of because collaborative reflection enables teachers to see things in their practice that they didn’t know were there (Power, 2000). The eye-opening power of this kind of mentoring offers transformation for the partners, their relationship, and their practice. There is the potential for critical friendship (Koo, 2002) to develop or for learning leaders (Fritts, 1998) to emerge. Learning leaders network across boundaries to support and challenge the learning needs of community members and represent another plane of mentoring. Further, such mentoring for professional learning and leadership positions partners to become significant players in educational reforms towards improving student learning outcomes. It is widely accepted that teacher learning is critical to increasing student learning (for example, Fullan, 2001; Hawley & Valli, 1999).

That mentoring as a practice of professional growth and a tool of school improvement is changing is evident from the literature consulted. Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) have identified three strategic approaches that mentoring programs could adopt to make a difference. First, they advocate that mentoring programs be conceptualised and designed explicitly as instruments of school reculturing. For example, a common factor that mitigates against teacher
participation in school improvement initiatives is the lack of time and opportunity they have to talk with each other (Sytsma, 2004b). Designing and implementing a co-mentoring program for teachers provides time and space for “teacher talk”. Teachers have the opportunity to function as professional colleagues, can address the rub of theory and practice, and can become leaders in learning communities, as mentioned previously. Mentoring can be conducted in person or online. While space is variable, time is the essential element. Given time to talk, the mentoring process moves partners and participants from “what is” to “what might be”, as practitioners and in practice. The new eyes of collegial professional learning lead to new action in changing schools and in improving student learning outcomes (DuFour, 2004; Fullan, 2001).

Second, Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) advocate that mentoring be explicitly linked with other components in transforming the teaching profession. Too often, as highlighted earlier, change in education is seen in systemic and structural ways and does not attend to how change is experienced in personal ways within educators (Sytsma, 2004a). The process of mentoring offers a very personal way for teachers and other educators to work through what change means to them. Change becomes an exciting and empowering experience to live through, rather than the disheartening and disenfranchising experience of recent times. Mated with mentoring wherein individuals honour each other, mandated changes in teaching have a better chance of succeeding. Thus, Hargreaves and Fullan lastly propose that those involved in making a difference in schools must have their eyes open to the window of opportunity that mentoring provides to recreate the profession. For example, new age mentoring can be taken up by leaders in all spheres of education who desire new eyes for themselves and others. To move student learning into the more collegial, cooperative, and social modes of the learning community, professional learning amongst educators could be the model. Mentoring would be an exemplary tool for the task and demonstrate that learning together is the most effective way to learn better. Clearly, in Hargreaves’ and Fullan’s eyes, and in the eyes of those who would lead the way, mentoring has yet potential.

A “journey” is the metaphor often used to describe mentoring. To go from here to there, to be a tool that all teachers can use to become a professional community of learners who can change the face of schools and give students new eyes, mentoring itself is undergoing a journey: from happening in isolated pairs to becoming an integral part of professional cultures, from focusing only on what teachers do to developing the ability to form strong relationships in a learning community, from dispensing wisdom to sharing inquiry into practice, and from being isolated growth to becoming part of transforming the profession and reculturing schooling (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000). For teachers of all ages and stages, mentoring offers the “real voyage of discovery” that supports and challenges professional and organizational growth and develops the new eyes that we all know we need to serve our students and ourselves better. Mentoring is, as Fletcher (2000, p.x) puts it, “to participate in life growing”.

References


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