Mentors for Work Based Learning and Mentor Training

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Research into the role and experience of mentors in Foundation Degrees is sparse, perhaps due to foundation degrees being a relatively new development. However, much research exists into the comparatively established use of mentors in the workplacements undertaken by nursing students and student teachers during their undergraduate degree. The work-based element of this provides a similar background to that of Foundation Degrees in that students are expected to combine academic theory with practice. It may therefore be valuable to take into account this research and any lessons it may provide for the use of mentors in Foundation Degrees.

There are much documented difficulties with the term mentor, particularly with regard to definition of the role (Andrew & Wallis, 1999). This ambiguity in meaning has implications both for research, where comparisons between studies may be difficult, and for those using mentors in education and there may be a need to be very explicit about what is expected of the mentor in order to avoid confusion on the part of the mentor or the student, and particularly to avoid mismatched expectations that may lead to conflict. Research looking into mentoring within a nursing context examined the mentors’ perceptions of their role (Neary, 2000). The role of mentor was generally perceived to involve educational support, provision of feedback and facilitating. Additionally pastoral care was seen as a part of the role, as was liaising with appropriate staff and providing resources to the students. For the students a mentor was somebody who was a point of contact in the workplace, who provides pastoral care, who guides the student within the workplace and who provides feedback on progress made.

So what factors are important for effective mentoring? Andrews and Wallis (1999) reviewed the literature on mentoring and reported that the personal characteristics of mentors were very important to students. For example, mentors should be approachable, offer supervisory support, have good interpersonal skills, engage in positive teaching and provide help with professional development. They also report that there must be mutual respect and attraction between the student and the mentor, and both parties should be willing to dedicate time to the relationship. In general recommendations for using mentorship include that it should be implemented throughout training, that mentees should be able to change their mentors, that mentees can direct sessions with their mentors and that mentors should have training. They also report that although there has been no empirical evidence that mentoring improves learning research reports that usually both the mentor and the mentee have a positive experience.

Much research has focussed on the perspective of the student and the mentor in the mentoring experience. Gray & Smith (2000) interviewed or gave diaries to nursing students who were doing work placements on wards. Using grounded theory several themes emerged. Prior to starting their placements students were reassured by the presence of a mentor and perceived the mentor to have time set-aside exclusively for them. Once they had started their placement the students began to realise that their mentors had competing priorities and were appreciative of any effort the mentors made to help them. Students felt that a good mentor would be enthusiastic,
approachable, friendly and patient, professional and organised (providing a good role model). It was also important that the mentor had faith in the student and involved them in activities. Poor mentors were felt to have poor teaching skills, to break promises, be lacking in expertise and have an unclear idea of the student’s capabilities. Some students also felt that their mentor was using them to do jobs they did not want to do themselves and that the focus was not on learning. Poor mentors were also distant, unapproachable and intimidating. This provides an insight into the student’s experience of mentoring highlighting the issues of student expectation and mentor training.

The perspective of the mentor is also important. Issues for mentors include finding the time to be a mentor where, for their employer, it was low down on a long list of priorities (Stidder & Hayes, 1998; Pulsford, Boit & Owen, 2002). Stidder and Hayes raised concerns that students would not be receiving quality training and may feel unable to approach a mentor who was very busy. The teachers raised similar concerns about their ability to provide the right kind of support for the students and noted the lack of an appraisal structure to inform them of any areas of deficiency in their provision for the students. Furthermore, the teachers felt inadequately prepared for being a mentor. The additional pressures of mentor involvement in the assessment of students can be both a burden to the mentor and some suggested that this conflicts with the role of pastoral care. Moreover, some teachers perceived conflict where they were given sole responsibility for the assessment of students, especially in cases of personality clashes. Pulsford, Boit and Owen (2002) asked mentors what would make their role easier or more fulfilling. Responses included more motivated students, more feedback from the institutions, less paperwork, more organisational support and extra pay.

This research highlights the importance of preparing both students and mentors for the mentoring relationship providing guidelines of what can reasonably be expected from both parties. It also highlights some possible conflicts of interest where a mentor is also involved in assessment.


Other References

