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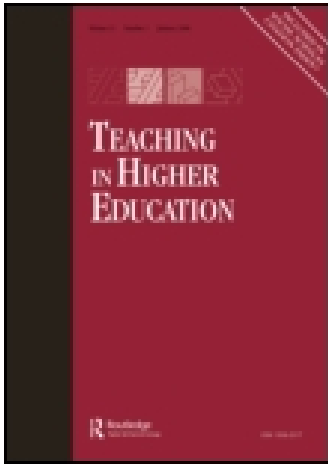


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Peer mentoring in higher education: issues of power and control

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In response to widespread support for mentoring schemes in higher education this article calls for a more critical investigation of the dynamics of power and control, which are intrinsic to the mentoring process, and questions presumptions that mentoring brings only positive benefits to its participants. It provides this more critical appraisal by using evidence from a mentoring project at one university in the UK. Attention is drawn to three key issues: first, to the highly formalised nature of the mentoring project; second, to the extent to which the project socialises mentees to ‘fit in’ to university life; and third, to tensions in the mentoring relationship which centre on academic skills development. Together these issues allow the beginning of a more critical interpretation of how mentoring operates as a form of institutional control, as well as opening up, for scrutiny, some of mentoring’s often taken-for-granted positive effects.

Keywords: mentoring; informal learning; student identities; retention

Introduction

Over the past three decades we have seen the emergence of new perspectives on learning, and it is widely recognised that learning is a social, as opposed to an individual, process. Rather than being about acquiring sequential cognitive skills, learning is a situated process where the skills, dispositions and self-knowledge that are crucial to success are grounded in the particular institutional environments, where students come and know and understand through ongoing processes of participation and engagement (Anderson and McCune 2013; Lave and Wenger 1991). This perspective points to a range of social practices through which students are supported to become successful learners such as peer learning, active and problem-based learning, and student mentoring (Brockbank and McGill 2007; Falchikov 2002). Mentoring has become ever more prominent in higher education as a way of enhancing the personal and professional development of the students, as well as of smoothing transitions into, and through, university. The value that universities ascribe to mentoring is often positive in nature, with high expectations about the benefits it brings to mentors and mentees alike (Colley 2002). Indeed, Sundli (2007, 201) argues that mentoring has ‘become almost a new mantra for education’.

Current trends in education suggest that mentoring is one key way to encourage student engagement and participation, and research has focused on two distinctive sets of questions about the nature of mentoring within universities. On the one hand, a body of

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research looks to the range of forms that mentoring takes, which depend on the institutional context, the particular functions of the mentoring scheme, and whether the scheme is formal or informal in nature (Chao, Walz and Gardner 2006; Colvin & Ashman 2010). Despite the plethora of mentoring initiatives in higher education, some consensus has emerged about their shared characteristics. Thus, for example, mentoring relationships tend to focus on the development of individuals, and to include broad forms of support, such as assistance with professional and career development (Crisp and Cruz 2009). Further, mentoring relationships should be personal and reciprocal, and everyone involved in the process should benefit in some tangible way.

On the other hand, research looks to the experience of mentoring including how students interact with mentoring schemes, and the extent to which this effects engagement and participation (Jacobi 1991). An important aspect of these studies is to investigate the connections between mentoring schemes and successful learning with an emphasis on how mentoring supports students to become members of a learning community (Fox et al. 2010; Wilson et al. 2011). Other studies point to the range of potential benefits and costs associated with mentoring, as well as to the role of trust in developing successful mentoring relationships (Bouquillon, Sosik, and Lee 2005). Findings from diverse disciplinary backgrounds shed light on how social relations and differences, such as age, race and gender, influence the nature and shape of the mentoring relationships (Blake-Beard et al. 2011). Gender differences are apparent in that, male mentors tend to provide more instrumental and career support, whereas female mentorships are characterised by more emotional support (Bogat and Liang 2005). In terms of age, the assumption is often made that it is the younger person – or the protégé – who is being mentored.

As indicated above, there is a strong presumption in policy debates that mentoring is a positive process that brings benefits for participants and institutions alike. Despite this – or perhaps because of it – critical investigations of mentoring have been limited. Colley (2002), for example, stresses that the popularity of mentoring has not been matched by similar progress in its conceptualisation. In particular, she points to the need for a detailed investigation of its (potential) negative effects. Important here are questions about the relations of power and control which inhere within the mentoring relationship, as well as about tacit understandings of the kinds of engagement that are encouraged within mentoring schemes.

It is the intention in this paper to focus upon such questions by drawing on evidence from an ongoing mentoring project based at a post-1992 university in the UK. The first part of the paper outlines the methods used to investigate the dynamics of the mentoring project in the case study university. In the sections which follow, the expectations of mentoring's taken-for-granted positive effects will be examined in the light of results showing other effects, including the extent of institutional control and the existence of power relations between participants. The final section of the paper turns to the difficulties, which arise when mentors and mentees hold competing or conflicting views about what constitutes the mentoring relationship, and which centre on academic skills development.

Methods

'Student Peer Mentoring' is an ongoing project at a post-1992 university which is concerned with promoting student retention. The project matches new students (mentees) and experienced peers (mentors), with a view to better supporting the mentees to the

successful conclusion of their degrees. The programme was set up by a central university service to provide support for undergraduate students throughout their first year. It has a very clear remit: to support new students to make the transition to university; to help them integrate into the learning community; to encourage them to develop independent learning skills; and to refer them on to other sources of support when appropriate. Students are recruited to the scheme in September, and are encouraged to develop their relationship over the course of the year. The project was set up in the 2003/04 and is now a firmly established part of the wider landscape of support within the case study university.

The paper uses secondary evidence from the project's annual report (Case Study University 2012). The project report includes quantitative profiles of the participants, as well as discussion of the practical arrangements for the development and management of the programme. The report also includes student feedback, which was gathered from a standardised questionnaire sent by email to mentors and mentees in May, when the mentoring period was coming to an end. This questionnaire covered the regularity and form of meetings, topics discussed and aspects of the relationship which had proved beneficial.

The data from the project report is analysed using critical discourse analysis (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002), which sees language as a social practice. It is not a methodology as such, but can perhaps be described in Van Dijk's (1993, 131) words as 'a shared perspective on doing linguistic, semiotic or discourse analysis'. For the purposes of this study, discourse analysis was used to facilitate a 'critical' reading of the mentoring project report from 2012 which focused on 'making things visible' by unpacking the assumptions which are often hidden in policy documents (Saarinen 2008). This meant undertaking a critical reading of the project report as a whole to investigate what was included, as well as to what was excluded. This analysis involved a detailed investigation of, if and how, the report used evidence from an evaluation of the mentoring project to construct an argument about the perceived benefits of the scheme, and how this contributed to a wider set of debates about student retention. The analysis also involved close attention to how the roles of the various actors in the process were represented particularly in relation to the formal processes through which the scheme operated.

The project report comprises evidence from 175 students. Of these, 101 expressed interest in being a mentee, and the other 74 volunteered to become a trained mentor. A total of 87 mentor and mentee matches were made. The remainder of the paper draws on the data in the report which drew on the 87 matched pairs. The standardised questionnaire elicited feedback from 50 of the mentors (57%) and 56 of the mentees (64%). That the response rates were so high indicates the esteem in which the programme was held. As can be seen from Table 1, the majority of the participants were female, which confirms other studies which have found that women are more likely than men to join a mentoring scheme (Bogat and Liang 2005). Table 2 shows the age profile of the mentors and mentees. The great majority of both mentors and mentees were mature students (classed as age 21 at point of entry to university). In total, 70 of the mentees (80%), a further 70 mentors (80%), were 21 or over when they took part in the scheme. Younger students are under-represented across the scheme as a whole.

Table 1. Sex of participants.

	Female	Male
Mentors	65	22
Mentees	60	27

Table 2. Age of participants at start of mentoring relationship.

	18–20	21–24	25–29	30+
Mentors	17	26	15	29
Mentees	17	37	11	22

Mentoring as a relationship of power and control

Uncritical acceptance of the beneficial effects of mentoring has led to universities devoting more time and financial resources to mentoring programmes. Given this expansion, Colley (2002, 270) argues that ‘we need to understand more about the specific contexts of mentoring [...], and about the ways in which mentors and mentees construct their roles’. This, points to the need to unpack the institutional context within which the peer mentoring project is located, with a view to better understanding the power relations, which inhere in the mentoring relationship. Here, a critical reading of the project report is illuminating, because it draws attention to presuppositions about the mentoring processes which are presented in a positive way in order to construct a particular view of the desirability of a formal mentoring scheme. Analysing these presuppositions is revealing, because underlying assumptions can be made visible and explicit. What this analysis reveals is the power of the project staff to exercise considerable influence on the direction, shape and ethos of the mentoring programme. This critical reading suggests that there are two key ways in which power and control are intrinsic to the process of mentoring.

First, the report documents the management of the mentoring scheme. Reading this indicates that the scheme is heavily formalised. It employs one project officer, located in a central service, whose remit is to coordinate the programme as a whole. This person has responsibility for recruiting students, designing and delivering training for mentors, matching mentors and mentees, and the day-to-day management of the project. Presenting this management structure as a matter of accepted background knowledge shapes the view of reality that is presented (see Berger and Luckmann 1979). In this instance, the coordinator’s role is presented as a series of common-sense processes, thus presenting a hegemonic discourse, or an ideologically organised view of ‘truth’ or ‘knowledge’ (see also Foucault 2002) about the importance of the job that she does.

Sbisa (1999) suggests that it is important to unpack the presuppositions involved in presenting new information, especially those that have to do with values, social norms or ideals, and that seem to present persuasive views. Reading the report with this perspective in mind reveals the considerable power of the project officer to shape the specific community of practice within which the mentoring relationships take place (Chao, Walz and Gardner 2006). Much of the report is taken up with documenting the nature of the

training that both mentors and mentees must undertake. As such the report sets out to 'persuade' the reader that training is a simple matter of covering certain key topics:

What is mentoring; qualities of a mentor; mentee expectations; role of the mentor; some key study skills; skills for mentoring; the mentoring relationship; boundaries; confidentiality; support services; reflection and evaluation. (Case Study University 2012, 2)

But a more critical reading of this training package indicates the power-filled nature of the view of reality that is being presented to us. In particular, training for mentors is a source of legitimation and formalisation of the mentoring process, because the project officer is vested with the formal power to set the nature and content of this training. Indeed, it is an arena through which mentoring becomes understood as a 'site of governmentality', and thus, as a locus of power and control (Manathunga 2007).

Secondly, power and control are invested in the dynamics of the working relationships between the project officer and the mentors and mentees. Research has shown that the success of mentor training depends on two key factors, both of which indicate different dimensions of the power relations between the players in the project (Colvin and Ashman 2010). On the one hand, all parties must be willing and able to work within prescribed sets of rules about the mentoring relationship. On the other, the success of training relies on there being clarity of expectation about the roles of the various people involved. Social actors have roles and the representation of these activities and roles leads in turn to the possibility of viewing the representations of different roles in the report. In this case, the analysis of social actors and their responsibilities is particularly limited to the representation of agency versus passivity: who is presented as active and as setting the agenda in the mentoring relationship, and who is presented as a passive recipient of the scheme.

Again, a critical reading of the report indicates how it is the project officer who is represented as the active agent in the mentoring programme. A great deal of emphasis is placed on how she sets boundaries between her role and that of the mentor and mentees, and on what happens if these roles are overstepped, or if problems arise. As such, there is a clearly demarcated role for the project officer:

It is stressed during the training, and in the meetings with mentees, that if any problems arise, students must contact the project staff. In terms of on-going support, both mentors and mentees were emailed every six weeks to check how things were going, which gave them an opportunity to raise any issues. (Case Study University 2012, 3)

And as discourse analysis suggests, what is not said is just as significant as what is said (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002). Mentees, when mentioned, are positioned as passive recipients of the scheme; if they become troublesome, or step out of line, they must be referred on to the project officer for remediation.

The operation of power and control between the project officer and the participants is further expressed in the existence of formal strategies to match mentors with mentees. Again, the report makes clear the active role that the project officer must take in ensuring that the process should achieve 'best' matches:

We always try to match mentees with a mentor in their subject area. We also take level of maturity into account, as well as some aspects of character, when matching. (Case Study University 2012, 3)

The existence of a formalised process of matching, based on established sets of procedures, shapes and strengthens the power of the coordinator, and the representation of this in the report works to legitimate the practice of mentoring within the institution. It also indicates that what appears like a straightforward expert–novice interaction is cut across by broader questions of expertise, experience and power (Smith 2007). Here, the relations are strongly hierarchical in nature, based on the assumption that more ‘mature’ students will be able to help less experienced students with the transition to studying in a new learning environment (Falchikov, 2002). It is also clear that more value is placed on some matches than on others, based on judgements about ‘character’, which may be strongly mediated by sociocultural beliefs about class, race, age and gender. As such, the coordinator has formally sanctioned power to construct and control the social practices through which mentoring relationship takes place. Rather than taking the potential benefits of these practices at face value, this analysis shows that is important to unpack the relations of power and inequality that underpin the social processes of matching mentors and mentees.

Mentoring as a social process: socialising mentees to fit in

The mentoring relationship has increasingly become a subject of scrutiny in universities with research concentrating primarily on the nature of the relationship (formal or informal) and its function (career development and psychosocial development). As indicated above, a hierarchical relationship is built into the mentoring process, where the mentor is perceived as being in an expert position, and as being willing to induct the inexperienced mentee into the learning environment of the university. This is achieved through the mentor drawing upon tacit knowledge and understanding of the norms and practices of the university, and using this to encourage mentees to learn to work effectively within this community. Not surprisingly, a common theme in studies of the mentoring relationship is the power of the mentor to ensure the mentee’s success by passing on cultural values and norms which help them to succeed at university (Fox et al. 2010).

This theme resonated with the findings presented in the report under the heading ‘benefits of the scheme’. Here, illustrative quotes from mentees are used to describe the process of being mentored which centred on the help they received to ‘fit in’ to the university culture. Again, by analysing these presuppositions it is possible to make the underlying assumptions visible and explicit. In this case, assumptions centred on the value to the institution of having students who would be socialised, and who would thus be more likely to stay on. A carefully chosen range of comments from mentees, for example, constructs a picture of the mentor as a guide to University life; as someone who could de-mystify university for the mentees by explaining how its processes and structures worked. A particular emphasis was on the value of this for mentees who were returning to education after a period away and were consciously participating in the scheme as a way to understand how to fit in. Mentee 41 was chosen for inclusion in the report:

My mentor was invaluable to me at the start of my year at Uni, absolutely invaluable. As I was coming back as a mature student I found it very hard at the beginning and had no friends. I was lonely and felt I didn’t fit in so having a mentor was amazing. She was so friendly and that bit older too so I could relate to her.

Similarly Mentee 25’s case was presented:

I think the mentoring service is great because it really helps students have the opportunity of settling into university life, especially if you are a mature student returning to studies and exams after several years away from higher education.

A critical reading of the comments from the mentees indicates the need to examine the complexities that this process of socialisation reveals. The report makes the case that the mentoring relationship should be read in a positive fashion, because mentees were made to feel as part of the university norms and practices, and so were more likely to succeed. However, mentoring can be interpreted more critically as an instrument of governmentality through which the University inducts students into particular ways of thinking and being, such that they are more likely to succeed. In this way, retention figures are enhanced and mentoring becomes a site of governmentality. Again evidence presented in the report is used to suggest that the project had a strong role to play in helping mentees to continue with their studies, at times, when they were struggling or questioning their decision to be there. In total, 16% of the mentees had thought about leaving university in the first year, and had turned to their mentors for advice and support. Again, input from the mentors was represented as pivotal in their decision to remain. The following comments were used:

I was about to quit but my mentor made it a bit easier to stay. (Mentee 32)

Without my mentor's reassurance I would have considered leaving as I would have continued to feel that I didn't fit in. (Mentee 5)

This more nuanced reading of the mentoring report indicates just how powerful a mechanism mentoring is from an institutional point of view. In teasing apart the intertwined aspects of socialisation in mentoring, the paper highlights how institutional power circulates through mentoring even when it is constructed as a straightforward process of supporting mentees.

Crossing boundaries: advice about academic skills

There are additional dangers in constructing mentoring as a process of socialisation, because it may encourage mentees to cross hidden boundaries to seek support on a range of academic and personal issues. It was noticeable in the report that the relationship between mentors and mentees tended to be perceived in a positive light when issues of membership and belonging were highlighted. Interesting for the purposes of this paper was that the report did address the problems that arose in the mentoring project. This section of the report was restricted to concerns about the boundaries between mentors and mentees. Discussion centred on active support for learning, particularly the development of academic skills. Again the construction of the argument in the report started from the positive benefits of the scheme with an emphasis on the mentees who had commented on the extent to which their mentors had helped them to develop their academic skills. Evidence was presented to suggest that mentoring was an important means of helping mentees to sustain their studies; indeed 83% reported that mentoring had been important in this respect. The illustrative quotes focused on the benefits to the mentees of receiving practical tips:

I got the advice (about writing essays) from someone who I felt know things better than me and who I could trust. (Mentee 50).

My exam results improved compared to before. (Mentee 72)

But the report also included a more wide-ranging discussion about how the help and advice of the mentors had enhanced the mentees' confidence in their academic skills, and enabled them to develop identities as successful students:

She was a great help with the (academic skills) issues I was concerned about. I feel a lot more confident about things now. She has offered to meet me next week to assess whether I've been able to put into practice all the information she has given me. (Mentee 19)

I feel like I have someone who knows what I am going through in terms of keeping on top of workloads, research and revising. (Mentee 11)

While mentoring can provide students with a great deal of support and motivation, there are dangers in constructing mentors as being in a formal position of expertise. A great deal of discussion in the literature focuses on this tension between formality and informality in mentoring, precisely because the heart of its success is thought to lie in the development of a trusting personal relationship. In particular, discussion of academic skills carries with it an 'asymmetry of dependent trust' (Manathunga 2007, 218). Being put into a position of expertise is a risky space for mentors to inhabit precisely because there are myriad ways in which the trusting relationship can be breached. Some of these dangers were recognised in the report. While the problems of the mentoring scheme were reported as a simple table, further analysis of them revealed two ways in which trust was problematic as far as the mentees' quest to develop academic skills were concerned. First, tension centred on the amount of time available for academic skills development. That is, mentees often hoped and expected that mentors would support their learning by offering a more comprehensive package of study support than was realistic (see also Colvin and Ashman 2010). Some mentees viewed the mentor as akin to a personal tutor, and expected more help than was available with assessments and course work. One student was very critical of the help she received with studying:

Not at all, there is (sic) still many things I would like to know about my study. (Mentee 57)

Another mentee's comments about her mentor were similar to the more widespread complaints often voiced by the student population about academic staff:

I would have liked to have more time with my mentor and so if perhaps there was a way to add more structure such as dedicated appointment times then that would be good. I did feel that I didn't like to bother her too much because I knew she was busy with her own work so if there was a way to get around that then that would be ideal. (Mentee 5)

A second area of concern was overdependence, where mentees had enormously high expectations of their mentors which they could not deliver on. The evidence suggests that mentors were concerned about demands placed on them for academic support which they did not feel they could, or should, provide. One commented:

I felt she was wanting me to provide more help i.e. whether she had done the work correctly and I suggested she speak to the lecturer for guidance. [...] I felt quite bad at the time and thought I should have offered her more support. (Mentor 17)

While being in a position of responsibility can be enormously powerful for students, this study reveals the real worries that mentors had about the mentees being dependent on them. This left mentors feeling overwhelmed, and mentees feeling dissatisfied, and echoes some of the concerns that Manathunga and Goozée (2007) outline in their study of the ‘always/already’ effective supervisor. One mentor reported that a mentee:

Mentioned she was very stressed and could not cope. I tried to encourage her [...] I concentrate on the positive things of uni, for instance the opportunity of getting a better job once graduated. But I cannot give her all the help and support she wants. (Mentor 45).

In these ways, mentors and mentees found it difficult to negotiate the boundaries between providing general advice and support about university and providing in-depth academic skills support. This is a difficult space for the mentors to inhabit, and it is one that the authors of the report chose to list but not to comment on. While mentoring can be a very positive relationship it is important to highlight these contradictions and ambivalences so that we can better understand the myriad ways in which power is intrinsic to the mentoring relationship.

Conclusions

Mentoring has become an integral part of the policy agenda, being widely used in a range of fields from higher education to employment and training. As yet, research has been slow to develop critical approaches to mentoring, with little investigation of its highly formalised aspects or of its potentially negative effects. Most research on mentoring in educational settings is anchored in positive assumptions of its benefits for participants, from the universities themselves to the students who participate as either mentors or mentees. This study has sketched out the beginnings of a more critical appraisal of mentoring by drawing attention to three key features of a mentoring project in one university.

First, it has considered mentoring as a relationship of power and control, as evident in the formalisation of the mentoring programme in the case study university. The existence of training for the mentors, as well as the process of matching mentors and mentees, is indicative of the formal power of the institution, embodied by the project staff, to set the agenda for a mentoring process, which is often uncritically assumed to be informal and student-directed. The analysis presented here shows that institutional mechanisms for legitimating and controlling the formal aspects of the mentoring relationship are of paramount importance to our understanding of mentoring. As Maynard argues, ‘the possession of mentoring skills alone will not guarantee that students receive appropriate support’; rather it is important ‘to analyse how participants are inducted into a particular vision of a mentoring relationship, with its own history and goals, and how they learn to work as effectively as they can within that relationship’ (2000, 29).

Secondly, it has recognised that the mentoring process is socially constructed, and the relationship between the participants is tailored to supporting mentees to develop identities which enable them to ‘fit in’ to University life. Issues of power in these

relationships were not blatant, but were rather couched in terms of tacit understandings about the kinds of engagement, and the kinds of student identities that should be encouraged. The findings also indicated that mentoring can be understood as a site of governmentality, precisely because the forms of engagement deemed as desirable are those which enable students to become successful learners. As such, mentoring is harnessed to a wider set of debates about retention. This suggests that institutional power is always present in the mentoring relationship, and that, it is ‘not an innocent, collegial practice’ (Manathanga 2007, 218).

Finally, the paper has demonstrated that there are dangers in the mentoring process which centre on positioning mentors as experts, and which involve disruption to the trust which is through to lie at the heart of good mentoring relationships (Bouquillon, Sosik, and Lee 2005). Some of the issues this raises, including the nature of the boundaries between mentors and mentees, crystallised around issues of academic study support. While there are many pleasures of mentoring, including feeling supported in the daunting process of becoming a university student, there are also significant risks. Particularly for mentees, there is the inherent risk of wanting more academic support from the scheme than is available, and of feeling that their trust in the mentor to deliver has been breached. This is not to dismiss mentoring but to suggest that research needs to pay attention to the relations of power and control that are inherent to the mentoring relationship, and to challenge the assumption that mentoring is a positive force that universities should promote in an uncritical fashion.

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