1.

Mentor Development:
psychological aspects and evaluation

Jean Ann NAYLOR

Whilst it may be useful to consider how a mentor needs to be, what they need to know and be able to do, as set out in the profile of the European mentor, it is also important to consider in what areas an individual mentor or groups of mentors involved in a training scheme can improve their performance and progress.

Initial mentor training will inform new mentors about their student teacher's learning curve, but information is not knowledge, and knowledge is not understanding. It is through the experience of mentoring that the mentor will come to recognise the information in practice, converting it into knowledge, and their next conversion will be to articulate this knowledge and work on it with the student teacher in such a way that, in the delicate exchange of views, the mentor's knowledge becomes understanding of the mentor's role and the student teacher's position.

The Modern Foreign Languages mentor's task is to help the student teacher help learners to learn another language. It is a different task from teaching a language, which is the student teacher's task. The mentor is in the privileged position (cf M. Buber, *On Education*) of knowing the position both of the teacher and that of the learner, ie their own position and that of the student teacher. The teacher/mentor has known what it is like to be raw and new in the classroom, and observing a student teacher will restimulate memories of their own first steps. This may lead to a certain degree of sympathy for the student teacher, but the conflict engendered by having to hand over classes to a less experienced (student) teacher can cause confusion for the mentor, who may not make the most appropriate comments to the student teacher.

There needs to be a feedback mechanism for the student teacher to the mentor, and sometimes, because of the perceived authority role of the mentor (an authority as a more experienced teacher and the authority for evaluating and formally assessing the student teacher) the student teacher may not feel it is appropriate to give anything other than positive feedback.

Any system which has no 'third party' to the student teacher-mentor dyad puts the student teacher at risk. A triad can be established:

- by having another member of staff in the practice school with overall responsibility for student teacher welfare
- by having another institution (seminar, university) involved with a personal tutor for the student teacher
- by having a peer group of student teachers who can share their experience and perhaps gain courage from listening to other student teachers that they can use in their own situation with their own mentor.

Preparing to become a teacher is a transitional phase in the student teacher's life and we are all vulnerable in transition. The mentor has to be able to offer security and reassurance so that the student teacher's vulnerability can find experimental expression as the student teacher moves into their chosen professional role.

In order to do this successfully the mentor needs the confidence to listen to the student teacher, whose expression of their own progress (successes and challenges) will be only one aspect of that performance. The mentor needs a clear idea of where the student teacher is heading, and this is provided in detail in England now with the four standards for assessment (1 – subject knowledge, 2 – lesson planning and classroom management, 3 – monitoring, assessment, recording, reporting, accountability, 4 – other professional requirements) but in any case, anywhere, by the experienced mentor's own experience and abilities and the relevant national context.

The mentor then has to be able to handle the tensions involved in:
- observing a less experienced teacher take their classes
- both supporting and assessing the student teacher's work
- establishing a professional relationship with the student teacher which will tend towards the personal through the joint involvement in the work being done
- feeling sympathy for the student teacher that has to be transferred into empathy, because this allows for the movement necessary to judge the student teacher's work and decide on the appropriate way to respond.

Initial mentor training can provide an introduction to the major areas involved in mentoring:
- knowledge of both the local and national contexts regarding modern foreign languages (MFL) in the curriculum and what is required of a newly qualified teacher
- classroom expertise
- awareness of recent developments in the field

- understanding of and ability to carry out both the supportive and assessment aspects of the mentor role.

These will all be furthered by the personal work the mentor does, which involves reflection on their practice. This is helped by experience sharing and discussion with other mentors and also with the support of more experienced mentors or university-based colleagues with an overview of mentor progress. This can be encouraged and supported through addressing questions which are bound to come up in mentoring.

In mentor training sessions videos of student teachers at work can be used for work on observation. This is useful for an ITT course, because some consensus can be arrived at and judgements aligned across schools. However, even when the judgements of different mentors have been aligned, this is only an objective aspect of the work. The subjective aspect remains. To deal with this and to progress towards integrating the 'awkward' feelings that arise throughout mentoring into a comfortable professional attitude that will allow the mentor to make a professional judgement of their student teacher's performance at the same time as maintaining a supportive relationship with them a host of topics need to be addressed. Some of these are:
- memories of the first lesson you ever gave
- your favourite teacher
- a teacher you were afraid of
- a challenge in your work as mentor
- your best quality as a mentor – why is your student teacher so lucky to have you as their mentor?

Some of these can be dealt with formally in mentor training. The point of dealing with some of the points in mentor training is to demonstrate their importance to mentors so that they can take the responsibility of recognising when they need support themselves.

It is always useful to check out early on who your student teacher reminds you of. They may remind you of someone you were very fond of, respected a lot, or of someone you could not stand, someone you considered stupid. It is as well to become conscious of this, because if we are not, these similarities definitely affect our behaviour towards the person. This is an ongoing check to carry out, because different actions at different times can remind us of different people. It is always important to be able to distinguish a person from the other person they remind us of by telling ourselves the ways in which they are different from the other person.

If a mentor feels that it is difficult to be constructive in their criticism, this is perhaps a point to consider who was negative towards the mentor at an earlier stage. Recognising and

acknowledging can separate the past from the present and help us not to bring current and past problems to bear on the present situation.

The mentor may feel afraid of the student's personal tutor. This is rarely justified in the present, but may be related to the mentor's general attitude to authority figures as well as their (closely related) sense of self-esteem and competence.

These old, profound feelings which all people have can, if unrecognised and unchecked, at times wreck a mentor's ability to act as a mentor.

This is when the mentor needs to take a step back and reflect on what links there are between the present situation and some situation in their past which has just somehow taken their attention away from what they are supposed to be doing with their student teacher into a past, unresolved situation.

It is important that mentors are aware of this type of situation both from their own point of view and also so that they can recognise when something of the sort is happening for their student teacher.

A loss of confidence on the part of a student teacher is rarely due solely to the mentoring they encounter. Poor mentoring can fail to reassure a student teacher who will always feel vulnerable. A loss of confidence can be triggered by something in the current situation but it will relate to something earlier. This is a difficult situation to retrieve, and the mentor should try to avoid it by focussing on constructive criticism and positive comments.

Obviously, nothing but positive comments will not work because the student teachers are intelligent and realise at some level that there are things they are simply not being told.

A mentor needs to be prepared to say strong things to a student teacher, and will have to work through any feelings they may have that if they do this the student teacher may cease to like them. This is where it is crucial to be clear about what the mentor/student relationship is, that its focus is on the student teacher's learning.

Many mentors claim that mentoring is a two-way process and they learn a lot from the student teachers. This can often be true if the student teacher is au fait with some recent information in the field that the mentor has not yet encountered. However there is a difference between being an experienced teacher who can take pleasure in some fresh ideas coming via the student teacher and being a mentor who abdicates their responsibility in the relationship and instead becomes dependent on their student teacher. The mentor is the professional leader in the relationship and will assist the student teacher to progress to as equal a relationship as is possible in due course. This takes time.

The mentor has to accept the responsibility for being the more experienced partner to the relationship and act accordingly. This state is reached through self-awareness and clear understanding of what it means to be a student teacher and what it means to be a mentor. And not to

expect the student teacher to understand what it means to be a mentor, because their privilege is to focus on their own learning and it is the mentor's job to see that this process can take place with as little interference from outside as possible.

A useful way to assist mentors is to give them case studies to consider.

eg.   What would you do if ....?

1   Your student teacher, a woman of 30, teaches a lesson at the beginning of the course which is good apart from one problem of class management which she had not foreseen. She comes out at the end and tells you it was a total disaster and bursts into tears.

2   The student teacher has been struggling with introducing the topic of weather. He finally decides to check on the class to see if they have understood. He asks what «Quel temps fait-il? means, there is a pause. He looks at the class. A bright boy asks, «Does it mean how old is your monkey?»

3   The oral phase of the lesson goes very well indeed, but when the class then have to copy things down you see that the student teacher has got a gender wrong on the board.

It is easy to compile lists of such examples – each is a challenge to the mentor, whose perceptive attitude will be revealed in each comment and each action. Whatever happens, the mentor's task is to focus on the student teacher's learning. This does not mean that the mentor should create dependency.

The student teacher will become quite dependent upon a good mentor, but equally a good mentor will realise what is happening, recognise that this is a necessary phase, and consider how to wean the student teacher away from dependency and towards responsibility. This is necessary, but is done by trial and error, and the more experience a mentor has, the fewer the errors. A responsible mentor will see support as necessary – displaying in fact the characteristics of any efficient learner. They will also have to accept the responsibility of acting as a model to their student teacher. This is not the occasion for overconfidence or false modesty, but just the straightforward acceptance that part of being a mentor is being a model.

It is a good idea to record a feedback session (audio or video) because there are always aspects of our behaviour that we cannot be aware of simply because we habitually produce them. A recording can be very helpful. This will demonstrate to the student teacher that the mentor is also prepared to accept feedback. And this creates the basis for the trust that is so vital for the student teacher's development as well as that of the mentors.

I share here an evaluation format which has been used in the University of Manchester and which has proved useful.

We use three questions:

1   What went well?
2   What would you do differently another time?
3   Did you achieve your aims and what evidence do you have for this?

These questions have served us well for a number of years now. Because student teachers use these three questions for evaluation of the individual lessons they teach, mentors need to become familiar with them since they are a strong support tool for them when they debrief students after lessons.

1. What went well?

This is put first because when we come to evaluate our performance we tend to be our own worst critics. It is therefore useful to begin with the high points to encourage a positive view. It is always worth celebrating when things go well, and there is always something that went well.

2. What would you do differently another time?

Encouraging constructive criticism is challenging and not so easy to achieve as it may seem. Many people «translate» this into «what went wrong?» and they tend to criticise their performance in terms of «what I should have done». We insist that this (should have, could have, would have) is an inappropriate form of the verb. We say to mentors, when they are learning about how to give feedback to student teachers after observing their lessons «if they could have, they would have; they didn't, so they couldn't». This is to demonstrate that the student teacher did their best at the time, when the attendant circumstances are taken into account (eg their experience of teaching the topic, their acquaintance with the group of learners, what happened just before, the equipment available to them). People seem to find it easy to condemn their own and others' performances and to summarise their views in a very negative way, eg «It was dreadful!» «I was terrible».

Such 'criticism' is not very helpful because it is an overall dramatisation rather than a rational evaluation on the basis of which future plans can be made.

We have to train mentors to encourage student teachers to focus on 'next time'. This allows them the opportunity to say such things as, «Well, I wouldn't hand out the worksheets before telling the class what to do with them.» It is only all right to say «That was a mess» if they go on to say what was a mess and how they think they could do it differently on another occasion. This is useful as it helps the student teacher focus on strategies they have used and

might amend in future. It encourages strategic thinking. It also prevents them from getting stuck in how badly something went. They do need to express how they have felt when, for example, they attempt to present a new piece of language and subsequent responses from the group show that their carefully-planned explanation did not make anything clear to the group at all. A sense of failure needs to be expressed – but not dwelled upon. So: next time I could/would/should –. This is to encourage an attitude of not giving up, not resting on 'failures' (which occur not infrequently in teaching/learning situations as we try to find the best way of putting things across).

3. Did you achieve your aims and what evidence do you have for this?

This is aimed at assisting the student teacher to focus on their aims, what they had intended the group of learners would know/be able to do at the end of the period. This puts attention on how clear the aims actually were, whether they were teacher-centred (eg teach the perfect tense) or pupil-centred (eg be able to use the perfect tense to talk about what they did the previous evening/weekend/week), and at which phases in the period they were able to judge whether learning was taking place and if so, how much, as well as how they planned ways of forming their judgements. This focuses on lesson planning and evaluation of learner performance.

We attempt to encourage mentors to let the student teacher speak first. This is because what the student teacher says about their experience will indicate to the mentor where their input should be pitched. The mentor will be able to judge the student teacher's progress from the comments the student teacher makes. To begin with, however, it is not easy to let the student teacher speak first. It is always much easier as the more experienced person to see what the less experienced person still has to learn. The desire to express this before the less experienced person has a turn can be because:

- the mentor has not much time and wants to make the point before the next lesson on their own very full timetable
- the mentor feels relieved that they can actually spot some area where the student teacher can improve
- the mentor felt uncomfortable watching the student teacher make 'mistakes' and wants to state what they thought they were to relieve their own sense of discomfort
- the mentor is aware that the learners have very little time to complete a part of the syllabus and feels anxious about the rate of progress of the class.

The list could go on. However, these all relate to the mentor's attitude to the student teacher and the student teacher's learning as well as reflecting the sense of responsibility the

mentor has for both their class and their student teacher. These two responsibilities can conflict, particularly with a weaker student teacher. Time is a major constraint, but we are all aware that learning does take time. This applies to everything in life – eating, talking, walking, playing football, welding, acting, cooking, learning a language and helping people learn a language.

Student teachers need time – to practise and to reflect on their performance. They need support as they do this, and the support is both practical in the material sense (a place to work, textbooks and equipment), and practical in the psychological sense (a designated time to discuss and reflect upon that work with more experienced colleagues, information, encouragement, reassurance).

A mentor has to provide both forms of support for their student teacher. We can use the same three questions for mentor self-evaluation as with the trainees, plus four more:

1. What went well?
2. What would you do differently another time?
3. Did you achieve your aims and what evidence do you have for this?
4. What did you particularly like/dislike about your mentoring work this year?
5. What did you learn about mentoring this year?
6. What would you like more help with from the University?
7. Any other comments on our partnership generally?

Question 1 is for celebration.
Questions 2, 4 and 5 are in the area of goal-setting.
Question 3 is to encourage a focus on what was actually observed.
Questions 6 and 7 are monitoring of our work.

Mentors are asked to reflect on the questions and discuss their answers with the university tutors. Each time they are encouraged to focus on areas they will set to improve on in the following year.

Reporting back on the results of these questionnaires enriches the partnership between trainees, mentors and tutors and will provide a source of information about mentor progression. Some such instrument is probably an essential tool to help mentors close the gap between their perceived performance and the 'ideal' represented by the profile.