

Professional experience, mentoring and transformative spaces in initial teacher education: a praxis perspective

Mia O'Brien, Bronwen Wade Leeuwen, Fay Hadley, Nick Kelly, Steven Kickbusch, Deb Talbot and Rebecca Andrews.

This symposium examines the praxis of mentoring and the potential of professional experience as praxis. A series of four papers present four distinctive but interrelated themes of consequence that together explore what Zeichner (2010) refers to as the third space in teacher education. The aim of the symposium is to reframe existing views of professional experience learning and mentoring by drawing from a suite of vignettes to portray the contextual, relational and mutually formative space that this space entails.

TO BE UNITED WITH:

In this symposium we draw on relevant research and a number of vignettes of recent innovations in mentoring practices to move discussion on from an historical focus on definitions of the roles of mentors and mentees, in what might be considered as largely 'supervisory arrangements'. The vignettes are taken from four different Australian university professional experience programs. The actual doings of those involved in the mentoring relationships presented in the vignettes are considered through a number of theoretical lenses. Through a nuanced description and analysis of mentoring practices we aim to trouble existing paradigms of mentoring and thus contribute to a conceptualisation of mentoring as praxis that is mutually educative. In addition, this collaborative work seeks to offer a justification of why we believe it is necessary for initial and ongoing teacher education to trouble the existing paradigm and enactments of mentoring that continue in many institutions.

Paper 1: Spaces of Mentoring

Debra Talbot

This introductory paper briefly lays out the historical territory of mentoring in relation to its place in initial teacher education. It examines the problematic nature of some of the terminology and practices historically and currently associated with mentoring as a form of ongoing teacher education for both pre-service and in-service teachers. A vignette of mentoring practice involving a pre-service teacher, a supervising teacher and a university academic working in a 'space' of mentoring is analysed using the theoretical work of Voloshinov and Bakhtin. The mentoring actions depicted in the vignette are considered as a dialogic process in which meaning is made in 'inter-individual' territory as utterances, in the form of speech acts and texts, are exchanged between participants in this mentoring 'space'. The analysis raises a number of issues for further discussion which will be taken up by subsequent papers in this session, including: (i) an expanded notion of the 'spaces' in which mentoring might occur, who might be in those spaces and how they might act; (ii) why the presenters in this symposium believe it is necessary to the interests of ongoing teacher education, and particularly initial teacher education, to trouble the existing paradigm and enactments of mentoring that continue in many institutions; (iii) how mentoring may be enacted differently in the interests of mutually educative praxis.

Paper 2: Learning To Be

Mia O'Brien and Bronwen Wade Leeuwen

This article presents and describes how we used notions and structures that challenge existing perceptions of mentoring, supervision and their relatedness to professional experience; and instead join us in a sharply reconsidered analysis of the communicative space in which teachers and preservice teachers negotiate the phenomenon of 'learning to be' (Mezirow, 1991). We take the Habermasian concept of communicative space (1990) and earlier notions of lifeworld (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1945; Sandberg & Dall'Alba, 2009) as a theoretical frame to foreground learning and practice as 'ways of being in the world'. A series of vignettes is presented to illustrate how mentoring is both epistemological (what we are learning to know or do) and ontological (how we are learning to be). It is this learning to be, in the teaching and learning to teach relationship, that we aim to identify, illustrate and elaborate in this chapter.

One vignette that will be presented illustrates a blended approach to mentoring that encompasses both epistemological and ontological perspectives. International and Australian research demonstrates the importance of every early childhood and primary teacher to develop both the confidence and expertise to teach the Arts imaginatively and to embed quality arts processes and experiences across the curriculum (Ewing, 2015). This innovative creativity arts learning approach (Wade-Leeuwen, 2016; Barone & Eisner, 2012) builds on a community-of-practice model (Wenger, 2011) led by Arts educators at Macquarie University, Australia. These researchers were responding to an initial teacher survey that indicated 80% of preservice teachers in their final-fourth year of a Bachelor of Arts (Education) degree did not feel confident or competent to teach 21st century critical and creative thinking skills to primary aged children. Working in an intercultural community-of-practice framework allowed preservice teachers to examine these tensions through supportive mentoring processes where there was sufficient time for instruction, exploration and play, provocations and documentation, mindfulness and reflections (Edwards et.al. 2011, Langer, 2006). Notable increases in preservice teacher's confidence and problem-solving capabilities were observed and documented over a five-year period (2011-2015). At the end of the study, all preservice teachers acknowledged a deepened awareness of their own artistic and metacognitive abilities. They voiced they were able to visualise how embedded principles of 'learning to be' in their own pedagogical practices enriched their critical and creative thinking skills.

This vignette illustrates how nurturing a supportive environment through strong mentoring relationships between the mentor and mentee can alter their relatedness to professional experience.

Paper 3: The Place of Context

Fay Hadley and Rebecca Andrews

This paper unpacks the place of context and how this can define what mentoring can look like. Specifically, the notion of diversity and understanding the preservice teacher's pathways to university, background and personal values are explored. This complexity of context does impact on how mentoring is enacted and the negotiation of values, we argue is the foundation stance that both the mentor and mentee should begin with. We explore this notion through the lens of Boler and Zemblas' (2003) 'pedagogy of discomfort' framework. This notion of

understanding difference and diversity (or what is often termed as differentiation in the delivery of curriculum content) we argue, needs to be applied to mentoring the preservice teacher. A vignette of supporting students who enter university via alternative pathways, including the VET sector stream will be unpacked as an example of how this position can be applied in teacher educational organisations to reduce inequity and power imbalances.

Paper 4: The praxis of mentoring and the potential of non-traditional mentoring arrangements

Nick Kelly and Steven Kickbusch

This paper describes the praxis of mentoring in order to provide a foundation for exploring the potential of non-traditional mentoring arrangements, such as online and group mentoring. We draw upon Freire and Habermas to establish a foundation of what is meant by a quality of praxis in mentoring: What does a high quality praxis of mentoring look like, and how does it translate into non-traditional arrangements?

Existing frameworks for mentoring (e.g., Hudson 2004) describe the current paradigm of one-to-one, predominantly face-to-face, mentorship. Using the literature we distil the essence of the mentoring relationship; establish the conditions necessary for it to flourish; and discuss the root needs of autonomy, competence and connection for both mentor and mentee (Ryan & Deci 2008). We argue why there is a need to talk more about socio-cultural context, philosophy and ethics when we talk about mentorship – for mentees and mentors.

The paper provides examples of how some of these principles have been actioned in the non-traditional mentoring relationships developed in the TeachConnect platform through peer mentoring, one-to-one online mentoring, mentor education, and group online mentoring – where TeachConnect is an online state-wide platform to support teachers in Queensland as they enter and flourish in the teaching profession.

We attempt to trouble the existing paradigm of mentorship by discussing the multiple perspectives that have been encountered on controversial topics during our research: Is group online mentoring really mentoring? How can or should quality of praxis be established in both formal and informal mentorship programs? On what basis does or should the “gatekeeping” of who becomes a mentor occur?