

DIGITAL MENTORING: REIMAGINING MENTORING IN AN ODL CONTEXT

Prof JM Dreyer

Dreyejm1@unisa.ac.za

PO Box 43339

Theresapark 0155

Cell: 082 4628464

Home: 012 542 3562

ABSTRACT

The concept and practice of mentoring has survived for thousands of years from very ancient communities into the twenty-first century. Unisa needs to use mentors to support students not only because it is a good idea, but because the institution is obliged to make sure that it provides expert, informed and good quality mentoring for student teachers to meet the expectations and requirements of the Department of Higher Education.

The question before us is: Is there still a place for personal face-to-face mentoring in an open, digital educational context where students can access the internet and social media to get support, guidance and answers to “all” their questions and needs? In other words, should we digitise mentoring and get rid of the human mentors?

Research on mentoring by the author is underway. The preliminary findings have led to the development of a mentoring model which is (partially) digitised and which is more suitable to ODL contexts. The findings and the proposed model will be discussed in the presentation.

Key words: Mentoring, ODL, teaching practice, ODL mentoring model

PROPOSAL

It is conventional wisdom (supported by thousands of examples and confirmed many times over by research) that people in general and student teachers in particular find mentoring not only beneficial but almost indispensable as a support mechanism when attempting something new or when facing a challenge of some sort, for instance practical teaching in the case of student teachers.

Where possible, Unisa makes use of mentors to assist and guide student teachers during their teaching practice at schools. The ideal people for this mentoring task are school-based experienced teachers. Their task is even more important for students at

ODL institutions because the students have much less contact with their lecturers and depend more on the on-site support and guidance from mentors.

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Research on mentoring by the author is underway. The research is undertaken from a socio-critical and socio-constructivist perspective as the personal perspectives and experiences of mentors and students are sought, but it is also done from a critical point of view as not everyone has access to a good mentor and not all mentoring is necessarily good. We are also questioning the age-old tradition of face-to-face mentoring.

The research is being conducted through the use of interviews at schools where Unisa students are being mentored (some where mentors and students are interviewed individually and some where they are interviewed together). The evidence gathered in this way is triangulated with evidence gathered from narratives written by mentors in training and with information gained from an overview of the literature on relevant aspects of mentoring.

Preliminary findings of research among students indicate the following:

- Mentors can and still do play a significant role in the life of students.
- Students report that mentors provide a personal presence in the absence of a lecturer, especially during times when they are vulnerable and in dire need of “protection” guidance and personal support.
- Mentors also intervene on their behalf, they identify opportunities, they create a safe space and atmosphere where students can learn and they provide a shoulder to cry on when needed.
- Students can sit in when mentors teach and they can ask questions afterwards.
- Mentors can give them direct feedback after they have attempted giving a lesson or planned a lesson.

Mentors tell us the following:

- They need some guidance and training from us to become better mentors and to better understand what is required of them.
- What is significant is that so many of them **want** to share and **want** to support (and they do it free of charge).

- What is even more significant is that most have something good and special to share with students which can benefit them at this vulnerable time just before they start their careers.

NOTE: The above will be elaborated on during the presentation.

From the findings it is abundantly clear that the concept and practice of physical face-to-face mentoring still offers the best support for practical teaching students, but that does not mean that the present system we have is good enough. The reason for this is that both students and mentors have also indicated that they want more interaction with the university and particularly with the subject method lecturers. And this is where the opportunity for digitised communication lies.

Universities (including ODL institutions) need to use mentors to support students not only because it is a good idea, but because these institutions are obliged to make sure that they provide expert, informed and good quality mentoring for student teachers to meet the expectations and requirements from the Department of Higher Education.

To ensure that we can tap into this off-campus support system to the benefit of our students and the university, we want to propose a mentoring system that can satisfy the needs of the students, the needs of the mentors, the needs of the ODL institutions and the requirements from the Department of Higher Education. And best of all, we want to propose a system that is (partly) digital and more suited to ODL contexts.

Mentors provide a free service to the university but need our guidance, support and training. To satisfy this need, Unisa should provide an accredited online training course (preferably free of charge) to compensate them for the mentoring task they perform but also to empower them to do it better. This will ensure a better level of mentoring for **all** students in **all** schools where they are placed.

The course must be structured in such a way that the actual mentoring they do becomes the performance that is assessed so that no additional assessments (such as an exam) are required. The performance assessment therefore is the examination equivalent and the practice of mentoring equates successful completion of their training.

The mentor should further have access to the subject method lecturers through electronic communications such as myUnisa (if they register for the mentoring course they become students and have immediate access to myUnisa where there can be a blog or chat room, etc.).

Students will, of course, also have access to lecturers through the same networks and e-mail. Students furthermore have direct access to mentors at the school, which means that there is a triangular network of communication where ideas and experiences can be shared and progress can be monitored.

Part of the mentoring process will go digital but nothing is taken away from the face-to-face personal mentoring, which is the best possible support and guidance that student teachers so desperately need.

From the research it is also clear that the training should include the following aspects:

- the role of the mentor teacher
- the mentor as mediator
- the role and responsibilities of the general school mentor
- the role and responsibilities of the subject mentor
- working with the student
- observing the student and giving feedback
- how to implement progressive collaborative teaching
- assisting/supporting the student with the assignments and teaching practice portfolios

The training should be online and assessment can be done through the submission of e-portfolios. If this is done in such a way that the portfolios are submitted and resubmitted step by step, mentors can change and improve as they go along. This would make iterate assessment not only a reality but a tool for real learning to take place.

It is believed that the above ODL mentoring model makes it possible to get the best out of mentoring in an ODL context and will benefit students, lecturers, mentors, ODL institutions and the education profession.