

**WHO MENTORS THE MENTOR:
UNDERSTANDING TEACHING THROUGH MENTORING
IN THE FIRST AND SECOND YEAR OF UNIVERSITY**

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ABSTRACT

Several role models emerge in universities, schools and industry, each perhaps with different connotations of 'mentor.' Why mentors? What does the term mean? How is such a role formalised or practicalised? How does a new regional university build a research culture, leading to the socialisation necessary to promote the understanding of becoming a teacher, of taking one's place from the university into the community, and leading to a vigorous teacher education program fitting the graduate to be 'out the front'?

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is a very ancient term. Nearly two thousand five hundred years ago, when Odysseus embarked on his mythical journey (Bintrim, 2001), he entrusted the upbringing and education of his son to his friend, *Mentor*. The name has become proverbial for a wise and trusted counsellor. Today the Mackay campus of Central Queensland University does have a mentoring program for all first year students. When I began my PhD studies on this campus, the first year Education students would continue their degree on the Rockhampton campus. My doctoral topic flowed from my Masters study (McDougall, 1995), on How do you select the best teachers? and having lectured overseas, I went to universities and educational personnel in Thailand, Penang and Singapore. In their opinion the



problem was not in the selection of the best prospective teachers, but in how to retain them.

In research on the prediction of success in the teacher program, I became aware that Grade Point Average, standardised and other tests (such as the Queensland O. P. (Overall Position), do not appear to predict student success as well as studies which explore the student perceptions of their own evaluations of student teachers, as substantiated by Salzman, 1991. In 1997 plans were announced (McDougall, 1998) for the offer of a complete Bachelor of Education (primary) degree at Mackay. At last Mackay students who wished to become teachers did not have to leave home. But in that new culture of the new teacher education program in Mackay, a similar problem was apparent, that the greatest number of dropouts occurred in the first term of the first year (Pope and Van Dyke, 1998). It became obvious that having an understanding of what these potential teachers believed teaching was all about could be an important step to identify any concerns evident in their perceptions of initial understandings of preservice teachers in a regional university campus.

In this paper I draw partly on data obtained during the two-year study of nine preservice teachers, their understandings of being primary teachers in the initial year of the teacher education program on the Mackay Central Queensland University campus. I focus on the socialisation of those prospective teachers coming into teaching from diverse backgrounds, straight from school or mature age entry (Deer, 1997). To address a paucity of research about what happens to teacher entrants in the first year as they clarify their perceptions of what being a



teacher means to them I conducted a pilot study of eight volunteer First Year student teachers at the end of 1998 using a semistructured interview. From the snapshot I gained from that data I therefore interviewed nine volunteer preservice teachers at the start of the 1999 university year. I added further interviews at the middle and end of their first year. In this way I was able to obtain answers for my research questions that asked what did teaching mean to prospective teachers at the beginning and end of the first year, and the implications to their career preparation and future career paths.

Anticipation

According to Nimmo (1994) teacher entrants anticipate their teaching in terms of their own school experiences, and use the models internalised from that time as triggers to their own teaching, a process described by Lortie (1973) as being part of the 'apprenticeship of observation' from schooldays. This may be true for those student teachers who have come straight from school. However many mature age prospective teachers have updated their contact with schools, perhaps with the teachers of their own children, or when deciding to become a teacher they have made deliberate attempts to see what goes on in contemporary schools. Lortie (1975) asserts that the resources of teaching (described as 'attractors' below) do attract certain types of people to consider a teaching career. If prospective teachers are drawn towards teaching, I intended to explore what it is that attracts and holds the first year student teacher on the Mackay campus, how they find out that they really want to be teachers.

Lortie designated five themes, Attractors to Teaching, that he believed offered considerable advantages to those considering becoming teachers. He stated that



most important was the wanting to work with people, the protracted contact with young people, so that teaching was dignified work. Second was the idea that teachers provided a service for society, a special mission, while third was the view that teaching becomes a continuation of school as an enjoyable place. A fourth theme meant school time schedules were attractive to many, and lastly there was an awareness of the material benefits in teaching - money, prestige and employment security.

Views of prospective teachers

Lortie identified his themes from interviews with practising secondary and elementary school teachers, but I spoke to initial student teachers in my study. The views of commencing primary student teachers in Australia have not been identified at a regional university campus. It would, however, be reasonable to expect some of the views identified by Lortie would also be common to these students.

Conceptions of teaching

Primarily I looked for the student teachers' conceptions of teaching (McDougall, 2001), the things about teaching which appealed to entrants and those that did not, such as Lortie's (1975) five attractors to teaching, Bogad McWilliams'(1983) case study of those who did not want to be teachers, and whether teacher graduates would stay or leave teaching (Diamond, 1989).

Effective retention

University students often enter the academic world in cohorts (Tom, 1995), a group of learners together, although in some courses progression in units may be



individual. Holbeck (1990) researched reasons why Queensland rural students dropped out in their first year of higher education and concluded that early withdrawal as characterised by low educational commitment because of unrealistic expectations, insufficient preparation, and negative experiences early in tertiary studies. The above factors lead to the conclusion that some university students were unable to fit into the reality of higher education. Tinto (1993) also identified institutional distress as a concept that refers to the anxieties received by students in the environment of the campus. It includes anxiety created in the tertiary atmosphere and within student peer relationships. Other factors were lecturer-student relationships and cultural adjustments of social and educational handicaps. In a semi-rural area ecological misfits (students who do not meet the normal culture in higher education institutions, and cannot make cultural adjustments in academic life), were identified in teacher education using the theories of Bourdieu that social origin predetermines educational destiny.

Making the difference

While Holbeck identified causes of attrition in teaching, Tinto (1993) has shown that a key to effective retention lies in a strong sense of inclusive and social community. Tinto and Godsell (1993) sought to track the academic and social behaviours, perceptions of academic performance and persistence outcomes of students who were enrolled or not enrolled in a collaborative learning university program during their first year. His analysis yielded confirmatory evidence that collaborative programs made a difference in the importance of student involvement to student attainment, reaffirming that involvement matters.



Tinto's theories have been very important to this new Mackay University, as the university community of lecturers, counsellors, mentors, other staff and peers should be of great support when problems arise. While the 1998 first year student teachers did not have mentors themselves, they (as second year students) became mentors in 1999 to the first year students I interviewed in my study.

Mentoring is one of the ways that collaboration is made possible in the teacher education program. It is a feature of the teaching profession that mentoring exists in various facets, as many of you as teachers, professors, lecturers and professionals are aware. In Australia supervising teachers of student teachers in the practicum are not normally called mentors, as termed in some overseas academic periodicals.

However in the induction of first year graduate teachers into the school, into the classroom, more experienced teachers are appointed to mentor the beginning teachers (Dever, 2000). In my experience I was asked to be the 'buddy teacher' to a mature age male graduate in his first year, and after three years he became a principal out west. Tinto (1993) calls for a collaborative climate in the first year of tertiary education. The university supports the teacher education program, so that the second year education student mentors the first year student teacher. The supervising teacher mentors the neophyte during the practicum (Nettle, 1998), and the new graduate is mentored by an experienced teacher.

I argue that mentoring in the teaching profession has become more common, as reported by Dever, 2000) in medicine, social and public services, and business



(Fagan & Walter, 1982; Gray & Gray, 1985), particularly for the purpose of retaining beginning teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). Such collegiality may counter the professional isolation, as referred to by Lortie (1975) which lessens the extent to which teachers are able to share professional knowledge and values in the workplace.

Nimmo (1994) viewed practicum experiences as problematic, as while student teachers identify such experiences as most valuable in Queensland tertiary institutions, the practicum can be very diverse, and dependent on the development of the relationship between the entrant and the supervising teacher (Kagan, 1992; Nettle, 1998). McArthur (1981) stated that the process of compliance and identification may be observed in student teachers in the very early stage of teacher socialisation. This passivity (Danziger, 1971) may develop in the individual student teacher through the shock of realisation that teaching is not all 'happy smiles and little children.

All interviews were coded and categorised. In the pilot study the student teachers, while expressing their 'own liking for kids,' were quick to comment on reasons why some of their peers left the teacher education course in that first year, because they found they 'didn't like kids,' couldn't relate to kids (McDougall, 2000).

In the first year of the Mackay course, 1999, in the first week, the prospective teachers went straight out to schools to take pupils in small groups in Health and Physical Education, supported by the lecturer. Tom (1995) reconsiders the structure of teacher education, asserting that the first course in professional



education should be a short and intense episode that should 'rivet our attention,' to be exciting not boring. Zeichner (1989) viewed fundamental change as necessary to teacher education. By moving the practicum beyond an unstructured apprenticeship, the focus is shifted towards the idea of the cognitive apprenticeship, using the growing presence of the work of cognitive psychologists. He asserts such an avant garde apprenticeship would focus on helping student teachers alter their cognitive dispositions.

The social cognitive theory of Bandura (1997) contends that much human learning is facilitated by observing the behaviour of others, so that we learn to imitate by receiving reinforcement in performing certain behaviour, so that the capacity to perform similar behaviour can be developed by modelling. In clinical supervision in the practicum there are basically three phases, the pre-observation (or planning) phase, the observation (or teaching) phase, and the feedback (or conference) phase.

According to Bandura (1997) the striving for control over one's life circumstances permeates almost everything people do in life, providing countless personal and social benefits. In the first year of a teacher education course a great deal of psychological modelling takes place in everyday networks, through those with whom one regularly associates. In this particular mode of self-influence, student teachers can visualise themselves repeatedly confronting and mastering more challenging or threatening situations. Cooperative structures, in which members encourage and teach one another, generally promote higher performance attainments than do competitive ones. The first year of teacher education should



be one where efficacious self-regulators invest their graduation aims with their own short-term challenges by adopting the goals of progressive improvement, when they can get feedback of how they are doing (Bandura, 1991b; Bandura & Cervone, 1983). Successful socialisation in the first year of the course will give impetus to a successful completion of becoming a teacher.

The mentoring program is a program offered by the university, however the individual student teacher is free to reject such collaboration, and the mentor must balance his/her workload and capacity to carry out the collegiate aims. In this paper it is not possible show the study's findings regarding mentoring, however some successes and possibilities are portrayed.

When I asked each student about meeting their mentors in orientation week, they explained that the mentors had a group of about ten students each, and they were given a card with the mentor's phone number and particulars.

Results

Students straight from school

1/2 Of the two students straight from school, Carissa (all pseudonyms) said she would ring if she needed help. The second, Liah, said she had not heard from or rang her mentor, but seeing there was a tragedy in her group, it would have been good to speak to her mentor, but she did not. She said that next year she would be a friend and a mentor.



Mature age students

3. Liz. A mature age student said in the midyear interview she was the 'one who was a bit slack as she just doesn't go and have a talk with her'. When I asked did she need to talk with her mentor she said she did really, to set her up on the right track for resources. She said she could just ring her. At the end of the year interview she said that even the mentor's smile, and the fact that she remembers Liz's name is pleasant. But she felt that probably because her mentor was in another year was a barrier for her. She believed that perhaps next year she could be a mentor and be a friend for some of the first years.

4. Di, as a mature age student, said she hadn't seen her mentor since O week but she had her phone number. She would have liked to have rung twice, but didn't, and once when she had rung there was no answer.

5. Chris. In the midyear interview she thought her mentor was quite helpful although she was having a baby and was quite sick, but did help Chris when she asked. In the last interview she said her mentor didn't have a lot to do with her, but she wouldn't know what to expect of a mentor.

6/7. Both mature age. Renae was only present for first interview. Rita, present for only first and second interview, had rung her mentor about her assignment, but was disappointed as he had suggested she should speak to the lecturer. She would have preferred an older mentor.



8. The only male mature age student, Jack, found his mentor was very helpful. She phoned, emailed, send letters in the mail. In the last interview he had contacted his mentor, as he needed help, saying that it would be easier for him to just hop on a dole queue and looking for a job than studying, with all the stress and pressure. He explained that she had spoken to him at lengths about sticking it out. She won the mentor of the year awarded on the campus. He said he would like to help someone succeed by being a mentor. The next year he did and won the mentor award himself.

The mentor program is offered to all first year students by the university, and it is hoped that when those students become second years they will volunteer to become mentors also. The collaborative community of learners as envisioned by Tinto (1993) and the Mackay campus can be achieved. Mentors are peer role models who as second year student teachers can help the first year students in that transition from student to teachers. Mentoring, with its fostering of social responsibility facilitates the socialisation process in the community of scholars (Coaldrake and Stedman, 1998).

Conclusion

Being attracted to becoming a teacher appears to depend on how attractive the career is to the candidate according to his/her prior and current understanding of teaching. Research has shown that prospective teachers may take a passive stance in the first year, so the problem is for designers of the teacher education program to challenge the changing beliefs of student teachers through a diversity of learning and teaching that research literature asserts enhances positive outcomes. By combining elements of both the worlds of reflection and applied science, the



Mackay experience for student teachers certainly promotes such a program by providing opportunities for reflection on many role models. Neophytes actively engage in teaching, learning and planning from competent and also peer role models on both the university and school sites, so that observation, self-experiential modelling, reflection and cognitive knowledge become the means for development. In the mentor program both mentors and mentees can develop their own modelling and observational skills, and can in turn take their own turn in providing leadership for their fellow peers. The prospective teachers are challenged in the first year, actually the first few days, to accomplish the tasks necessary to assume the role of the modern day teacher, to understand What It Means To Be A Teacher!



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