

To Know Is Not Enough: Mentoring Interns through a Liminal Phase

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Mentoring has been used as a mechanism to introduce undergraduate teaching students and newly qualified teachers to the reality of the 'elementary school' workplace. At CQUniversity the internship signifies the end point of being a student and the transition towards becoming a teacher thus we see this as a liminal phase. In this paper we suggest a challenge facing pre-service teachers during their teaching internships is the notion of the liminal guide and the liminal gatekeeper. Our paper elaborates on this challenge and what we can do to meet that challenge to improve education outcomes and serve the public good.

Objectives or purposes

Teaching has become highly complex along with increasing accountability (Martinez, 2004) and can be seen as a multigenerational workplace (Mayer, 2006). This has implications for attrition, career changes, retention and mentoring. The purpose of this paper is twofold: present findings and indicate direction for operationalizing our findings to improve education outcomes and improve practice in a multigenerational teaching workplace.

Theoretical framework

Anthropological studies have shown that we encounter liminal periods in our lives where we are on the threshold of entering a new phase (Turner, 1969). Liminality as used on this study has three stages (Turner, 1969). The first stage known as 'point of separation'; the student leaves the university for the field placement. The actual Internship of six weeks is the second stage or 'liminal (transition) phase' with the third stage signaled by 're-incorporation' where the student completes their internship with their graduate interview and joins the list for graduation of the program. Mentoring through an internship can be seen as an extension of university training, plus a transition into the workplace where the pre-service teacher is neither a student nor a fully fledged teacher, therefore can be seen as being "between and betwixt" (Cook-Sather, 2006; Pierce, 2007). We argue that the internship is liminal where the interns learn about the rules and requirements of being the 'good' teacher in the context of their mentor. At the same time the mentor is formally and informally assessing whether this particular intern should 'join the club' aka the profession. Martinez (2004) argues that mentoring can be both promising and risky and a way of introducing the mentee to the realities of the workplace.

Methods / Data source

As this was a qualitative, interpretative, ethnographic study, individual semi-structured interviews were completed with ten pre-service teachers; three mentor teachers and two administrators to gain different perspectives of the CQUniversity Internship. Recruitment of pre-service teachers was done via a snowball technique among the final year cohort of students. It had been decided to conduct the interviews immediately *after* the Internship had been completed because:

- 1) Memories of the previous 10 weeks would still be fresh but offered participants the opportunity to reflect and make sense of their experience.
- 2) There was less of a likelihood of this disrupting their Internship time and obligations.
- 3) The Interns would feel more comfortable speaking about the Internship once all assessment had been marked and signed off by the school.
- 4) Ethical aspects regarding the mentor / mentee relationships; it was made known that we were not interviewing their specific mentor teacher. Again we felt that this may alter the existing relationship therefore it was also decided to go with interviewing three experienced mentors to offer this perspective rather than mentors of the mentees involved.
- 5) The research had ethical clearance given by CQUniversity Australia.

Data was analysed using both pre-determined codes/categories and coding development/thematic analysis (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). The theoretical framework provided several signposts of liminality, acting as organising themes for the data such as point of separation, transition and re-incorporation. Triggers or signal words and phrases identified the presence of these liminal signposts within the stories of participants, plus other themes that emerged from the data such as teacher practice, curriculum, mentoring and expectations were categorized and grouped by thematic threads and emergent patterns in the way of 'patterned regularities' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

Results

Various roles of what mentors should play have been identified in the literature (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005). Kwan and Lopez-Real (2005) looked at the roles that mentors perceive that they play in the mentoring partnerships. Roles identified included critical friend (Schon, 1987), reflective practitioner (Braund, 2001) equal partner and observer (Hopper, 2001), counselor, role model, advisor, quality controller and assessor (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005). What we argue is that the mentor teacher can have two further identities; liminal guide and liminal gatekeeper and these identities influence outcomes for pre-service teacher students.

Specific findings documented indicate the experiences of the participants and highlight that particular stages of the Internship mean different things to the Intern compared to the Mentor Teacher, importantly there was a mismatch in expectations of how the Intern should 'perform' in the classroom and when the Intern should assume teaching responsibilities.

The pre-liminal phase and 'point of separation' provided students with time to prepare emotionally. They organized childcare, curriculum materials and met with their Mentor Teacher. Schools responded differently to each Intern through ritual recognition. While 'the school' recognized change in status from practicum student to Intern over the weekend, it took longer for the students to recognize this change emotionally and internally. Similarities noted among the Interns related to how all wanted to be the 'good' teacher and the differences were the different understandings of what this actually meant for each.

The importance of having a shared understanding about the role of the Intern was highlighted. While Interns appear to be 'workplace ready' they are still students and

require guidance. From the school administrative perspective it was acknowledged that mentors who are supporting Interns are required to change their beliefs about the capacity and capability of the Intern; significantly support for Mentor Teachers and allocating sufficient time for Mentors to support Interns was highlighted. There was an increasing trend exhibited though the Intern discourses of being positioned as a 'practicing teacher' and an implicit expectation to imitate the Mentor Teacher. This presents an assumption by the Mentor Teacher that 'all teaching is practiced as they do'. Therefore this attitude can be seen as reproducing practice rather than critiquing new ways to cater for the knowledge society and generational changes.

More significantly it was found that 're-incorporation' from the CQUniversity program perspective occurs at the end of the Internship and 're-incorporation' for the Mentor Teacher is seen at the beginning of the Internship. This mismatch results in differing expectations of the Intern and the Mentor Teacher about handing over teaching responsibility of the class and giving of feedback. Therefore at the point of separation from the university, education students, university staff and mentor teachers need to have similar understandings of the expectations of the Internship. A scaffold approach including all stakeholders could be used to co-construct understanding of roles and expectations of the Internship.

When it comes to effective teaching and learning, international research (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997) and local research (de Vries, 2004; Martinez, 2004) has shown that the teacher is pivotal for success in the classroom; in other words it is the teaching that happens in individual classrooms that has the greatest effect on student learning. What the teacher does and how they do it, influences the relationship between the teacher and the student. We would argue that this also reflects the mentor and mentee relationship in the classroom context. For pedagogy to change to suit contemporary times, pre-service teachers require support to develop their own teaching identity that reflects Professional Standards and Educational policy.

Significance of study

Mentoring as a strategy to bridge theory and practice is consistent in the literature; it is a strategy to practice theory in real life and a way of translating theory into practice. Recently mentoring has become embedded in teacher training at all levels from first year to graduation and beyond. Many schools and districts have induction programs; it could be argued that post-graduation mentoring is being used for enculturation into a specific school culture thus 're-training' graduates into a different schooling mindset that is more likely to reproduce past practice than transform schooling into the 21st century knowledge economy and new work order (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996).

Eddy (cited in Berman, 1994, p. 42) warns that the local school system guards against outsiders: effectively screening those who should, or should not become part of the 'club'. Only those selected to be part of the 'club' are privy to the sharing of local folklore and tradition passing from one generation to the next. Berman (1994, p. 42) goes on to say that this is a way of being able to see internships as a rite of passage where pre-service teachers learn the ways of a peculiar culture – that of "school". We would argue here that the mentee and the mentor are using the relationship of the internship in particular ways: one to get into the club and one to select who will be lucky enough to be allowed to join the club.

Our study demonstrates certain dominant discourses that construct the “good teacher” remain powerful and are found within the identities of liminal guide and liminal gatekeeper. These powerful discourses can be used to improve practice and educational outcomes for both students and new teachers. Therefore mentoring should be a priority in the school placement and that ‘getting this right’ is imperative. More detail in screening experienced teachers who, willing or not, act as mentors needs to be considered. We would argue that mentoring interns and beginning teachers offers opportunities to enhance the professionalization of teaching. Mentoring could be developed as an area of expertise for senior teachers and by valuing the role of mentor it is more likely that teachers in the classroom will act as guides rather than gatekeepers with a more professionalized approach to linking theory and practice for interns. This, in turn, would work to improve educational practice plus serve the public good by enhancing the educational experience for students and enhancing the teaching and learning experience for teachers.

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