



Reflections from the field

Educational Research Mentoring and Coaching as Co-creative Synergy

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Abstract

Mentoring and coaching are rarely clearly defined and there has been a growth of confusion, as both terms tend to develop singular meanings in different professional contexts. In this paper both activities are defined and explored in terms of how they can develop as co-creative synergy where the personal and professional development of both parties results in mutual benefit. Additionally, I explore how mentoring and coaching can be generative. New generations of coaches and mentors can evolve out of pre-existing coaching and mentoring relationships and this has a particular relevance to research at a time where practitioners are encouraged to investigate their work in order to improve.

Key words: Coaching, mentoring, research mentors, synergy

Contextualisation

As a school-based mentor for modern language teachers trained during the Licensed Teacher era in the early 1990's, I was introduced to the term mentor. Coaches were operating in sports activities as far as I was concerned. Later, I moved into higher education where I became responsible for mentor development for beginning teachers. I was aware of coaching in business but it was not until I became included in hosting the meetings for the OSCM (Oxford School of Coaching and Mentoring) at the University of Bath that I began to set aside my lack of knowledge about 'coaching'. Curiosity was reignited when I took over an undergraduate group of international athletes who were learning to become sports coaches and yet in that very turmoil of meaning and missed meaning I began to realise that coaching and mentoring had significant areas of overlap. The model of the Chartered Teacher Scheme in Scotland (2002), which revolves around professional skills, values and knowledge, began to underpin my own understanding about how mentoring and coaching could lead to professional and personal development.

If I imagined a dynamic triangle with values, skills and understandings at each angle and with the balance of attention shifting between them I began to see how I might come to conceptualise mentoring and coaching. *Coaching* seemed related more to the skills dimension but not exclusively – it also revolved around developing values and understandings. *Mentoring* was less about focusing on skills and more about values and understandings - but again, not exclusively. I realised that the mentors in schools were also coaches and that sports coaches were frequently mentoring. I also became aware that mentoring and coaching had the potential to give rise to the growth of new generations of coaches and mentors.

The focus of this paper

My focus of enquiry here is to determine how mentoring and coaching are *educational* and how they assist mentor and mentee and coach and client to develop personally and professionally in the workplace. I am investigating the hypothesis that both activities can emerge as a co-creative synergy. I am not saying they necessarily do and I will refer to a long-standing educational research mentoring relationship where this has most certainly not occurred. But it can occur and in my experience it often does. Perhaps my investigation is somewhat rare in that I have been researching existing mentoring and coaching relationships over a long period of time. At the Coaching and Mentoring Research Conference at Oxford Brookes on 23 March 2007, I was interested to hear Professor David Clutterbuck say that there seemed to be no research into such long-term relationships. I begin to explore this relatively uncharted land here.

As far as defining mentoring and coaching *per se* I find the TDA (Teacher Development Agency) definitions in the mentoring and coaching framework (2005) useful, even though I do not entirely agree with the definitions that attach to these activities. According to the TDA National Framework (which was first developed by CUREE-PACCTS in 2005):-

Mentoring is a structured, sustained process for supporting professional learners through significant career transitions.

Specialist Coaching is a structured, sustained process for enabling the development of a specific aspect of a professional learner's practice.

Collaborative (Co-) Coaching is a structured, sustained process between two or more professional learners to enable them to embed new knowledge and skills from specialist sources in day-to-day practice.

What does this distinction tell us? Mentoring is assisting change in major transitions, coaching about assisting change in an established career practice. I don't agree. I think coaching can be a significant part of mentoring in a period of substantial career transition – perhaps in ties of promotion of from one career post to another. I think mentoring subsumes coaching as it relates not just to specific aspects of skill and knowledge. I think mentoring delves in to the unknown, whereas coaching is working along more predetermined paths. The coach knows where the client needs to be even though it is the client who does the moving closer to this point. The mentor is working in a less certain environment. He or she is exploring the transition as it occurs alongside the mentee. I rather like the Spanish translation of mentoring – *orientar*. To orientate. I think that is a close approximation to my meaning of mentoring. And coaching? The closest Spanish

translation is apparently *asesorar* – to advise and ‘to advise’ in my mind means that the advisor has an impression already formed of the desirable outcomes – as a coach sometimes does.

Might mentoring as ‘orienteering’ and coaching as ‘advising’ be considered *educational*? If we reconsider the original meaning of *education* we see it comes from the practice of animal husbandry – of rearing and nurturing. It is also said to derive from the Latin to draw out – hence to draw out understandings rather than to instil them as predetermined knowledge. Mentors and coaches are working not with blank slates but in relationships where mentees and clients are frequently already experts in their field. We are looking for a co-creative synergy of professional and personal skills, values and understandings and not a dictatorial ‘*I know - You don’t - so you must do things my style without a question*’ way kind of hierarchical imposition when we examine educational pursuits.

I think it is timely to seek a definition as I ask myself, ‘What is this ‘synergy’ I refer to?’

Simply defined it means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It means that the relationship that the parts have to each other is a part in and of itself. It is not only a part, but the most catalytic, the most empowering, the most unifying and the most exciting part. The creative process is also the most terrifying part because you don't know exactly what is going to happen or where it is going to lead.

(Covey, 1989 pp. 36/37)

How might we recognise *quality* mentoring and coaching?

Recently, I was marking a consignment of university submissions at MA level, and many referred to having made an Internet search and finding there were countless references to coaches and mentors in all shapes, sizes and affiliations. From life coaches to executive and sports coaches and from quasi-mystic mentors to others who offered structured accredited mentoring. It stands to reason that amongst this proliferation there will be some who are more adept at mentoring and coaching. But how would one identify them? Some can be recognised by their pedigree – they have worked for prestigious institutions over a number of years, are clearly highly regarded by peers and clients and may have moved into private practice. Others are jumping on what appears to be a lucrative bandwagon.

In my experience, many school based mentors have often not been selected so much as designated for their roles. Certainly, when school-based mentoring was introduced into schools in 1992, there were occasions where colleagues whose career appeared to be slumping were called upon to become mentors in the hope that it would bring about revitalisation; a risky strategy and sometimes two careers became damaged. Institutional accreditation is some guide to quality, or at least one hopes that it is so. However, where accreditation is automatically handed out as a perk of being chosen as a mentor and does not include an obligation to participate in on-going *development* except for the initial short burst of *training* one can only wonder at what accreditation might indeed signify.

There are coaching and mentoring programmes offering certification – some are excellent. The cost of such programmes, however, can be well beyond the means of a sole trading consultant and a lack of certification is not a reflection of a lack of expertise, necessarily. I have always thought

that a useful rule of thumb is to talk with the mentor or coach before embarking on a contract. Listen not only with your ears but with your eyes ... watch the body language especially in off guarded moments. It is necessary to ask questions such as: Do you feel at ease with this person? Do they have a successful past clientele who are willing to give you insights into how they work and the nature of their skills, values and understandings? How well does a mentor or coach match your need?

My area of interest in mentoring and coaching has shifted since I gained a CNAA award in Structured Mentoring in 1992. I began by working with novice teachers and later became a mentor for mentors and a mentor for coaches. I became committed to working with more experienced educators in school and nursing settings, especially in relation to my consultancies in Japan. I worked as a mentor for school leaders and when the Best Practice Research Scholarship Scheme was running in the early 2000s assisted some 70 teachers to gain funding and work towards M level accreditation in local universities. As part of the Wiltshire LEA scheme funding teacher research I was privileged to become a research mentor in several schools, a role I enjoyed enormously. Gradually my focus in mentoring and coaching narrowed and refined as a research mentor-coach. Chapter 7 of my doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Bath, describes the emergence of my understandings about research mentoring and how it relates to, but differs from, 'tutoring'.

Educational research mentoring emerged from a fusion of structured mentoring (Fletcher, 2000) and enquiry of the kind 'How Can I improve my Practice?' (Whitehead *et al* 2002). Over time, the model of educational research mentoring I have developed has moved from taking a problem as its starting point (Whitehead and McNiff, 2002) and researching lived experience (Van Manen 1990) towards Affirmative Enquiry (Cooperrider 1999). This shift reflected my experience of working Japan where losing face by expressing tension in confronting a problem was deterring teachers from undertaking action research in schools following a visit by Whitehead and Fletcher in 2002. A similar problem was being encountered by nurses and nurse educators and starting from I do 'X' well and wish to do it better was a more attractive option than I have a problem which I need to address.

Rather than run the risk of exploring research mentoring in too diverse a context I have decided to focus on just one area in the remainder of this paper. With this decision in mind, in the next section I turn my attention to reviewing in-school research mentoring and coaching. This section marks my own research in progress and the observations that I make may not necessarily carry full significance across from a school teaching context to other professional disciplines. More research remains to be done to see if this is possible.

How might we ensure quality research mentoring and coaching?

A move by the General Teaching Council's Teacher Learning Academy in 2004 to introduce Stages of Recognition for teacher research is widely recognised as a very positive step in enabling research in the classroom by practitioners (teachers and students) to complement academics' research in schools (on teachers and students). It raises the profile of teacher research especially where higher education institutions are now consciously integrating strategies to assist teachers in gaining recognition alongside accreditation at MA level. One of the core criteria for gaining recognition is to account for the contribution of research mentoring and coaching in the research

process. This is an overt indication that research mentoring and coaching has a vitally important role to play in enabling practitioner research in the workplace and contrasts with a traditional view that research tutoring is a self-sufficient intervention to enable teachers to represent knowledge.

This move to my recognition of the importance of research mentoring and coaching raises a number of key questions that I shall seek to address in six subsections:-

- How might a research mentor or coach assist a teacher researcher in school?
- Which criteria might determine the expertise of research coaches and mentors?
- Which ethical considerations should inform research mentors' and coaches' work?
- How might research mentors and coaches gain recognition for their own work?
- How might an insider research mentor and coach assist their peers' research?
- How might an outsider research mentor and coach assist practitioner research?

How might a research mentor or coach assist a teacher researcher in school?

- forming a focused, manageable research question that is relevant to practice
- ensuring the teacher takes responsibility for any ethical implications involved
- coaching the teacher in research skills appropriate to the research project
- supporting personal and professional development in a period of transition
- listening carefully and appreciatively to how the teacher approaches research
- enabling the teacher to represent and disseminate their research internationally

Which criteria might determine the expertise of research coaches and mentors?

- has the coach and mentor undertaken recent research in school with teachers
- has the coach or mentor experience of teaching in this phase of schooling?
- how far has the mentor or coach researched his or her own practice?
- how well does the mentor or coach relate to teachers and pupils in school?
- does the research mentor or coach hold a qualification related to research?
- how far is the mentor or coach committed to collaborative research?

What ethical considerations should inform research mentors' and coaches' work?

- who will own copyright and intellectual property of any research outcome?
- have necessary permissions been sort from all relevant parties pre research?
- is the mentor and coach and teacher abiding by BERA's Ethical Guidelines?
- how far is the mentor or coach leading the research rather than the teacher?
- how feasible is it to ensure anonymity and confidentiality in a school?
- does the teacher have the support of the senior management team for research?

How might research mentors and coaches gain recognition for their own work?

- is the research mentor and coach researching his or her own practice as an archive?
- might the research mentor and coach be interested in gaining TLA recognition?
- is the research mentor and coach studying for a research based qualification in HE?
- does the research mentor and coach require appropriate citation of their research?
- is the research mentor and coach invited to co-present with the teacher researcher?
- In writing a report about collaborative research is the mentor and coach named?

How might an insider research mentor and coach assist their peers' research?

- assisting the teacher in data gathering and testing research hypotheses in school
- supporting the teacher as an advocate to senior management team and colleagues
- ensuring the teacher has time to undertake research for the school's improvement
- enabling the teacher researcher to work with other teachers as a sounding board
- acting as a critical friend offering support and challenge from a school perspective
- validating and triangulating any claims to know that the teacher researcher makes

How might an outsider research mentor and coach assist practitioner research?

- assisting the school to evidence claims for its Self Evaluation Form (OfSTED)
- working with teachers in class to help them research their teaching and learning
- providing support and challenge for all members of the school in an impartial way
- helping the school to develop a culture of affirmative enquiry in daily activities
- providing opportunities for representing work in an national/international context
- helping to situate teacher research through critical engagement with other research

Research mentors and coaches as collaborative learners

The wise coach or mentor is competent, but continuously strives to increase the capacity to learn; about themselves; about their clients; and about the organisations and contexts in which clients live and work. Every experience is viewed as a learning opportunity and this ensures continuous incremental improvement. (Connor and Pokora, 2007 p.21)

Mentors and coaches should retain an excitement about and a delight in learning to teach and be role models for other teachers. They need to embody credibility in a classroom, as there will be occasions when they may be called upon to suggest strategies to test out as means to improving practice. The teacher researcher takes the ultimate responsibility of course but the mentor or coach should be capable of offering perspectives on the strategies they opt for if invited to do so and these should reflect a wide experience of working with other schools. The teacher and the mentor-coach are both experts whose skills, values and understandings should complement one another. The mentor-coach needs to enable the teacher to step beyond their immediate comfort zone into the zone of proximal development, aware of challenges that may arise and prepared for others too.

By moving alongside the teacher research as a collaborative learner the issues of power and ownership become less troublesome. This is not some outside expert coming in to say how things should run but a fellow research traveler inquisitive about how to teach and learn better, how to approach building on existing practice in a creative, innovative way. The ideal in a mentoring and coaching relationship, it seems to me is that the mentor-coach seeks to become redundant as the teacher's research expertise matures! As a mentor-coach collaborative learner we do away with the notion of becoming researcher clone and move to methodological inventiveness (Dadds and Hart, 2001) where research is undertaken with a sense of curiosity and any outcome is not a foregone conclusion. Research mentoring and coaching is not about rediscovering the wheel but about helping teacher researchers to develop ways of researching practice as a means to improvement.

Using a supportive mentoring relationship to aid independent action research

In 2005 I prototyped a new MA level mentoring module that was designed not only to integrate mentoring and action research, but also to enable the participants to develop as research mentors for their peers. This is an account by two of the teachers (Chopping and Morse, 2006) about the module pioneered at Bitterne Park High School, Southampton.

Over time, the mentoring style we favoured was much in line with Mullen and Lick's definition where the synergy comes from working collaboratively with someone on a pathway of co-enquiry which hopefully leads to greater successes than working independently. This we understand as being what research mentoring is all about. We would support the definition offered by Fletcher (2000) of research mentoring as 'creative collaboration between teachers as researchers and other researchers. ... one of our greatest discoveries is was that mentoring is a two-way learning process.

Representations of the teacher researchers' work using KEEP Toolkit technology from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching can be accessed from the Homepage of <http://www.TeacherResearch.net> in the Bitterne Park section. To my surprise and delight I discovered that the mentoring relationship that developed between teachers in the group took on a life of its own. The teachers began to collaborate in their school in new ways and they were clearly also energised to induct their students into developing action research projects in their turn. At BERA presentations it was clear that teachers had found that mentoring had enriched their professional and personal lives. One of the teachers is now planning to develop a teacher research group in her new school and the focus will be on creating a coaching scheme and how might develop. The enabler, mentoring, has become the focus of the action research; an unexpected outcome.

Where are the gaps in our knowledge about research mentoring and coaching?

I would agree with David Clutterbuck that we lack sufficient insight into how mentoring and coaching relationships develop and can be sustained over time. In order to develop such understandings it is important, in my opinion, for mentors and coaches to undertake systematic self study, keeping an archive of research diaries whether in text or audio-visual form from which

to see how patterns emerge and change over time. We need to understand how mentoring and coaching relationships change as contexts change and from such accounts we need to learn how to create the conditions that will maximise the constrictive and creative potential of long term relationships as collaborative enquiries.

As Chipping and Morse infer there is a potential for both partners in a mentoring and coaching relationship to work towards the realisation of their positive possible selves:

The realisation of possible selves occurs in a social dialogic context. Mentoring relationships constitute one such context that can help those involved to realise their potential. Integrating self-study action research into mentoring enables mentor and mentee to undertake sustained and systematic enquiry into their development. This in turn enables them to understand the changes they have initiated and offers insights regarding the creation of more effective forms of human development programs. (Fletcher, 2007: in press)

I am conscious that there are some gaps in our knowledge about mentoring and coaching – there is surprisingly little research into how effective coaching can be managed in schools although coaching is becoming a widely practiced activity there. Similarly it can be surmised that there are gaps in our knowledge (but who knows how great and how significant) that we do not yet know. In imaging a Johari window we see but a portion of reality and remain in denial or blissful ignorance of what we do not know. Precisely how for example do effective mentors enable mentees to develop towards their projected possible selves? How do they use silence as well as words? What part does body language play? How far do cultural and environmental dynamics come into play?

I would argue that there is no one way to develop knowledge about mentoring and coaching but through a combination of research approaches which can help evidence complementary visions of reality we are likely to move closer to an understanding. Research on mentors and coaches is only going to give us a partial picture and I endorse Cox' view (2006) that creating coherent life stories is likely to move us a step closer:

I would argue that belief in oneself through recognition of a coherent life story is important in the formation and maintenance of self-efficacy ... making sense of transitions allows for the exploration of values ... which are intimately linked to motivation. (Cox, 2006, p. 207)

One personal narrative is useful but imagine the combined knowledge that can emerge when several are brought together. As we read self-study accounts created by mentors and coaches and witness their values, skills and understandings our knowledge 'gap' narrows:

What I would like to do is very simple indeed. I would like to share with you some of the things I have learned for myself in regard to communication. These are personal learnings growing out of my own experience. I am not attempting at all to say that you should learn or do the same things but I feel that if I can report my own experiences honestly enough, perhaps you can check what I say against your own experience and decide as to its truth or falsity for you. (Rogers, 1980, p.6)

But I want to argue that text alone cannot bring to life the dynamic of living relationships that are mentoring and coaching and that a combination of text and multi-media is likely to move us closer to understanding what is yet to be understood about these activities. Talking with Toru Iiyoshi, Head of the KEEP Knowledge Laboratory and his colleagues at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, I explained (2006a):-

Taking as a starting point a notion that digital representations would enable teacher-researchers to share richer, contextualised understandings of their work, I tried several templates, which were freely available for digital representation, including the KEEP Toolkit. I eventually selected a KEEP Toolkit Project Template that I saw used by teacher researchers at the International Conference for Teacher Researchers in 2004, mainly because the enthusiasm among the users of the Toolkit at that conference was infectious! I created my first draft snapshot in 12 hours and was delighted that it allowed me to capture teaching moments in 3D through the interaction between the layers of text, video, images, and audio. Since 2004, I have introduced this tool to many teachers and students as a means for communicating their research in learning. Currently, I am working with over 30 teacher-researchers and also many student-researchers who are developing their Snapshots. My excitement lies in seeing how each brings his or her choices and values into how they represent knowledge. Although my preferred format for representing images, video and text is in columns, the Gallery of Teaching and Learning has provided an inspiring selection for teachers introduced to the concept of representing their teaching. Using some of these examples as guides, teachers have become increasingly adventurous in linking pages from their students as well as Critical Thinking Scaffolds into the 'snapshots' they create. Through their eyes the wider educational research community can have insights into the process of teaching and learning in schools, a privileged view that few otherwise attain. (Fletcher, 2006a)

Van Manen has pointed out that writing exercises the ability to see and if that is so then digital technology enables a sharing and critical engagement in seeing that paper based text alone cannot afford. When a teacher-researcher can construct a multi media account of their research, their seeing can be communicated in a dynamic and living form using still and video photography. Providing critical friendship through educational research mentoring (and coaching) does assist the process of knowledge creation when coupled with using digital technology. (Fletcher, 2006a, p. 51)

Digital technology offers mentors and coaches a plethora of exciting opportunities. Already recognised in the area of sports coaching, replay video, as a basis for reflection and subsequent improvement of practice is a long established routine. Similarly in teaching novices and experienced teachers frequently reflect on video lessons or on areas of practice they wish to improve. But what about video as a means to improving mentoring and coaching? How far are we building a creative 'commons' of mentoring and coaching? We are certainly moving in the direction of communicating what we know, but without awareness of the possible it is unlikely we can move possibility to probability. Pockets of research into mentoring and coaching, which

can be shared as a basis for critical engagement, certainly exist, but in my opinion we need to build a much larger commons.

If we are to avoid reinventing the wheel about good practice in mentoring and coaching as these practices move into different professional domains it will be crucial to engage critically with existing knowledge as a basis for developing new and better practices. Video mail (V-mail) using KEEP Toolkit technology, video-conferenced mentoring and coaching are bringing new clarity into demystifying mentoring and coaching activities. These technologies do not replace but can complement well written accounts of practice. With greater understanding but simultaneously avoiding a temptation towards conformity and one-size fits all programmes, we have an opportunity in this digital age to inspire and inform new generations of research mentors and coaches to stimulate *creative* endeavour.

Conclusion

My premise in this paper is that mentoring and coaching not only need to be defined more clearly, they need to be understood as they emerge as a dynamic and living relationship. Digital technology can enhance our understandings of mentoring and coaching and further research into these empowering relationships in a way that text based accounts may not.

We have a growing body of evidence that mentoring and coaching can be generative and that mentors and coaches can leave a creative legacy of mentoring and coaching in their wake. Accounts like those by Chipping and Morse (2006) have a reassuring ring about them. However, such accounts stand in some isolation when we compare their number to the burgeoning sales in 'How To' handbooks for mentoring and coaching. It is through on-line journals like this one, edited by Elaine Cox, that we have an investment in creating a 'commons' for mentoring and coaching to which we can contribute and from which we learn. With the growing realisation about the importance of mentoring and coaching not only for adult learners but also for children (CUREE: 2007) we are in a state of transition between a surge in the growth of the mentoring and coaching road show and band wagon, and understandings and knowledge that should (hopefully) improve our future practices.

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