

# Teaching practice guidelines – on reflexive counseling - mentoring<sup>1</sup>

By Ole Løv

"The questions asked by the mentor depend on the responses he or she wishes to hear."  
(inspired by Karl Tomm).

In the 1998 reform of teacher training, the importance of teaching practice was enhanced. Since then, students have had more hands-on experience of teaching in schools. Teaching practice can be beneficial for students' professional development if they are set challenges and receive support for critical reflection in a mentoring context before, during and after teaching practice.

I see teaching practice mentoring as a skills development method, i.e. as a specific process and as an experience-based type of learning. The students' practical experience of teaching is the cornerstone of this learning process, in the sense that there is an interaction between their studies at teacher training college and their participation in teaching practice at the school. The content of the mentoring they receive is based on actual situations and themes the student encounters during teaching practice. However, the mentor can employ different mentoring strategies and each of these reflects different perspectives on how the student learns through the mentoring process.

## Choice of mentoring strategy

These perspectives cover a spectrum ranging from mentoring as *the mentor showing the way* to mentoring as *the mentee seeking the way* (Løv 1996). At one end of this spectrum, mentoring is seen as communication or transference of the mentor's skills, experience and attitudes (Inglar 1997). The mentor acts as an instructor (and role model) for the mentee/student. At the other end of the spectrum, mentoring is seen as an experiential process, in which participants have opportunities to relate, investigate and reflect on issues they encounter in teaching practice. The mentor acts as a guide (and catalyst) in the student's learning process.

The mentoring strategy chosen depends on the mentor's approach (humanistic, pedagogical and empirical) and of the generic (framework for working together) and specific (inter-personal relationship) aspects of the mentoring situation. One important skill required of the mentor is that he is able to identify an appropriate type of mentoring.

The mentor is advised to pose himself a number of questions (and to discuss these with the mentee/student). For example, he must clarify the *aim* of mentoring, the *relationship* between mentor and mentee, the *preconditions and wishes* of the mentee, the *circumstances*, under which mentoring is to take place – including how *responsibility and control* are distributed and exercised, and which *agreements* can be made between the participants (Lauvås og Handal 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> From Larsen & Lundahl (1999): *Praktikbogen. En fælles bog for den lærerstuderende, praktiklæreren og skolelederen.* Forlaget Alinea, side 13-26.

In teaching practice the student teacher is involved in three important social relationships: her relationship with the pupils she teaches, her relationship with the teaching practice tutor (training college tutor) and her relationship with fellow students in her teaching practice group. The social interaction inherent in these relationships represents *the experiential and learning dimensions of teaching practice*.

Mentoring in the teaching practice context has professional orientation. The mentoring aims to develop the mentee's professional skills, and focuses on what motivates action, the relationships between the participants and the effect of the action(s). Learning from the mentoring process can therefore be seen to take place at three levels: the student's specific teaching work, her professional persona and the framework in which she teaches.

*The mentoring situation* between tutor and student is an asymmetrical relationship between the more competent, more experienced teacher and the less competent, less experienced student(s). This is the vertical dimension of the learning gained from teaching practice. Mentoring takes place over an extended period and is based on an agreement, in which general and local preconditions are applied to teaching practice as a discipline, including the fact that teaching practice and mentoring are obligatory parts of teacher training. In teaching practice, the teaching practice tutor (the mentor) is formally responsible for the student's tutoring and professional monitoring. These responsibilities are clearly stated in the provision of the relevant executive order's Section 18(1-2), which stipulates that the student must receive advice during and a grade for teaching practice. See Torben Roswall's article: *Advice and grading*).

Throughout the training, the point of departure for mentoring must be the student's capacity (and wishes) and the mentoring process should result in a *progression* from the more communicative types of mentoring towards more reflexively orientated strategies. This is also suggested in guidelines published by the Danish Ministry of Education. (See [www.alinea.dk](http://www.alinea.dk)).

Reciprocal peer coaching between students is also intended to develop students' skills. The dialogue is therefore regulated by means of predetermined and ongoing agreements between the parties. However, the coaching relationship between students is symmetrical as, firstly, their skills are formally at the same level. Secondly, there are no formal control functions and participation is voluntary, and, finally, there is no formal responsibility in reciprocal peer coaching. This is the horizontal dimension of the learning to be gained from teaching practice.

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned summaries of the two situations, mentoring and coaching (i.e. the vertical and horizontal dimensions, respectively) require different approaches to guidance, can be seen as variations of the same mentoring strategy: reflexive mentoring (Løv 1996). In the following I will focus on describing reciprocal coaching situations between students and includes, by way of conclusion, an explanation of the importance of and perspectives inherent to this type of dialogue and experience-based learning processes.

## **Reflexive mentoring**

Reflexive mentoring is a structured type of interview with a specific framework and regulations. This strategy is assumed to enhance the students' own reflexive and learning

processes. Reflexive mentoring is based on an approach to learning which assumes that we achieve learning by means of gaining experience in specific cultural contexts. Another basic assumption is that knowledge is built as a result of the interaction between individuals – i.e. it has a social foundations and is therefore not something static that can simply be transferred from mentor to mentee.

We can describe reflexive mentoring as a process which provides opportunities for the student to change her perspective on her own reality by means of the mentor's questions and reflexive dialogues. By posing specific questions, the mentor seeks to *comprehend and challenge* the student's understanding of reality. The mentor seeks to invite the implicated parties to reflect on the issues raised and on how they think. In other words, the mentor focuses on the *opportunities for learning* inherent in the issues raised.

My point here is that a successful mentoring dialogue results in a reorganisation of previous experience – the student "reframes" her experience and opens up to a new chapter of or a new perspective on "reality".

Of course, the mentor can try to give the student advice. He can also insist on his own interpretation and understanding. However, such an approach will most often be destructive for the relationship, of which the dialogue is a part. His good intentions will probably only bear fruit if his counterpart (the student) was already willing to adhere to the mentor's ideas. If not, she will somehow end the relationship.

The cornerstones of reflexive mentoring are therefore *active questioning and active listening*. I will return to these in my discussion of the key mentoring skills.

## **Structured interviews between mentor and student**

Reflexive mentoring requires a specific presence, which is structured in accordance with the specific rules that apply to the mentoring dialogue. In other words, *a specific dialogue space* is established, in which communication takes place in accordance with principles other than those characteristic of the coffee bar chat, meeting or planning interview. To the experienced tutor, this may seem artificial and superfluous. The social context would seem to suggest that ordinary everyday form of conversation would suffice. To all intents and purposes the interview might seem to flow well without formal regulations and structure. Firstly, however, an ordinary collegial conversation normally has a different purpose, i.e. to reach an agreement or compromise. An ordinary conversation is solution- and action-orientated. The purpose of reflexive mentoring, however, is to examine an issue with a view to becoming wiser about one's own professional reality. Reflexive mentoring is oriented towards comprehending and learning. Secondly, an ordinary conversation is inevitably marked by patterns of communication which the parties have developed in other contexts. These are not necessarily conducive to active questioning and active listening, or to critical reflection. My point is and my experience dictates therefore that reflection on and during teaching practice requires that mentoring is given as a structured dialogue. Once the structure is integrated, it can of course be adapted to match practical circumstances and participants' wishes.

A mentoring process ideally comprises the following:

- Preparation for mentoring.

- Mentoring before teaching: *pre-mentoring*.
- Performance of the teaching and other teaching activities
- Mentoring after the teaching: *post-mentoring*.
- Subsequent evaluation of the student's/students' experience of teaching practice

One important aspect of preparation is the initial *contact* between the teaching practice mentor and the students.

It is imperative from the outset that the atmosphere is comfortable, and the mentor is especially responsible for ensuring that the mood is comfortable. He may, for example, find it useful to have considered a number of predictable conditions in advance. For example:

- How will I start the dialogue?
- What can I say about myself and the school?
- What is important for me to ask the students?
- How will I introduce my dilemma, i.e. that I am both the mentor and the students' examiner?

Another important aspect of preparing for the initial dialogue is the *agreement* between the parties. It is imperative that the parties establish agreements between them based on a common understanding of e.g. the mentoring strategies and the intentions of the mentoring process. In my experience, if the parties fail to align their expectations for the aim of mentoring, the mentoring dialogue is disrupted. If, for example, students expect to receive good advice and instructions from the mentor, they will be disappointed by a mentor who aims to coach them to reflect critically over their own actions and their fundamental effects.

The mentoring perspective must be described as clearly and unequivocally as possible to participants. To this end, it may be useful to distinguish between two different types of mentoring agreement: The introductory contract should include clarification of *the framework agreement*, i.e. goals, means, frameworks, resources, rights and obligations. In connection with both pre and post-mentoring, the participants should make procedural agreements, to manage the mentoring dialogue process. *The procedural agreement* is not a contract that can be drawn up once and for all. It must be adjusted at regular intervals by means of a dialogue about the dialogue – so-called "metacommunication".

Reflexive mentoring also requires that the participants – especially the mentor – relate to and reflect upon the intentions, implementation and results of the mentoring process. For example, the participants may find it beneficial to discuss the following:

- Choice of mentoring strategy (showing the way - seeking the way?)
- Communication principles – special rules for the mentoring dialogue
- Mentoring themes – how will mentoring content and areas be established?
- Areas on which to focus or pay special attention to (See section on mentoring skills)
- Use of mentoring documentation (see section on structured student peer dialogues).
- Duty of confidentiality – what may be talked about outside the mentoring room?

*Pre-mentoring – reflecting on action plans:* Pre-mentoring is conducted on the basis of the students' teaching plans. The aim is to encourage them to reflect over the connection between grounds and actions taken (Lauvås og Handal 1997). In other words, students have to reflect on the whats and hows of teaching and their intentions as these are key issues in the pre-mentoring phase. The mentor will, for example, ask: What are you thinking of doing? What

will the pupils do? What do you wish to achieve by asking pupils to work in groups? What is the purpose of the theme process?

I think it is important to think long and hard about pre-mentoring. For example, we have to consider that it takes place while the student is still in the decision-making phase. And pre-mentoring becomes the point of departure for the post-mentoring. It is important to avoid the pre-mentoring becoming a type of joint preparation by mentor and mentee – it should not become more a planning meeting than a pre-mentoring. Pre-mentoring should be concentrated on students' reflections and action plans.

*Post-mentoring – reflecting on actions:* Post-mentoring must take the actual teaching as its point of departure. The dialogue may end up covering a great deal of ground if specific issues are not identified from the outset or if specific focus areas were not agreed in the pre-mentoring phase. I will return briefly to this matter, along with the dialogue and mentoring document, in the final section on reciprocal student peer coaching. The characteristics of post-mentoring can be described as follows:

- Takes place based on observations of and reflections on actual teaching situations.
- A forum for reflecting on the interaction between teaching plans and their realisation, as evaluated by the participants.
- Allows for the recognition of new opportunities for understanding and acting.

As an example, I have chosen the dialogue between a mentor and a student using an individual mentoring model. It is also possible to involve other participants as reflective participants in the dialogue. Students are often organised in teaching practice groups. However, I think it is important that the individual student is also given an opportunity to be the point of focus in the mentoring dialogue. By a similar token, I believe that it is most appropriate to have only one mentor. *The basic model* is a dialogue between two parties, mentor and student, about a third entity: the case in hand.

The mentor steers the dialogue with the mentee. The student/mentee presents a selected pedagogical situation and the mentor poses questions in order to clarify. The other students form what is called the *reflexive team* (Løv 1999). They listen to the mentoring dialogue and then discuss what they have seen and heard, while the mentor and mentee listen. The extended model with active participation of the other students therefore includes a series of "scene changes" which ensure that *participants switch between speaking and listening roles and which thus encourages different perspectives on the issues arising in the mentoring dialogue..* The mentee is able to observe herself and her team mates in the pedagogical context. After a while, the mentor again changes scene, bringing the mentee and himself into the speaking role once more. Note that the team members must talk between themselves, i.e. with neither the mentor nor the mentee (their fellow student).

Relating to one's own teaching practice requires that the student can see herself from the outside and thus examine her relationship in the light of any issues that may arise. The mentor adopts a so-called metaposition, from which he can speculate on what may seem to be matters of course to the mentee. The reflexive team also has a different perspective from that of the mentee. They are able to observe the mentoring process from the outside and also adopt a metaposition vis-à-vis the mentor and mentee.

*Post-mentoring* can best be described as a structured dialogue, which reviews a series of different fields, ranging from procedural agreements and descriptions to evaluation (and possibly grading). At the start of the process, the weight of emphasis in the description is on the pedagogical situation. By the end of the process however, the weight of emphasis changes to what the student can extract from the interview in the way of learning.

The mentoring process can be described as a spiral movement, in which descriptions and dialogue together lead to recognitions, which subsequently lead to new descriptions, and so on. In the following I split the process into different phases. These phases should, however, not be considered as phases with clear subdivisions in terms of timing and content. There are different approaches to dividing the process into phases but the progression is the same in all of them (Inglar 1997 and Lauvås & Handel 1997). I propose to split post-mentoring into the following four phases:

- Clarifying phase
  - clarifies points of focus in the mentoring – what will we be working on together?
- Investigative phase
  - investigates and analyses points of focus – how does the mentee feel about and understand the issues that have arisen?
  
- Action phase
  - mobilising the mentee's problem-solving (problem-resolving) resources – which alternative courses of action does the mentee envisage?
- Evaluation phase
  - mutual assessments of the mentoring dialogue process
  - what (in particular) has the mentee learned?

The progression marks some decisive points of reference in the mentoring process. For example, these may be highlighted by the fact that the descriptive, investigative and recognition-based phases take place prior to phases which involve an exchange of experience and proposals for action. In the following I will provide several examples of the types of questions that are related to progression in the dialogue.

A mentor's basic toolbox contains professional, informative and communicative skills. The weight of emphasis on these three principal components will vary, depending in the tradition or strategy, within which the mentoring process takes place. In critical and reflexive mentoring, the mentor's *communicative skills* are decisive, as they are in fact determinant factors in creating processes which encourage critical reflection.

One of the preconditions for successful mentoring is that *a positive relationship between tutor and students* is established from the very beginning. At their first meeting, both tutor and students are open to new impressions (Tron Inglar 1997). Both parties absorb and emit messages that are verbal (digital) and non-verbal (analogue) in character. Each forms an opinion, which is seldom expressed verbally. The establishment of social relationships requires special awareness of non-verbal communication (body language, intonation, etc.) as these are thought to be especially significant to the way the parties decode the atmosphere/mood of their meeting.

Another important precondition for successful mentoring is that *the atmosphere established reflects fundamental respect* for the individual's right to have opinions and

thoughts of her own (Løw 1999). The more secure the relationship, the more attention is drawn to verbal language – i.e. the information contained in the message. The opposite is also true. The more uncertain the relationship, the more attention is drawn to non-verbal language, i.e. the way in which things are said.

An important precondition for learning and creating change through the dialogue is that there are external disruptions. In the present context, these are *challenging questions*. The mentor's questions must not be excessively disruptive – nor must his questions be too unusual. If so, the mentee is likely to repudiate the challenge. However, the questions should not cause too little disruption – they should not be too commonplace. If they are too ordinary, questions fail to facilitate a new perspective. If the mentor succeeds in striking the perfect balance and asks suitably unusual questions, the mentor lays open opportunities for the mentee to expand her sphere of comprehension and scope for action. As suggested by the quote from Karl Tomm at the top of this article, the questions posed by the mentor are not random at all. When a mentor asks "When did Tom begin to have difficulties?", he is asking a completely different question from "When did you begin to find Tom difficult to deal with?"

In the clarification phase of the post-mentoring process, the primary objective of the mentor's questions is to clarify the case – what will we be working on together?

He will ask who did what, where, when, how and to what end. The mentor's role can be described metaphorically as the role of detective.

The mentor employs active listening at every phase in the process but particularly in the clarification phase. The mentor employs *active listening* at every phase in the process but particularly in the clarification phase. The mentor demonstrates that he is listening actively and reports what he has heard. For example, he says: Am I right in thinking – does this mean that...?

There are four elements in an active listening process: repetitions, pauses, elaborations and summaries. The technique is used for a number of reasons, including to clarify whether the student's explanation is based on his own impression of the situation.

In the subsequent investigative phase, the purpose of the mentor's questions will be to *examine* the case in more detail. By asking questions, the mentor seeks to elucidate key connections and differences (Løw 1999).

For example, he asks: "How do you feel when Tom suddenly leaves the classroom?" or "Are there any situations in which you have no qualms about saying No?" Here, the mentor's role can be described metaphorically as the role of researcher.

In the action phase, the mentor asks questions, *the purpose of which is to mobilise reflection and creativity in the student*.

For example, the mentor may ask: "If your fellow students were to suggest the best solution for you, which would they choose?" In this phase, the mentor's role can be described metaphorically as the role of guide.

The mentor may possibly follow a *pattern*, in which he first asks about a specific person, i.e. the mentee, and then expands the perspective by posing questions with successively more connections within the context – e.g. other teaching practice tutors and students. Similarly, the mentor will often start in the *present tense* and may then expand using the past and future tenses. In actual fact, the mentor may first and foremost ask questions in the post-mentoring, such as: "Did the lesson go as planned?" Later, the mentor might ask: "Were there times when you felt that you followed your lesson plan?"

His questions may also revolve around *actions, experiences, resources and theories*. The dialogue may also start by examining the student's actions in a specific teaching situation. The mentor may then ask if the student has had similar experiences, if she can relate theories to the situations and resources she can apply in connection with such situations.

Depending on his mentoring intentions, the mentor could also ask other questions. For example:

- How will you know when your goal is achieved? (goal-oriented question)
- What will you do if they aren't willing to form a circle? (action-oriented question)
- What would you think if she continued to respond without being asked? (explanatory question)
- When you get involved, whose side are you on most often - the girls' or the boys'? (context-oriented question)
- What do you see as the best type of support to give: leaving her alone, remaining in the vicinity, trying to talk to her or giving her a hug? (question about differences)
- How did you view the situation that set off the reaction?" (question about the student's attention)
- What do you think she thinks when she finds herself in this situation? (question about others' attention)

## **Structured interviews between students**

Students are often put together in teaching practice groups. I believe this provides excellent opportunities for mutual support and challenges. What the students learn from teaching practice can be organised so that they take it in turns to perform different classroom assignments. I believe it is important that the individual student gains an understanding of the various teaching situations for herself. This also releases resources so that the other students in the group can *make observations*. Teaching demands so much attention and involvement on the part of the student that she will find it difficult to observe her own actions. Her fellow students will be able to maintain sufficient objective distance to make observations and discuss them as joint reflections on her actions. However, making and recording classroom observations is not as simple as it would seem. The mentor is well-advised to assign *focal points* for the students' observations. And once these focal points are clarified, the students' reflections on the actions are already in progress!

Similarly, the mentor and student observers are advised jointly to write down what they have observed. Although this is advisable simply to ensure that the mentor and students remember what they have observed, the process of writing them down often creates a new perspective on the topic. The notes are also useful when the student or students write(s) a *mentoring document*. The purpose of a mentoring document is to ensure that the student seeks in advance to clarify for herself what ground she specifically needs the mentoring process to cover. This gives the remaining participants a chance to prepare and it helps the mentor to identify and focus the dialogue on the key principles and circumstances stated in the mentoring document.

Reciprocal peer coaching between the students is an important key element in the process of learning from teaching practice. At the teacher training college, students must be given the chance to learn how to set up and conduct structured dialogues with one another

and with their mentors, to use both at the teacher training college and during teaching practice. Here I am thinking in terms particularly of insight and skills related to *group processes, observations and communication*. If they have no framework or method for their dialogue, it becomes a friendly chat, in which the students will tend to pat each other on the back (affirmation dialogue).

Mentoring has to be learned and this is best achieved by training different types of structured dialogues. The whole idea of reciprocal peer mentoring is that the individual and the group has/have knowledge and potential that can be brought into play in the dialogue process – "we know more than we think we know!" In addition to the learning they can extract from reciprocal peer mentoring, the students also learn to give and take guidance. These are skills that they will be in a position to use in networking fora and when they have completed their teaching training.

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