

Five Habits for Effective Mentors

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More information, the full report and all three resources are available at:

www.ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/learning-dialogue-in-field-based-experiences

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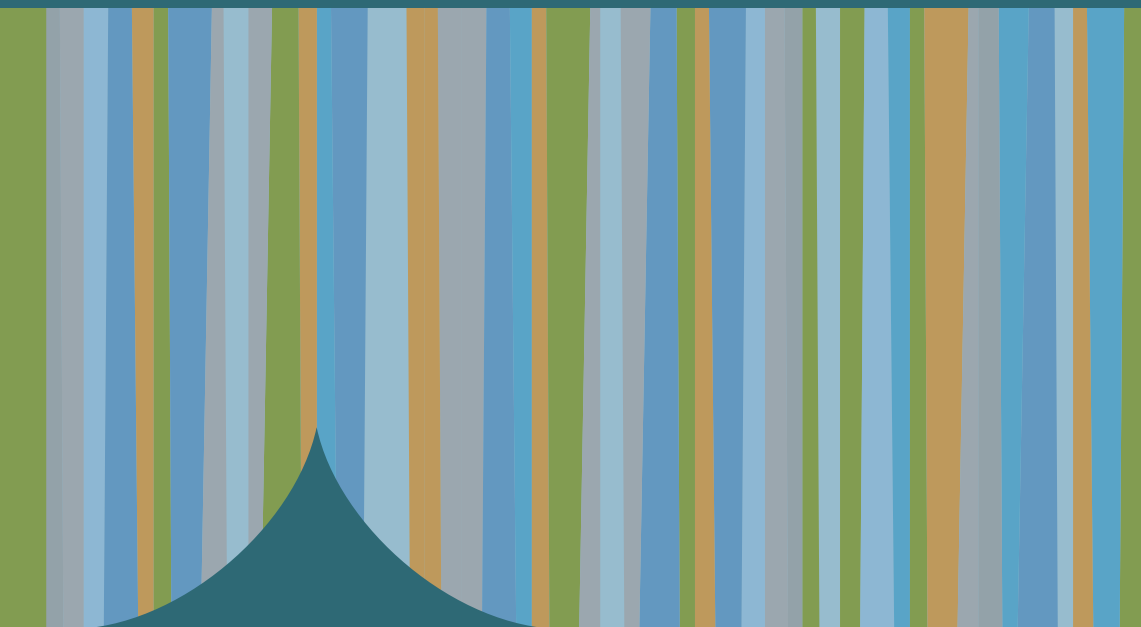
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Introduction

... the primary goal [of the mentor] is to help novice professionals build the critical consciousness necessary for reflection, which then leads to action resulting in transformation. Steek, 2008

The purpose of this resource is to provide support for mentors in professional and vocational areas. The habits of effective mentors described here are based on the findings of a larger project supported through the Ako Aotearoa National Project Fund in 2009 *Maximising Learning Dialogue Opportunities in Professional Field-Based Experiences*. Two other resources are available relating to this work that support organisations and learners in field-based settings. The full report and additional resources are available at www.akoatearora.ac.nz/learning-dialogue-in-field-based-experiences

This resource focuses on five known habits of effective mentors, these habits are:

1. building a learning relationship
2. engaging in learning dialogue
3. being intentional
4. making time to mentor
5. valuing the role.

We encourage all mentors to consider their practices in relation to these habits. You may want to try out the interventions described in the research as a way to enhance your relationship with your mentee (see pages 10-11).

Overview of the Research

The research project on which this resource is based investigated ways to develop genuine learning dialogue between practicum mentors/supervisors and their students. Genuine learning dialogue is when the conversation between a supervisor/mentor and learner is characterised by genuine professional co-enquiry.

Data was gathered from 16 participant pairs in early childhood education settings (associate teachers and student teachers) and 11 counselling settings (supervisors and student counsellors).

These participant pairs were asked to trial four interventions to enhance practicums: A partnership map, a belief inventory, a critical incident discussion, and a research journal article discussion (see pages 10-11).

Findings revealed that while the training provider may consider the placement to be of great significance for student learning, it is possible to make inaccurate assumptions about what is actually happening. Sometimes students are not actually meeting with their mentor because one or the other is too busy, or the practicalities of making time to talk at any depth are too difficult, and some students experience their mentor as disinterested in them. We also found that both students and mentors tend to veer towards supportive rather than challenging learning dialogue.

While mentors are often experts in their field many have not had any professional development around how to best enhance student learning. We believe support and professional development for mentors is crucial.

Habit 1

Building a learning relationship

... a safe, trusting environment where individual ideas and views can be offered and explored in challenging ways without causing offence.

Sanders, 2008

Building a learning relationship means moving beyond a cordial relationship.

The primary focus of a cordial relationship relates to the support offered to the student by the mentor. This helps to build confidence. However, feedback to the student often remains at a superficial level, because the mentor can be afraid to 'rock the boat'. Conversations can tend to be one-sided, with the mentor taking a directive role.

The key to developing a learning relationship is building knowledge about each other's beliefs, values, aspirations, roles, working styles etc. If this exploration happens early in the practicum, the understanding that develops provides a base for challenge as well as support. The mentor can take a responsive role, and conversations become a genuine dialogue, with professional growth occurring for both student and mentor.

WHAT STUDENTS SAY:

The relationship I have with my mentor makes a difference to the impact of our discussions. I now have confidence to ask for help.

When there is (a learning) relationship the challenging roles become supportive – the roles become interlocked.

WHAT MENTORS SAY:

The partnership was most useful for both parties as I was able to discuss and understand the direction my students want to go.

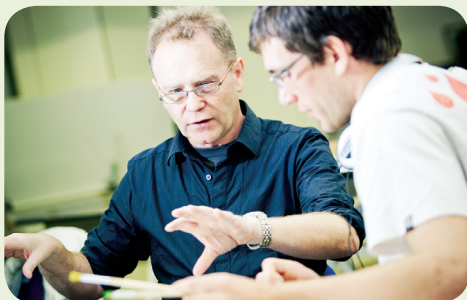
[Building a learning relationship] has made us more confident and comfortable to talk with each other about our practices and any problems that may come about.

Habit 2

Engaging in learning dialogue

... discussions are the engine that drives well-planned, active mentoring.

Edwards & Collision, 1996



It is easy as a mentor to interact with students at a technical level, focusing on what should be done and how to do it. While these elements are important, it is crucial that conversations also move to genuine co-inquiry, with a willingness to examine why we act as we do, what theoretical considerations underpin our practice, and also apply current research to practice.

It is important that these interactions are reciprocal, genuine explorations of professional practice. This type of learning dialogue aids congruence between beliefs and practice and encourages genuine professional learning.

WHAT STUDENTS SAY:

[It is good] to have critical discussions to question reasons for my decisions.

[Dialogue] made me realise that I am on the same wavelength as my mentor and [helped me] to be more confident in what I believe is the right thing to do.

...discussing what I felt worked well, why I thought that way, alternatives that could be even more beneficial, what didn't work well, new or different ways of working with clients that would enhance my work.

WHAT MENTORS SAY:

The increased dialogue allowed me to give specific positive and constructive feedback on the student's practice and study skills.

Habit 3

Being intentional

Strategies, structures and tools provide scaffolding which turns intention into reality.

Sanders, 2008

Intentionality in structuring mentoring conversations can be highly effective in enhancing and deepening learning dialogue. The use of specific tasks is one means of providing that structure.

Being intentional right from the start will help to move the mentoring interactions to genuine learning dialogue and to create a transparent space within which to communicate.

Specifically selected tasks can provide a pathway that will scaffold the mentor, so that professional dialogue and professional knowledge is shared. They can also be a springboard to contextually appropriate dialogue that covers both practical and theoretical matters.

It is not the task *per se* that enhances dialogue, but the intentionality behind planning to use a task. Implementing a structured approach to mentoring will help the overall quality of mentoring experienced.

WHAT STUDENTS SAY:

The mentoring sessions have been more tightly focussed on the learning dialogue and professional development because of the research project.

The structure broke down my barriers to asking for help.

The set tasks [that were sent out] were the first time we had ever sat down and had a one-on-one together.

I wonder if more structure would result in a deeper level of communication surrounding my practice.

AN EFFECTIVE MENTOR:

- develops a repertoire of effective tasks/strategies/techniques that will support learning dialogue
- uses the tasks to build shared understanding and a common language
- gives feedback regularly
- shares key learning experiences from their own development
- plans activities together to strengthen areas identified as needing development
- focuses on developing an awareness and professional identity
- shows the connection between theory and practice
- uses the tasks to help them engage in critique of the student's practice
- encourages the student to ask questions
- gives their contact details to their student



WHAT MENTORS SAY:

The tasks have greatly broadened and clarified the quality of dialogue and therefore made possible a far better level of relationship at all levels within the work context.

[Because of the tasks] I have had to consider the purposes and uses of supervision.

I looked forward to having structured content to discuss and explore together.

Habit 4

Making time to mentor

Mentors need to make time to create and use content-appropriate scaffolding tasks.

Smith et al. (2012)

Mentoring relationships take time; time to observe the student, time to reflect on those observations, time to critique practice, and time to talk with the student about the practice.

The literature on mentoring has highlighted the difficulty students have in accessing the mentor and finding time for enriched conversations. When meetings are infrequent, knowing what to prioritise can become an issue.

It can be difficult to find time to observe a student and engage in learning dialogue, when the mentor concurrently has responsibilities within the setting. Such time constraints can impact severely on the relationship and can be heightened by a lack in organisation or the availability of an appropriate meeting space.

AN EFFECTIVE MENTOR:

- keeps a check on their level of busyness and the student's
- has a regular set time for learning dialogue to occur. Conversations on the run are helpful but often stay at a practical level. Intentional learning dialogue will allow exploration of theory also, and encourage reflection
- finds an appropriate place to meet, which is free of interruptions and distractions
- has a predetermined focus for their mentoring discussion and then allows time for other topics that have arisen since the last meeting
- takes time to listen to the student's views
- helps the student set their own learning goals

WHAT STUDENTS SAY:

It was good to have regular meetings and to encourage thinking in a different way.

It was good to be able to sit down and talk to each other.

The person who was supposed to be my mentor was not there to observe me.

Habit 5

Valuing the role

The mentor helps the student to build on the richness of past experience and the accumulated understanding, the heritage of past enquiry.

Smith et al. (2012)

The mentoring role is complex, intricate and involves significant responsibility. The opportunity to help share a new professional colleague's practice is a privilege.

Mentoring requires distinct skills that are not necessarily gained as we complete our initial professional qualifications. These are skills to be practised and mastered.

It is important to seek advice on the mentoring role through reading, discussion with other mentors and professional development sessions.

Being able to articulate your own practice and beliefs is an important aspect of being a mentor. Your experience is of great value to the student you are mentoring. You can guide the student beyond the apparent and surface features, and encourage them to look deeper into the professional decisions they make.

Students value highly the learning opportunities within practicum experiences, and earnestly desire collegial dialogue about their practice.

WHAT STUDENTS SAY:

The last thing you want is to be made to feel inferior.

AN EFFECTIVE MENTOR:

- is very clear about the expectations of the providers whose students they mentor
- uses every opportunity to learn more about mentoring practices
- makes time in their work schedule for mentoring
- accepts their responsibility to support and challenge, always remembering they are a gate keeper for their profession
- takes time to reflect on their interactions with their students, checking that they are offering both support and challenge
- sees their mentoring experience as a contribution to their own professional development

WHAT MENTORS SAY:

The ultimate aim to have the student self-challenge is achieved by building platforms for support and challenge.

The role of the mentor is to witness, celebrate, archive progress to professionalism, making something more visible than it has been.

Strategies and tools

to help build learning relationships

[The Partnership Map] was a tool, a pathway that opened up discussion [and built] a solid professional relationship.

Student

PARTNERSHIP MAP

This is a visual record of a mutual narrative between mentor and student about how the practicum will play out. It covers such topics as roles, expectations, protocols, assumptions, timeframes and feedback strategies. The map can take the form of overlapping circles, lists etc. If used early in the practicum, a partnership map can contribute to an effective learning relationship. Both the mentor and student contribute their ideas to the map.

BELIEF INVENTORY

Both the mentor and the student independently complete a belief inventory, presented as 10 linked items related to beliefs and attitudes about their professional area (either the mentor or the student can construct the inventory). When the mentor and student have completed the inventory, the items become the basis for a dialogue that uncovers theoretical foundations, clashes and professional language, and makes assumptions explicit. All of these discussions build the learning relationship.

RESEARCH JOURNAL ARTICLE

The mentoring pair agrees on a relevant professional article to read individually. The student then formulates some questions relating to the content of the article, which, with the mentor's help, guide the learning dialogue that ensues. This tool generates in-depth learning dialogue as each one digs deeper into their professional knowledge.



[The Belief Inventory] was helpful to explore the language used and to see varying perspectives.

Student

Professional decisions will be determined by underlying beliefs, so it is important to be quite clear what these beliefs are founded on.

Mentor

CRITICAL INCIDENT REPORT

A critical incident is a specific event that results in a shift in thinking. A written report on this incident is discussed with the mentor. This has the potential to bring powerful growth and understanding. Discussing relevant, real life events promotes critical thinking, honest reflection and an increased sense of congruence between beliefs and practice.



The student's report includes:

- a clear description of the event or incident
- a summary of the response
- a comment on the theoretical understandings of the incident
- a reflection on what can be learned.



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