

Ideas for learners

Making the most of student learning in
field-based, practical experiences.

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This publication is intended to be used in conjunction with *Five habits for effective mentors* and *Ideas for training providers* as a set of resources developed from the Ako Aotearoa-funded project *Maximising Learning Dialogue in Professional Field-based Experiences* by Dr Andrew Smith *et al* – funded in 2009 through the National Project Fund.

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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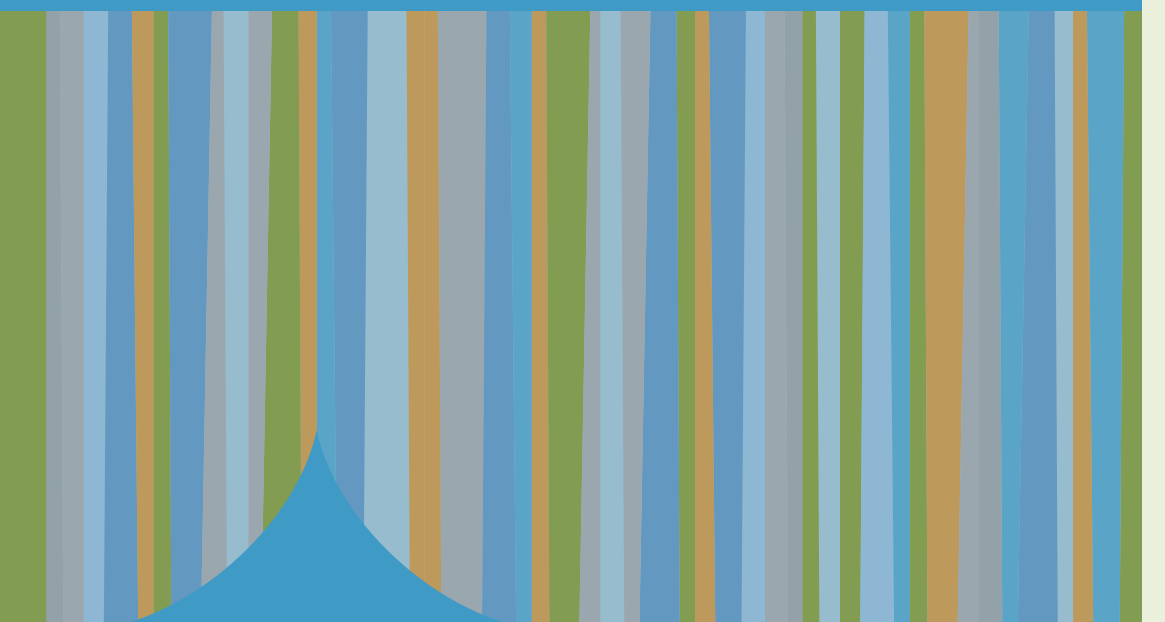
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Introduction

... [My supervisor] reminds me that I am learning and mistakes are ok; it's learning from those mistakes that really matters.

The purpose of this resource is to provide support for learners in professional and vocational training areas. The tips and suggestions 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 mentors and training providers in field-based settings. The full report and additional resources are available at www.akoaotearoa.ac.nz/learning-dialogue-in-field-based-experiences

We encourage all learners to consider their mentoring relationship in relation to the suggestions in this resource.



Overview

of the Research

[Supervision] really helps me become more aware about the way I do things and how I could do things differently. Therefore, it helps me to not fall into ruts...it constantly challenges me to keep growing and developing.

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 page 7).

Training providers for both professional and vocational areas recognise the importance of field-based learning.

Usually the tutor or mentor with whom the student is linked in these situations is not a part of the core teaching team at the training institution. This can create some communication challenges for both parties, in terms of expectations, reporting and awareness of what is actually happening in the placement.

Findings from this research 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.

Key findings

from the Research

She gave structure to my learning and offered goals for me to focus on.

1. The most important factor in making the most of working with a tutor or mentor is that you have a relationship of trust and openness with them.
2. The foundation of the relationship needs to focus on developing your learning. It can be helpful to use specific tasks or strategies to scaffold the conversations that you have. A strong relationship makes the tasks more effective – using structured tasks builds on and helps develop depth in the relationship.
3. It is important to value the opportunity to spend time with your mentor. This means being intentional about making time to talk, and then using that time well. If you don't make time and then guard it, the busyness of life and work means that your time together gets eroded and filled up with other things.
4. It is helpful to be really clear about the ideas and expectations that both you and your mentor have about how your times together are going to work – and to regularly check how things are going and whether you are both satisfied with the work you are doing together.
5. There is a spectrum with support at one end and challenge at the other. The tendency is for conversations to stay either superficial and affirming or critical. The best learning comes from both: challenge when it takes place in an environment of support.



What ideas

can learners take from these findings?

If there is something I feel embarrassed by...or I have not done something very well in my practice, then I do not feel judged by my supervisor – instead we talk and work out why I am feeling this way and ... work towards fixing it.

- You do not need to be friends with your mentor, but you do need to be able to trust them.
- Let your mentor get to know you.
- If you sense they are not interested in you, be prepared to seek support from others in your training organisation.
- Mentoring tasks can either be aimed at helping you and your mentor get to know each other better – what is important for each of you, for example. Or, they can be aimed at the specific knowledge of your area of developing expertise. Some examples of specific tasks are described on page 7.
- Be rigorous about making times to meet.
- Try not to allow things to change your plan.
- Make sure that you meet in a place where you can have a good conversation without being interrupted.
- Early in the mentoring process, talk about what you want from the relationship and clarify your mentor's expectations.



- Keep reviewing what is happening to ensure that you are getting the most from the time.
- Think of yourself as a professional rather than 'just' a student, and be prepared to take initiative.
- Make sure the conversations with your mentor contain a good balance of support (affirmation of you and your work) and challenge (what you need to work on and how to work on it).
- Welcome challenges and try not to react defensively. If you are not sure what to do with the suggestions ask for clarification.

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

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

Mentor

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.

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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