

Improving mentoring with action research and digital video technology

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This paper is an account of the presentation I gave at the CILT ITT Conference at the University of Bath on Friday 7 September 2001. I began the presentation by explaining why I believe we have a need, as educators, to enable beginning teachers to undertake self-study enquiries. Research is all too often done **on** teachers rather than **with** them.'

Decisions about curriculum and instruction are often made without reference to real problems of classroom life. Teachers are 'developed' by outside experts rather than participating in their own development. Leberman, A. (2000) Stanford University Journal of Teacher Education, Vol. 51: 221-7.

From this springboard, I gave an account of how I have begun to work with trainee teachers and mentors by integrating action research and mentoring and how we are beginning to use digital video to assist our processes of professional development.

My presentation developed around a number of focused questions that I try to bear in mind as I undertake my work as a PGCE tutor and researcher at the University of Bath:

- How do I improve my own mentoring?
- How do I try to assist other mentors in improving their practice?
- How do I integrate mentoring and action research?
- How do I try to assist my trainee teachers to improve their practice?
- What issues arise from my work as I integrate action research and mentoring?

How do I improve my own mentoring?

I don't like being video recorded but I am used to seeing myself on video, the expansive hand movements, the smiling, the intensity of my gaze. I still don't relish the experience, but I value it, deeply. As I work in my role as a university-based tutor I often turn the camera lens on my own practice with the intention of learning more about how I do what I do and how I might use what I learn as a basis for improvement. I video record my work when I meet trainee teachers and when I meet a new group of school-based mentors because I want them to see that I am prepared to undergo what I will suggest they do. How can I ask others – trainees or mentors – to consider looking at their own practice so they might improve it, if I am not prepared to practise what I am asking?

One of my values, as an educator, is that I should open up possibilities for my own learning as well as for others, wherever I am able to. I believe that teachers are, by the very fact of their engagement with learners, enquirers and learners, too. Learning is not something done to others; it is experienced in being alongside them. When I work with mentors I learn as much or more than I

teach. They help develop my tutoring skills as I gain insights into their practice and my own. I was a school-based mentor for three years before I became a university lecturer and this was a useful starting point for enabling me to understand what we mentors do – but it was just that, a starting point. I hold a conviction and a passion that as a mentor, I am therefore a researcher. I am involved in a two-way learning situation and I can come to understand what I do and how I can improve by sharing others' experiences and engaging in an on-going dialogue.

How do I try to assist other mentors in improving their own practice?

When we start working together, we explore what it means to mentor by looking for shared understandings. As I work with mentors I begin to share my understandings of what it is for me to engage in action research. I explain what it is that I do. I try to assist mentors in identifying a focus for improvement and we brainstorm possible strategies. Starting from a very simple question such as 'How do I improve my practice as a mentor?' I gradually draw out the learning processes that I have learnt alongside Jack Whitehead while we have engaged in dialogue, sharing exploration of our work as tutors.

Sometimes I show a video of one of my trainees articulating her account of how she has used action research to improve a small aspect of her work. I want to communicate that in mentoring we learn with one another. We cannot do the learning 'to' another person. I often put forward the suggestion that most of the research about mentoring has been undertaken by researchers who have never been mentors. How much richer our shared understanding of mentoring would be if we learnt from one another as we mentor! I explain that I wrote my book on mentoring because it was the book I needed and which did not exist. I needed to externalise what I was learning as I tutored and mentored and tentatively put my learning forward as a basis with the intention that I and others would learn more through reading what I had written. My own definition of mentoring is not a definitive statement of what mentoring can and should be but a 'coming to understand.'

Mentoring means guiding and supporting trainees to ease them through difficult transitions: it is about smoothing the way, enabling and reassuring as well as directing, managing and instructing. Mentoring is concerned with continuing personal as well as professional development (CPPD) and not just professional development. In the process, personal and professional values come under scrutiny and are subject to change. Fletcher, S. (2000) Mentoring in schools: A handbook of good practice. Kogan Page: 1-2

How do I integrate mentoring and action research?

I began my experiment in integrating action research and mentoring in ITT after the Easter vacation in 2000. I was inspired by seeing experienced teachers undertaking such high-quality enquiries for accredited programmes at the University of Bath, especially those relating to the unit Portfolio Assessment that I began to wonder if action enquiry might not usefully be introduced into the PGCE year. As I visited the trainees in their school placements and in our frequent e-mail communications, we explored together what it meant to research our own practice. The group watched me as I studied my own work as a tutor and I used digital video to record my work with them as I travelled out to see them teaching in placement schools. By the final week of term they would be expected as individuals to give account of their progress and how they used action-research approaches to improve. I agreed that some trainees would not be videoed during my school visits as I believe it is vital to video only those who believe that a multimedia representation will help them. By the final session of our PGCE course every one of my trainees was happy to be video recorded as they made their presentations to one another.

I asked my trainee teachers at the end of last year how they viewed the introduction of action-research approaches to help them to improve their teaching and they were generally full of praise for the process. Some concerns were expressed by some about calling it 'research' when I explained that I was planning to introduce it earlier next time.

It's important that the techniques of action research are only made explicit when novice teachers have reached a certain stage of competence and confidence in their own abilities as teachers. Teachers and novice teachers will see the benefits of action research in practice in their classroom. There are only positive results, as whether you reach a 'solution' or not you gain a deeper understanding of your values as an educator. A.J. [trainee]

How do I try to help my trainee teachers to improve their practice?

I try to assist my trainees in improving their teaching and their own and their students' learning by modelling and by inviting them to participate in action-research enquiries. As they ask themselves questions about their practice of teaching, I often encourage them to celebrate what they see they do well as well as to share areas of concern they may have. Typically, the areas of concern arise from feedback from their mentors or from me, as a visiting tutor who observes an occasional lesson that we then discuss. One of the ways I think I help my trainees to improve is to show them how they are progressing through video as well as telling them what I see in a series of written reports. I reference the video timings to the written feedback, so for example, I might write:

Standard B3 for QTS see timing 02.43-03.49 I really like the way worked with M. to see how she could use the feedback you gave her on her coursework to improve her writing.

Do I have any evidence that I have helped anyone to improve his or her teaching?

In my work with mentors and with our trainee teachers, I insist that any claims to know or to have improved must be supported with appropriate evidence. Thus any claim and supporting evidence has to be offered for public validation by trainees and by mentors. One

of my favourite pieces of evidence about my influence as an educator upon the professional development of a trainee teacher comprises a sequence of video clips. Effectively he has a video diary that enables him to analyse and reflect upon his professional development as a teacher. His praise of using video was fulsome and he soon began to use it in his lessons to assist his students in learning a foreign language. Helping beginning teachers to compile video diaries within portfolios for QTS is a way of preparing teachers for a profession where they must be accountable for their own work.

My view of myself has changed through all those teaching experiences and over this course. The video you made was so useful. I know people told me to slow down but you need to see it to really believe it. I think I'm right to insist on target language in Spanish. I realise now they need time to absorb it. And time to work in pairs, groups and on their own. Since seeing myself I have unconsciously slowed down. Teachers have commented on this since the video. I wish I had been videoed sooner. I'd like to be videoed again. A.J.

What issues arise from my work as I integrate action research and mentoring?

I believe that using an action-research approach to enquiry within the ITT provision afforded by the PGCE course at Bath University enables me to get a holistic view of trainees' professional development. I fully endorse the views expressed by Pachler and Field in the *Language Learning Journal*, Summer 2001, No. 23.

[...] a narrow skills-based approach to learning to teach is at best misguided and at worst counter-productive in that it does not do justice to the complex web of 'knowledges', skills and understanding characterising excellence in teaching and teachers.

I believe that I am able to assist them on an individual basis as they seek to improve their own teaching and learning. I think I help them to define and refine their professional values and this will become an increasingly central focus with the introduction of the TTA's revisions to 4/98 in September 2002. In these revised Standards for QTS we can rightfully locate Professional Values and Practice at the heart of ITT/CPD requirements. We need to move towards assisting the development of a new generation of teachers who can sustain commitment through retaining engagement with their professional values.

I believe that integrating action research and mentoring is one creative way of doing this. As I assist trainees through creative compliance with externally imposed standards for QTS, they are defining their own values to become internalised standards of judgement.