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Mentoring in career guidance and career development: problems in formalising an informal practice?

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Introduction

This paper presents one aspect of a much broader review of the literature on informality and formality in learning, commissioned by the Learning and Skills Research Centre (see Colley *et al.*, 2003, Colley, 2005), and also draws on my own research on mentoring (see Colley, 2003a). European lifelong learning policies in particular have created much interest in what they term 'non-formal' modes of learning. These introduce new elements of formality – assessment, recognition, the use of learning facilitators – into learning that is usually regarded as informal, such as in the workplace or community. On the other hand, there is a parallel tendency to introduce more informal elements into learning situations typically regarded as formal, such the use of mentors alongside or instead of more traditional pedagogical roles in schools, colleges and universities.

Mentoring offers a particularly useful exemplar for studying these trends. It is a learning practice that has become increasingly formalised over the last 25 years, as myriad planned mentor programmes have been introduced across a wide range of contexts. Yet at the same time, it is a practice that is generally defined as inherently informal, essentially founded on a trusting personal relationship, and often carried out by volunteers or co-workers replacing the former remit of professional trainers, teachers and so on. Moreover, from the earliest moments of public interest in mentoring in the 1970s, debates have polarised around different concepts of formal and informal mentoring. It, therefore, allows us an opportunity to investigate this parallel process of formalisation/informalisation over time and to analyse some of its consequences. Here, I trace the evolution of mentoring in two contrasting career-related contexts: career development for business managers, and career guidance and support for socially excluded young people.

Mentoring for career development of business managers

The first influential studies of mentoring in the US (Levinson *et al.*, 1978, Roche, 1979) focused on the field of business management. They revealed that it was predominantly an unplanned activity sought out by young executives, and provided voluntarily by their senior colleagues. The most highly-rated benefits provided by mentors included not only sharing knowledge and counselling the protégé through difficulties, but also providing insights into the politics of the organisation and using rank and status on the protégé's behalf. However, mentoring also tended to reflect the 'old boys' network': women found it difficult to obtain a mentor, and there were few women in senior positions who might act as mentors. Black people experienced similar problems.

These studies created intense interest in planned mentoring programmes to replicate these benefits more widely. Firstly, the world-wide economy was becoming globalised and increasingly competitive, and knowledge-production was viewed as overtaking manufacturing. Economic recessions following the 1973 oil crisis led to the 'de-layering' of organisations, with the ensuing loss of in-house training and development programmes and personnel. Planned mentoring was seen as a way to maximise on-the-job learning while minimising expenditure on development activities. Secondly, the advances of the civil rights and women's movements had resulted in affirmative action legislation. Critics of unplanned mentoring protested that it favoured middle-class white men and reinforced inequalities, and they argued for planned mentoring programmes to support female and black employees in gaining equal access to career development opportunities.

However, at the first international conference on mentoring in 1986, Hunt (1986) noted that increased benefits might be expected from planned mentoring, but these could be weakened by important differences in style. More formal mentoring programmes promoted organisational goals over those of the individuals involved; the relationships it created were less voluntary and less intense; and its processes tended to become more directive and less negotiated. Hunt also posed a crucial question. Despite the introduction of planned mentoring, unplanned mentoring seemed likely to continue: would there be conflict between the two?

Subsequent evidence of the 'dark side' of mentoring, although under-researched, suggests there have indeed been problems in transferring mentoring practice onto a planned footing. For example, Kram (1988) found that mentoring still remained unavailable to many women, and that cross-gender mentoring exposed some women to sexual harassment or sexist prejudice. More recently, I have suggested that planned mentoring has shifted from paternalistic models to a more 'maternalistic'

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form, in which mentors are more often female, and are exploited by expectations that they will fulfil this task over and above their regular duties in a self-sacrificing way (Colley, 2001). Thus, despite the benign intentions of formalised mentoring programmes, intended positive consequences can fail to materialise, while unintended negative consequences can arise. At the same time, the negative consequences of unplanned mentoring may remain unchallenged. A similar history can be traced in mentoring young people for social inclusion.

Mentoring in career guidance and support for disadvantaged youth

Interest in mentoring for young people also came to prominence in the late 1970s, focusing on the transitions of 'at risk' adolescents in poor communities (e.g. Rutter, 1979, Werner and Smith, 1982). A series of studies showed that resilient young people had often sought support from an adult within their family or community, and that this appeared to be a key protective factor in surviving adversity. Philip (1997) argues that such mentors include youth workers, and that they are effective because of their highly localised knowledge, and because, while that may have status within the community, they are not in a position of direct authority over the young person. The mentoring process is unplanned, yet intentional, socially close and trusting, and its agenda is controlled by the young person. Its goals may, therefore, include not only conventional achievements such as succeeding in school examinations or entering employment, but also experimentation – with identity, sexual activity or drug use – which dominant value-systems construct as risky or deviant. (There is, however, insufficient research into the potential for negative outcomes for this kind of mentoring so these findings must be treated with some caution.)

Just as in the field of business management, these studies spurred the introduction of planned youth mentoring programmes on a massive scale in the US, UK and elsewhere from the 1990s onwards. Here too, there are both economic and social justice rationales. Faced with the imperatives of economic competitiveness, policy-makers need to reduce spending on welfare as well as social services, and Freedman (1999) argues that governments use mentoring by volunteers as a 'cheap fix' to reduce both. Others believe that middle class mentors working with socially excluded young people can generate social solidarity, and help to undermine class, gender and racial inequalities in the labour market by enhancing young people's social and cultural capital (e.g. Aldridge *et al.*, 2002).

As a result, planned mentoring has become a central element of recent government polices on career guidance and other forms of youth support in the UK, particularly with the introduction of *Connexions* as a new form of generic youth support service, and with substantial Treasury funding for the National Mentoring Network. In my own study of mentoring (Colley, 2003a, 2003b) I

have reviewed this process of increasing formalisation, referring to the dominant model as 'engagement mentoring', due to its explicit targets of re-engaging socially excluded young people with the formal labour market.

As with planned programmes in business management, engagement mentoring introduces external goals, determined by institutions, into the supposedly dyadic mentor relationship. Often there are elements of compulsion – legal or financial – on young people to participate, and the agenda is negotiable only within tightly-framed, employment-related outcomes. The primary goal is often that of altering young people's attitudes, values and beliefs in line with 'employability', rather than attempting to challenge the context of education, training and employment which often alienates and excludes them.

My research showed how counterproductive engagement mentoring can be, since it takes no account of the agency and resistance that young people exercise within mentor relationships. Ironically, it can often result in the young person's re-exclusion through a process that is supposed to promote inclusion. Once again, there is the possibility that unplanned mentoring continues to operate alongside – and possibly in conflict with – more formal mentoring, particularly since the latter often seeks to prise young people away from their peer groups and even their families. All these problems indicate that, as for women and black people in our previous example, young people can find themselves in mentor relationships that do not challenge wider systems of power relations in society, but reproduce them.

Understanding informality and formality in mentoring

Our report on informality and formality in learning (Colley *et al.*, 2003) argued that, rather than treating 'formal' and 'informal' learning as separate and distinct, it is more helpful to understand that any kind of learning (including mentoring) comprises both formal and informal aspects. It is the balance of in/formality that is significant, and which we need to analyse carefully. Mentoring offers a case study of a practice in which policy-makers have altered this balance without clearly understanding the implications. Instead, they have assumed that the practice and its benefits can be straightforwardly transferred from the informal to the formal domain. However, as the balance has shifted towards greater formality with planned mentoring programmes, tensions are created as unplanned mentoring continues to function. The interests of institutions and dominant social groupings intrude into mentor relationships, altering their power dynamics, their locus of control and the degree of autonomy for individuals involved. This raises issues of both ethics and social equity, particularly in career guidance and career development contexts.

Note

A longer version of this article, along with other research papers about European policies on non-formal learning, can be found in Chisholm, L. & Hoskins, B. (Eds.) (2005) *Trading Up: potential and performance in non-formal learning*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

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