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The Vision, Challenges and Reality

**The academic mentor: A new vision of secondary pre-service teacher education in
Canberra.**

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The academic mentor: A new vision of secondary pre-service teacher education in Canberra.

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The paper draws on a pilot study of the role of the academic mentor in secondary pre-service teacher education conducted in 2006. ACU National in Canberra offers a new vision of secondary pre-service education with a collaborative partnership between the university, Catholic Education Office of the Archdiocese of Canberra Goulburn, leading teachers and the Catholic schools.

While over the past decades teacher preparation courses across Australia have instituted a mentoring program during the practicum component, the program at ACU National differs in having the mentor teachers fulfilling a more academic role in the provision of small group tutorials addressing educational theories in practice, philosophies and professional performance and effective teaching strategies. The academic mentor has an ongoing role throughout the year and provides another level for reflective practice for the pre-service teacher beyond the practicum. The professional relationship embarked upon by the pre-service teacher and mentor teacher provides a significant initiation into both the profession and a professional practice of a competent educator.

The study explored the effectiveness of the experience for both the pre-service teacher and the academic mentor. The conclusions provided recommendations for the enhancement of the programme in addition to assisting the professional development and career advancement of these educational leaders.

Introduction

Professional preparation is strengthened through effective partnerships that bring together all stakeholders, including universities, employing bodies, schools, and pre-service teachers (ACDE, 2003). Opportunities for university and school staff to contribute to pre-service teachers' education, share responsibility for learning and assist in the on-going clarification of roles is known to enhance the overall success of the program (Clinard & Ariav, 1998; Broadbent, 2006).

A new model of pre-service secondary teacher education commenced with the introduction of the Graduate Diploma of Education Secondary Program at the Canberra campus of ACU National in 2005. Given the small cohort of students and the need for a variety of specialisations in the curriculum areas, a unique partnership was undertaken with the Catholic Education Office of Canberra Goulburn.

ACU National lecturers provided the theoretical input at University while the school subject co-ordinators or 'academic mentors', usually with at least five years experience, delivered the major practical components of the academic program. The role of the academic mentor is distinct from that of the practicum mentor whose function is determined by the nature and duration of the practicum. The academic mentors in this program assume a role similar to university lecturers in the provision of small group tutorials that address educational theories in practice, philosophies and professional performance and effective teaching strategies. A significant difference, however, is that the academic mentors, unlike university staff, operate within a school setting and students travel to schools for their sessions. This provides pre-service teachers with an opportunity to reflect on their professional learning and practice at a different dimension to that of the practicum. The professional relationship embarked upon by the pre-service teacher and academic mentor provides a significant initiation into both the profession and insights into the professional practice of a competent educator.

In the ACU national program, academic mentors are assigned to small groups of students in each curriculum and teaching area. In consultation with the lecturer-in-charge for each discipline area, the academic mentors devise a program of study appropriate to the needs of their group which may include the following:

- identify the aims, objectives, outcomes, content and assessment requirements of the relevant secondary syllabuses
- plan and develop individual lesson plans and short lesson sequences based on particular syllabus requirements
- implement a variety of teaching and learning strategies to meet a range of student learning styles, prior experiences and special needs
- use a range of information and communication technologies to develop learning resources
- demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between unit and lesson planning, assessment and reporting

Defining the mentor

Literature on mentoring has largely focussed on the role of the mentor teacher in initial teacher education within the professional experience program, teacher induction and approaches to professional development (Carter & Francis, 2001; Walkington, 2004). In a review of the literature by Carter and Francis (2001), mentoring is also presented as a process that 'mitigates teacher isolation, promotes the concept of an educative workplace and that leads to the creation of understanding of consensual norms in a school, faculty or grade team' (p. 250). They conclude that contextualised or workplace learning that is mediated by mentors can be effective in the development of 'an appropriate body of practical professional knowledge for beginning teachers' (p.250). Further, use of a constructivist epistemology has the potential to 'generate a dynamic interactive learning process and challenge, if not transform, the status quo' (p.250). The significant impact of mentoring on the mentors themselves has also been noted (Brooks & Sikes, 1997; Carter & Francis, 2001; Smith & Zeegers, 2002). From this perspective, mentoring is regarded as a professional learning strategy that aligns with Marsick and Watkins' (1990) 'process of dialogic (transactional) learning' (Carter & Francis, 2001, p. 250). McNally (1994) suggests that the focus should be on the professional learning environments, rather than the individual mentors, as this is where successful mentoring relationships form.

The provision of at least six to eight lecturers and four academic mentors throughout the program exposes pre-service teachers to a variety of professional learning environments and teaching styles. The role of the lecturer ensures the latest theoretical developments are presented, while the academic mentor embeds the theory within the experience of the workplace. A stimulating learning program that includes a combination of university lectures, tutorials and workshops, as well as observation of academic mentors modelling best practice within their classrooms, works effectively to strengthen pre-service teachers' understanding of the connections between professional knowledge and practice. Inclusion of academic mentors in the delivery of content and support for professional practice avoids the criticism that university pre-service courses are overly theoretical and too far removed from the realities of the classroom. Through this program, pre-service teachers are invited to share the practitioners' vision and work collaboratively with their academic mentors to bring about the transformation of classrooms that challenge the status quo of secondary schooling.

The research study

In 2006 a research study was conducted to evaluate the existing ACU/CEO academic mentor program for secondary pre-service teachers. The research also aimed to identify areas for further development and to study the impact of the experience on the academic mentors' professional development. The conclusions provided recommendations for the enhancement of the program as well as identifying its value in the professional development and career advancement of these academic mentors.

Design and methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted for the study. As highlighted by Eisner (1991), all knowledge, including that gained through quantitative research, is referenced in qualities, and there are many ways to represent our understanding of the world. Qualitative research allows for the collection of rich detail and insights into the participants' experiences of the world and these may prove to be more meaningful than other approaches.

The design of the research included semi-structured interviews with participants from each sector: ACU lecturers, academic mentors, pre-service teachers and CEO consultants. The interviews provided opportunities for the participants to reflect on their experiences and evaluate the success of the program. Semi-structured interviews were preferred for the collection of data as they enabled the researcher to probe responses and solicit further details from the interviewees. Analysis of the responses revealed insights into the dynamics of the program and are discussed later in this paper.

The interview questions focused on the impact of the mentoring process on assisting the professional induction of pre-service secondary teachers and the required knowledge, skills and related personal attributes of academic mentors. The professional benefits and related costs for the academic mentor were also considered. To provide a direction for the future of the program the academic mentors were asked to comment on the level of support and professional development required to undertake effectively the role of academic mentor.

The impact of mentoring

The academic mentors commented on the significant impact of the practical application of the theory within their particular curriculum area. As the secondary pre-service teachers were older it was seen as an immeasurable assistance in the easing them into the

profession, though recognising that the professional relationship needed time to develop. As identified by Healy and Welchert (1990), mentoring is the achievement of an identity transformation into the profession. Through the process the pre-service teachers were enabled to reflect on what it means to be a good teacher. In the induction to the profession one academic mentor acknowledged the opportunity to inspire, develop ethics and share in the passion for teaching balanced by the academic mentor's attitude to students and teaching. Others recognised the importance of preparedness, conduct, stress levels, mental health and the teachers' workload as significant aspects of initiation into the profession.

The practical aspect of the process was articulated in the provision of skills such as developing and planning units of work and assessment. Several commented on the realistic approach they provide through the opportunity to facilitate the first real relationship between the pre-service teacher and the school. They believed that the academic mentor program allowed a more realistic attitude, particularly as many pre-service teachers were negotiating a change of career and had an idealised memory of a more perfect schooling system.

One pre-service teacher viewed lecture times as providing the theory and that the practical experience came through mentoring and being in the classroom. The focus on the difficulties in the classroom and the professional guidance offered were regarded as strengths to the extent that the students felt more confident when beginning teaching.

Skills and personal attributes of the academic mentor

- **Experience**

The academic mentors regarded the academic knowledge of their discipline as a pre-requisite attribute. There was a need for the academic mentor to have at least five years experience coupled with the realisation that they should not be 'too long in the job'. This was based on the observation that it may be difficult for older teachers to consider what they do from an objective perspective, especially aspects that they had originally found demanding. For some, age was not a significant factor, but rather the person selected should be recognised as a key teacher with energy and spark; a person with good practice. Academic mentors identified the need for contemporary knowledge of the discipline and awareness of new developments.

- **Communication skills**

Academic mentors acknowledged the need for an ability to develop relationships that engage the pre-service teachers and their students. Mentoring is more than a role as it is both a relationship and process. Walkington (2005) identifies the role as one requiring welcoming and enculturating the pre-service teacher into the role as well as modelling, explaining and providing feedback. The academic mentor has a key role in being aware of the pre-service teachers' anxieties and concerns, to be intuitive to their weaknesses and affirm them in their choice of change of career, giving them the confidence to proceed.

- **The teaching craft**

CEO staff and academic mentors acknowledged that a mentor must have the attributes of an excellent teacher and be generous in the use of time. The necessity to have a positive outlook on teaching was identified as any negativity would be obvious to the pre-service teachers. The academic mentor also had responsibility in evoking the importance of organizational and professional skills with their students. As academic mentors, they were required to acknowledge the need to model what is to be a reflective practitioner, engaged in professional development and perfecting the craft. The CEO personnel identified the ability to be honest in sharing failure and to communicate to student teachers that the greatest sign of strength is to ask for help. The importance of being able to communicate, not merely maintaining a conversation but moving into evaluation and analysis, drawing the students into deeper learning, and providing real answers which lead to long term learning was highlighted by the CEO participant (Interview 9, November 2006).

Some pre-service teachers regarded the opportunity to observe academic mentors modelling good teaching practice as a highlight of their ten weeks work together. For some, the mentoring relationship had flowed over into the professional life of the beginning teacher; academic mentors also considered this a real strength of the program.

Professional benefits for the academic mentor

As Smith and Zeegers (2002) suggest, mentoring should not be seen as a one way process; rather, it should have the dimension of mutuality and be an enriching experience for both mentor and pre-service teacher. The experience of mentoring proved to be positive in providing the academic mentors with a new perspective on teaching through the

development of new ideas and skills. There was an identified excitement in being revitalized by sharing in the enthusiasm, inventiveness and creativity of the pre-service teacher. Comments indicated the experience was professionally invigorating in terms of the academic mentors becoming more self-reflective; as explained by one academic mentor: 'to never be satisfied but always curious and ready to come back' (Interview 6, November 2006). This supports Healy and Welchert (1990) who identified the mentor experience as one of achieving generativity in midlife. The resultant impact on the academic mentors' practice is therefore to become a better practitioner and derive a sense of satisfaction in passing on a love of teaching.

The contribution of the academic mentor program to the preparation as a teacher

As one pre-service teacher comments, "Not having a mentor provides a weaker range of experiences in schools" (Interview 12, November 2006). The development of units, lesson plans, sharing assignments and assessments was useful to the pre-service teachers. Such practical aspects of teaching as report writing were covered. For one the most useful aspect was the continued contact with the academic mentor in the beginning of the year and the knowledge that professional help was only an email away. For these pre-service teachers, the strength of the program was in enabling them to feel more confident in entering the profession and beginning teaching.

Recommendations and conclusion

For the academic mentors the experience provided an opportunity for self-reflection and as Walkington (2005) acknowledges, reflective activity underpins all mentoring and allows both the academic mentor and pre-service teacher to challenge the individual and institutional practice. The academic mentors relished the chance to impart a passion for the discipline and for teaching itself finding the enthusiasm and vitality of the pre-service teachers enlivening. The benefits for those engaged in the process compensated for the problems occasioned by lack of time. The challenges of teaching at a tertiary level were sufficiently rewarding.

As a result of the study, it is apparent that the University needs to address a number of issues to enhance the program and for clarity of purpose, including the development of an orientation program for academic mentors prior to the commencement of the academic year, convene a workshop on assessment and evaluation and facilitate easier communication between the lecturers-in-charge and the academic mentors. Other research has concluded

that successful mentoring processes are dependent upon good planning, blocks of time devoted to coaching for meaningful mentoring, mutual development of all partners in the mentoring process, clear guidelines for the selection of mentors with clear criteria for participation, and the on-going clarification of the mentors' role (Clinard & Ariav, 1998).

The relationship developed in the pre-service phase of this secondary teacher education program extended into the first years of teaching with ongoing professional support. For the pre-service teacher the process provided a sound introduction to the profession with the mixture of idealism coupled with the reality. The results of this study highlight the value of new approaches to the professional preparation of secondary pre-service teachers, while providing educational leadership towards the development of future programs. The mentoring program is innovative as it brings together the University, the Catholic Education Office, schools, and pre-service teachers to enhance learning for all participants and thereby provide leadership through the improvement of the quality and outcomes of pre-service secondary teacher education.

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