

Study skills: the case for mentoring

Many FE colleges encourage their foundation degree learners to select a workplace mentor to support them with their vocational development. Yet, the practitioners in this study discovered that their learners' greatest need was for academic support. This article explores what learners want from their mentors and how providers can meet their expectations in relation to both study skills and personal support.



The learners in this research project were undertaking their foundation degree in early years education. The cohort was diverse as it ranged from part-time learners who were established in their profession, and often ran their own early-years organisations, to full-time learners in their teens who had just completed their vocational qualification at college.

What most had in common was a lack of time (most were working full-time) and a lack of study skills and knowledge of basic academic procedures. Many of them had no experience, for example, of how to select and analyse information, use a library effectively, reference their papers, interpret assignment criteria or did not differentiate between presentations and seminars.

How the mentoring was organised

To help address these challenges and offer the learners in-depth, individual academic support, a system of academic mentoring was set up at the college. Mentors were chosen from existing college staff. They all held a degree-level qualification and had the time available to see learners. Only one of the mentors specialised in early years; the others had different professional backgrounds such as physics or art. Both the mentors and the learners were given information packs which included guidance about the role of the academic mentor.

Throughout the academic year, the researcher monitored the frequency and type of mentor contact, how learners used their mentors and what difficulties they experienced, in order to establish whether mentors helped them to become more confident learners.

Although learners' perceptions of their mentors' impact on their grades and confidence as learners varied, they all said they would want a mentor the following year or would recommend one to others. This and other evidence allowed the researcher to conclude that academic mentoring could be an effective form of learner support at an FE college, but only in circumstances that take account of personal and procedural matters.

Taking account of personal circumstances

The impact of personal circumstances on vocational learners'

attitude to academic studies can include:

- negative emotions related to previous unsuccessful education activities or feelings of uncertainty and insecurity caused by studying outside their usual vocational area
- overemphasising the vocational side of their work rather than broader academic aspects – but although many requested a mentor with an early years background, the mentors who were most praised by learners at the end of the year were not early years specialists
- a preference for 'nice' (or unchallenging) relational styles in their professional settings – they often struggled with 'critical' aspects of their mentor's role, and
- the importance of good relationships and trust, which were identified as crucial by both learners and mentors.

Based on the evidence collected within the project, the researcher suggested that relational as well as academic needs should be taken into account when matching learners to mentors.

Taking account of procedural matters

Procedural matters included:

- lack of contact time. Using email rather than face-to-face meetings appeared to be the natural solution for this problem, and
- lack of professional consensus resulting in differences of opinion over common academic procedures, which seemed to be a particular issue with multi-disciplinary teams. A set of agreed definitions and approaches was assembled after a debate at a staff meeting and was seen as essential for providing consistent support to learners in the future.

Take action

Doing something like this already? If not, could you:

- think about the study skills support learners need, plus their personal needs and preferences, and consider these when matching learners and mentors?
- work with colleagues on a common approach to academic procedures so that learners are presented with similar ways of doing things?

Evidence source

Russell, M. (2009) Towards more confident learners: the use of academic mentors with foundation degree students. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 14 (1), pp.57-74.

Twenty eight learners undertaking a foundation degree in early years at an FE college took part in this research project. The learners were given three sets of questionnaires at educationally significant points throughout the academic year, asking them about their experience of academic mentoring. The researcher, herself a mentor, also carried out observations and informal conversations with mentors and learners, and collected relevant documentation such as field notes and comments from meetings.