Chapter 13
The Role of the Mentor

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the role of the mentor the context of a modern language institution. It looks at two strands of mentorship: within the organization and while interacting with the wider ELT world. In the first context the authors look at the various functions a mentor is expected to perform with a particular focus on the scheme as it exists in Centre of English Studies in the UK and Ireland. Here we have a comprehensive mentor program in operation for the summer quarter of the year with weekly sessions and comprehensive support provided. For the other three quarters of the year, the mentor role is more ad-hoc, with a flexible program and timetable dictated by the teachers' needs. In both of these situations, the mentor has to play a number of key roles and be relatively proficient in these. In terms of the role of the mentor in an external context, this chapter looks at the role of mentor in the Irish Research Scheme for Teaching, a national research scheme aimed at promoting academic quality through research in Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

In the field of education, mentoring is a role that has existed in various guises, officially and unofficially, for quite a long time in the primary and secondary sectors as well as in adult education. The ELT or TESOL industry has long regarded mentoring as an important part of the development of both the teaching staff and the institution as a whole. So it would seem that this role, that of a Mentor, having been created and sustained over such a long period, would be clearly defined, routinized, and treated as an essential part of every language teaching organisation? Well that is not often the case, with a quite wide range of views on what a mentor should do, how valuable a mentor actually is, and, indeed, what is the difference between a mentor and a colleague. This chapter will seek to give a brief overview of mentoring in ELT and some examples of the role that mentors are being asked to play.

Here we will seek to highlight why the concept of mentoring plays quite a unique and vital role in the education sector as opposed to other sectors. As the primary point of reference for this chapter will be the ‘Private English Language Teaching Industry’ in an English-speaking country, there will an unavoidable bias towards that particular context, however, as much focus as possible will be put on the

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concept of mentoring in teaching in a general sense. In global terms, by far the most common context for teaching is in the state sector, with a primarily non-adult student populace, so we have to ensure that our parameters for mentoring suffice for that context as much as any other, otherwise we risk creating a narrow and inaccessible ideal of best practice in mentoring.

The English Language Teaching (ELT) industry based in English speaking countries deals primarily in rolling enrolment general English courses for adult learners. Thus, the needs of the teacher in this context differ from that of a teacher in who has the same group of learners for a complete academic and so the training and mentoring will need to be modelled in quite different ways. What we must strive to create here are loose but not realistic roles within which a mentor could prove equally valuable in both contexts. In my context, in the UK and Ireland, the entry requirements for a teacher in the ELT profession are a primary degree in any subject and an accredited 4-week training course (120 hours with 6 hours observed teaching practice). The onus, therefore, of initial mentoring programme will be to follow on from such a preparatory course and try to supplement and upgrade the skills and knowledge acquired by the teacher. The role of the mentor in the aforementioned case is fundamentally different from an EAP teacher in University context, or an even trainer mentoring another trainer on a training course, but there must be considerable cross over in the fundamentals of what the mentor does, and in the overall focus of the mentoring, which must be considered. Here we will also include peer to peer mentoring for a particular goal, albeit a research project, or the creation and delivery of a workshop.

The Role of the Teacher

Before we attempt to look at the role of the mentor we must first clarify what the role of the teacher is, or ought to be, in the ELT industry. Jeremey Harmer in The Practice of English Language Teaching (2001) outlines some of the roles expected of the modern teacher including Controller, Organiser, Assessor, Prompter, Participant, Resource, Tutor, and Observer. Cindy Harrison and Joellen Killion added to this in their article Ten Roles for Teacher Leaders (2007) by claiming that the teacher ought to be a Resource Provider; an Instructional Specialist; a Curriculum Specialist; a Catalyst for Change; and a Mentor, among several other roles. To broaden the context of the role further, Wright (1987) adds father, mother, librarian, judge, and salesperson to the list. The weight of expectation on the teacher to reach a reasonable level of proficiency in a number of roles is quite a task to manage and so the role of the mentor has been born out the necessity for the institution to help the teacher achieve this. Therefore a key question we must ask is that In order to guide the teacher towards these roles, does the mentor have to have the ability to fulfil them also? I think that the role of the mentor, like the role of the teacher, will depend heavily on the personality of the teacher and the context of the execution of the said duties and any further discussion on these lines must attempt to honour this fact. As Jack C Richards (1996) says regarding teachers: we are all complex amalgams of a range of teacher roles (pp 138). The same must be true for mentors, with respect paid to needs, individual strengths, and context.

Finally, we clarify the fact that considerations on the role of the mentor is a valuable exercise for the modern educational institution, and quite especially for the modern language-teaching organisation. The fact that the entry requirement for the ELT profession is often a 4-week preparatory course should alone mean that every institute should consider some form of mentoring to be essential. Richards (1987) also emphasises the fact that money spent on new syllables and curriculum is wasted if the teachers are not prepared for the variety of expectations which the material they use may make of them.
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