



# Reflections on Mentoring PGCE Trainees

by Anna Karsten

For the past 10 years I have been involved in mentoring trainees on the PGCE Classics course at the University of Cambridge, mainly in their first placement, which takes place in the first term. This year (2014) I had the opportunity to take part in the Stage 2 mentoring certificate programme run by the University. The aim of this course is to help mentors reflect on their practice in a structured and academic way. This has proven to be a worthwhile exercise in many ways, helping me to reflect not only on this year's trainees but on the previous nine years of trainees I have mentored.

One of the important things that mentors on the Stage 2 Mentoring Course are encouraged to do from the start is to engage with the research and literature associated with mentoring. The reading we had to do proved invaluable to me for crystalizing many of the unformed conclusions and opinions that had built up in my mind over several years. They were also useful for framing my practice and the direction of my mentoring this year. For instance, in their research 'Mentoring Student Teachers', Furlong and Maynard discuss how trainees begin with "simplistic and idealistic understandings about, for example, their role as a teacher the relationship they may have with the children in their class." This can be seen in different ways: such as, the trainee who thinks they will walk into a classroom and teaching will happen naturally and all the pupils will be eating out of their hands; or the trainee who speaks and acts the same way in front of class as they do with their own friends or peers.

Both of these responses reveal one area that a mentor has to help a trainee in developing and that is their teacher persona. In the first case you are helping a trainee realise that they must work at and develop their own

authority and relationships in the classroom. In the second case a mentor will be helping a trainee to develop their sense of professionalism and authority. Throughout my time as a mentor it has often struck me that this has been an area that many trainees need to tackle early on, not because they are approaching teacher training in an immature or naïve way, but because they see experienced colleagues seemingly carrying out the job in front of a class in a very natural way. I therefore found myself this year in the position of having to deconstruct my practice and help my trainees understand that this is something that I have worked at and which has become second nature but is not in itself innate.

It was important that I developed a training strategy that was personal to my trainee and I believe that any good mentor will always tailor what they do to the individual they are mentoring. There is no one size fits all approach to any given situation and this was underlined by the conversations I had with the other mentors who were on the programme with me. Although some of us had similar issues that we were exploring, due to the individuals we were training we all took different approaches. Yet there are several underlying principles that were guiding us. One of these is summed up well by Smith and Alred in their article 'The Impersonation of Wisdom': "It is clearly important in helping anyone to learn anything to have a sense of where they are going. However, it is also important to have a sense of where the learner is starting from." This year in particular my mind was focused on this sense of understanding where trainees were coming from as the three trainees I mentored all had very different places that they were coming from, both academically and personally.

One trainee in particular had made

the throw away comment that "it should come naturally" and this revealed to me the sense that this trainee needed to be guided into understanding the need to work at and develop skills that may appear natural in teachers who have been teaching for a few years. I began from a point of view of explaining what my thinking was as I entered a classroom and how I approached teaching in front of a class. Building on a session I had led at the mentor training day in winter, I demonstrated different ways to walking into a classroom and then standing in front of and addressing a class. This enabled the trainee to reflect on what they had observed me doing in lessons and how that needed to be a conscious decision initially until it became normal practice. I was also keen, however, to help this trainee through using examples from outside of teaching which demonstrated the same principles. In this way I was hoping to shift the focus away from one person – myself – and onto general principles. Fortunately for me the trainee had been watching *The Voice* on BBC1 just like me so I was able to use judge Ricky Wilson as an example. Anyone who has seen him on the programme will notice his amenable, affable air with contestants and his sense of needing to encourage them and be supportive. There is also an expectation of a certain register of language that is needed on any TV programme broadcast in the early evening on a Saturday. In contrast I found an article from the *Mirror* newspaper where his language was more colloquial and prosaic because he was able to be more relaxed and informal (perhaps more himself). Finally I showed the trainee one of the videos that he has made with the rest of the Kaiser Chiefs where he is clearly acting a part in the story of the video. By using these examples the trainee

was able to see how we can all change our personas to fit in with the situation we find ourselves in, including in the classroom. By the end of the placement, when the trainee took on some parallel classes to those they had taught since the beginning of the placement, they were able to demonstrate how they had taken this guidance on board – they entered the classroom confidently, used their voice authoritatively and responded appropriately to the class.

However, this belief that it should all come naturally can lead to a sense of failure, particularly for those who have a tendency towards perfectionism (a trait that is often seen on the Classics PGCE course since most trainees have been high achievers at school and then gone on to study at a top university). This can sometimes paralyse trainees when they approach their teaching practice and means that they do not work at developing their skills. Conversely some trainees may be caught in the trap of not realising that what they believe to be natural in the practice of experienced teachers is in fact part of the teacher's professional expectations (as summed up in the QTS standards, for instance) and again this means that they do not realise that they need to work at this. This is again encapsulated by Furlong and Maynard when they say "certain beliefs and expectations held by individual students either enhanced or militated against the development of ..... understanding and skills." In this situation as a mentor it is important to help trainees understand either that in teaching there is no such thing as perfection, but that aiming to improve and develop our practice is what is important, or that there are professional expectations on us that we should be aiming to achieve and develop.

Reflecting on this at the end of this mentor training programme it is probably in this area that I have most developed my ideas and approach as a mentor. The ability to reflect intentionally has made me realise that there are things as mentors that we can do early on to help our trainees in the areas of perfectionism and professionalism. For the future I have decided to discuss the QTS standards and their implications for us as professionals explicitly. It was only as I went through the mentoring process this year that I realised how much the standards are actually part of my psyche as a teacher (even if I might express it in different language). Later on in the

mentoring process I realised that I had never sat down and explicitly discussed with my trainees what the implications of the standards were and how we could see them working out in our teaching. When I did spend a mentor meeting discussing each one in depth it turned into a useful exercise for the trainee and myself to reflect on our practice and to take stock of how far they were fulfilling the requirements which were expected of them. My hope is that my initial discussions in mentor meetings will constantly come back to the QTS standards and how trainees can develop in each area. In turn this will also help them when compiling their QTS folder and gathering their evidence for those standards: if they know them from the beginning, they will know immediately which pieces of evidence they have for their practice.

I have also determined that early in the mentoring process I will make it clear that I am not looking for the finished article and that I am not expecting great activities and lessons to be delivered right from the start. I also want trainees to realise that they do not have to pretend that they are already good at teaching and that they are on top of everything: as experienced teachers we all know that we are always juggling different pulls on our time, our emotions, our abilities. No-one has everything sorted out and no-one is ever expected to be in that position. In fact I believe this should be a liberating concept for trainees – they are here to learn and develop and we are here as mentors to guide them through. The PGCE provides such a great environment for that training and development – there is no responsibility on their shoulders for the performance of classes; they are free to learn their craft and experiment; it is a safe place. My desire would be for my trainees to therefore not be stressed and anxious but to enjoy that freedom which we do not have once we are employed by a school and held responsible for the achievements of our pupils. And I hope that within that process they can feel free to be honest when they are struggling and elated when they have done well. In this way we can look to develop well-rounded practitioners who take their profession seriously and reflect on it, but who also enjoy it because they are taking a healthy and confident approach.

***Anna Karsten is Head of Classics and a PGCE Mentor in a secondary school.***

