



Lifelong learners: in their own words

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This paper draws on research that utilized principles of grounded theory to inquire into the most significant learning relationships throughout the lives of individuals. The partners in this informal learning alliance are defined as 'learner' and 'mentor'. The structure of these alliances is described and the learners' perspective of the alliance is presented. Some meaningful relationships are ascribed to formal settings of schools and colleges, but most take place in social, familial, and community settings, with learning outcomes reported as important for personal development and citizenship. Traditional mentor partnerships are primarily learning relationships and as such are valuable sources of data for those interested in the process of lifelong learning, and what learners value in learning alliances. Traditional mentoring should be considered as valuable as more formal teaching, as it promotes sustainable learning by means of reflection and reflexivity, and appears to be self-perpetuating.

Introduction

The term lifelong learning has fuelled important debates in terms of policy and practice and has produced many interpretations of how lifelong learning might be viewed. Although there are some notable studies which seek understanding of the life-worlds of learners (West 1996, Fraser *et al.* 1998, Williamson 1998), less obvious in the literature are the perceptions of lifelong learning from the learners' point of view, or the type of relationship learners consider best produces sustainable learning and development. This paper attempts to address the issue of learners' voices by describing research into learning relationships throughout the lives of learners, and allowing those voices to be heard. Within this paper continuing education is taken to mean formal or informal opportunities for learning throughout life. Lifelong learning is seen as 'not merely a valuable tool for living, but one of its purposes' (Titmus 1999: 350) in as much as it is in the service of achieving optimal human potential. Lifelong learning in this context is owned by those who utilize learning opportunities, and who are best placed to evaluate the learning outcomes.

Initially the reason for my research into mentoring was that of my own professional and personal development. I am aware that there were certain individuals in childhood who enabled me to learn and develop, and in whose company I felt confident and valued for who I was. Although both individuals were teachers in junior and secondary education, the learning that they imparted to me had nothing to do with examinations, but conveyed the excitement of

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words and learning in a way with which I felt totally at ease. There was a certain sense of 'rightness' about their presence in my life.

Retrospectively as a mature student, I became much more aware of the influence and value of those individuals in my early life, and I was curious to consider just how these relationships functioned, and what made those people long since dead, so special. Discussion with others confirmed that the presence of significant individuals was not confined to my limited personal experience, and highlighted that these relationships although not exactly secret, were ones which had been rarely discussed, but were spoken of somewhat shyly, suggesting a private and special alliance.

Such discussions interested and fascinated me. If others are having such natural and spontaneous relationships wherein the learning is of a lasting and valued type, then why are these not recognized as valid learning experiences by those who worked in educational fields in general, and continuing education fields in particular?

I wanted to understand more about how these alliances form, what is their structure, what keeps them going, what do people get out of them, why are they so valued by learners, what is their relevance to the present life of learners, and what part do they play in self-actualization? In short, what do the learning relationships of individuals look like? This paper will give a brief overview of the study, whilst the value of learning relationships from childhood onwards will be described from the perspective of participants who worked collaboratively with me in the research process to access the essence and structure of these alliances.

Lifelong learning in this context is seen holistically as progress throughout life toward achieving development as a person, and growth as a citizen within the community, as well as from the perspective of achieving educational goals. Throughout the paper the terms used are those of 'learner' and 'mentor', however this does not imply that learning is only one-way. Where possible, participants' quotations serve to provide the voices that presently are seldom seen within the literature.

The Learning Alliance

'Mentoring', says Daloz (1986: ix), is 'a slippery concept', and thus it has been particularly difficult for researchers to obtain what could be classed as generic mentor documentation in view of the lack of definition, or competing definitions, of the term 'mentor' (Merriam 1983: 162, Nash and Treffinger 1986, Pleiss and Feldhusen 1995: 167). However some definitions have been offered with Phillips (1979: 2) describing the mentor concept as 'one of intimacy', and others defining the mentor as:

- one with experience and power in an organization who promotes and coaches career development (Chao *et al.* 1992: 624, Phillips 1977)
- one who gives their blessing on the goals of their protégés (Bova and Phillips 1981: 5)
- one who supports the dreams of the protégé (Levinson *et al.* 1976: 21–25)
- one who acts as good father and good friend (Levinson *et al.* 1978: 333)
- one who teaches tacit and technical knowledge (Long and McGinnis 1984: 256)
- one who instigates a change in the pattern of growth (Weiner 1984)
- one who encourages and supports the other (Torrance 1984: 2)

Undertaking continuing education for self-knowledge and personal development is a personal, mutual and shared event according to Karpiak (1992), who says:

To begin with, it will likely occur not at social agencies nor at universities, but rather within the community itself. (Karpiak 1992: 56)

There has been much debate about the nature of mentoring, but few empirical studies have taken place, and therefore much of the literature remains anecdotal. However Blackwell and McLean's studies at the University of Nottingham (1996: 26) showed that people perceived more benefit from an unstructured mentoring alliance, whilst Lyons *et al.* (1990: 284) affirm the importance of including informal methods of learning in any evaluation of effectiveness. Law (1987) concluded that as the role of mentor was quite often informal, then organizations should:

...identify, recognise, acknowledge and legitimise where it exists, and thereby create a climate for its existence, rather than constrain it by formal structures within the organisation. (Law, 1987: 136)

Kram's study (1983: 608–625) has highlighted a clear divide between what she terms 'the career functions' and the 'psychosocial functions' of mentoring. The career functions of mentoring are those which focus on the skills required to do one's job, whereas the psychosocial functions refer to the interpersonal aspects of the relationship which enable the learner to gain self-esteem and a clear ego identity.

Schwartz and Williams (1995: 103–110) choose to view the mentor alliance in psychological terms, stating that the mythical story of Mentor and Telemakhos is about the psychological, social, moral and spiritual development of the individual. Consequently, they maintain, it is the job of the traditional mentor to help the hero to expand his or her consciousness 'in order to avoid doom, and succeed in the quest' (1995: 105), and it has been proposed that such cultural myths provide 'a matrix, from which individual Dreams may grow' (Levinson 1996: 369).

The findings of Torrance's 22-year longitudinal empirical study indicated that 'the presence or absence of a mentor' as a statistical predictor of creative achievement, 'makes a difference that cannot be explained by chance.' (Torrance 1984: 5). Some years ago Torrance sent me his private collection of monographs that offer a cross-cultural perspective on mentoring. One of these is Bellon's (1985 trans. Goff 1991) study of mentoring in the Spanish educational system. Since 1975, mentoring has been mandatory in Spain as the way to assist students' personal and intellectual growth throughout a sustained continuous process in order to offer:

...him/her the necessary means for personal development and self-actualisation...that is not merely instruction nor merely intellectual in nature, but that is intent on promoting the development of the full potential of the individual, which includes scientific knowledge and personal knowledge of feelings and will. (Goff 1991: 34)

Elsewhere, Nicola's study of eminent Romanians indicates that creative original personalities are the product of long-term influence by others:

To whom they remain spiritually attached their whole lives. A great intellectual love, mutual sacrifice and a reciprocal feeling binds the mentor and the mentee in a *spiritual family*. (1990: 40 emphasis in original)

He also studied the accounts of the protégés of these personalities, who continued the work their mentors started and proposed that:

The study of mentor relationship suggests it could be taken as a *model of genesis of a human competence*; expresses the unity between theory and method, flexibility and invariability, real and virtual, individual and culture, thinking and learning, intellect and affectivity. (1990: 40 emphasis in original)

He informs us that in Romania 'The same as for natural kinship, the verb "to be mentee" can't be conjugated in the past tense; it designates a state valid all life long' (1990: 143). This 'familial' relationship is one which is particularly applicable to traditional mentor alliances, but which could rarely be applied to the arranged relationships in formal settings. No relationship ended because of dislike or dissonance, but only because of a change of professional status and distance, and all but two of the learners later became notable mentors. Nicola concludes:

The mentor relationships represent a significant factor of progress in the learning processes, creative production, leadership and team activity. (1990: 43)

Soliman tells us that mentor relationships have been deeply rooted in the Arab culture, and that they taught 'all that was required at any given time to make a person complete and integrated' (1986:2). Such holistic teaching included spiritual guidance, and health care, and the characteristics adopted by students from mentors were in the domain of interpersonal and personality traits. Soliman's research showed that students' needs for interpersonal caring predominate over needs which are skill related, and after their death, mentors become ideals to be emulated, with their support and values remaining a source of inspiration.

Expressions of feelings which received the highest mention were: appreciation, respect, love, and considering the mentor as an ideal. Other expressions were; friendship, likeness, valuing, admiration, brotherhood, good feelings, gratefulness and loyalty. (Soliman 1986: 26)

In India however, the transmission of knowledge within diverse disciplines such as medicine, music, and philosophy, was essentially one of the oral tradition, and as the purpose of education initially in India was one of salvation, the training period for the learner was 25 years. Raina and Vats liken the mentor relationship to that of the guru which originally meant 'one who can lead from darkness to light; from untruth to truth, and from death to

immortality' (1985: 2). The aim of the relationship was total transformation in an atmosphere of 'benevolence, love and affection' (1985: 19), and the system allowed for the learner to leave the guru if they were incompetent, had temper problems, were offensive, or wasted the learner's time. Such a system might still find favour today in some settings, but was a very necessary provision when the student was otherwise bound by custom and law. The guru, they state:

... is considered to be the prime alchemist of the soul who brings about the great mental and personality change. It is therefore not surprising that some Indian psychologists consider the guru/shisya [learner] relationship as the most acceptable model of psychotherapy in Indian settings. (1985: 26, insert mine)

The diversity in mentoring across other cultures and customs does not detract from the mentor relationship but indicates some areas of commonality that appear important to mentor alliances in the traditional mode and which have 'being and becoming' as central to their *raison d'être*, a concept not unlike Lauzon's (1998: 323) 'soulful adult education'.

Although formal mentoring initiatives as part of career or education make up the main body of reported literature in Britain, naturally formed learning alliances still flourish and their study could provide useful insights for those working in more formal learning relationships, or researching lifelong learning. Kalbfleisch and Davies (1993: 413) echoing Reich (1985: 46), called for investigation into the facets of these natural relationships as the first priority for those wishing to enhance formal programmes, and Merriam too has long been insistent that the fundamental question for those involved in adult education and research:

... is not how mentoring leads to material success, but how it relates to adult development and adult learning. (Merriam, 1983: 171)

My definition of the traditional informal mentor is as follows:

A mentor is that person who achieves a one-to-one developmental relationship with a learner, and one *whom the learner identifies* as having enabled personal growth to take place. (Bennetts 1994: 4)

This definition places the title 'mentor' firmly in the gift of the learner in appreciation of outcomes, as opposed to organized programmes where the mentor is named by a third party in anticipation of aims. It also recognizes that mentors are viewed as facilitators of learning. Although I initially referred to these alliances as 'informal' mentor relationships (Bennetts 1994), it became apparent that others viewed 'informal' as of less significance than 'formal'. Since 1995 I have referred to this alliance as 'traditional', to denote 'that which is handed down'.

This paper looks at the ways that lifelong learning takes place within traditional mentoring, and what effect it has in the lives of learners. It aims to show in participants own words, how these relationships are instrumental in encouraging them to perceive and utilize learning opportunities throughout life.

Method and Overview

The study involved 24 participants from diverse disciplines and organizational cultures in the South West of England, all of whom had a teaching remit within their posts. I was at that time employed in a Health Service setting to facilitate AIDS education on a countywide basis, and had established good working relationships with participants prior to the study. Letters were sent to 30 prospective participants setting out the research questions. This afforded opportunity for initial private reflection prior to the interviews, when participants were asked to describe their most important learning and developmental relationships. The semi-structured depth interviews provided opportunities for participants to give detailed accounts of incidents deemed to be critical in influencing learning, and enabled discussion of how such relationships formed and were maintained.

The interviews were analysed according to grounded theory principles which builds theory that is grounded in the data generated by the inquiry (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Concepts, categories and conditions were identified, and links between them were formulated. In accordance with Glaser and Strauss's original version of grounded theoretical research (1967), verification of the resultant theory was not sought, but was later confirmed in a further study (Bennetts 1998). In the event only 24 of the 30 participants were interviewed, as by then the data in each category appeared saturated with no new data emerging.

The detailed results and discussion of this study are described elsewhere (Bennetts 1996) and in this paper I will give a simple overview of the structure of traditional mentor relationships, before letting the voices of participants speak about their learning without further theoretical interpretation. This is appropriate to the nature of the paper, to its acknowledgement that lifelong learning belongs to learners, and to its aim of providing a forum for their voices to be heard.

The conditions under which such relationships occur and are maintained are those of Rogers' 'core conditions' for change and learning (Rogers 1957: 95–103, Rogers 1983: 121–126). Briefly these consist of the ability to have insight into the world of the other (empathy), the ability to be oneself (genuineness), the willingness to show care and concern for the other (acceptance, trust), and the ability to be able to communicate all of these conditions to the other person (facilitation). Coupled with no time restrictions and no formal constraints, these conditions led to a freely chosen mutually rewarding relationship which showed itself to be learner-centred, in as much as its primary reason for existing was to serve the learning needs of the developing person.

Participants described meaningful learning relationships, some as many as three, which had occurred from childhood to adulthood and which had a spiritual dimension in the secular sense of the word. The relationships in childhood were usually with a member of the extended family, or a teacher. Those in teenage years also included youth, church, or community service workers, as well as older family friends. In adult years mentors were found in work or social settings, as well as college or university. However for most learners, relationships that had their origins in classrooms or formal settings soon moved to more informal social and recreational settings. This removed the teaching focus, encouraged the trust and mutuality, and enhanced the conditions for learning to take place. It also enabled the learners and the relationships to develop at an individual pace.

The Evolution of a Learning Alliance

What is of most interest however is not that most of these relationships were conducted in recreational settings, but that they were described as having the most influence in learners' later teaching style, philosophy and values. Personal development was linked to professional development and mentor relationships functioned as a foundation and catalyst for the lifelong learning which followed. This study indicated that the enjoyment of learning alongside mentors who took pleasure in sharing ideas and skills through collaborative ventures, provided learners with a sense of excitement about learning.

When asking participants to recall their most significant relationships I was continually reminded of Eliot's (1969: 186) lines 'we had the experience but missed the meaning'. The concept of learning from reflection-in-action (Schon 1987, Hasselkus and Ray 1988: 32) does not infer that the whole significance of the experience is always grasped at once, but that it is a continual process, a way of knowing. Whilst the participants could all be described as reflective practitioners, they had previously reflected more on what they had learned (content), as opposed to how they had learned (activity), how effective that learning had been (assessment), and how they had incorporated it into the rest of their lives (assimilation).

Participants identified mentor relationships with obvious pleasure and were quick to point out their importance for both personal and professional development, but said that because such long-term outcomes could only be seen in retrospect, their significance had not been recognized so completely at the time. The alliances had been conducted openly and were exclusive, but were also a part of normal everyday life, so whilst they were never taken for granted, they sat easily within the lives of participants and were enjoyed wholly. Retrospectively they were evaluated, afforded high status, and within the interviews were identified by participants as 'mentor' relationships. This informed my redefinition of mentor:

A mentor is that person who achieves a one-to-one developmental relationship with a learner, and one whom the learner *later* identifies as having enabled personal growth to take place. (Bennetts 1998)

However as Eliot (1969:186) reminds us, '... approach to the experience restores the meaning in a different form', and it was to be through approaching the experiences of all the participants through their recollections during interviews, that the distinct quality of these relationships was revealed. Participants had not previously discussed these alliances with anyone, so the immediacy of reflecting on experiences in the light of present knowledge enabled them to be seen fully, and acknowledged as foundations for future learning. Initial meanings from experiential learning are not necessarily all that is there and experience may need revisiting more than once in order to see what else can be learned from the event.

Three major issues emerged from the interviews. These were ways of thinking, ways of working, and ways of being. Mentor relationships in very practical and unobtrusive ways, were fertile ground for learning how to think, work, and live, helping learners to follow dreams, define goals, and find direction. Mentors worked in ways that encouraged learners to act as agents in their own destiny.

With no proselytizing but by their way of 'being', mentors acted as exemplars and guides for the less experienced learners, with everyday discussion acting as a forum for reasoned debate and mutual challenge. The skills and key requirements for successful learning alliances were those that participants identified in mentors, and also those learned from the mentors. These are:

- Empathy
- Debating (reasoning, lateral thinking)
- Negotiation
- Social/cultural behaviour (the way one behaves in a given setting or circumstance)
- Communication (verbal and non-verbal)
- Advocacy
- Facilitation
- Reflection and reflexivity (thinking and doing)
- Nurturing
- Counselling (active listening, responding, empathy)
- Time-management
- Insight
- Work practice (where relevant)
- Management (where relevant)

Participants identified at least one mentor in their lives. Many gave examples from childhood to middle age and, as all the relationships examined had developed spontaneously, they included those in academic, workplace or recreational settings. The following excerpts from interviews indicate how the relationship is initiated, developed and established, and how the meaning of the relationship in the present-day life of the learner is understood and valued. Mentoring it seems, is about more than skill acquisition, it is about acquiring a certain wisdom.

Mentor initiated relationships were identified as happening at any age and were characterized by mentors displaying an accurate insight into the world of learners, by direct experience from their own life. The mentors, in effect were seeing themselves in the learners but at an earlier stage in their personal development. This 'mirror' effect was sometimes apparent to the learners, as one woman explains:

CB: What was it that made her relationship with you different from her relationship with the others?

Jill: I think she saw me, and this is purely intuitive, I think she saw me as herself 10 or 15 years ago.

CB: So she recognized something in you?

Jill: Yes.

CB: What do you think she recognized?

Jill: Oh, we have very similar qualities – a sense of the ridiculous – we're both very organized and we're both not afraid to take risks. And I think she took a risk when she took me on. She recognized something in me that struck a chord in her.

This 'mirror' effect became a recurrent theme when learners later described their rationale and criteria when 'handing the torch' to their own protégés in later life.

John: I think that I see myself in him. We've explored his childhood to some extent, and when I say I see myself in him – we came from different backgrounds, but he felt as if he was out of his depth where he was at school. His life experiences had been very much like mine.

Learner initiated relationships were identified initially in mid-teens and continued throughout the age range interviewed. They happened as a result of the learner asking the prospective mentor for help in some way, perhaps for psychological, spiritual, academic or professional support. This request for help might be direct as in the case of this description given by a learner of her 17-year-old self:

Jane: As I got towards the VI form I knew I wanted to teach, and I knew that music was not going to be one of my strengths so I had to approach her, and I was reluctant to do so because I didn't think I could get on with her at all. That very first meeting which was based around me and 'how I wanted to teach and that I didn't have musical ability but how could I develop musical understanding?', was the first time that I realized that she was different from what I'd perceived her to be over the last five years.

or indirect, as this learner described her 15-year-old self:

Alice: I asked an oblique question, and I think that's how teenagers do ask for help, their behaviour demands your attention. She responded to that, she responded to my behaviour. It was very valuable. In terms of mentoring what she gave me was a belief in myself; she validated my feelings which I think was probably the most important thing then. It would have been very easy for me to have shut down emotionally at that age, and she encouraged me.

The majority of relationships fell into the jointly initiated category. They were characterized by the prospective mentor and learner already being in contact but on recognizing mutual interests, suddenly seeing the real person behind the role of teacher, manager or whoever. Relationships began at any age and stage of development, and were initiated by personal disclosures on the part of mentor or learner. One learner related an experience of such an event in her fourteenth year:

Susan: I said to her one day that I'd gone to see a particular play and she said she'd been to see it in London. She offered to take me another time and I suddenly realized there was a secret life going on, that she had a life I would like to have been part of. And she just opened up and we went everywhere. I saw so much theatre. It was like a door-opening bit by bit, but you had to keep scratching at the door. She was a very private person.

Another learner described how at the age of nine, his sense of self was restored by a house-master at boarding school:

Michael: I was nine. He was my housemaster and taught me Latin. This man was the first one beyond my age of reason who treated me as an individual, whereas most of the other schoolteachers treated me as one of the class... I was fairly severely affected by being away from home, in an emotional

desert. There was not much attention paid to the psychological needs of children. There were also family problems and my father had a nervous breakdown. I started shoplifting and eventually it became apparent to people because my tuck-box overflowed and I'd half filled up a cupboard of stuff I'd nicked from shops. His response to that was where an affectionate respect turned into something else.

CB: How did he respond? Tell me about that.

Michael: He got to know about this and I was faced with it. He came to the classroom where I was and asked the teacher if he could remove me. I didn't know what it was about, and he said 'Come with me'. I sensed he wasn't angry with me but he was very troubled within himself. We sat in his garden and he indicated that he knew what it was about, and I broke down in tears and wept. He talked for about an hour, and I was able to talk about what was going on at home. He supported me and he didn't take it any further. He acknowledged me as an individual in a situation where individuals weren't acknowledged. That was very important. I was aware that he was treating me as an individual, he was thinking about what was best for me. In it was perhaps an element of the fact that I did not have a relationship, with my father, of love.

This sharing of hitherto unrevealed personal information as key to forming a mutual trust was not limited to children or adolescents, but was repeated with each mentor relationship at any age. It was this depth of sharing which appeared to be a major factor in moving the relationship into one of mentoring. Much of the early communication was instigated by mentors in creating opportunities for meetings that focused on the learners' development. It was interesting to note that although the learner was clearly in a position where manipulation would have been easy, all participants indicated that the mentor was the satellite not the sun, and said the developing relationship was learner centred. This pattern was also apparent in those alliances occurring in the workplace. A woman recalls how as a 24 year old new to management she was helped by a burgeoning mentor relationship:

Ellen: It was very constructive because he didn't say 'Come here and listen to me', he'd allow you to go off and find out for yourself, and then come back and talk it through with him.

Another learner described the rapidity of development within the relationship, in his account of himself aged twelve years, with his teacher:

David: She was my form teacher, and my love of history was developing, and I became very very interested in it and she happened to be the Head of history. I got really good marks and I excelled in it. I was really interested. I would do extra work above homework.

CB: What made you want to do extra work out of time?

David: Because she enjoyed what you gave her. She would offer praise and thanks, and she would recognise that you had gone that extra bit further than she expected. And she would talk to you about things, about your assignments and about why you had done it and the relationship developed.

CB: The relationship developed from the specific subject she was teaching?

David: That's right.

CB: And your love for that and your mutual regard for the subject?

David: That's right.

CB: So tell me about the relationship.

David: It got very close at one point. The pupil/teacher relationship disappeared and it was real friends. A friendship relationship which continues today.

CB: You're smiling when you say that.

David: Yes. I can remember, which must seem quite strange actually thinking about it, going round to her house in the evenings for cups of coffee and a chat and meeting her family. She was a single lady and she had her mother living with her. Getting to know her family, doing things outside of school like joining a history society, going out on day trips together, which we both enjoyed.

Equality

Equality of regard underpinned all of the relationships examined, in a way that never appeared contrived, and was said to be of prime importance in sustaining both continued learning and the continued desire for the company of the other. This was despite the obvious inequality of experience on the part of the learner and the opportunity to abuse power on the part of the mentor.

Sally: She was the sort of person who encouraged other people to feel good about themselves, she was easy to talk to. She wasn't authoritarian, I think that's a key in my life, any authority and I immediately back off, there was no power game, no authoritarianism. She herself was bright and knowledgeable, so I found any discussion with her to be interesting and exciting and stimulating. She was interesting and she was interested in passing on what she knew and encouraging you too. Some people don't want you to improve or achieve 'cos it diminishes them in some way – she wasn't like that. It wouldn't matter if you did a million times better than her in anything you attempted, she was just interested in other people's growth, for her that was part of her job satisfaction I suppose.

Anne: He never had a power complex. He never was in there because he wanted to dictate or determine to other people what they should be. He believed what was in his view, the right things in life, but I don't think he was a person who would impose.

The mutual regard shown by each party appeared instrumental in allowing the growing bond to develop toward a mutually responsive collaborative relationship which fostered productive learning for both individuals, and increased self esteem for the learner.

Personal values

It appeared to be at this close collaborative stage of the relationship that personal values that might have been implicit for either individual, now became explicit through conversation or by living example:

Jean: ...if you look at the comparison, he was quite clearly a socialist, he was doing the job he was doing because he really cared about giving the underdog a better life... it comes through in their actions and the way they talk and the way they made comment on things. And so you know that these are people that actually are genuinely there to help other people, and not there for money or self-aggrandisement, or any of those things. It's there because they want to give to other people.

Stephen: I think that he most likely influenced my own sense of values and helped me to build up what I believe my own value system might be, and he informed that. What he was about was having worth for people, and I think that's what I could see within him, about having worth, and I suppose that was the start of me being interested in people. He was also very much for the underdog, and I suppose that's where I've often come from at times; interesting to know why, but I think that's where it's come from. So from that I think he informed my values in later life.

So although the relationship displayed learner-centred characteristics, the values of the mentor were clearly visible and their effects were clearly displayed. Developing learners were enabled to consider their own value base in the light of how personal beliefs can shape personal behaviour.

Emotional ties

The emotional content of the relationship between mentor and learner was an area where it was necessary to combine a certain sensitivity with a deeper investigative stance in order to attempt an understanding of why the relationship exerted such a powerful influence on the persons involved. Without exception the interviewees described the over-riding emotion within the relationship as one which ranged from a feeling of deep affection, warmth and intimacy, to one of love, regardless of gender. Bearing in mind that the word 'love' is difficult to define it stands only as an indication of a subjective response to an inquisitive researcher. For some the word 'love' was used in an holistic way, for some it was used as part of their spiritual philosophy, but for others who had formed relationships in adult life it was some of the former plus a strong attraction which led to being 'in love'. No matter how it was described, it was discussed respectfully by participants who considered that there was no abuse of position either at the time, or in retrospect.

Karen: It's a relationship that absolutely and utterly allows and supports growth. That's what it is. Other relationships I think, start to contain somebody.

However if love was a factor in keeping the relationship alive, was it the sole factor, and if so, then the question, 'Why don't all love relationships produce personal growth?' became uppermost in my mind. Further examination of the transcripts revealed that there were two other factors that needed to be taken into account. These were the stated desire to learn from the mentor, and a deep mutual feeling of being understood.

Outcomes of the relationship

All of the mentor/learner relationships were described as friendships for the total duration of the association. With the exception of those whose mentors had died, most were still involved in alliances that for some had lasted for almost 35 years. These friendships were obviously meeting the needs of both parties in both personal and professional ways. The effect of the mentor in the personal and professional life of the learner became a study in reflective practice, and that the learners had all been through learner-centred experiences with their mentors was implied when they described their interactions today with those who have since 'taken the torch':

Mark: I think I spent extra time marking her work and making extra comments, because she was making the effort I felt I needed to make extra effort to make her efforts worthwhile. She wasn't very good at asking questions during the class but would hang around afterwards and chat, and so I made myself available for that. I think I got her to join in with the group as much as possible. And by the end of the two years she was much more gregarious and independent and part of the group, than she was to start with.

Mary: I think the feeling that I have, thinking about him, is a warm glow that he put so much into my life, being there and being accepting of me. And that is something that I try to do when I'm teaching or when I'm counselling, as counsellors do. I mean the feeling that I give to my students or my clients that I accept them and that I'm approachable. And that's what I think he did for me.

Alice: I definitely do try to do what was done for me. I think that I feel so grateful that people helped to see that I had more possibilities than I thought, that if I feel I see that in other people I always try to encourage it.

It was, however, not only the style of mentors that appeared to persist in the lives of learners, but also their values and way of approaching problems:

Ian: They were people who just stand out so strongly as being influences on me. You do tend to look back if you're in difficult straits and say, 'What would so-and-so have done under these circumstances?'

Meaning and value

Toward the end of the interviews, most participants were well into a reflective mode and were thinking deeply about their experiences. The following quotations speak for themselves in terms of the value placed on the relationships:

Mary: I think you can have mentoring on a superficial level and you might be able to help them develop professionally or whatever, but to help develop someone personally, that is on an entirely different level. It takes you into a deeper emotional realm, and I think you take on a greater responsibility. I think primarily it would be caring, caring enough for that individual. The

willingness to put yourself out for that person whether that be in a practical realm or an emotional realm.

Philip: There's an immense human depth of feeling and contact that comes out of that, it's probably love...And it's inevitable that a relationship involves things like love and other emotional feelings. It's some dimension of love and human love and friendship. But in a different context, in the context of growth and development, rather than in a relationship for the sake of a relationship. I think that life's too important and wonderful to keep it to yourself, not to share it with somebody else, and I feel that learning and development are too important not to share with other people.

Alice: ...I would thank them for what they've done, and hope that I will be given the chance to do that for somebody or whatever. Not to make me feel good, but just because to pay it back, to keep it going. They handed it to me and I would like to give it to someone else. I think it would be awful if it was given to me and I did nothing with it. I sort of feel it's a real responsibility that one must take an interest.

Angela: Well I would say that when I do publish the book I will dedicate it to her. And to the idea of her as well as to her; for what people, what teachers can do to another human being, for another human being.

Concluding remarks

Throughout the study it was clear that participants considered that they had been part of a mutual learning relationship, where learning often appeared to occur by osmosis or by example. However it was through reflection and thorough examination of these relationships during the interview process that participants began to address how they had become reflexive as practitioners, as they realized how they had learned. Although time-consuming, the interview process invites reflection and a 'bringing forth' of hitherto unvoiced meaning which has not been lying dormant waiting to be stirred, but is actively constructed from past events and given meaning within the interview itself. The interview is a learning process, and one that lends itself to exploring the world of the adult learner. English too, has noted how 'naming' experience can lead to 'aha' moments and queries whether:

...if a more systematic, but yet informal effort were made to ask people to name their experience and to reflect critically on it, if more learning would result and the transfer of learning would be more effective. (English 1999: 393)

The interviews acted as catalysts in participants' learning processes. They provided the impetus for learners to reconstruct their relationships from an informed and mature stance, and offered the opportunity to appraise the whole of the experience through a learner-centred conversational approach which like mentoring, provided the conditions for learning to take place. It could be argued that the relationships became enhanced by reflection, and that they acquired a somewhat rosy glow in retrospect. That alliances did or did not happen the way they are described is not the issue. Many of the relationships were still in progress, and if their description has been enhanced

in some way, then it is interesting that they should all have a similar pattern, and exhibit the same conditions. Whatever the case, the alliances described are what participants thought had enabled learning to be an on-going part of their lives.

Underlying all of the learning experiences were relationships that were transformational in the lives of participants. They were human connections that made a difference. Wherever learning occurs it frequently involves another, be it a subordinate, line manager, peer, tutor, partner or friend. Returning to my initial view of continuing education and lifelong learning, it might be seen as similar to mentoring. Traditional mentoring affords educational opportunities at appropriate stages of a learner's development, and the learning is the outcome of a process, the process of human connection. Traditional mentoring appears to keep the human connection so alive and vibrant that lifelong learning becomes seamless and continuous, rather than artificially divided into educational blocks of teaching at set ages and with set agendas.

These relationships have no written or verbal protocols, but are structured in that they appear to follow consistent patterns of initiation, development and maintenance, which must be assumed to be natural for these phenomena. The relationships are long lasting, have great importance in the lives of learners, and are deemed by them to be successful. Whilst protocols might legitimize and explain the dynamics of the relationships in the eyes of others, the introduction of such protocols would be counter-productive to these relationships and would destroy them. What is essential to a traditional mentor relationship appears to be its informality, and as what occurs naturally cannot be expected to flourish under artificial constraints there is little we can do to reproduce the relationship. However I argue elsewhere that if the conditions for learning are achieved, and the relationship is allowed to develop naturally over a prolonged period of time, then the possibility of creating a traditional mentor relationship becomes increased (Bennetts 1994: 92).

But just because traditional mentor relationships cannot be conjured to order and require support more than regulation, does not mean that we should treat them with benign neglect. Tausch (1978) undertook empirical work to verify Rogers' assumptions of the 'core conditions' and concludes:

If teachers, parents, psychotherapists, member of groups and people in general, can be, to a significant extent empathic and understanding, genuine, afford each other warm respect and interact in non-directive ways, the consequences would be substantial. It would facilitate constructive development of personality, lead to enhanced psychological health, and intellectual development. If these qualities were found in teachers, parents, psychotherapists and group leaders, then the lives of children and adult members of all groups would be more humane and growthful. Unfortunately these qualities seem relatively rare in professional helping persons at present. (Tausch, 1978: 10)

Traditional mentor relationships do appear to offer these qualities, and have much to offer researchers, at least as much as formal teaching relationships. Titmus (1999: 350) quotes Dohmen (1996: 100) as writing, 'the foundation for active lifelong learning should be laid during childhood and adolescence'.

Examination of these alliances enables us to see how mentors function as foundation stones in lifelong learning. This subtle form of education provides learning opportunities, supports the desire to learn, and helps learners acquire skills for life and for citizenship, a concept which Benn and Fieldhouse argue remains a necessary part of formal adult education (1995: 304). Sharing the world of the learner through interviews helps us to understand how children and adults continue to utilize learning from past experience, and shows how those who experience such relationships are themselves inclined to 'hand on the torch'. Hearing the voices of learners reminds us just who owns lifelong learning, and highlights the freedom of choice in matters such as mentoring. The traditional mentor relationship may be a hard act to follow, but as a model of sustainable lifelong learning, the alliance deserves recognition, respect and support, as an important indicator of what learners value in relationships which make a difference.

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