

HARM TILLEMA, GERT J. VAN DER WESTHUIZEN
AND KARI SMITH

17. “IT IS NOT JUST THE TALK...” – A REJOINDER

Maureen Robinson, who is an eminent scholar in the field of mentoring and learning was asked to offer an overview perspective, and a critical reading of our work. We, as authors, were very interested to learn what messages our first reader took from our work. We were curious to learn if our intended central claims and aims coincide with the readers’ understanding of the text.

To recapitulate our main message throughout the book we could state the following:

It is not just the talk that matters in mentoring, but really whether the conversation mounts up to learning. Talk is, as we see it, the main vehicle to bring about learning on part of the mentee. Learning is being viewed from the perspective of ‘knowledge productivity’, that is, has the mentee become more able to cope with the demands of practice. Mentoring, therefore, is primarily for learning for the mentee as well as for the mentor.

Our basic claim is that mentoring matters, provided that mentors become aware about how they conduct conversations and we strongly argue for mentor professional development in this respect.

The summing up of our work can be positioned against messages or highlights taken from the review of our book:

- “Mentoring is to be understood as learning conversations; – it stimulates to questions”

What follows in the review are a set of intriguing questions on the nature of learning in mentoring. Indeed this relation between mentoring and learning lies at the heart of our work. Some readers might assert we overstate the relation since mentoring is primarily about relationship and “helping”. Certainly the relation between mentoring and learning is different from the one between instruction and learning in the sense that the setting, mode of communication, intention, structure of relationship differ. But, nevertheless, mentoring is about learning, which is: bringing the “learner” to understand, shift perspective, and accept the recommendations given by a helping agent. Learning in mentoring in our view is governed by ‘knowledge productivity’, i.e., bringing about change in practices. This does not in any way discard or denounce the importance of relationship in mentoring. Typical for learning

in mentoring is: trust in guidance based on integrity (Garvey, 2008). These principles should govern the learning conversations between mentor and mentee.

- “Conversations that are both supportive and challenging are argued to be most productive”.

In short, mentoring is at its best when learning conversations occur. The conversational analysis described in the book point to two important ingredients: monitoring of past performance and scaffolding of future action. The speech moves which are shepherding a learning conversation are (Chapter 2 & 8): exploring, monitoring, and directing. Several modes of challenging learning conversation have been identified (Mostert & Vander Westhuizen, 2004); such as: open disclosure; inviting other viewpoints, detecting assumptions, exploring possibilities, planning for action, questioning to remove barriers (Barnes, 2008).

A more or less implicit assumption in the book is that many mentoring conversations stay well within the comfort zone of partakers. We noted in our studies (as did our reviewer) that most of the speech acts in a conversation were of a relational kind, i.e., avoid silences, small talk, and paying attention to relationships, which, no doubt, are part and parcel of a normal conversation, but do not suffice in a knowledge productive environment.

- “Mentoring is not an end in itself”

The notion of mentoring displayed in this book regards mentoring as a vehicle, a process in hand of the mentor and mentee to attain learning goals. These learning goals are set mutually by both partakers and they may develop during the course taken. In this respect the metaphor “Climbing the mountain” comes in: wanting to achieve what previously was thought to be hard to accomplish, and also: attaining a higher level of performance, preferably sustained at a high level of performance. We certainly would like to avoid the situation addressed by the tongue in cheek remark of our reviewer about what would happen when one comes down from the mountain. There is usually another, higher and more challenging mountain to climb nearby. Mentoring is therefore not an end in itself, but a way to achievement (Alexander, 2008).

- “Mentoring does not happen by itself”

Our reviewer continues by saying that in mentoring attention is needed to structure, content and context. And we adhere to that explicitly; a reader might rightfully coin that the book pays an overly great attention to conversation, i.e, the talk without specifically addressing structure, content and context. Indeed, the main intention behind the book is specifying how the vehicle of mentoring, the conversation, can be analyzed and understood. Given such an understanding we assert that the mentor (and mentee) can become more aware of how the process works in which they are partaking, as a fundamental step to knowing the content they are addressing, the context in which they operate, and the structure of their mutual involvement. For

this reason we started the book with an explication of the nature of knowledge as it relates to mentoring settings.

- “By analyzing talk mentors can become aware”

A mentor’s awareness of style, strategy, the other as a person, and the meanings conveyed is a crucial constituent of ‘good’ mentoring; it is part of mentor professionalism (Chapter 13–15). In order to bring awareness up to the level of professionalism we positioned this awareness at the level of mentor knowledge (Chapter 1) and interpreted it as situated understanding and distributed” knowledge shared and recognized among mentor professionals. What then triggers the knowledge building among mentor professionals? We believe it is analyzing the heart of what they do: that is, talk.

- “Mentoring context enables and constraints”

Mentoring itself provides a context as space for interpersonal reasoning, framed by the wider setting (institutional, programmatic) which provides the affordances to mentor. The close and interactional context of a space for dialogue is a delicate platform affected by authority, norms and reigned by integrity (Chapter 9). We encountered many instances of delicateness in spaces of mentoring in the conversations we analyzed. As Bakhtin (2010) notes (interpersonal reasoning and expressing voice in dialogues creates identity as well as shapes (multiple) identities. Mentors are highly influential in shaping the conversational space. On the other hand, they themselves are ‘shaped’ by the setting in which they work (Chapter 13). Being part of a professional learning community as a mentor can help (Chapter 15) to design supportive learning environments in mentoring.

- An “important consideration is the relationship between discipline-specific and generic professional training”

As our reviewer notes 2 Chapters (Chapter 11 & 12) specifically address domain specificity in mentoring conversation. What is apparent from these Chapters is that the mentor activity and problems encountered in conversation are so recognizable and to be found across different subject matter areas. Chapter 3 and 5 give evidence of such a communality of issues in mentoring in different (content) settings. This brings us to plead for a profession in a profession (Chapter 13) that can deal with the competences of mentors in different domains.

- “Does mentor education make a difference?”

In connection to the previous issue and in answering the question, yes, the line of thought throughout the book, and specifically the last part, advocates a raising of professionalism in mentoring. Our argument starts by noting that “mentors make a difference” (Zanting et al., 1998). The difference of being a ‘good’ mentor expresses itself mainly in: guidance, relationship, and integrity (see Chapter 8); and most of

these qualities can be acquired through deliberate professional development (and practice).

Our intention is that this book contributes new knowledge to mentoring conversations and to the mentoring profession. But the road ahead is still long and there are many aspects of mentoring we still need to learn more about.

Closely connected to this book, yet going a step further, is creating more knowledge about how analysis of a conversation can help the mentor and mentee to plan future action, and to which extent is the future actions based on learning for the mentee as well as for the mentor. Another issue that still needs to be further developed is how to, first from a research perspective and second from a practical perspective, to find ways to ‘routinize’ complex conversational analysis systems into more adoptable and feasible systems for examining talk between a mentor and a mentee.

We still need to know more about how mentors can be prepared for, educated to take on mentoring responsibilities, being aware of the fact that mentoring in itself is not necessarily a good thing, it is the quality of mentoring that counts. By analysing mentor conversation we are able to learn what the needs of the mentee are, and not least, what mentoring knowledge and skills are needed to respond to the mentee’s needs, so learning can occur. Acknowledging the fact that mentoring is to a large extent context bound, our research and previous research (Tillema, Smith, & Leshem, 2011) suggest there are several generic features of mentoring which need to be further explored. This will be an important contribution to an international debate on on mentor professionalism and education that would lead to an (internationally accepted) profession.

REFERENCES

- Alexander R. J. (2008). *Essays on pedagogy*. London, England: Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (2010). *Dialogic imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Barnes D. (2008). Exploratory talk for learning. In N. Mercer & S. Hodgkinson (Eds.), *Exploring talk in school*. London, England: Sage.
- Garvey, B. (2008). Readiness to mentor. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching*, *VI*(2), 06.
- Magano, M. D., Mostert, P., & Van der Westhuizen, G. (2010). *Learning conversations: The value of interactive learning*. Johannesburg: Heinemann.
- Tillema, H., Smith, K., & Leshem, S. (2011). Dual roles – conflicting purposes: A comparative study on perceptions on assessment in mentoring relations during practicum. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, *34*(2), 139–159.
- Zanting, A., Verloop, N., Vermunt, J. D., & Van Driel, J. H. (1998). Explicating practical knowledge: An extension of mentor teachers’ roles. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, *21*(1), 11–28.