CHRIS HOLLAND

6. APPRENTICE MENTORING

A Return to Relationship in Learning

INTRODUCTION

Imagine yourself a young person about to start an apprenticeship. You have come directly from school eager to start working life. You are likely to have chosen an apprenticeship because you are a physical kind of person, good at solving practical problems or making things. Your understanding of the trades is that they value hands-on, practical know-how. You are not interested in continuing at school – you don't see the relevance of school-like learning to your work ambitions. Nevertheless, you know some off-site training will be required in your apprenticeship, and that there will be theory connected to the practical work. You have no formal work experience or skills to offer, but you are keen to qualify in your chosen trade, maybe start up your own business one day. You will be paid the minimum wage at the start of your apprenticeship, or maybe less, when tools and training costs are deducted. You will be the lowest on the organisational ladder. If you have family or friends in the trades you'll have some sense of what to expect in terms of formal and informal learning and qualifications as well as the norms, values and practices of the trade workplace. If you have no family or friends in your trade or perhaps if English is not your family's first language, some of these formal learning requirements, norms, values and practices may surprise you or even cause you to feel unsafe.

This chapter discusses the importance of apprentice mentoring, not only in terms of basic empathy and support for fellow workers, but also in terms of the goals of business. It discusses the vocational environment where training, recruitment, retention, progression and qualification completions continue to be major issues, and argues that without important relational elements in mentoring, apprentices/trainees will continue to struggle to stay in the workplace and to complete their apprenticeship.

PRE- 20TH CENTURY APPRENTICESHIP

In New Zealand, work in the 18th and 19th century was modelled on British industrial practices. Writing about apprenticeship in the United Kingdom (UK), Peter Senker states, "… the knowledge and skills acquired by apprentices were almost exclusively tacit: heuristic, subjective and internalised, and learned through practical examples,

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experience and practice" (2000, p. 30). The apprentice, usually a young man or boy, was likely to live in the community where he worked, and to already be familiar with the business itself, and the local employer. The local employer would know the families in the area. In the 19th century employers didn't have to pay their apprentices, but they were supposed to feed and clothe them, and make sure they went to church. So the relationship between the employer as tutor and the apprentice as learner would have had a strong personal element through the connection of both to the local community.

20TH CENTURY APPRENTICESHIP

The Apprenticeship Act of 1923 required apprentices to gain part of their training at technical schools, which later became polytechnics. This change was accompanied by national exams and a fixed wage structure for apprentices. At this time, New Zealand was a prosperous country, with safe international markets, full employment and social development programmes that addressed social equity. In the 1950s and 1960s more children were able to attend secondary school for longer, and a university education gradually became a possibility for greater number of young people. Into the 1960s and 1970s, education became more liberal and opportunities and aspirations rose for the working class. By the 1980s, with increased access to higher education, there was a growing stigma attached to working in the trades, and young people who were doing well scholastically were generally not attracted to them. The number of apprentices being trained declined dramatically, causing a crisis of skilled labour (Murray, 2001).

At the same time, as Nicky Murray outlines, massive downward trends in employment followed the loss of British markets, the oil crisis and inflation. Education was perceived to be unable to keep up with this "pace of change" (ibid.). The neo-liberal ideology of the second Labour government in 1987 informed political and economic restructuring, introducing a market ideology and driving educational institutions towards managerialist practices (Boshier, 2001).

Despite legislative attempts to create dynamic work-based training schemes, these lost status for a variety of reasons during the 1980s and 1990s (Higgins, 2002). In an environment where productivity was paramount, time supporting students needed to be balanced against expected outcomes.

GLOBALISED ECONOMIES AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

In the latter part of the 20th century, industrialised countries were shifting from national welfare states to globalised economies (Jessop, 2002). This involved a rolling back of government and the introduction of measures that would ensure higher industrial productivity. New Zealand Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) were established with the Industry Training Act of 1992, and charged with setting national industry standards, ensuring quality of training, and arranging training with

tertiary education provider institutions. In line with a global shift to education as a product, apprenticeship training became competency-based (rather than time-based) and modular. In 2002 Apprenticeship Co-ordinators were funded by the Tertiary Education Commission to reduce the dropout rate. Specifically, they were required to facilitate placement and mentor apprentices and employers (Baker, 2015). However, the co-ordinators were faced with conflicting responsibilities. Their requirement to support employers to resolve employment relationships conflicted with the need to develop apprentices' trust in them as mentors. In addition, co-ordinators often held positions as assessors – an authority role that was counter to a mentoring role.

THE LITERACY WAVE

A further educational development was complicating the industry training environment. Internationally, strategies were being developed to address perceived low levels of literacy in the workforce. In 2001, the Ministry of Education released *More than words: The New Zealand adult literacy strategy* (Ministry of Education, 2001). The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), given responsibility for tertiary education, took over the Ministry of Education's drive to improve students' progress in functional literacy through course material development, vocational teacher training, and initial literacy assessment. Decades of research into literacy (see for instance, Gee, 1994; Hull, 1997; Gowen, 1992, 1996; Gowen & Bartlett 1997; Lankshear, 1998; Street, 1984), as well as research into international literacy assessments (Hamilton & Barton, 2000), have shown how literacy is a socio-political practice shaping and shaped by different contexts. Despite this and other like research, new apprentices are currently required to undertake de-contextualised literacy and numeracy tests that focus on functional deficits, through the use of the Tertiary Education Commission's Assessment Tool.

CONTEXT IN LEARNING

The current focus on the acquisition of functional skills elides other dimensions that impact on learning. For instance, status, ethnicity, and gender influence how one approaches and is able to negotiate workplace relationships, politics and hierarchies. Economic downturns resulting in low job security and low wages make these negotiations particularly difficult for apprentices to manage. In addition, learning can be affected by cultural incompatibilities between the home and the workplace. Neither the emotional toll on apprentices trying to cope with all of these matters without support, nor the impact of the emotional dimension on apprentice learning, has been discussed widely in the literature on workplace learning.

Jane Bluestein (2001) describes an emotionally safe environment for learning as one in which students can experience a sense of belonging, of being welcomed and valued, where they are treated with respect, dignity and acceptance; where they can make choices that influence their own learning, control various factors in the

process of learning; and where they can express their feelings and opinions without fear of recrimination. Andrea Needham (2004) describes how unsafe relationships in the workplace become significant barriers to progress. Michael Eraut asserts that "relationships play a critical role in workplace learning, and … the emotional dimension of … work is much more significant than normally recognized" (2004, p. 255). In work that draws on a psychological view of learning, Illeris (2002) discusses his three-dimensional model of learning comprising the cognitive (rational, knowledge and skills focused), the social, and the emotional. He notes how cognitive, skills focused learning has gained ascendance in the world of work, at the expense of the other dimensions. When apprentices have difficulties in the workplace or polytechnic that cannot be directly attributed to on- or off-site training modules, there is no one who has the responsibility of listening to and working with them to address their concerns.

MENTORING RESEARCH

What, then, might be done to rebalance the situation for apprentices, to support them to understand and negotiate workplace relationships and culture, to keep their jobs, to complete their qualifications and to realise their dreams of becoming qualified tradesmen or private contractors? Could mentoring be put in place, and if so, what shape should that mentoring take? And would employers see the value of mentoring?

Employers seem open to mentoring *per se* Darwin (2000) states that mentoring is presently at the forefront of strategies to improve workplace learning, and Harris Willis, Simons and Collins go further, arguing that "workplace mentoring is the most critical factor in worksite learning" (2001, p. 274). In individualistic 'western' industrialised countries influenced by neo-liberal doctrines, current workplace mentoring practice tends to be strategic – focused mainly on the instrumental competence of the new employee in relation to the employing organisation. According to this model, the mentor is a senior person in a position of authority (and power) over the mentee, and provides organisation and industry-related learning, advice and guidance to shape the performance of new recruit. Boud and Garrick (1999) note this person may be unable to mentor effectively because of the structural constraints of the role i.e. having a formal role in surveillance of staff.

In the last two decades, the idea of *apprentice* mentoring has gained the attention of researchers and theorists as an effective way of improving apprentice learning and development. Research in Australia (Billet, 2003; Billett & Somerville, 2004) has shown that properly trained mentors are a powerful support for apprentice learning. These findings seem to be confirmed in a series of case studies conducted in New Zealand between 2008–2012 (Holland & Murray, 2010; Holland, 2011, 2012). Tahau-Hodges (2010) and Holland (2012) show that groups such as Māori and Pasifika show particularly significant gains from culturally specific mentoring.

APPRENTICE MENTORING INITIATIVES

Some countries are now making headway in this area. In Australia an apprentice mentoring fund was launched in 2012 following a report by the Australian. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2011) which stated:

> Support mechanisms for … the apprentice, trainee and the employer, such as mentoring, pastoral care and quality training provision are required. A shared investment by both government and industry is essential to build these support mechanisms into the system. Current Australian Government investment should be redirected to support the successful completion of an Australian Apprenticeship. (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011, p. 10)

The Australian Apprenticeships Mentoring Programme supports targeted mentoring to Australian Apprentices. The programme focuses on industries and workplaces employing apprentices who may face barriers to participation (it identifies indigenous and rural apprentices). Mentoring projects provide support during the first year of training when apprentices are most at risk of withdrawing.

Effective Journeyperson Apprentice Mentoring On-the-job: Tips, Strategies, and Resources was released by the Canadian New Apprentice Forum (2013). It discusses how the skill and ability of the next generation of skilled trades professionals rely in large part on the mentors who teach them, and asserts that journeyperson mentors are crucial to apprenticeship success. In the province of Nova Scotia, Workplace Mentoring is now required for all apprenticeship programmes; employers must apply strategies to assist with learning and teaching skills in the workplace. To support this new initiative for apprentices, in the province of Nova Scotia, the Apprenticeship Training and Skill Development Division provides materials and activities for mentors and learners to use.

Apprentice mentoring is gaining traction in the UK public sector. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) has been training union learning representatives since 2000, as part of the UK government strategy to address perceived low levels of literacy in the workforce. The New Zealand Council of Trade Unions (NZCTU) and the Canadian Union of Postal Employees (CUPE) have both developed models based on the TUC learning representatives model, where shop-floor workers (usually union delegates or members) support co-workers with a range of issues including industrial relations and literacy. The learning representative role has always been a mentoring one, although in the past the characteristics of effective mentoring have not been stressed in learning representative training.

Lack of mentor professional development can render the mentor and the mentoring practice vulnerable in several ways. First, if insufficient time and safeguards are approved by the manager the venture may be doomed to failure and that failure is

likely to be attributed to the mentor. Secondly, the apprentice can become wary of engaging with mentoring if the mentor is struggling with the role. Thirdly, if there are no quantifiable results from mentoring, the employer will be unlikely to support any further support initiatives, and may again hold the mentor responsible. Thus professional development is vital. In New Zealand, professional development has been funded by a number of ITOs and undertaken in a range of industries including glass and joinery, fire and rescue, hairdressing, electro-technology and hospitality. There are three professional development workshops and supporting material that are customised to the industry. They take place over nine months and include phone/email support. The TUC in the UK has also recently begun to offer mentor training within its learning reps programme. The training covers active listening, questioning, building rapport, offering constructive feedback, setting target, offering support and guidance, signposting and acting as a role model.

RELATIONAL APPROACHES TO MENTORING PRACTICE

While much mentoring in western industrialised countries is traditional, strategic, and functional (focusing on knowledge, skills and literacy deficits) Ragins and Verbos (2006) believe that *relational* mentoring is the highest state of quality mentoring. They attribute to relational mentoring the ability to develop empathic, empowering processes that create personal growth, development and enrichment for both mentors and protégés. Relational mentoring approaches, based on emotional bonds between mentor and mentee, are widespread in Japan, and are also favoured by other "collectivistic" cultures such as Maori and Pacific (Ratima & Grant, 2007). Indeed, the closest Māori word for mentor "awhina" means to befriend (Williams, 2007).

Many employers regard relational mentoring as inappropriate for apprentices. Some, especially employers in male dominated workplaces, consider mentoring to be too "mollycoddling", (Small business employer, April 2009, in conversation). Other managers who have explored their own mentoring capabilities, have suggested that employer appraisals perform the same function (assessing performance, keeping an eye on progress). However, the function of mentoring is qualitatively different from the function of appraisal in that effective mentoring is dependent on the development of a trust relationship, and appraisal carries with it the possibility of dismissal. Managers find it very hard to separate these functions, recording comments in their portfolios such as: "Had to tell her off" and "Told her she will have to watch it next time, otherwise we will not use her in the future" (Mentors' record books, August 2011). For this reason mentoring is easier for all concerned if it is undertaken by men and women who do not have the responsibility for appraisal, and who are closer in status to the apprentices they wish to support, and more able therefore to act as an experienced friend.

In my research into mentoring, examples of particularly successful mentors included qualified tradespeople, final year apprentices, "one-up mentors" (where

the mentor was just a year ahead of the new recruit), administrative mentors (usually women with the ability to support literacy and distance learning) and tradespeople from the apprentice's local and/or cultural community.

The key success factor for mentoring is the trustworthiness of the mentor. The characteristics of trust, identified through mentoring development and research (Holland, 2013), are care (empathy), competence (in mentoring) and confidentiality (in terms of matters discussed between the mentor and their apprentice). Caring – showing empathy, is crucial in terms of disclosures of concerns, and without these disclosures, the mentor will have little information on which to act. Competence is being able to manage sessions, keep appointments, set ground rules, listen, ask useful questions, gather information and consider issues in the wider picture of the apprentice's life. It involves working with the apprentice to set goals, track issues, solve problems, record achievements, foster independence and follow through with promises. Finally, it includes knowing and managing boundaries of support. Confidentiality is particularly important when working with people who have low status/power in the workplace, and for whom some disclosures may risk others' regard for them or even their job security. Often mentors feel anxious about maintaining confidentiality when certain disclosures could impact on the business. Discussing boundaries for disclosures, and asking for permission to share information will safeguard both the mentor and the apprentice.

Dennis and Michelle Reina (2006), warn that levels of trust are low among workers in the climate of downsizing, restructuring and mergers. Alluding to the lack of emotional safety experienced by workers in organisations today, they develop a model similar to the characteristics of trust described above. It includes the trust of character, or contractual trust; the trust of disclosure or communication trust; and the trust of capability, or competence trust. We can see that while organisations may have a different purpose for building trust among its workforce, it is nevertheless understood as vital to learning and workplace performance.

In summary, in order for trust to be built between the mentor and learner (in this case the apprentice), they need at least to be able to meet with each other, face-to-face, on a regular basis and to have no power differential such as an authority relationship between them. Using the examples of Learning Representatives and Apprenticeship Co-ordinators, we can map the difference these and other circumstances make to the building of trust. Learning representatives in the UK, New Zealand and Canada are able to build trust because they are regularly accessible, and have experience on the shop floor with new recruits. In addition, they understand the socio-political context of learning in the workplace and therefore the perils of breaking confidentiality. As union representatives, they are able to demonstrate commitment to the apprentice's welfare. As unionists, with the welfare of workers at the core of their work, it can be argued that Learning Representatives display characteristics of relational mentoring: care, competence and confidentiality. By contrast, Apprenticeship Co-ordinators, employed by ITOs, cannot meet face-to-face on a regular basis, and when they do meet, they have to split their (often short) visit time between the employer and the

apprentice, and be available to represent the employers' interests before those of the apprentice. This means that confidentiality is not required between the co-ordinator and the apprentice. Apprenticeship Co-ordinators often hold dual roles as apprentice support persons and assessors, creating a power relationship. Thus the Apprentice Co-ordinator role embodies characteristics of a strategic mentoring.

Case study research conducted in ITOs (Holland & Murray, 2010; Holland, 2011, 2012) has shown that a relational model of mentoring can be very effective in supporting apprentices, practically, educationally and emotionally. It helps apprentices to get through their first year, manage workplace relationships, keep their jobs and progress towards qualification completion. Research has yet to be conducted that compares levels of apprentice retention and achievement between mentored and non-mentored apprentices, and between trained and untrained mentors. Indications from case study research are that mentored apprentices do significantly better in terms of retention and progress than their non-mentored counterparts, and that mentor professional development is key to that success.

CONCLUSION

Imagine that within three months of your recruitment, you were assigned a mentor who worked with you throughout your first year. You didn't think you needed her at first, but the course modules were to be done by distance learning, and you had a lot of home responsibilities. You found yourself unable to complete some modules without assistance. Your mentor helped you to better understand the expectations of the course, to manage your time more efficiently, to make sense of unclear learning material and to put together your assessment portfolios. When you had trouble with your course tutor, and felt like leaving after six months, she advised you how to talk about it with him. Now you have almost completed your apprenticeship and you've put your hand up to train as a mentor once you gain your qualification. Like many of your fellow apprentices, you see this as a way of giving back, of helping another apprentice succeed, and of showing that you can be trusted to lead others.

Imagine that, despite sweeping neo-liberal, market driven demands on learning, socially driven empathic, relational support for apprentices is, and will continue to be, the approach that enables these young people to develop into skilled workers.

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Chris Holland
Work & Education Research & Development Services
New Zealand