
The Contextual Imperative: Implications for coaching and mentoring

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of context on the development of coaching and mentoring practice. Qualitative research was undertaken with mentors working in the voluntary sector in the United Kingdom and this is combined with the author's own reflections on coaching practice, in order to examine the role that contextual knowledge and understanding plays in the development of standards for coaching and mentoring practice.

Theories of knowing, socially constructed learning and the action-oriented nature of knowledge are explored in order to explain the potential for accessing and developing coaching and mentoring 'know how' through practice, and to support the argument for a 'post-technocratic' model of professional development.

Key words: mentoring, coaching, tacit knowledge, context, standards.

Introduction

Invariably in the coaching and mentoring arena it is the relationship that is emphasised, whilst the contexts, which impact on the relationship and within which the relationship exists, are downplayed (Harris 1995). All personal relationships are shaped by the environment in which they are set and all partners in the relationship bring with them contextual understandings, beliefs and perceptions that influence the relationship. Every relationship is also the context for other relationships. Context is influenced by cultures and subcultures, organisational mores, socio-economic conditions, the physical environments of home and work, historical and generational effects, social and peer associations, political and religious beliefs, etc. This paper examines how context impacts on coaching and mentoring practice at a number of levels, producing functional complexities that are seldom explored.

The paper links the terms coach and mentor since it is considered that these two areas of practice have large areas of commonality and overlap. Mentors are often more effective if a coaching style is adopted where appropriate (Darwin, 2000). This was particularly the case for the mentors studied here, who were helping their mentees to prepare for a return to the workplace. It could also be argued that effective coaching relies on wisdom and prior knowledge at least as much as mentoring.

Schön argues that outstanding practitioners appear to have more "wisdom" and "artistry" than others (1987 p.13) and certainly, in the mentoring literature the mystical and wise properties of the mentor have often been referred to (Daloz 1986, Caldwell and Carter 1993, Smith and Alred 1994). The use of such terms, Schön suggests, tends to reinforce the elusiveness of any conventional strategies of explanation for these qualities and therefore, I would suggest, underscores, but does not articulate, what Schön calls the "largely unexamined epistemology of practice" (1987 p.13).

Smith and Alred (1994, p.103) have commented that “the idea of a ‘mentor’ has its origins [...] in ways of thinking about the world that do not sit easily with the modern language of formal education.” They lament the demise of wisdom as a valuable attribute:

Until the last 20 or so years, perhaps, when it has been customary to reduce all kinds of quality, capacity, virtue, knowledge and understanding to ‘skills’, it was possible to speak without too much embarrassment of ‘wisdom’ as something like an enduring quality of certain kinds of human beings (Smith and Alred 1994 p.104).

In this paper the question of how the wisdom and artistry of both coaches and mentors is formed and modified through the interplay of different contexts is explored, together with the implications of this in relation to recent moves to develop competence-based standards.

Methodology

The paper is based on qualitative research undertaken with mentors working in the voluntary sector in the United Kingdom, together with their mentees and mentoring scheme co-ordinators. Methods used to gather the data included dialogic interviews with six mentors, four mentees and two co-ordinators, a total of four focus groups and the analysis of 17 journals. The study also draws on theories of knowing and socially constructed learning and the action-oriented nature of knowledge in order to explain the potential for accessing and developing ‘know-how’ through practice.

Focus group meetings took place within scheduled group supervision meetings and consisted of between six and ten mentors. Dialogic interviews were conducted in order to follow up and verify focus group results. All mentors were asked to keep a journal throughout their mentoring relationships as a part of their ongoing development, and to use this to analyse their feelings and record learning points from each mentoring meeting.

The format of the journals followed the reflective stages in the debriefing process described by Pearson and Smith (1985), namely:

- 1) What happened?
- 2) How did you feel?
- 3) What does it mean?

Initial findings

To begin to explore the way in which knowledge of context impacts upon mentoring practice I draw on the results of the four focus groups, where it was noted that mentors invariably moved the discussion towards immediate practical solutions to the problems that their individual mentees were facing, rather than issues relating to their own development as practitioners, or additional training that could be made available to them. This was considered significant.

Analysis of journals also revealed that mentors most frequently recorded only the facts of their meetings and information about their mentee's concerns. The journals became a descriptive record of mentoring events, essentially an aid to managing the mentoring relationship rather than a self-development tool. Mentors, it seemed, were invariably caught in a contextual quagmire and remained in the 'swampy' problem-solving dimension, described by Schön (1983).

Initially the apparent reluctance of mentors to reflect on their practice was disappointing. My concern was that, as a number of commentators had suggested, there is no virtue in trying to describe and faithfully regurgitate what has happened: learning only occurs when events are interrogated through critical reflection or discussion (Ghaye and Ghaye 1998 p.86). Brookfield had also argued that "experience without critical analysis can be little more than anecdotal reminiscence; interesting but unconnected, experiential travellers' tales from the front lines of practice" (Brookfield 1993 p.30 reporting from Usher and Bryant 1989).

However, Svensson's discussion of professional knowledge provides useful guidance on this failure to reflect. He confirms the tendency in practice to concentrate more on the solutions than on the "formulation of the problems" and suggests that professional knowledge and skill "depend strongly on the individual and the context" (1990 p.62). Since professional knowledge is difficult to uncover and to articulate, it is best illustrated through examples. I would suggest that the mentors in this study, like the architects and psychoanalysts studied by Svensson, saw the practical case (i.e. their mentees) as unique, and like the architects and psychoanalysts "make no attempt to reflect on their own reflection-in-action. Hence they cannot show on a meta-level what they are doing." (1990 p.62) The mentors used their previous knowledge (their repertoire of previous experience, views and beliefs, understanding, successful or unsuccessful actions, culture, education etc.) to deal with the situations presented by the mentees, but as Svensson demonstrates, such knowledge is bound to contexts and constitutes resources only in these contexts. For mentors then, solutions evolve only in interaction with their mentees. Eraut's arguments that meaning will be "strongly influenced by previous contexts of use; and the idea will not be transferable to a new context without future intellectual effort" (1994 p.51) seem pertinent here.

Eraut also suggests that "rapid intuitive responses are based on an ability to retrieve similar cases from memory and to use prior experience for making quick decisions" (1994 p.12). I suggest that the mentors, the majority of whom had considerable experience of working in one-to-one supporting situations, focused on reporting facts, rather than reflecting on incidents, because they were able to draw on significant prior experience. Experienced people were already familiar with similar incidents and so focused less on the know-how they were using, or how they could acquire more know-how, unless they came across new incidents or experiences, which they had not encountered before.

Hence, I would argue that some mentors reported apparently less 'meaning change' or learning, because of their already wide experience of working in similar contexts. They were less concerned with their own reactions than mentors who were new to the field. Their journals focused on the needs of the mentee rather than their own, whilst

novice mentors, on the other hand, did more reflecting and often reported surprise or consternation about their own responses during mentoring.

Comments from two novice mentors' journals illustrate this:

I thought I had the necessary qualities to be a mentor: e.g. outgoing, patient, kind, adaptable, enthusiastic, non-judgemental, imaginative, intelligent, sense of humour (just about perfect!). In the event it proved easy to build the initial relationship but my enthusiasm and patience were strained by the mentee's tendency to blow hot and cold. I couldn't forecast her actions or responses and so found forward-planning difficult.

I find myself becoming increasingly confused about this partnership [...] I find that I always feel 'drained' at the end of the session which invariably goes on for longer than the agreed hour [...] Perhaps I am not assertive enough but my dilemma is that these sessions are mainly for her benefit and therefore she must use them as she wishes.

The contextual imperative

Harris (1995 p.20) claims that contexts frame the mentoring process in two ways: "by setting an historical context which lays down the ways in which the mentoring is conceived and set up; and by providing a concurrent context which impinges constantly on the ongoing processes and practices of mentoring." In this study I am concerned with highlighting and understanding the nature of the contextual knowledge which mentors (and their mentees) carry with them and bring to the relationship, and which may or may not be tacit. This experiential knowledge is not solely dependent upon the context of time or place implied by Harris in his 'historical' descriptor, nor upon the concurrent context, since both relate to the context of the relationship itself; but is also dependent on the understandings of situations gleaned by the coach or mentor through previous experience. This contextual knowledge is likely to impact upon coach/mentor practice in a variety of ways.

Garrigan and Pearce have suggested that it is important for a mentor to have "knowledge related to the particular needs of the individual in the specific context for which they are responsible" (1996 p.27). Research with mentors in this study also confirms that empathy with a client is more likely to occur when coaches or mentors have experienced or encountered similar life experiences. One mentor taking part in the study illustrated the potential for empathy with her mentee by describing the sudden realisation that she had in fact shared the same feelings:

I have an understanding of feeling 'locked in'. I've been there and didn't like it. Couldn't find my way out/needed someone to show me the exit/didn't know there was an exit/didn't know there was an 'outside'.

Drawing on extensive previous experience of the context in which the mentee found herself, this mentor was able to share significant feelings with her mentee and from there consider what questions to frame, whether challenge was appropriate etc. Eraut confirms that experience informs actions, but that "it is only when some action is

needed that one rehearses one's memory of these incidents, deliberates upon them and decides what to do." (Eraut 1994 p. 51).

It is my contention also that the process skills of both coaching and mentoring, such as active listening, questioning and confrontation, cannot be independent of context since their very application depends upon the amount of background or contextual knowledge the coach or mentor has, as well as the context within which he or she is working and through which all action is framed. Process skills are dependent upon the field of acquisition, suggesting that the context of use not only affects learning but is likely to be influenced by previous contexts of use (Eraut, 1994 p.51).

It may be helpful here to think of the process skills used in coaching or mentoring as tools: "tools share several significant features with knowledge. They can only be fully understood through use, and using them entails both changing the user's view of the world and adopting the belief system of the culture in which they are used" (Brown, et al. 1989 p.33).

To illustrate this, one important area where contextual understanding is imperative in the process is in knowing not only how to challenge the mentee, but when to challenge. Daloz (1986 p.212) has identified challenge as one of the essential components of mentoring and a number of mentors in this study identified challenge as something they would have liked to have been able to initiate more often. My findings confirm that challenging actions and responses is not easy without an understanding of context. Mentors with little experience of the context in which they were working reported: -

I didn't always realise she needed challenging. Some people have experience of this already.

Anything you have done once you can do better the next time. I would probably be more challenging.

Confidence to undertake challenge, I would suggest, comes from knowing the situation in which the mentee finds him/herself, and/or knowing the mentee well. A coach or mentor often needs to challenge a client by highlighting inconsistencies in thinking or suggesting the consideration of alternative strategies or approaches. But it is not enough to remain at a superficial or Meta level of challenge, with no accurate or specific knowledge of the viability of the alternatives facing the client. When coaches and mentors have no knowledge or experience of what those alternatives are or how their challenge will be received, then, I would argue, their credibility is in jeopardy and in some cases their confidence may be reduced. As in any other situation confidence and expertise comes with a more in-depth understanding of the context and the person.

A further example of this contextual imperative is illustrated in the 'mentoring mind-set' compiled by Millwater and Yarrow (1997 p.23), which captures the holistic structure of the attitudes, values and beliefs, which constitute mentoring:

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- *earning the trust of the learner*
 - *accepting but challenging the mistakes and differences of the learner*
 - *taking the learner from where they were and developing the person from there*
 - *taking every problem in their stride*
 - *encouraging the initiation of shared innovation*
 - *reflecting together*
 - *tolerating the learning style of learners*
 - *accepting that there are times when help is needed and doing this with minimum fuss*
 - *responding to the needs of the learner in both personal and professional areas*
 - *being dynamic and creative*
 - *sharing confidences*

In their exploration of the mentoring mindset Millwater and Yarrow (1997 p.24) confirm that mentors' approaches to mentoring can differ depending upon their own particular experiences of education and support, and that an exploration of the nature of knowledge held by mentors is important. Any discussion of mentor development, therefore, needs to focus on the way in which existing knowledge is enhanced and modified as a result of mentoring practice and whether ultimately that knowledge can be captured to inform future practice.

Zeus and Skiffington (2001 p.28) highlight a similar range of capabilities required by the coach: authenticity, empathy, insight, willingness to offer feedback and the ability to confront others. They also consider that the coach should have a capacity to diagnose issues and find solutions, suggesting that coaches will also draw heavily on their previous experiences and understanding of contexts. The identification of the need for this expertise illustrates the shifting complexity and uniqueness of coaching and mentoring practice and the broad range of attributes, skills, experience and knowledge that is needed for effective practice.

It is my contention then that both coaching and mentoring draw on a wide range of life experiences, which the practitioner calls upon as and when appropriate. However, the uniqueness of each encounter implies that it may not be possible to forecast which knowledge or experience is going to be called into play at any one time. Suchman argues that the course of any activity is dependent on individual circumstances based on a "cumulative range of concrete embodied responses, guided by the wisdom of memory and experience" (1987 p.viii). It is not possible to prepare someone for action when that action is necessarily context dependent: people will, in any event, draw down whatever they can from their previous experience to inform the contextual demands of the moment. Using a maritime metaphor, Suchman argues that maps are too abstract and coarse grained to be helpful to the navigator and since the fine detail of the journey is not included it cannot be prepared for. Coaches and mentors need to use their memory and experience in much the same way as Suchman's sailors in order to respond to the individual circumstances: avoiding rocks and finding safe harbours has parallels with coaching and mentoring practice in that know-how is drawn from

experience with different types of subject, in a range of circumstances, and cannot be developed solely through training or the provision of a 'how to' map. Any specific competences that can be identified, taught and measured can only act as a compass to guide their voyage with their mentee. It is local (contextual) knowledge that gives substance to the journey. Interviews with mentors confirmed that previous experience of working on a one-to-one basis with people, particularly in a learning situation, such as counselling or training, is a significant factor in mentoring success.

Knowledge as active and contextually bound

In the Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986) model of skill acquisition, whereas the novice practitioner has to rely on rules and schemas in order to perform, it is suggested that because the proficient performer has experienced similar situations in the past, "memories of them trigger plans similar to those that worked in the past and anticipations of events similar to those that occurred" (p.28 cited in Eraut, 1994). Turner (1993), working in the field of cognitive science, describes this process in detail :

The agent assesses the current situation by retrieving one or more schemas from its memory, based on features of the situation. The contextual information is then used as predictive and prescriptive information to:-

1. identify and make predictions about the current context, including features that may not yet have been seen;
2. appropriately set behavioural parameters;
3. help the agent focus its attention on appropriate goals to achieve in the current situation;
4. select appropriate actions to take to achieve its goals; and
5. respond quickly and appropriately to unanticipated events.

Similarly, Blackler asserts that since knowledge is an "active process that is mediated, situated, provisional, pragmatic and contested," attention should be focused on "the systems through which people achieve their knowing, on the changes that are occurring within such systems and on the processes through which new knowledge may be generated" (Blackler 1995 p.1039). Wenger develops this argument further, suggesting that although our engagement in practice may have patterns, it is the production of such patterns anew that gives rise to an experience of meaning:

All that we do and say may refer to what has been done and said in the past, and yet we produce again a new situation, an impression, an experience: we produce meanings that extend, redirect, dismiss, reinterpret, modify or confirm - in a word, negotiate anew - the histories of meanings of which they are part (Wenger 1998 p.52).

This emphasis on the action-oriented nature of knowledge suggests that both coaches and mentors will be modifying their existing knowledge throughout their practice. That knowledge will in fact have been influenced by previous experience and will be modified through their current practice and the current context. As Eraut confirms, it is misleading to think of knowledge as first being acquired and then later put to use

since “personal knowledge is significantly shaped by the context in which it has been and is intended to be used ...” (1994 p.26).

Figure 1 illustrates the process of practice-based learning for the practitioner. Interaction with the client informs existing knowledge through the modification of that knowledge in the context of the relationship. This ongoing negotiation of meaning continues indefinitely through the practice of coaching and mentoring, thus contributing to ever increasing ‘know-how’, wisdom and artistry.

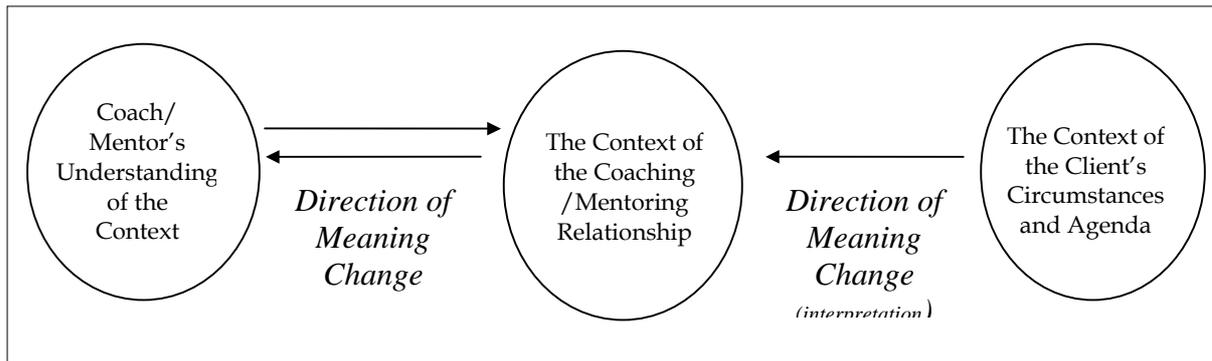


Figure 1: Determinants of practice-based learning for the coach/mentor

Standards in UK Mentoring: Recent History

At the end of the 1990s in the UK, the University of North London (UNL), together with the then European Mentoring Centre and Hertfordshire Training and Enterprise Council, worked towards developing a set of mentoring standards within the National Council for Vocational Qualification framework (NCVQ) aimed at validating the skills of mentors in the labour market (University of North London, 1998). Performance criteria were incorporated from the UK Training and Development Lead Body (TDLB) and Advice, Guidance, Counselling and Psychotherapy (AGCP) together with Edexcel's Key Skills Unit¹ in problem solving.

The standards were intended to be generic in that they were designed around “the common stages of any mentor/mentee relationship and all the associated skills and underpinning knowledge which should be present and are then transferable from one mentoring context to another (UNL 1998). UNL proposed that through the use of nationally recognised standards mentoring could “attain the status and credibility of a discrete profession despite the unique characteristic that the majority of mentoring practitioners are unpaid.” The purpose of the enterprise therefore, was “not only to

¹ Edexcel was formed in 1996 through a merger of the Business & Technology Education Council (BTEC), the leading provider of vocational qualifications, and the University of London Examinations and Assessment Council (ULEAC), one of the major GCSE and GCE examining bodies. It is one of the leading examining and awarding bodies in the UK. It develops a diverse range of academic and vocational qualifications, preparing course specifications, assessing, examining and providing quality control of qualifications and certifying achievement.

‘standardise’ mentoring in a way that indicates best practice and recognises unified objectives, but also to acknowledge the undoubted professionalism of a growing mentor movement” (UNL 1998).

However, despite the comprehensive breakdown of mentoring skills eventually presented by UNL as constituting the ‘standard’, and which formed the foundation subsequently of the EmpNTO Coaching and Mentoring Units L21 and L22, I would suggest that mentoring cannot be reduced to a simple, static, technical-rational formulation of competence statements. This is particularly the case for those working at a professional level (NVQ 4 or 5). These concerns are echoed by Parsloe (2000) who reports the concerns of a number of focus groups set up to consider the EmpNTO standards. Their view was that the units constituted a narrow and inaccurate view of the reality of workplace coaching and mentoring.

Problems with competence-based standards

Competence in a job can be defined as the ability to perform the necessary tasks and roles to an expected standard.

Since the early 1990s this notion of competence has been at the centre of a crucial educational debate: critics of the concept argue that focusing on specific task-related skills means ignoring factors such as values, underpinning knowledge and attributes such as resourcefulness, vision and creativity. For example, Hyland suggests that competence based assessment methods are inappropriate for programmes of preparation and development in many professional spheres. He argues that this is because: “human behaviour is unintelligible without references to the context of learning and to the development of understanding...” (1994 p.13). He stresses that knowledge is not inert or passive:

Competence strategies are guilty of two cardinal errors: first they separate the mental and the physical components of performance and attempt to appraise them separately; secondly, they mistakenly give performance pride of place in evaluating competence, and seriously underestimate the role of knowledge and understanding (1993 p.68).

and claims quite vehemently that underpinning such strategies is a “reductionist view of human agency which assumes that knowledge, skills and values can be codified in terms of lists of competence statements and measured objectively in abstraction from everyday experience” (1997 p. 495).

Watkins (1999) also confirms the views expressed by several professional bodies that NVQs on their own cannot adequately prove that a body of knowledge has been acquired or that excellence has been achieved:

They all share concerns about the difficulty of finding meaningful, effective and rigorous ways of identifying and assessing professional skills, knowledge and creativity (Watkins, 1999 p.53).

Other authors have confirmed that skills, attitudes and other aspects of competence cannot have a fixed meaning, which is separate from the experience of practice, and claim that meaning is constituted through experience (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 1996).

It is for this reason that the conversion of the mentor's implicit expertise into explicit descriptions, that can then form competences for assessment, has been so difficult. As demonstrated earlier, experienced coaches and mentors may know what to do or say in practice, but are unlikely to be able to articulate that knowledge. As Giddens argues "everyone knows much more about why he or she follows any particular course of action than is expressed discursively" (Giddens 1996 p.69).

Using a business-based model, Clutterbuck (1998 p.91) has attempted to describe a process of potential translation of tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge. In the coaching and mentoring context this could be summarised as:-

1. Client presents a problem
2. Coach/Mentor thinks back to when he/she encountered similar issues, either personally or in supporting others, and how they were resolved
3. Coach/mentor tries to present/recast the knowledge gained at that time for access by the client. (In the coaching process this is done implicitly through the careful formulation of questions).

What happens during this process is, as Clutterbuck suggests, "the articulation of a process that has probably never before been mapped." The articulation and analysis of issues "obliges the mentor to think about what he or she does from a critical perspective that would rarely occur otherwise" (1998 p.91/92). In the business context, or any other in-work context, this means that both mentor and mentee will gain from the elucidation of tacit knowledge related to the particular work sphere. However, the individuality, complexity and distinctiveness of every client problem is inherent in this process, and is almost impossible to predict or capture. This has significant implications for the development of professional standards.

Despite acknowledging professionalism, standards ignore the importance of experiential learning cycles and reflective forms of learning which are the key learning modes for professionals (Kolb, 1984, Schön, 1987). Schön claims that "indeterminate zones of practice - uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict - escape the canons of technical rationality," and suggests that this is because, when a practitioner recognises a situation as unique, "she cannot handle it solely by applying theories or techniques derived from her store of professional knowledge" (1987 p.6). In the field of Education the technical rational approach to teacher training has been contrasted with the reflective practitioner model, maintaining that "professional artistry sees the practitioner as being educated roundly, not drilled in skills" (Fish, 1995 p.40). These same arguments, I would suggest, can be applied to coaching and mentoring and reinforce Fish's recognition that all practice is "messy, unpredictable, unexpected, and requires the ability to improvise".

Another concern is that a competence model concentrates on defining the outcomes of competent practice rather than on developing the attributes required to achieve them

and so ultimately attests “to no more than the ability to perform effectively in a predefined range of situations” (Lester, 1995 p.239). This limitation is seen as sitting uneasily with the notion of ‘managing messes,’ (Schön 1987) which are precisely the situations which coaches and mentors are invited to interpret and challenge.

Cushion (2001), working in the field of sports coaching, reinforces the notion that a rational and mechanistic approach, where the coaching process is presented as two-dimensional and compartmentalised, results in a de-contextualised view. He laments the flawed assumption that experience can be created through the acquisition of technical skills alone and suggests that there are gaps in our current knowledge concerning the complexity inherent in the coaching process that cannot be filled by breakdown of coaching activity into a “logical set of ‘episodes’ (e.g. planning, communication, motivation, instructing, goals setting, etc.) that can be isolated for analysis and then re-assembled later” (2001 p.2). I would further suggest that it is this very attempt at decontextualisation and categorisation of contextual knowledge and understanding that makes it appear generic, when in fact in application it is quite context specific.

Eraut (1994), who has carefully captured Schön’s argument against technical rationality, has confirmed that when engaged in ill-defined situations and tackling complex problems that require a creative approach “professionals are drawing on their own practical experience in a highly intuitive manner, and at the same time reflecting on what they are doing. The process is the opposite in almost every respect to that suggested by the technical rationality model” (1994 p.142).

A way forward

Whilst it is recognised that, in their practice, mentors may not always share the same contextual understanding as their mentees, it is however, always necessary for them to be competent. They must have the necessary knowledge of the mentoring process and the skills and understanding to act professionally. So whilst the assessment of competence cannot take account of all possible contexts of practice we do need somehow to make a judgement, based on limited cases, of whether someone is competent to practice. So in this sense, competence could be seen as context-independent.

However, there will always be a gap between competence and performance/practice; between what a mentor can do and what a mentor does do. This gap is governed by the contextual imperative which, as has been shown, is difficult to express and assess.

Lester describes how Bines (1992) proposes a “post-technocratic” model which may provide a solution to this dilemma. This model is based on the “integration of knowledge and practice in the development of both competence and artistry (the acquisition of abilities and understandings incapable of explicit definition or teaching), and on the constant questioning and improvement or redefinition of methods, standards and parameters which leads to the ongoing advancement of the individual’s practice” (Lester 1995 p.240).

Lester suggests that, invariably, in technocratic development routes, considerable effort is put into developing a range of analytic, rather than creative, abilities, and not always in a way that aids their transfer into the “messy side of practice situations or into constructive reflection” (1995, p.240). However, he suggests that within an essentially constructivist epistemology competence must no longer be purely defined in advance, “but needs to be negotiated between the practitioner and the other actors in the situation in which he or she is working, something which calls for contextual and political awareness and sensitivity as well as technical ability” (1995 p.240).

The constructivist approach advocated by Lester would nurture professionals through reflection, enquiry and creative action. He advocates:

starting from the practitioner’s subjective knowledge and personal experience, and using them to develop improvements in and new conceptions of practice from which personal theory is derived and is fed back into practice (1995 p.240).

This emphasis on constructivism would ensure that intellectual skills are developed and that they are valid and useful in practice, as well as satisfying the requirements for assessment of professional development programmes. This concept is a long way from the generic banks of competences controlled by EmpNTO and similar bodies, but I would argue, constitutes a useful way forward for the development of the coaching and mentoring professions.

Conclusion

In this study I have highlighted an inherent contradiction in the attempt to decontextualise the attributes needed to be a successful coach and/or mentor. Drawing on empirical evidence, I have demonstrated how the effective use of skills for coaching and mentoring rely on the existing knowledge and previous understanding brought by both parties to the situation, and are accessed in response to the demands made by the context of the coaching or mentoring transaction itself.

There are of course important implications in this argument for beginning coaches and mentors, where standards might act as benchmarking. In such cases, the alternative to having access to a ‘schema’ of previous experience to draw upon would be, as Turner suggests (1993), to fall back on some default knowledge about how to set parameters, focus attention, select actions and handle events. This is what training for coaches and mentors who lack experience may need to provide and it might well use a set of standards to guide that training, but, as has been argued here, it cannot substitute for higher level professional development, which requires a more comprehensive, constructivist approach.

The contextual imperative implies that coaches and mentors need the relevant experience and understanding to help them comprehend the situations they will encounter, to provide them with the wisdom to enable them to use the personal capacities and process skills of coaching or mentoring and to provide credibility for themselves, their clients and the profession. It is incumbent upon educators and trainers to recognise the imperative that context places on the enhancement of

professional practice, the implications it holds for the use of standards and the opportunity that it provides for a creative approach to coach/mentor development.

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