

Tertiary Mentoring: A mixture of purpose and pleasure

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Having retired in January 2010 I initially experienced a mixture of emotions in terms of relief at not having time restraints on my life, but on the other hand possessing resources to experience the activities that I had already developed a love for such as exercise, watching sport and devoting a lot more time to family and friends. I recognised that the mental stimulation of the workplace and the enjoyable social dimensions it brought with it were temporarily missing as I sought to explore a new, flexible and broader lifestyle.

During my first few years of retirement I experienced the pleasures of a mixture of international and local travel with family, volunteer roles near home and, when needed, a consultancy role at a number of high schools supporting Australian curriculum and assessment implementation.

In more recent times I have been undertaking a tertiary mentoring role and have thoroughly enjoyed this work. It has been an absolute honour to play a small but significant role in the early, crucial development of talented pre-service teachers. But why is tertiary mentoring so much fun and in turn enormously rewarding for a retired secondary principal?

The role incorporates visiting a variety of secondary schools which are all unique and therefore provide so many comparisons and contrasts to my own experiences which were broad, having worked in several boys' high schools, co-educational schools and university teacher education courses. An unexpected fascination developed in that I now had an opportunity to visit a variety of private schools as well as many unique public schools and absorb some of the respective cultures inherent in these schools and their faculties, including their distinct links with their communities. Mentoring within some of the state's prestigious private schools and then on the same day travelling to a disadvantaged community and entering a vibrant public high school made for a wonderful self-education experience for a retired principal who thought he had been exposed to a lot during many years in public education.

On entering a school and meeting the respective teacher mentor/s (in many cases the role was shared), it was immediately obvious that you were back in a faculty culture and operating on school time with the associated limits these create for genuine conversations with both teachers and pre-service teachers. Mentoring then became a process of selecting the best times for meetings and reflection periods when ideally both pre-service teachers and school teachers were available for consultation. The university allocates pre-service teachers in groups, especially in the early practicums, so that tertiary mentoring can be conducted more effectively through professional sharing and economies can also be gained in either after or before school time slots. Occasionally however I have also brought single students together in one of the respective schools and rotated the meetings to broaden the practicum context even further.

The mentoring meetings are generally associated with discussion on Standards 1-5 of the Australian Professional Teaching Standards (2012.) They normally focus on Standard 3, i.e. planning skills and knowledge on a single lesson basis or over a short series of lessons in the early practicums. Later as confidence and reflections are shared, Standard 4 and elements associated with classroom management are very relevant. My role here is to assist all pre-service teachers both in terms of mentoring within their respective contexts but also in hopefully making them aware of the many other possible school contexts and classroom environments they can encounter in the future. In the first meeting with pre-service teachers I prefer to learn about their own school background, courses studied at university and future aspirations and preferences for teaching certain courses and subjects.

Lesson observations are an early means of providing feedback based on the meta-language of Standards 1-5 (BOSTES, 2015) within a classroom environment and the faculty program. The feedback conversation is a platform for the pre-service teacher to reflect on their teaching and learning strategies and to skilfully summarise their thoughts for further improvement. Once the pre-service teacher has implemented their lesson and interacted with the tertiary mentor and class teacher this process is often a highlight. As a tertiary mentor, it is sometimes difficult to talk less and listen more. To respond to comments, rather than lead off with a sequence of suggested alternative strategies is an ideal approach. The excellent *Evidence Guide* (C Sims et al, 2012) developed by Melbourne University staff provides a wonderful checklist for both mentor and pre-service teacher to target specific skills in a planned manner. Having taken a great interest in teacher growth throughout my career the evidence guide would still be very suitable as a reference point for the current accreditation process for Proficiency, Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher categories.

There are numerous aspects of teaching and learning which arise within the mentoring conversations as the practicum progresses. A common discussion point is the design and implementation of formative assessment strategies within planning skills, once the early lessons have been conducted, and further learning data is being accumulated for the class and individual students. Tertiary mentoring may assist in providing feedback on quality assessment, process and follow-up while suggesting areas for improvement in the context of faculty resources and teacher mentor input. Another enjoyable area of conversation is the use of ICT resources and the enrichment of learning. Often the pre-service teacher demonstrates considerable skill in effectively integrating technology in the learning strategies, although the variations between practicum schools are surprising.

The tertiary mentor role has the added advantage in that the actual practicum periods are planned within a university calendar. The clustering means breaks for other activities and time to read and freshen up after an intensive 4-week mentoring period. Being a member of ACEL and therefore accessing their high quality “e-publications” which feature concise and practical teaching, leading and technology based articles allows an additional resource to be considered with students when a skill or pedagogical issue is relevant. This has been appreciated by university students who have tired of long academic articles.

In sum, I look forward to my next venture into schools to meet old friends and make new professional acquaintances during the practicum periods. The advantages mentioned above give so much pleasure. The highlight often is when you observe a young pre-service teacher from a state high school in a disadvantaged area who in turn demonstrates well researched knowledge, skill and passion for teaching and often talks about their own background. I often drive home after these experiences well satisfied that public education is in good hands.

Contributor details

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Ian was Principal at Homebush Boys High School (1999-2010) and since retirement has been a Tertiary Mentor at Sydney University, consultant to several schools on curriculum change and mentor of HSC students. His personal interests include travel, reading, watching sport plus swimming, yoga and jogging at a ‘comfortable’ pace.

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