What do we talk about when we talk about mentoring? Blooms and thorns

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ABSTRACT  The dialogue in the field of mentoring has changed over time. In the early days mentoring was a straightforward and pragmatic means to an end: developing others. The blooms of mentoring flowered everywhere. Then thorny issues started to be encountered, both in theory and in practice. Case studies are used here to illustrate the mixed fortunes experienced in contemporary times in three different organisations. A balance between mentoring blooms and mentoring thorns is evident in each case. Three major themes are then identified from these case studies that raise questions for the mentoring discourse. These are: different views of systems thinking, different value bases for evaluating mentoring, and different ideas about the kind of relationship mentoring ought to be. In conclusion, there is a need for a balance: between on the one hand understanding these different positions to promote dialogue and on the other hand developing rivalries to animate dialogue in the first place.

Blooming mentoring?

When the first blooms of mentoring flowered, they caught the imagination because mentoring seemed so simple, organic and natural. Writers viewed mentoring as a straightforward and pragmatic method for helping people in various circumstances to develop (Clutterbuck, 1992; Levinson et al., 1978; Roche, 1979). It was straightforward because it offered a loosely defined role, which most people could understand. Mentoring helped align the capabilities of those who could help and the needs of those who sought help. It was pragmatic because to make someone a mentor there was no great knowledge to be grasped or applied (Billett, 2000; Cox, 2000; Gay, 1994; Pegg, 1999). This was also the case in preparing someone to become a mentee. There was little need for a system of institutional supervision and control for mentoring to work. The invisible hands of natural human relations and common
sense provided the required guidance and this was complemented by brief training in some mentoring skills.

The characteristics of these blooms may be contrasted with the requirements for others who play ‘helping roles’ in career, learning and psychosocial support such as teachers, counsellors, careers advisors, managers and others. Those who play these roles have to be professionals and highly developed specialists, drawing on bodies of knowledge and acting consistently within a framework of ethical practice. Those who are helped need to adopt their roles in the systems these professionals controlled as pupils, patients, job seekers and employees. Institutional supervision and control is a central feature of the management of these professions and these relations. People working in these fields face many thorny issues but mentoring seemed to be free from these.

But interest in the ‘magic’ of mentoring (Murray & Owen, 1991) was displaced by analysis of concerns, from its embodiment of human relations dilemmas (Baum, 1992) through to its fit with the emerging ‘human and social capital’ (Caruso, 1992). Here there were no longer just natural blooms to be tended; there were thorns, and toil and trouble. Mentoring was not straightforward, nor a problem free pragmatic role (Dymock, 1999; Hale, 2000; Ragins, 1999). Academics sought to propose theories that would explain how to produce more and better blooms (Gibb, 1999; Hale, 1999; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Ragins et al., 2000). Practitioners toiled to achieve training and development for mentors (Garvey & Alred, 2000) that could help them produce more and better blooms. From this there began to emerge an institutional context where it made sense for mentors and mentoring to be evaluated and supervised. The dialogue about mentoring was changing; it was becoming more like the discourse associated with the blooms and thorns of teaching, counselling, advising and managing with pupils, clients and staff.

Three case studies

To illustrate the theme of the blooms and thorns encountered within mentoring, I offer three case studies taken from recently developed formal mentoring schemes in three large organisations. The organisations are:

- a local authority;
- a consultancy firm; and
- an investment bank.

A local authority

Mentoring first appeared on the agenda in the mid 1990s in this large public sector organisation. In this local authority, there were longstanding concerns, about the training and development of managers. More recently, these had come to the fore within the Human Resources Department. Human Resource Management (HRM) staff sought to contribute to the modernisation of management in the organisation as
a whole. Mentoring was introduced at that time because of its prominence in the contemporary world of management development and training. As a part of the council’s high-profile anti-racism principles and strategy, another issue came to the top of the organisations HRM agenda. The focus was on attracting and developing ethnic minority groups. The under-representation of ethnic minority groups became the primary focus for the application of mentoring. As these plans developed, another concern was included. In the context of impending legislation, the disabled, as a disadvantaged group, were also targeted in recruitment and development systems. Finally, mentoring was broadened further to include the career development of women in the context of equal opportunities policy. In sum, mentoring was to be used as a tool for helping to develop various disadvantaged/minority groups rather than as a general management development tool.

At this point, the city council faced a major re-organisation and substantial restructuring. This resulted in severe financial problems. Over the next 3 years, the workforce was reduced from 34,000 to 31,000. Plans for mentoring of any kind fell by the wayside and the intentions and aspirations to develop people were the first casualties.

Once the trauma of change had passed, the plans for mentoring were revived. The concern was still with ethnic minority groups and a formal mentoring scheme was established. It was hoped that mentors would be role models, providing access to networks and advice that would help target disadvantaged groups to be successfully inducted and developed within the organisation. However, there were problems in finding positive role models in the organisation. The scheme organisers also found resistance from the prospective mentees themselves. They did not want to be lumped together as members of disadvantaged groups. There were, for example, inter-cultural differences among ethnic minorities and none of them wanted to feel singled out for special treatment.

On the positive side, the employees involved were satisfied that mentoring in principle was a good idea, but a formal scheme was hard to devise which met the core aim of learning and development. There were operational problems rather than opposition in principle. Mentees were matched with volunteer mentors, but no senior managers participated as volunteer mentors. Mentoring relations were established at a joint training session, held for the mentors and the mentees over a half day. Thereafter they were left to ‘get on with it’. Requirements, such as keeping diaries to record thoughts and issues to discuss with mentors, proved unpopular. These difficulties resulted in problems of mismatch of mentoring partners and expectations and loss of motivation. In evaluations, the participants said that they had enjoyed the mentoring. But mentors felt they had not been much use, and there were no significant improvements in attracting the target group to the organisation or the mentoring scheme nor did they feel that the target group were developing in terms of learning and integration.

The mentees said they wanted fair and equal access to mainstream learning and development initiatives. The HRM staff complained about the lack of resources for the project for training mentors, for support, and for evaluating and improving the scheme. They complained in particular that it was too time-consuming to match
mentors and mentees. Nonetheless, and despite all these difficulties, the intention was to launch a further formal mentoring scheme for all staff. The HRM staff believed that they had learned from a problematic experience and were better able to implement a new and ideal formal mentoring scheme.

A large consultancy organisation

In the second case, mentoring took place in a quite different organisational context. The organisation was formed from the merger of three large consultancy organisations. The Human Resources professionals were concerned with harmonising the terms, conditions and staff policies. They were also anxious retain staff in the post merger organisation. The organisation was structured on sets of professional groups, and the threat to retention was present in any of these professional groups. A range of policies were boosted or introduced to deal with these demands and threats. In all these professional groups, a formal mentoring system was introduced, to complement existing management and counselling networks.

The observations in this case study relate to the ‘enabling professions group’ — a group with 700 staff managing, facilities, finance, and human resources in the organisation.

The formal mentoring scheme was based on a form of peer mentoring. The mentor's status would be the same as or close to mentee in terms of position, and the differential between the mentoring pair was simply that the mentor had 2/3 years more service than the mentee.

The skills required for mentors were described in terms of coaching, counselling, learning and motivational skills. Training for mentors involved development in these areas.

The intention was that all staff should have such a skilled mentor, who would in particular help the mentee create and manage a personal development plan. The mentors were also expected to provide input to performance appraisal, along with the line manager. There was a laissez faire approach to setting up relationships in that the Human Resources Department would select mentors but it was then up to the parties to evolve and manage the relationship. To emphasise the differences from existing coaching and counselling relationships ‘ground rules’ and a handbook were issued.

In implementing the system, problems soon arose. First, each of the three constituent organisations had used different grading systems, with the result that it was difficult to match mentor and mentee. Each mentor typically had five or six mentees and additionally the mentor could be performing two roles by being both manager and mentor, for same person. Meanwhile these managers, who were asked to act as mentors, also faced their own demands and threats in establishing new networks in the merged organisation and were actually of little use in providing access to new networks for their mentees. Informal evaluations suggested that 4 months into the scheme mentees’ expectations of mentoring were still great, but mentors’ anxieties about meeting these expectations were equally great.
An investment company

The third case is an example of successful mentoring being expanded in an investment company. The organisation previously had two graduate mentoring programmes: one for the Investment Management or ‘front office’ graduates, the other for the Investment Administration or ‘back office’ graduates. No more than two trainees per year were recruited for each programme, so it was small and focused. Mentoring has been in use in both areas for the last 3 years. Although there are differences in the two schemes, both were broadly similar with the implicit objectives of assisting the transition from university to work and to maximise retention within the first 2–3 years of the graduates’ careers. While the mentor who currently handled the back office graduates also collated feedback with their performance appraisals, the front office mentor, outside the line management and performance appraisal loop, dealt specifically with issues around settling into the workplace and early career development. Graduates in the front office were also assigned a coach with responsibility to guide workplace learning.

A number of issues affected the success of the mentoring. The objectives had not been well communicated, leading to unclear expectations among both front and back office graduates. This had caused confusion between mentoring and performance management roles in the back office programme. Matching mentors and learners had been an ad hoc process completed on the basis of staff availability, rather than suitability. This led to mixed outcomes in terms of relationship sustainability. While a short workshop had been used to train mentors, limited further training and follow-up support had been provided. No formal evaluation of the mentoring arrangements had been carried out. Finally, little attention had been paid to the process for the mentoring relationships to end, causing arrangements to dissolve without guidance or intervention.

Despite these difficulties, the organisation remained committed to a formal mentoring scheme as part of the provision of support for new staff. To improve the scheme they needed to have a clearer statement of mentoring objectives (to enable clear contracting between mentors and learners over their respective roles), a review of the current matching process, moving back office mentors outside of the normal line relationship and designing a proper evaluation process to assess outcomes and identify improvements.

With these ideas in mind, the organisation planned to expand the use of mentoring. A review of needs within the organisation suggested three specific opportunities for extending the use of mentoring. First, an in-house development programme, run in conjunction with an external partner, gave existing and aspiring team leaders accreditation towards a Certificate in Supervisory Management. The course was workshop- and assignment-based. Delegates had often asked for additional ‘offline’ support to help them learn and develop. A new system of informal mentoring would enable course delegates to self-select other talented managers as role models, providing support for their skills and career development during and beyond the 12-month programme. As some of the course delegates had experience of formal mentoring on the graduate programme, they would be more
confident in establishing new informal mentoring relationships to further their development.

Second, mentoring was used to assist in the promotion of women into leadership roles. However, there were concerns that formal mentoring may actually disadvantage women. Although the company had one senior female Global Equities manager, women were generally under-represented at higher levels within the organisation. Informal mentoring would have a role to play in assisting female middle managers or fund managers to realise their full potential. The organisation believed that the self-selection of mentors by female learners would maximise the chance of developing the openness, trust and ‘natural chemistry’ necessary for a productive mentoring relationship. In this way, mentoring would help unlock more of the talent within the organisation and improve female representation within the senior management team.

Finally, there was a concern to combine formal mentoring and guided learning in a development programme for middle managers. The organisation planned to design and implement a new management development programme for staff above the level of Team Leader. The benefits of assigning a ‘coach’ or ‘mentor’ to programme delegates had already been discussed as a possible option. As the objectives of the programme related to the development of talent for future succession planning, it was proposed that a more formal system of mentoring would be appropriate.

The organisation allocated senior managers as mentors, matching them to learners on the basis of underlying talent, learning needs and preferred working styles. In the future, as the organisation company begins to re-orientate processes around expanding global opportunities; such mentoring relationships could provide a source of stability and reassurance during organisational change. Such ‘strategic mentoring’ could help promote the changing culture that would be necessary to manage operations in the UK, Hong Kong and other international locations.

In the organisation, these expansion plans were located within a combination of both formal and informal approaches to mentoring for use at different levels within the organisation (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Mentoring in the investment company.
Three emerging themes

These cases are in three very different contexts, but they illustrate a common set of themes. The first theme is linked to developing either more formality or more ‘naturalness’ in mentoring relations. The thorny issue here is in the differences between management systems thinking, which favours mapping and formalising activities in the workplace, and ‘holistic systems thinking’ (Bateson, 1979), where there is an interest in seeing and understanding the ‘pattern that connects’. These can both involve broadening conceptions of mentoring, but they have quite different implications.

Management systems thinking involves attention to the clarity of policy and mechanics of activities in the workplace and practice in management, whether the paradigm is scientific management, human relations, total quality management, business process re-engineering or knowledge management. The aim is often not to map the whole tangle of interconnections, but to get to know enough to implement formal systems to help achieve the aims of the organisation. Some studies about mentoring seek to support this (Gibb & Megginson, 1993; IDS, 1996; Tabbron et al., 1997). What are the inputs? Who is to be mentored and why? What are the processes? What is to be done, and when? What are the outcomes? Where are the feedback and control mechanisms?

The alternative, the holistic systems thinking approach, involves seeing and understanding complex environments and the clusters of interconnected issues they contain—to change one thing is to affect other things in unseen ways. If these patterns are not seen and understood, then an ‘obvious solutions’ for one specific problem seems to do no more than create other problems elsewhere in the system. The three cases show that the ‘obvious solution’ of formalising mentoring to help either disadvantaged groups, people in a merged organisation, or new graduates for either career or psychosocial purposes, can create as many problems as it solves. There can be confusion among staff about what mentoring means, examples of high expectations and disappointments, and of commitments compromised.

For the pioneers and practitioners of management systems thinking the specific patterns that enabled the development of useful performance enhancing initiatives were viewed the be all and end all. Implementation was the problem—making it happen, moving it from the drawing board and the meeting room into practice. For the pioneers of holistic systems thinking, biologists like Bateson (1979), the ‘patterns that connect’ were about the unity and integrity of life. There were ecological interconnections between all the elements of the environment, from the smallest to the greatest level. The problem for them was that what has to be investigated and described was a ‘tangle’; a vast network of interlocking parts. To be faced with such intricate interconnections was like opening up a box to be met with a tangle of wires, without any diagram to explain which did what, but with an expectation that if certain of them could be changed then desirable results would come. The development of chaos theory represented a way of trying to make sense of such tangles—there was a simple order underneath the complexity (Cohen & Stewart, 1994; Field & Golubitsky, 1992).
The second theme is different and contains views about the functions or purposes of mentoring. This is often defined in terms of the duality of career and/or psychosocial functions or purposes. The controversy is about the duality of career or psychosocial development and the role of mentoring is often interpreted in terms of North American versus a European view of work and human relations. But it is possible to discern a different kind of division being used in debates in this aspect of mentoring—a duality of values. In this case these are both liberal and the conservative values and conceptions of mentoring. Liberal values are associated with a conception of mentoring that emphasises its progressive and modernist functions; the utility of mentoring in opening up careers for disadvantaged groups and promoting humanistic ideals through improved psychosocial development. Conservative values are associated with a conception of mentoring which is about its contribution to the continuity of the status quo and its utility in legitimising and replicating patterns of behaviour; control through the influence of the ‘old guard’ on the career and psychosocial development of new generations (see Fig. 2).

Viewing debates through the lenses of these archetypal conceptions of value provides one way to explore discussions about mentoring as exemplifying the broader dynamics of intellectual controversy. Smith (2000) defines the general dynamics of intellectual controversy in terms of a pattern of adversarial embrace, a contest but also a co-dependency between those for and those against, the believers and the sceptics. The context here is mentoring and career and/or psychosocial development. Belief in mentoring based on liberal values represents an agenda about humanism and social change and progress. Belief in mentoring based on conservative values represents an agenda about tradition and stability (Anderson, 1998). But, based on either set of values, mentoring can be seen as an ineffective tool, a substitute for really effective initiatives, and possibly even a diversion from concerns of substance. For liberals this would include seeing the development of mentoring as an alternative to the wholesale reform of systems, such as formal education or employment, which are required to enable change and progress. For conservatives this would include seeing mentoring as a poor alternative to reinforcing or redeeming established relations,

![Conservative Values Table](image)

**Against Mentoring**
- Mentoring is a poor substitute for natural relationships
- At best these are fake relations

**For Mentoring**
- Mentoring is the best method of ensuring continuity and the status quo; the way things are

**Liberal Values**
- Mentoring is not potent enough; need other reforms to open up careers and/or psychosocial

**Conservative Values**
- Mentoring is very potent; key to opening up careers and/or achieving associated psychosocial

Fig. 2. Mapping conservative–liberal values and being for or against mentoring.
such as the relations in stable families of parents and children, or in schools of respected teachers and pupils.

Finally, there is a third theme of mentoring as a relationship (Gibb, 1999; Naylor et al., 1996). A mentoring relationship may be defined as ‘pure’ mentoring only if it exists in a classic ‘one-to-one’ form which encompasses a range of functions. Whether it is formal or informal relationship, it is a ‘one stop shop’. Alternatively, given the difficulties of making and sustaining such relationships in many contexts and over the lifespan, it may be that different aspects of many relationships need to be put together. People have to adapt to constructing for themselves ‘bricolage mentoring’; using those who are to hand as and when needed, whether that involves formal or informal relationships with friends, professionals, peers, managers, strangers, authors, and so on. The concern being debated here is about which approach makes most sense in contemporary and future social and workplace conditions.

Are there social environments in the contemporary workplace contexts in which ideal one-to-one mentoring relationships can be established and maintained? Or are there environments in which the construction of ‘bricolage mentoring’ from disparate resources in diverse networks is the better option? There is more than an empirical question about what the current and future realities of social relations and the workplace are. There are deeper and more basic differences in perceptions about what the ideal form of human relations ought to be. These kinds of issues have been raised and analysed previously in terms of social exchange and communitarian explanations of healthy environments for human relationships (Gibb, 1999).

Conclusion

The themes which emerge from the experiences of three case study organisations exemplify how, in going beyond talking about mentoring as a useful pragmatic tool, conceptions have been broadened and thorny issues have been encountered as well as blooms. The trend to theorise, to professionalise and to institutionalise mentoring seems then to be justified, to be of relevance and use. But there are contests and conflicts in doing this. One response is to seek dialogue in the middle ground, constructive mediation between different positions, between different kinds of systems thinking, between liberal and conservative values, and between social exchange and communitarian explanations of human behaviour. Dialogue and potential reconciliation rather than rivalries and potential antagonisms are valued. But Smith’s argument is that ‘institutional antagonisms’ are needed to energise and shape the course of knowledge development, through contests animated by the differences between sceptics and believers. Rivalries as much as dialogue can be good for the pursuit of truth, and human institutions based on that principle, from justice systems to ‘balanced’ reporting in mass communication systems, reflect that. Of course, the danger is that if energising antagonisms go too far, they can become deepening mutual misunderstanding and incomprehension. Rivalries distract from
the pursuit of truth, by substituting spirals of conflict, which take on a life of their own.

The theory and practice of mentoring, as it evolves with blooms and with thorns, is currently subject to such rivalries and such dialogue. The parameters have been defined here in terms of rivalry and dialogue between different views of systems thinking, different value systems and different theories of what is best for effective human relations. These are all profoundly significant controversies in their own right; taken together, as they have to be in exploring the theory and practice of mentoring, the potentials for either fudging in the middle ground or deepening misunderstanding are both that much greater. Dialogue about phenomena such as mentoring has its own blooms and thorns; and who would expect the one without the other? And, now, what we talk about when we talk about mentoring encompasses all these dilemmas.

References


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