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Workplace mentors Demands and benefits

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Keywords

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Abstract

There is seemingly a growing range of workplace-based learning arrangements requiring more experienced workers to assist the development of less experienced co-workers. Much attention has been given to evaluating the quality of these learning arrangements and their outcomes for learners. However, little attention has been given to the demands upon and outcomes for the more experienced workers who assist others' development. Given this demand for mentoring in the workplace it is important to understand its impact on those nominated as mentors. In this paper, data from nominated learning guides who were involved in a year-long trial of guided learning in the workplace are used to illuminate the demands upon and benefits for workplace mentors. In this study, all mentors noted the efficacy of guiding learning in the workplace. Also, for some of these guides, it was a worthwhile and enriching experience. However, guiding the learning of others made considerable demands on these individuals. Consistently, the difficulty of finding time for the task and the low level of support or acknowledgement by management was reported by the mentors. So while there was evidence of its overall utility as reported by both the learners (see Billett & Boud 2001) and the mentors, the mentoring role made the work of these mentors more demanding and intense. So while workplace mentoring appears to have the capacity to improve learning, and that much of that improvement is centred on the actions of the mentor. However, there are consequences for the demands on the mentor that may not always be offset by benefits that mentors experience in assisting others learn.

Mentoring at work

There is increased interest in and emphasis on workplace-based learning arrangements in securing initial and on-going development throughout working lives (Boud & Garrick 1999). One outcome of this interest is that experienced workers are now more likely to be asked to assist the learning of other and less experienced workers. Some of the heightened demand for workplace mentoring comes from the locating vocational education programs in workplaces. Interest in workplace mentoring arises from the cut backs in training budgets and a shift of responsibilities from training personnel to workplace mentors who undertake the task as part of their everyday work. Other situations include enterprise specific learning arrangements associated with increases in remuneration or work classifications. In these situations, the workplace mentor might be asked to make judgements that will determine the level of remuneration and career advancement of worker. In the United Kingdom, changes have occurred in the institutionalised preparation of schoolteachers. School practicum experiences have been extended to resemble arrangements of apprenticeships, with lengthy periods of time in the school workplace being supported and supervised by more experienced teachers. There is evidence to suggest that learners benefit from the support for learning provided by mentors. This evidence includes the retention of the long-standing practices that occur in the trades and professions, where more experienced workers assist the development of novices. Also, studies of guided learning and mentoring advance evidence of the kinds of contributions made by more experienced workers to novices' learning (Billett 2001a, Unwin and others).

However, what is less understood is the impact on those workers who act as mentors. There are numerous published accounts of mentoring, but most of its focus is upon the learner. These studies outline various approaches to mentoring and the desirable qualities of the mentor and how these impact on the learners, mentees or protégés. Yet, there is little emphasis given to the mentors themselves. Those studies identified as taking up this concern, focus on the difficulties of cross-gender

mentoring and specifically female staff mentoring males as this lead to workplace innuendo and gossip (Hurley, 1996). However, questions about whether and for whom the mentoring role represents a welcomed opportunity to assist the learning of less experienced co-workers or an unwelcomed addition to their already overly busy work life, remain largely unanswered. So it is not known, whether mentoring constitutes merely the intensification of already demanding work roles. Also, to what degree the sharing of knowledge by workers is a reasonable part of their paid role or just another means of extracting greater value from these workers is not understood. For instance, in Japanese corporations there is an expectation that more experienced workers will ordinarily assist the development of junior staff. However, this expectation is supported by arrangements that prevent the mentors being displaced by those whom they have mentored (Dore & Sako 1989). In considering issues about the demands of and benefits of mentoring, this paper examines the role, demands of the role from the perspectives of eight workplace mentors who participated in a year-long-trial of workplace learning arrangements. The paper aims to provide an account of the demands upon and outcomes for the mentors' from workplace mentoring. The responses suggest the mentors believed the guided learning approach to be effective, and the evidence of its efficacy and the contributions of their role would encourage them to persist with its use. However, they reported unanimously that the mentoring task rendered their work more demanding and intense and that the mentoring was conducted with little or no support or acknowledgement from the workplace. In some ways, the degree of success was dependent on the mentors' efforts alone rather than also being assisted by additional affordances for the mentors and learners.

In considering the demands of and outcomes for workplace mentors, some of the different kinds of mentoring and expectations of that mentoring are discussed first. This is followed by an account of the procedures and findings of a study of workplace mentoring from the mentors' perspectives are presented. Finally, the demands upon the mentors and the implications for workplace mentoring are discussed. It is concluded that if enterprises want to enrich earning experiences in the workplace through the activities of workplace mentors, that appropriate support for this demanding role will likely be required as well as some acknowledgement for the contribution to learning provided by more experienced workers.

Different mentoring, different demands, different outcomes

There are a range of approaches to mentoring that make different kinds of demands and offer different kinds of benefits to the mentor. Therefore, it is briefly worth considering the different bases for mentoring and their demands upon the mentor. Commonly referred to as a wise advisor (Garvey 1994), the enactment of mentoring can occur on different premises. Some mentoring is conducted in the form of guidance throughout careers, where a more experienced peer will advise on and guide the career trajectory of another (Gay 1994). Professors may continue to guide the career of their doctoral students long after they graduate. Senior women public servants or executives might form relationships with younger women to advise them on work choices and difficult career decisions to assist their career development (Arnold & Davidson 1990). Mentoring also comprises more experienced worker might take some responsibilities for the well being of younger and less experienced co-workers. For instance, in some sports teams junior players are assigned a more senior player as a mentor. This mentoring may include assisting junior players avoid incautious and frivolous use of their salaries and substance abuse (Garvey 1994). Then, there is the role of mentoring that primarily focuses on the development of skills, such as in a tradesperson assisting an apprentice, a registrar a hospital intern and a solicitor an articled clerk.

These different forms of mentoring have distinct goals and processes, and also make different kinds of demands on the mentors. Some are clearly voluntary and engaged enthusiastically, because individuals view this role as an important obligation, which they are only too pleased to discharge. Some kinds of work might carry obligations to assist others', especially novices, learning. For instance, as tradespersons, doctors and lawyers have all benefited from being supported in their vocational preparation, might feel obliged to assist apprentices, interns and articled clerks learn. Such an obligation may well be easier to discharge when the mentors have no fear of being directly displacement by those whom they are mentoring. For instance, anthropological studies provide examples of structured instances of more experienced members assisting novices learn practices (Pelissier 1991). However, in these studies often the basis for this collaboration is some shared goal associated with the continuity of the community or group. Hence, there is a common goal to be

achieved and consensual participation by the more experienced partners. However, this may not be the case in many contemporary workplaces. Experienced workers may be concerned about displacement (Lave & Wenger 1991) or by engaging with workers in a supervisory role that includes conflictual relations and suspicions about the intents of workplace support (e.g. it is only being enacted because it is in the enterprises' interest) (Billett 2000). In considering how individuals might benefit from engaging in mentoring, Scandura et al (1996) claim that individuals may engage in mentoring to secure future allies who are compliant to their needs, with the aim of developing a network of supportive subordinates. They refer to crucial subordinates who are willing to put the needs of their superiors ahead of their own careers. They also refer to the benefits of status and acknowledgement that may flow from being asked to mentor junior staff.

In an earlier study of guided learning across five workplaces (Billett 2000), stories were gathered of the mentors' experiences. These provided diverse accounts of their willingness to be involved, competence in and experiences with the role and perceptions of their contributions. While some volunteered for the mentoring role, others were selected without consultation, which raised suspicions about the purpose of the mentoring and bases for their selection as mentors. Although the same preparation was provided for all participating mentors, some found the task more demanding than others. The bases of competence to perform the mentoring role across these workplaces, were identified as being attributable to previous experience, depth of and confidence in the knowledge of the work in which they were mentoring others, interest and the ability to develop the mentoring skills in a supportive environment. Over the six-month period that comprised this study in each workplace, a number of the mentors withdrew from the program. However, most persisted. Some faced belligerence from those who they were mentoring. Others may well have been sources of hostile relations. Others excelled in the mentoring role. In one workplace, as well as supporting his own mentee, one mentor took over the responsibilities for mentoring another worker after her mentor withdrew. Both mentees reported the powerful learning experiences provided by their willing mentor. They commented that it constituted the sole instance that anybody in their workplace had spent time elaborating their role and assisting with them with its development. Other mentees resisted, claiming to be more knowledgeable than their allotted mentors and were affronted by the mentoring process. Even the same workplaces provided different mentoring outcomes. In one workplace, despite a highly demarcated and suspicion laden work environment where the learning outcomes was reported as being lower than in other workplaces, the aforementioned willing mentor, provided high levels of guidance to two less experienced workers. In another workplace, that had reported otherwise successful mentoring experiences, one mentor was faced such level of belligerence and disdain from his mentee as to render the mentoring role impossible. So a diversity of experiences and outcomes were reported in these stories about the mentors' role. What is evident in these stories is that different kinds of demands were placed on the mentors. For some, the requirements of the role including being under-prepared for the role made the role highly and unwelcomingly demanding. For others, the task built upon what they done previously and/or was seen as a welcomed opportunity to assist others and enjoy acknowledgement of their capacities. So the demands and benefits of mentoring played out in different ways in these workplaces. So it is important to learn more about mentors' workplace experiences and the benefits and demands of that role.

In the investigation reported and discussed below, data were gathered about the mentors' experiences and perceptions of the mentoring process. Although these data refer only to the experiences of eight mentors across three work areas in the same workplace, they provide some initial bases to consider the mentoring experience.

Procedures

The investigation, from which the data provided discussed below is drawn, was of a year-long study of guided learning in a large manufacturing plant. During the year, data were gathered in three work areas of the plant (i.e. client relations, packaging and manufacturing). The study focused on how guided learning proceeded in those work areas and its effectiveness. Eight individuals were prepared for and acted as learning guides in these work areas. Their selection was premised on their technical knowledge and predicted ability to assist and support others to learn. Their preparation comprised two three-hour sessions that aimed to provide a basis to understand the orientation to guided learning approach to be used in the plant, the techniques to be used (e.g. modeling, coaching, questioning, diagrams and explanations) were modelled and then practiced in workplace settings. The preparation

was intended to have been far longer, however, the short sessions were the only periods the eight workers could be released from work duties. In each work area, a number of workplace learners were identified to act as informants throughout the investigation. These became the main informants for the project whose focus was on the efficacy of a model of workplace learning (Billett & Boud 2001). After their periods of preparation, the learning guides commenced using the strategies. Throughout the year, five rounds of critical incident interviews were conducted with the learners. These interviews were used primarily to gather grounded data about the efficacy of the guided learning strategies and other contributions to learning in terms of their utility and responding to workplace tasks, including new tasks or novel applications. The data comprised quantitative measures and qualitative data on the effectiveness of the learning strategies, the frequency of their use, and other contributions to learning through participation in workplace activities. However, progress and summative interviews were also conducted with the learning guides. These interviews provided data on the guides' perception of the efficacy of guided learning and identified factors that assisted or hindered the use of these strategies in the workplace. That is what determined the frequency of their use.

The findings discussed in the following section are drawn from the initial, progress and summative interviews with the learning guides. The analyses of the efficacy of the guided learning strategies are reported elsewhere (Billett & Boud 2001).

Findings

The findings reported here are those providing accounts of and analyses of the learning guides' perceptions of the efficacy of the approach to guided learning, and the demands and benefits of the guided learning role. They conclude with the mentors believing the guided learning role to be effective, and the evidence of its efficacy encouraged them to persist with its use. However, they reported unanimously that the task made their work more intense and was conducted with little or no support nor acknowledgement from workplace management.

Effectiveness of guided learning

At the end of the year-long study, in the final interviews all eight of the learning guides concluded that they believed the guided learning approach was effective. They claimed it was applicable to workplaces, relevant to the skills to be learnt and provided a method that was accepted as being effective. They were able to identify the effective attributes of each strategy and the requirements for its use. However, in reaching this conclusion, some of their attitudes towards guided learning had evolved over the period of the project. At the progress interviews, six months into the project, the learning guides were asked to compare their initial attitude towards their role in assisting others learn in the workplace. If there had been a change they were asked to identify the source of that change. Table 1 reports the responses to these questions. The left hand column identifies the learning guide with the letter prefixing the alpha character denoting the informant's work area. (i.e. C – client servicing; M – manufacturing, P – packaging). The column second from the left presents the informants' attitude to the guided learning method at the commencement of its use, and after their preparation in its use. The third column from the left presents the attitude after six months use of this method. The right hand column presents the reason for any change in attitude over that time. The initial attitudes were mixed. Some guides viewed the method strategies positively whereas others were unsure or apprehensive or sceptical. Some of the scepticism derived from concerns about the company's intent with the scheme, and the basis for their selection for the role. The uncertainty and apprehension seemed to be derived from a concern about these individuals' capacities to perform well in the role.

Table 1 Guides' attitudes towards guided learning

Sub	Initial attitude	Current attitude (six months later)	Reason for change
C1	Unsure – lack of knowledge	Good	Can see benefits
C2	insightful	Takes time, not always available	
M3	Sceptical (just another company forum), although realised potential benefits	Like idea of learning on the job – has potential, but only if staff has the right attitude	
M4	Felt shoved into it, but open minded	Looking for easier ways to make it work	Some strategies useful for learner and efficient for me to

M5	Apprehensive, although used similar strategies elsewhere	Good- positive feedback from trainees	teach Past experience
P6	Happy with strategies	Positive feedback from trainees	
P7	Very good – better than books	Very positive	You can get the results and, hopefully, the trainees benefit too.
P8	Sceptical – didn't really understand	Fairly positive – more understanding as to what I should be doing	More tolerant with operators – realistic about their levels of competence

After six months, overall the guides' attitudes were more positive. Three of the informants who had expressed reservations (C1, M5, P8), were now expressing positive sentiments towards the approach to workplace learning. In two cases, outcomes of the processes associated with getting to understand the needs of their learners were given as reasons for the change in sentiment. They had learnt more about their fellow workers through the process. Two guides (M3, M4) remained uncertain, although one reported efficacy in assisting learning and his time in providing that assistance. Those who had expressed initial support continued to, although one (C2) noted the difficulties in finding time for the guidance. So, there was some change in attitudes towards the use of the strategy of guided learning in the workplace, much of it arising through use. Use had also, for at least one informant, raised the issue of time. These views were reinforced in the responses to a direct question in the progress interviews about the overall efficacy of the guided learning strategies that comprise the guided learning method. Table 2 comprises two columns. The left-hand column reports the informants' judgement of the efficacy of the guided learning strategies. The right-hand column provides the justification for the judgement and identifies the informant. Here, six months after their commencement these workplace mentors reported these strategies as being effective or better. This efficacy was reported in the kind of structure it provides for learning at work, the kinds of experiences the learners have, and the quality of support being offered to the learners to assist their learning. However, some were careful to indicate while effective there were factors that inhibited their use. Issues associated with time, production flow, learners' interest and their readiness were identified.

Table 2 Overall perceptions of efficacy of guided learning strategies

Efficacy	Qualifying clause
Effective	but still room for improvement (C1)
Effective	Time needed for reflection (C2)
Effective	Only when production work is uninterrupted (M3)
Effective	But dependant on learners' interest and competence (M4)
Good	It's a good structure to work with as it allows me to plan training – what works and what doesn't (M5)
Effective	Hands on, experience and having somebody there to provide guidance. Much easier than being left to left to figure it out (P6)
Really good	The hands on approach is always more practical and gives better understanding and knowledge (P7)
Very effective	- easy for trainee and trainers – makes the trainee think (P8)

As noted, at the conclusion of the project, all of the guides spoke positively of guided learning. They supported its capacity to understand and meet individuals' needs, its relevance to the workplace context, its properties as a supportive approach to assist the learning of others. These views and perceptions are helpful in considering the utility of guided learning as a workplace strategy. They also identify some benefits that might accrue to the guides. However, they are less helpful in understanding the requirements and demands placed upon these workplace mentors. In the next section, factors that illuminate the demands of the mentoring role are described and discussed.

Demands of guided learning

The demands on the learning guides were those required to learn and use the strategies as part of their work activities. The preparation process required developing the capacities to use these strategies as part of everyday work duties. This meant understanding their purpose and having the opportunity for some practice prior to utilising these strategies in their work areas. Throughout the duration of the

project, the key task for the learning guides was to use the strategies as part of their everyday work activities. The guides were all senior members of their work teams and could legitimately undertake this role as part of their work activities.

At the progress interview, the learning guides were first asked about factors assisting and inhibiting strategy use over the previous six months. The responses are presented in Table 3. This table comprises two columns. The left hand column presents a synthesis of what the participants reported assisted their use of the strategies whereas the right hand column reports those that inhibited strategy use. There is degree of symmetry in these responses. Assistance was provided through the training and use of the strategies, yet frustration was reported in the lack of time and opportunity to use the strategies (across all three work areas), given the demands of and continuity of production. Other workers were seen to be supportive, but the attitudes of both learners and guides were held, by one informant (P8), to be a constraint. So overall, the time to use the strategies and the support the guides received were central to the enactment of the guided learning.

Table 3 Factors assisting and inhibiting strategy use.

<i>Strategy use assisted by:</i>	<i>Strategy use inhibited by:</i>
Training and practice (C1, C2, M3, P6)	Production demands (C2, M4, P7)
Support from other workers (M4, M5, P7)	Irregularities in production (M2, M5)
Experience using strategies (M5)	Time constraints (M4, P7)
Observing and understanding the requirements of learners (P8)	Attitude of trainees and guides (P8)

In sum, this data suggests that for the strategies to be used effectively, the learning guides, although having received some support, had to work around difficulties of a lack of time, constraints in opportunities to use the strategies and, maybe, contend with the negativity of co-workers.

(summative interviews) Following from these data about, the guides were also asked about how their use of these strategies could be improved and also how could they have been more thoroughly prepared for their role. The responses are reported in Table 4, which has two columns, with responses about the more effective use being aggregated in the left hand column and those pertaining to preparation in the right column.

Table 4 Requirements for more effective use and improvements to preparation

<i>More effective use requires:</i>	<i>Preparation improved by:</i>
More time for one-on-one interactions (C1, M5)	More time to prepare and practice (C1, M4)
Support in workplace and practice (C2, M4)	More opportunity to practice before implementation (C2, M4)
Need to concentrate on them more (M3)	Prior experience (M3)
Support for management (M4)	Getting to know trainees (P7)
More time – specific allocation (M4, M5, P6, P7)	

The suggested bases for more effective use largely refer to responses for qualities that are lacking in the workplace. These are more time and a specific allocation of time for their use and addition support from the workplace. One respondent reported the need for a greater personal commitment to their use. So again the issue of time and support emerge as key issues. These issues were also referred to in the aggregated responses about improving preparation. Here again, more time was referred to as being a requirement for both preparation and the opportunity to practice. Other bases for improvement was previous experience with these strategies and getting to understand more about learners prior to implementing the strategies.

Table 5 Factors assisting and inhibiting the mentoring role

	<i>Assisting</i>	<i>Inhibiting</i>
C1	The training was excellent, but no time given to put into practice. I followed the guidelines when showing staff members new tasks.	Time, time, time – none was given.
C2	Donna (C1) was great – she reminded me to stop and get the person to think before	Pressures of the job make it difficult – if the phone is ringing it has to be answered and you can't just stop and

M4	just telling them the answer. I had 2 learners and their attitude had a lot to do with how often I used the strategies.	work out where you're up to. The workload – there was insufficient work to run the line on a regular basis, therefore training was very limited.
M5	The training and fellow workers.	The amount of time that the line actually runs is insufficient to allow for training on a regular basis.
P6	The training and team meeting have been effective in problem solving and passing on information.	Insufficient people on the line and as a replacement for the trainee to concentrate on training.
P7	Support from management and fellow work mates getting in and assisting.	Crew reductions and changed paperwork which increases work load and reduces supervision and guidance.
P8	Fellow workers because they were trained at the beginning and I just supported them.	Having no trainees.

The responses from the two guides in the CAC area were very similar and applied to all strategies – when needed and as time permitted the strategies to be used.

The responses from the other two areas were more diverse

Modelling - -Ext – learners' attitude and production time; Packaging – learners and learners' needs

Coaching – Ext – learners' attitude and production time; Packaging – used frequently - learners' readiness and requirement (e.g. they are struggling)

Questioning – Ext – learners' attitude and production run time; Packaging – to determine need, and to get them to explain

Explanation – Ext - attitude and knowledge of the learners; Packaging – to develop understanding

Diagrams Ext – learners' level of understanding; Packaging – not applicable (?)

Group discussions – Ext – line structure and noise inhibits interactions; Packaging – team meetings and as needed, sharing expertise

Extending knowledge – Ext – not used; Packaging – used as assessment, questioning to create knowledge, willingness of fellow workers to pass on knowledge

Differences across the work area. Greater scepticism in the manufacturing area.

Discussion

It concluded that all mentors believed this approach to assisting learning in the workplace was effective, and for some a worthwhile and enriching experience. However, consistent was the reported difficulty of being able to find time for the task and the low level of support or acknowledgement by management. So while there was evidence of its overall utility and as having some benefits for those responsible for its enacted the mentoring role served to make the work of these mentors more intense. The base of this intensity was increased expectation that were not supported in the workplace by measures to enhance the task by support for the learners (e.g. some time, more staff) or direct support for the mentors. So, the success or otherwise of the guided learning approach was premised on the efforts and energies of workplace mentors. The provision of additional affordances for workers may have eased their interest in participating and made that participation more easy and more rewarding. Similarly, some support (even mentoring) and acknowledgement might have made the task of mentoring easier, more focused and more rewarding.

Demands of mentoring. The literature refers to the difficulties in females mentoring males, because of workplace inequity etc (

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