

THE ROLE OF MENTORING IN ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING – CASE STUDY ON THE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

There can be noticed a growing pressure on universities to become learning organizations. In order to become flexible and adaptable, universities have to seek for innovations, new fields of studies, new methods of building relationships with students and knowledge transfer. One way to achieve that is by mentoring, understood as one on one interactive process of developmental learning based on the premise that the participants will have reasonable frequent contact and sufficient interactive time together. In the recent years, mentoring is fast becoming one of the easiest ways of developing the skills and talents of individuals in many different organizations, including universities. This paper sought to address a gap in the literature on mentoring in academic settings by contributing a case study on mentoring as a pedagogical tool to enhance student education in local community management and animation. It presents implementation of mentoring programme designed for students of one of the polish universities.

Keywords: mentoring, university, mentee, mentor, learning organisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the role of the university can be perceived differently, universities has certainly occupied an important place in society. It is due to many factors, among which the following can be distinguished: the need for educating workforce with specific qualifications and skills, development of knowledge transfer between theory and practice, and preparing students to take on new role in life (both social and professional). The way in which the function of education is carried out changes along with the conditions of its implementation. Universities in Europe have been challenged in many ways in recent decades, since their environment has become more complex (Clark, 1987, p. 15; Enders, 2001, p. 8). On the course of evolution universities have travelled the long road to new generation of universities that has to respond to global trends as consequences resulting from challenges of globalization, turbulences occurring in the university environment as well as problems such as mass access to education (Etzkowitz, 2003, pp. 330–332).

Globalization concerns not only economy, but also higher education leading conservative in nature institutions towards entrepreneurial behaviour. Increasing turbulences in environment incline universities towards changing the orientation from *academic drift*, which was highlighted in the OECD report on Polish higher education (Fulton et al., 2007, pp. 46–47), to practical teaching based on a combination of knowledge, skills and behavior, as well as the creation of pro-social attitudes. Mass access to education (number of students in the world has increased from 13 million in 1960 to 68 million in 1991, 132 million in 2004 and 150 million in 2008) and financial dependence on state structures has caused difficulty of maintaining the quality of education (El-Khawas, 2001, p. 242; OECD, 2008, p. 3; Altbach, Resberg & Rumbley, 2009, pp. 12–15).

The above mentioned conditions turn the spotlight on searching for other than the current formula for the functioning of higher education. For example, the expansion of higher education has resulted in a larger and more heterogeneous student population, which has challenged traditional teaching methods (Gumport, 2000, p. 70). There clearly exists pressure on universities to become learning organizations where social processes aimed at creating, maintaining and acquiring knowledge would take place. These processes should take place both at the organizational and individual level. Therefore, flexible and adaptable universities are seeking new methods, new fields of studies, new methods of building relationships with students and knowledge transfer. An interesting concept is an implementation of educational innovations in the form of mentoring and linking it with the concept of organisational learning and learning organisation. Hence, this paper discusses the concept of learning organisation and mentoring along with associated concepts. On that theoretical background this paper presents experiences resulting from the process of implementation of mentoring programme at one of the polish universities.

2. CONCEPT OF LEARNING ORGANISATION

Accelerating environmental change has allowed theorists and practitioners to envision an organisational entity known as the learning organisation. The phrase ‘learning organisation’ has existed in the literature for several decades. More than other researchers, Senge has popularised the term in the 1990s defining learning organisation as one “where people continuously expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 7). Learning

organisations are designed to anticipate and react to changing external and competitive environments in a positive and proactive manner and help to institute internal organisational structures that are better able to respond to the turbulence of change (Watkins & Marsick, 1993, p. 123).

The concept of learning organization has been repeatedly redefined over the last two decades. Mulford (2000) defines learning organisations as organisations that structure, restructure and develop themselves in such a way that the organisation as well as its organisational members continually learn from their experiences, from one another as well as from the environment. At that time some people advocated for Senge's (1990) concept of the learning organization, as a goal, a state that could be achieved. Others advocated for organizational learning as a process supported by Argyris and Schön (1978), Huber (1991), Garvin (1993). Argyris defined organizational learning as a process of the detection and correction of errors (Argyris & Schön, 1978, p. 116). According to Hubert, an organization learns if, through the processing of information, the extent of its potential behaviours is changed (Hubert, 1991, p. 89). As Garvin claims, learning organization is a business unit focused on the creation, acquisition and transfer of knowledge, as well as on modifying behaviour as a reaction to occurring changes (Garvin, 1993, p. 80).

There has been considerable discussion amongst academics how the concept can be applied to educational institutions such as universities, as learning organizations also provide a wide range of opportunities for individual and collective learning and development. The learning organization is based on the premise, that it is important to create continuous learning opportunities, to promote inquiry, dialogue and encourage collaboration and team learning. One way to achieve that is by mentoring, understood as one on one interactive process of developmental learning based on the premise that the participants will have reasonable frequent contact and sufficient interactive time together. This mentoring model fits well with the basis of organizational learning and can promote the means to capture and share learning (Fenwick, 1998, p. 202). The idea was developed through a move towards learning principles in organizations that should strive to create collective learning opportunities, be continuously adaptive and (Fenwick, 1998, p. 204). Mentoring is one way in which this learning can be facilitated. The interest in the concept of organizational learning parallels the trend and subsequent growth of mentoring within organizations and the emphasis on the promotion and fostering of mentoring principles (Cohen & Galbraith, 1995, p. 9). As academics play an important role in society due to the fact they manage human potential in the academic environment, it is important to give them opportunity to consciously use their competences and not only provide students with the knowledge and experience, but also to pass it on and empower.

3. MENTORING – THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There is a lack of consensus on one single or standard definition of *mentoring* (Halai, 2006, p. 792; Wunsch, 1994, p. 12). It can be defined as an “intense interpersonal exchange between a senior experienced colleague (mentor) and a less experienced junior colleague (protégé or mentee) in which the mentor provides support, direction, and feedback regarding career plans and personal development” (Russell & Adams, 1997, p. 2). Mentoring is also viewed as an important field of education (Johnson et al., 1991, p. 385) and/or counseling (Gregson, 1994, p. 26) where mentors are old men who have wisdom and can be trusted to educate young men who have little experience (Kram, 1985, p. 15; Russell & Adams, 1997, p. 3; Wanguri, 1996, p. 445).

The most prevailing definitions, such as Eby's, (2010, p. 506) considers mentoring as developmentally oriented interpersonal relationship that is typically between a more experienced individual and a less experienced individual. It is important to acknowledge that the term "mentor" is borrowed from the male guide, Mentor, in Greek mythology, and this historical context has informed traditional manifestations of mentoring. According to Donaldson mentoring refers to dyadic, face-to-face, long-term relationship between a supervisory adult and a novice student that fosters the mentee's professional, academic, or personal development (Donaldson, Ensher & Grant-Vallone, 2000, p. 235). Gehrke (1988, p. 191) defines it as a complex, interactive process occurring between individuals of differing levels of experience and expertise, which incorporate interpersonal or psychosocial development, career or educational development and socialization function of relationship. She describes this one to one relationship as developmental process, which proceeds through a series of stages that help to determine both the conditions affecting and the outcomes of the process. Mentoring could also be described as a management process, styles and techniques, which aim at entrenching organizational culture and philosophy (Cox, 1997, p. 53). Reed et al. (2002, p. 105) simply define mentoring as "a process of coaching a person both personally and professionally" (p. 103), while Raggins and Cotton (1999, p. 535) argue that mentoring relationship is highly beneficial by providing career development aid and facilitating the mentee's personal growth and professional development. Mentoring process is also often a part of talent management and is addressed to various groups, such as key employees, newly hired graduates, high potentials and future leaders.

There are two sides involved in the process of mentoring. Mentee is an individual or group of people who is/are committed to expanding their capabilities, open and receptive to new ways of learning and trying new ideas. According to Schlee mentee is a less experienced employee who is offered special guidance and support by a respected and trusted person with more experience (2000, p. 324). A mentor is a trusted counselor or guide who is referred to as influential individual with advanced experience and knowledge who provide support and mobility to their mentee's career (Fagenson, 1989, p. 312; Noe, 1988, p. 66). Mentors are traditionally seen as individuals with advanced experience, knowledge, wisdom, skills and influence who provide support to and promote the career development of their protégés through an interactive relationship (Allen, 2003, p. 135; Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2005, p. 941; Bozeman & Feeney, 2007, p. 720; Gibson, 2004, p. 135; Jacobi, 1991, p. 505; Sosik & Godshalk, 2005, p. 41). A primary role of mentors is to provide psychosocial support to protégés, helping them to diagnose their prior actions, cast those actions in a positive light, and to serve as a source of validation for the protégé (Kram, 1985, p. 2). What is more, they help the student learn to navigate in the adult world and the world of work and provide protégés with advice and instruction about jobs; career planning guidance; orientation to an industry; direction regarding interpersonal development; achievement-related help and role modeling; and support, coaching, encouragement, feedback, and guidance to enhance the learner's growth (Allen & Poteet, 1999, p. 62; Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2005, p. 942; Gibson, 2004, p. 135; Hansford, Tennent, & Ehrich, 2002, p. 105; Mullen, 1998, p. 322). Existing literature on mentoring identifies a number of key roles of mentors, such as serving as a guide, offering support (Ganser, 1996, p. 47), and acting as adviser, trainer, or partner (Jones, 2001, p. 80), as well as nurturer to the mentee. However, Kochan and Trimble (2000, p. 22) warn not to perceive mentoring as a relationship where the mentee is viewed as subservient. On one hand, mentor provides counsel, insight and guidance to the mentee. But on the other hand he is given the opportunity to invest in the lives of others and to contribute to the mentee's future goals and aspirations (Bozeman, and Feerley, 2007, p. 727). The table below summarizes the key individuals and roles within the mentoring process.

Table 1: Key Individuals and Roles within the Mentoring Process

| Key elements in the Mentoring process | Commonly related terms | Role(s) performed in the Mentoring process |
|--|--|---|
| Mentor | Expert, coach, counsellor, tutor, guide | An individual with the experience, knowledge, and/or skills of a specific content area who is able, willing, and available to share this information with another individual. |
| Mentee | Protégé, novice, apprentice, trainee, student, learner | An individual who lacks experience, knowledge and/or skills in a specific area and who looks to another individual(s) to gain that which is lacking. |
| Relationship between the Mentor and Mentee | Association, pairing | A dynamic association between an individual who needs to learn and another who is willing to help and guide the learner. |

Source: Newby & Corner, 1997, p. 12.

The mentoring literature suggests that developmental relationships benefit both the protégé and the mentor (Eby & Lockwood, 2005, p. 445; Kram, 1985, p. 5) and there is a sense of satisfaction as the mentor watches the mentee grow (Reed et al., 2002, p. 105). Other research has shown that mentoring has a number of benefits for protégés, mentors and organizations (Russel & Addams, 1997, p.8). To the organization, mentoring has the benefit of succession planning, more effective management development, faster induction of new employees, improved communications, reduced training costs and increased productivity (Carter & Lewis, 1999, p. 22). The above mentioned attributes of mentoring proves that it may play a vital role in learning organisation.

4. MENTORING AT THE UNIVERSITY – CASE STUDY

Mentoring takes place in a variety of socio-economic context and as such its precise role may change dependent on the environment and the objectives of that mentoring relationship. One of these contexts can be a university one. A number of research studies on mentoring relationships have focused on higher education (Campbell & Campbell, 2002, p. 73; Harris, 2002, p. 55). Studies show that in the past two decades, professional careers have shifted from linear and stable to boundary less and unpredictable (Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999, p. 34; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, p. 21). What is more, relationships with mentors may be especially crucial for students in the turbulent, changing career environment of the 21st century (Allen et al., 2004, p. 131; Kram, 1996, p. 142). This part the paper presents experiences resulting from the process of implementation of mentoring programme. The mentoring programme has been implemented at one of the pedagogical universities (University X), which is one of the largest non-public universities in Poland. Therefore, experiences of a particular university are presented below.

4.1. Description of mentoring programme at the university

The idea of implementing mentoring programme at the University X has come into existence in response to visible need of modernizing system of higher education in Poland, as well as arising problem of low participation of local communities and the lack of professionally trained local leaders. It is known that humanities universities are responsible, among others, for shaping future local leaders, who have a great impact on the way how local governments

or NGOs operates, followed by the development of local communities. What is more, traditional teaching methods, often unsuited to the demands of modern society, promote neither innovation nor adaptability, both of which qualities are nowadays required. As a result of the search for product innovation, the University X has launched a project co-financed by EU, one of which aims is to introduce mentoring in the academic setting. Mentoring itself is to rebuild individual master-apprentice relationship between students (mentees) and academics (mentors). Master studies in either *Management and Leadership in Local Community* or *Social Animation and Community Development* have been developed in a collaboration with well-know experts from the field of leadership and community development. Apart from tailored courses students are given an opportunity to develop skills connected with community animation and leadership.

Often organizations identify a group of core competencies that serves as the foundation for their competency system (Armstrong, 1996, pp. 166–168; Ulrich et al., 1995, p. 480) Therefore, as a part of mentoring programme, competency profiles were developed to identify the competencies that will be supported by the *mentorials* (see Table 2). It provides the information required to design training/learning objectives for students. Profile were developed through a series of consultation sessions with supervisors. University representatives provided input on their expectations concerning the delivery of the mentoring programme. Next, interdepartmental working groups and supervisors used these expectations to develop a profile that lists the competencies required to meet these requirements. The profile also includes behavioural indicators for each of the listed competencies.

Table 2: Local community leader vs. local community animator

| Local community leader | Local community animator |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Competencies</i> | <i>Competencies</i> |
| Leading and Managing | Integration and Animation |
| Creativity | Communication |
| Communication | Cooperation |
| Team Working | Innovation |
| Planning and Organizing | Planning and Organizing |
| Coping with Pressure & Challenges | Problem Solving Ability |

The major innovation here is an introduction of mentoring understood as master-apprentice relationship aiming at discovering and developing student’s inner potential, which has proven to be a very effective means of teaching and learning. Each student has an opportunity of exchanging experiences and obtaining comprehensive assistance in the field of studies due to so-called *mentorials*, that is individual meetings with an academic trained to take on a role of mentor.

According to Martin (2002, p. 129), the most neglected characteristic of a mentoring relationship is the failure to adequately support the prospective mentor with the skills necessary to be an effective mentor. Therefore, in order to be thoroughly prepared, future mentors have taken part in comprehensive 80-hour training preparing to the role of academic mentor. The course consisted of issues such as: steps of the formal mentoring process, talent management, key mentor process skills, inspiring, building trust, managing risks, and giving corrective feedback. Apart from training, mentors are provided with constant group and individual supervision.

Preparation for the role of mentor has also included two foreign internships aiming at broadening future-mentors theoretical knowledge by observing best practices connected with

implementation of academic mentoring. During visit to The University of Manchester (UK) and The Sapienza University of Rome (Italy) academics have taken part in numerous meetings with their host university lecturers, mentors, tutors and directors of programs and projects from the field of mentoring. Both theoretical and practical aspects of mentoring has been underlined. Interns had a chance to get to know the system of mentoring and tutoring in higher education – mainly by taking part in meetings with university professors. They have also actively participated in classes and meetings with students having a chance to observe how real mentoring works in academic setting. Visiting academics have also familiarized themselves with different tools, frameworks and portfolios being used at Universities which, after critical transformation, were applied and are now in use at the University X. Taking into account, that academic mentoring is an entirely new and unexplored method in higher education in Poland, both of the visits were experiences not to be underestimated.

As mentoring programmes serve a variety of purposes, their characteristics may vary greatly. For example, mentoring can be mandatory or voluntary, take place in groups or in pairs, function between peers or hierarchically, transpire within a single organization or across organizations, include multiple mentors, and even occur at a distance (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2005, p. 942; Karcher, Kuperminc & Portwood, 2006, 716–718; D’Abate, Eddy & Tannenbaum, 2003, p. 368).

At the University X mentoring has taken the form of a mandatory face-to-face meetings, with regard to the fact that student has a possibility to select a matching mentor on the basis of short mentor portfolios. The overall objective of mentoring programme is a continuous, systematic development of the student based on a specific contract, which is a form of agreement between the mentor and mentee. The formal contract consists of rules of cooperation between parties and relates to how obligations stemming from mentee’s Individual Development Plan (IDP) are going to be carried out. IDP is designed to help students review their skills base, discover what competencies employers look for in graduate/postgraduate entrants, and identify which attributes will be most relevant in their chosen career area. This can be used in meetings with mentor to develop a number of skills. It also provides a framework for meetings with a mentor, and will serve as a record mentee can revisit over time. The cyclical nature of mentoring programme allows to observe mentee’s progress as well as to monitor realization of IDP. Mentors are required to meet face-to-face with mentee 8 times during an academic year. One meeting (*mentorial*) lasts for 45 minutes, and the intervals between *mentorials* should not be longer than 6 weeks, as it guarantees mentors regularity and continuity of observations. Each mentor is responsible for 6 to 8 mentees and during meetings makes use of various techniques, such as coaching, training, discussion, counseling, etc.

As there are different types of individuals with different types of learning needs, there are different ways in which mentoring can be focused to enhance a mentee's learning. Generally, these can be categorized into one of the following: (a) a skill-based emphasis, (b) an organizational and cultural emphasis, or (c) an emphasis on one's career path (Newby & Corner, 1997, pp. 13). Mentoring at the University X has mainly taken on a form of skill-based emphasis, where emphasis of mentoring concentrates on helping individuals improve and develop skills in areas where they are deficient. Not only is information provided, but frequently the mentor designs specific situations in which the mentee can practice these new skills without risk or "being on the line."

4.2. Research results

Research sample and procedure

Mentoring process at the university is subject to annual evaluation, which includes both mentors and students. The sample of this study consisted of the 101 students who responded to survey. Participants in this study included 101 mentees (51 students enrolled in *Social Animation and Community Development* and 50 enrolled in *Management and Leadership in Local Community* master studies). Data from students were collected after first year of mentoring, at the end of the semester 2010/2011 by the means of questionnaire survey consisting of 19 questions. The item responses were on a 5-point Likert scale from “*not at all*” to “*to a great extent.*” Some questions were opened, followed by filtering questions. The survey was distributed electronically. The primary purpose was to evaluate implementation of mentoring programme as well as to evaluate if *mentorials* contribute to the development of competence or skills of students.

Evaluation of mentoring from the mentees' point of view

According to research results, mentoring programme has significantly influenced student's personal development. Average rating of this impact on a scale from 1 (none) to 5 (very high impact) was 4.12. Only three out of 101 respondents had felt that *mentorials* has not contributed at all to their personal development. Respondents confirms multiple benefits of mentoring, such as: increase of self-awareness, including awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses, courage and ability to set development goals, as well as specific effects in the field of personal development, such as: increased assertiveness and self-confidence, negotiation skills, communication skills. *Mentorials* have enabled students to structure their development plans and set personal targets more efficiently. More than 80 respondents have emphasized that their mentors inspire them to take on new activities and assist in setting and achieving new objectives. The average impact of mentoring on the process of activation amounted to 4.0 on 1 to 5 scale. The process of mentoring, as declared by respondents, has also evidently influenced their academic development (3.92) and career development (average 3.74). Benefits included the acquisition of new professional qualifications, increased satisfaction and improved career progress.

Approximately eighty percent of respondents assessed their mentors are well prepared for their role and engaged in the process of mentoring. 15 % of respondents felt that mentors were "somewhat involved" in the process of mentoring, and "rather not involved" (18 %). Majority of students are satisfied (66 mentees) or fairly satisfied (28 mentees) with the mentoring objectives that have been set. Significantly, those dissatisfied with their mentoring objectives stated that objectives have been imposed on them by a mentor. These results clearly confirm that in mentoring process development objectives can not imposed upon by a mentor, as not only mentee does not identify himself/herself with it, but also frustration and lack of motivation emerges. Surprisingly, 42 respondents consider their objectives achieved, which can either mean objectives were not ambitious enough, or can implicate that progress is so clear that can be considered a huge success. One-third of respondents declared that they have rather achieved mentoring objectives or that objectives have been partly achieved (23 mentees). Such pace of progress is in line with the assumptions of mentoring process, as it leaves space for further self-improvement and provides a high level of self-diagnosis. 70 % of respondents expressed the belief that the evaluation of mentoring among students depends on

the mentor, his or her willingness and ability to actively support students, as well as how principle of mentoring work are understood and adhered to.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Certainly, mentoring has been known for its ability to develop the learning of students in effective, skill-based, and cognitive ways (Hezlett, 2005, p. 510). As it stems from research results, mentoring programme implemented at the University X has proven to be successful and measures up to expectations. Also in this case, it has shown to be an effective and innovative developmental tool in educational institutions (Mehlman & Glickauf-Hughes, 1994, p. 41; Mullen, 2008, pp. 52–60), helping students build a link between academic life and life after college, showing students that the business world includes people who are interested in fostering their development, providing networking opportunities, and helping students develop the skills they will need in the real world (Barker & Pitts, 1997, p. 223; Schlee, 2000, p. 325), which has been pointed out by respondent. It is crucial to remember that in learning organization's there exists a need to be self reflective, honest and open to changes and learning new things. That is why mentoring is an important source of individual learning and development, which can help reflective practice flourish. This paper sought to address to a gap in the literature on mentoring in academic settings (Girves, Zepeda & Gwathmey, 2005, p. 452; Schlee, 2000, p. 330) by contributing a case study on mentoring as a pedagogical tool to enhance student education in local community management and animation. It is worth remembering, that mentoring offers students' a glimpse at life in a business setting' (Schlee, 2000, p. 332), and can reduce stress (Allen, McManus & Russell, 1999, p. 455), enhance career success (e.g. productivity), and increase satisfaction (Tenenbaum, Crosby & Gliner, 2001, p. 330). Obviously, there still exists a need to continue carrying out researches on mentoring as a vital tool of organisational learning. It also has to be noted that, apart from visible advantages, mentoring has also some limitations. Conducted research has shown that not every academic is capable of taking on the role of mentor. Some respondents has pointed out some problems regarding *mentorials*, connected mainly to availability of mentors, imposing objectives or simple mismatch between mentor and mentee. It is therefore important to encourage academics to not only share their knowledge but also to empower students. It also should be pointed out that mentoring programmes are also expensive and often require huge organisational effort.

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