

1st order reflections on Andrew Sackville's evaluation of my teaching

The mentoring session that Andrew was invited to come in on and evaluate was a one-off training session for people working in Learning Resources at University College Chester as part of their staff development programme. I was approached to oversee this session because of my role as Programme Leader of the MA in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education at the College. Integral to the MA programme is the use of mentors and it was felt that I was an 'expert' in this area. Whilst I agreed to plan and deliver the session I was keen from the outset to make clear that I am no 'expert', rather, somebody who sees the value of the mentoring process within today's notion of 'learning organisations'. As such, I am in the process of testing out ideas with regard to the use of mentors. Successive evaluations and reading, plus my involvement as a tutor of an online mentoring module have informed my knowledge and understanding of the modern concept of mentoring. I felt that my involvement in the planning and delivery of this session would enhance my knowledge and understanding further.

Rather than deliver teaching, I always prefer to facilitate learning, seeing the participants themselves as the most important resource of the session. This is particularly true of adult learners who have opted to involve themselves in any form of CPD directly related to their work. That said, I was conscious too of my being there because of what I know and my experiences. Too often, we find ourselves attending CPD type activity sharing what we know yet not going away with anything concrete to extend our current conceptual knowledge and understanding of X further. It was important I felt that my presence was of value; that the participants would go away from my session with a clearer knowledge and understanding of the concept mentoring and some illustrative examples of it in places of work. With this in mind I proposed to structure the session/learning around 4 questions (What is a mentor? Why have a mentor? How do you select a mentor? Why do people want to become a mentor?), not only to help the participants to reflect on their own practice but also to extend it by drawing on strategic extracts from current literature. Integral to the discussion were a series of short activities, which, in turn, were supported by an interactive handout.

On reflection, I think that my intentions for this session were a little over ambitious. The session was to last for one hour only yet I had planned to cover the what, why and how of mentoring! As such, I believe Andrew's comment regarding this part of the session is a fair one and it highlights a concern I have over much of my teaching - a tendency to be content driven at the expense of the level of learning being promoted (see Biggs, 1999). This is in spite of the fact that I am acutely aware of the need for the emphasis in any learning/teaching context to be on the process of learning (i.e. learners 'doing', having time to reflect, digest and reflect on their own and one another's learning). That said, I had structured the session with activity and discussion in mind and at the time I felt pleased with much of the interactivity that took place. Indeed, Andrew's comments are positive about this aspect of the session. But in future I will think very carefully about the nature of the session I am facilitating, particularly in terms of its goals (see Mortimore, 1999). For an introductory session like this I will always cut the content I expect to cover by a third with a view to allowing more time for questions.

Timing is another area of concern for me and, once again, I fully appreciate Andrew's feedback on this point. I was unaware of the many references I had made to 'time'. In fairness to myself, I had planned the session with timings in mind and the session did start approximately 10 minutes late because of late arrivals, hence my anxiety! But, in future, I need to think more carefully what is feasible to cover with 'effective learning' in mind (see reference to Mortimore). Conscious that time would be an issue I had prepared a fairly detailed handout. Although not entirely satisfactory I should have trusted in this to deal with those aspects not covered during the session. Coverage of each activity was not essential to the successful outcome of the session. It wasn't important that the participants' attention was drawn to all the information embedded in the document and I will try not to rush the learners through uncovered information during the latter part of any session in future.

I will also pay particular attention to the complexity of the task(s) being set making sure that there is some alignment between what is being asked and the time being given to complete it. That said, I am pleased that my intention to involve the participants in short but 'deep' conversations worked reasonably well. Indeed, I was pleased with the quality of the constructive, critical discussion that took place after each task. The quality of questioning at the end was particularly rich and the support I was able to offer useful. This, in part, is to do with the way in which I relate to my learners. Generally speaking, I am pleased with the 'climate of trust' I am able to promote in most learning situations and Andrew's feedback seems to reinforce my ability to communicate effectively and to probe learner's thinking sensitively. I am conscious of the need, however, to summarise in ways that focus the learner's attention and will consider further the way I visualize participant feedback to aid their memorization. This, I feel can be done in a variety of ways (e.g. use of participant/tutor recording on OHT or flip chart). I am also conscious that I can disengage too much during group-based work and I need to consider the purpose and timings of the way I wish to mediate learning in my planning.

References

BIGGS, J., (1999) Teaching for Quality Learning at University, Buckingham: Routledge

MORTIMORE, P., (Ed.), (1999) Understanding Pedagogy and its Impact on Learning, London: Paul Chapman

Linda Rush 28/03/04