Promoting Mutual Learning in Reverse-mentoring: Professional Development for Experienced Educators

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Reverse-mentoring is a unique form of mentoring, derived from the Information Technology-related industries in the United States, in which a less experienced person serves as a mentor (junior-mentor) for a more experienced person (senior-mentee) to share the latest skills and knowledge in technology. However, there is a lack of research on reverse-mentoring in educational contexts. This study examines the effect of a reverse-mentoring session embedded within a mentoring program designed for experienced learning advisors and investigates how mutual learning occurs between mentor and mentee. Qualitative data were collected via participants' reflective journals and an open-ended, post-program questionnaire. The data demonstrate that the five participants underwent an attitude shift by having the opportunity to become a junior-mentor during the reverse-mentoring session, which implies that reverse-mentoring served as an effective approach to mentor development. The data also suggest that establishing a trusting relationship with the junior-mentor prior to the reverse-mentoring session, reviewing audio recordings of the preceding sessions where the junior-mentors attended as mentees, and analyzing how their mentor interacted with them, all served to effectively prepare the junior-mentors for the reverse-mentoring session. For the senior-mentee, who usually takes the role of trainer, reverse-mentoring was a refreshing experience where she could revisit her professional and personal values. The paper discusses how and why mutual learning occurred through the reverse-mentoring process and emphasizes the importance of mentor education.

リバース・メンタリングとは、従来のメンターとメンティの役割を逆転させるメンタリングを意味し、より経験の浅い者がメンターとなり、より経験のある先輩にメンタリングを実施するものである。米国のIT業界を発祥とするリバース・メンタリングは、若手が熟練者に最新の技術の知識やスキルを伝達することを目的とするが、教育分野において実施された例は少ない。本研究では、現職のラーニング・アドバイザー5

人を対象としたメンタリング・プログラムの中に、リバース・メンタリングセッションを導
入し、メンター・メンティ双方の「相互成長」がいかに促進されるのかを検証した。そ
の結果、リバース・メンタリング実施前に両者の関係性を構築しておくこと、それま
でに実施したセッションの録音を分析しておくこと、メンターの役割を再認識してお
くことなどが、効果的な事前準備となることがわかった。また、通常メンター役を担う
先輩メンティにとっては、自身の教育観や人生観を再確認する貴重な機会となっ
た。本稿は、どのような相互成長がいかに両者の間で促進されたのかを述べ、リバ
ース・メンタリングのメンター教育における役割について言及する。

Reverse-mentoring was initially introduced in the fields of information technology and business in the United States. It involves a less experienced, younger worker sharing the latest skills and knowledge in technology with a senior worker with more experience. The mentor in return learns to establish relationships, improve leadership competencies, and understand the organizational culture (Murphy, 2012). Thus, it is the inverse of the traditional mentoring relationship, where the mentor is usually the more experienced specialist extending career- and psychosocial-support to a less experienced mentee through directive and hierarchical approaches (Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007; Kram, 1984; Ragins & Kram, 2007).

Approaches in mentoring have been introduced in teacher education to enhance the professional growth of both novice and experienced teachers (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). Previous research has shown that mentoring relationships reduce attrition among new teachers (Delaney, 2012), improve confidence in teaching (Hobson et al., 2009), and develop self-reflection skills (Kissau & King, 2014). Furthermore, equality in relationships establishes trust and rapport which can lead to mutual learning that also helps experienced professionals grow (Brown, 2001; Delaney, 2012). Some researchers have observed the positive effects of mentoring on the mentors themselves, noting enhanced self-esteem and that it forced them to reflect on their own beliefs on teaching and learning (Ford & Parsons, 2000; Gordon & Maxey, 2000; Wollman-Bonilla, 1997).

Fletcher (2012) argues that a distinction needs to be made between mentoring in education and mentoring in other contexts because teaching is not merely providing knowledge in one-way learning, i.e., teachers teaching

students, but involves mutual learning, i.e., teachers learning from students. Reverse-mentoring in education, therefore, needs to have more diversity, where the 'younger to older' scheme is not precisely oriented (Dickinson, Jankot, & Gracon, 2009). In addition, while many of the studies on mentoring focus on training for pre-service or novice teachers, relatively few relate to reverse-mentoring for experienced educators' professional development.

Therefore, this study examines the effects of a reverse-mentoring session conducted as part of a wider mentoring program designed for experienced learning advisors who are professional language educators dedicated to promoting learner autonomy and who work in tandem with self-access centers (Benson, 2011; Gardner & Miller, 1999). These advisors enhance language learners' ability to control their own learning through one-to-one reflective dialogue (Carson & Mynard, 2012; Kato & Mynard, 2016). In general, these experienced advisors face more complicated learning issues and so require continuous training (Kato, 2017).

This study focuses in particular on the professional development achieved by experienced advisors through a mentoring program. It also investigates whether mutual learning occurs between mentor and mentee, and if so, which features are observed in such mutual learning.

Method

The study's participants, context, procedure, data collection tools and analysis are described below.

Participants and Context

The five female participants (two American and three Japanese) were in their 30s to 40s and were working as full-time advisors at the self-access center at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). All had completed initial advisor training at the beginning of their careers at KUIS and had between four to six years of experience providing one-to-one advisory sessions with language learners there. All had a Master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages or in Applied Linguistics and had language teaching experience prior to becoming advisors. Initially, these five participants took the role of "mentee"

during the mentoring program.

A sixth female Japanese participant, the author, had native English proficiency and was also a language advisor at KUIS with over ten years' experience, who initially took the role of "mentor".

Procedure

At the start of the program the participants were briefed orally and in writing on the purpose of this research study, the procedure, and what their roles would include and assured that, in line with ethical research practices, their data would be anonymized, after which they agreed to sign the consent form.

The five mentees each took part in the program's seven one-to-one mentoring sessions with the mentor over a 12- to 18-month period. Due to the need to conduct 35 individual sessions and difficulties in scheduling, the data collection could not be completed more quickly.

Each session lasted for 90 minutes on average (minimum 50 minutes, maximum 110 minutes), was conducted in the mentees' native language (English or Japanese), and was audio recorded using an integrated circuit recorder. All six participants kept a written reflective journal, updated after each session using the standardized form provided. In each mentee's first session, the mentor and mentee shared their life stories, professional and personal values, and the challenges they were facing, all of which helped to establish a mutually trusting, equitable relationship (Kato, 2017). The second and third sessions were used for traditional mentoring for which the mentees brought their own issues as an agenda. In the fourth, the mentor and mentee reflected upon the program to date by sharing their journals. The fifth was another traditional mentoring session. The mentees were then encouraged to review their previous sessions' audio recordings and their journals before the sixth, "reverse-mentoring" session, to which the senior-mentee brought a different agenda for each junior-mentor. These covered issues such as reflecting on her (the senior-mentee's) past ten years or reconfirming her professional identity. The junior-mentors did not know the agenda in advance. In the seventh, final session, the mentor and mentee again jointly reflected on the program, including the reverse-mentoring session, by sharing their journals.

Data collection and data analysis

Qualitative data were collected via the reflective journal form, on which participants wrote their thoughts after each session. A 20-item questionnaire was also administered at the end of the program to collect additional data on their overall feedback on the program.

In line with Creswell (2012), a three-step coding process was applied to analyze the qualitative data. First, open coding was used to create 34 tentative labels, each representing a general theme that emerged. Then, axial coding established relationships among these labels, with four becoming merged with others. Finally, selective coding was applied to choose core categories to weave the remaining labels into a simple narrative.

Results

The main categories which emerged from the data analysis were: Raised awareness, Practical knowledge and skills, Emotions, and Mutual learning. The results for each are discussed with reference to a sample of relevant supporting qualitative data from the participants.

Category 1: Raised awareness

Among the 30 codes used, 11 related to raised awareness of issues such as a mentor's roles, the effects of role-switching, preparation for the reverse-mentoring session, and broadening one's perspectives. In totality, data relating to raised awareness appeared 57 times in the junior-mentor's reflective journals. Perhaps as a result of reviewing the previous sessions' audio recordings where the junior-mentors attended as mentees, some of them became more aware of how the senior-mentee had fulfilled her role as a mentor. This review process both helped the junior-mentors to understand the mentor's roles and responsibilities and enabled them to prepare for the sixth, reverse-mentoring session, as the following comments show:

Junior-mentor 1: During sessions, I am too focused on the dialogue and cannot afford to analyze it; however, when I am listening to the recordings, I can pay attention to what was happening in the dialogues (e.g., skills that my mentor uses, intentions of the question, what I was really thinking at the moment, etc.).

Junior-mentor 2: ...reviewing the dialogues and how they shaped the course of the relationship was useful in terms of assisting me in delivering constructive and meaningful feedback during the role-switching session.

However, this attitude-shifting process also caused uncertainty among junior-mentors when taking the mentor's roles. More support was apparently needed for them to deal with their worries and concerns for the role-switching session:

Junior-mentor 4: Although the theme of the session was role-switching, it was hard for me to completely switch to mentor-mode.

Junior-mentor 5: I wish I could have one session with my mentor prior to the reverse-mentoring and share my worries about becoming a mentor to my mentor.

The data also indicated that awareness-raising occurred even after the reverse-mentoring session as the junior-mentors continued to reflect on their own performance and became more aware of the responsibilities and difficulties mentors have:

Junior-mentor 2: Today's session was a reminder that mentors also have questions or issues they are struggling with and [reverse-mentoring] helps to be able to have support to discuss those issues.

Category 2: Practical knowledge and skills

Ten codes were related to practical knowledge and skills which appeared 23 times in the junior-mentors' reflective journals. Most of these were associated with conversation strategies such as using metaphors, active listening, and questioning skills, which are often used by advisors during sessions with learners. Most of the junior-mentors reflected on the conversation strategies used, and the flow of the five sessions prior to the reverse-mentoring session by reviewing the recordings. They then tried to use in their role-switching session those that they had found effective.

The data showed that conducting a reverse-mentoring session also encouraged these participants to become more aware of their performance as mentors. When the junior-mentors attended the previous sessions as mentees, there had not been much focus on practical mentoring knowledge and skills.

However, once their mind was more attuned to the demands of the mentoring role, they focused more strongly on these practical aspects. An example of each is offered below.

Junior-mentor 5: I asked questions by repeating, restating, and summarizing in order to keep focusing on [the senior-mentee's] main message. I tried to ask questions based on the keywords I noticed in her story.

Junior-mentor 1: I was listening closely to her because I wanted to hear her thoughts and help her listen to her voice by summarizing and returning to what she had said previously to flesh out her feelings and help her work through them.

Furthermore, feedback on practical knowledge and skills transfer from the senior-mentee after the reverse-mentoring session was appreciated by the junior-mentors.

Junior-mentor 5: [The senior-mentee] told me that I asked the metaphor questions at the right time and that was why they were effective. I don't usually get feedback on my sessions and it was a very fresh and meaningful opportunity which increased my confidence.

Junior-mentor 3: After the session, [the senior-mentee] asked me how I would do the reverse-mentoring session differently if I could do it over. She told me that thinking about alternative scenarios is an effective way to deal with different cases. I noticed I was always using similar skills in the sessions.

Junior-mentor 4: Because I learned advising techniques from [the senior-mentee], I was able to apply them to my sessions. As the series of sessions made me realize that we advisors can approach students holistically, my entire understanding on advising was reconstructed.

Category 3: Emotions

Seven codes were related to emotions (enjoyment, worries, trust, gratitude, etc.) which appeared 13 times in the junior-mentors' journals. There was an important difference between the senior-mentee and junior-mentors in this category. For the senior-mentee, the highest frequency of comments related to enjoyment, whereas for the junior-mentors it was concern. For the former, who usually provides sessions to mentees and does not have many opportunities to be a mentee, the

reverse-mentoring sessions were a refreshing and enjoyable experience.

Senior-mentee: I can't remember the last time I attended a session as a mentee. I felt so empowered by being listened to by a professional. I believe all advisor educators need to have this opportunity to switch roles….This has been such an enjoyable, emotional and growing experience that everyone who wants to enjoy this process' benefits should do so.

Conversely, most of the junior-mentors expressed worries beforehand as to whether they could conduct a productive reverse-mentoring session for their mentor.

Junior-mentor 1: I was nervous about doing the session because I was hoping that I could help my mentee in the way that she had helped me.

Junior-mentor 5: As I knew my [senior-mentee] was looking forward to having the reverse-mentoring session, I was under a lot of pressure before the session.

However, the junior-mentors did express enjoyment *after* the session.

Junior-mentor 1: By the end of the session, [the senior-mentee] had her next steps and I was happy that we were able to get there in one session, especially since the topic was so tough.

Junior-mentor 2: [Reverse-mentoring] was the most challenging and enjoyable session. The creative approach is really meaningful to keep the relationship fresh and stimulate interesting dialogues.

Junior-mentor 5: I was glad when I heard that [the reverse-mentoring session] had helped [the senior-mentee] to reflect on herself and to digest the past and move on to the future.

Category 4: Mutual learning

The final two codes used related to mutual learning, which appeared 37 times in the participants' journals and questionnaire responses. The data showed that both the junior-mentors and senior-mentee recognized that learning was often mutual and collaborative rather than exclusively unilateral and that this often occurred through a dynamic process of unexpected dialogue.

Junior-mentor 2: A structured mentoring program has the potential

to mutually enrich each other's professional lives by co-investigating and challenging practice in ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented and growth-promoting ways.

Junior-mentor 5: I reached a deeper level of awareness than I could attain by myself. I noticed that [the senior-mentee] was also going through her own process of discovery which at the end turned out to be the process of co-creation.

From these comments it can be inferred that the junior-mentors were not merely interviewers asking questions but were collaborators trying to grow with the senior-mentee. Rather than following a traditional structure where a mentor provides support to a mentee, the reverse-mentoring in this study followed a process of collaborative discovery. In the reverse-mentoring session, there were some moments where the roles returned to the original mentor/mentee relationship, then switched quickly back to the reverse-mentoring relationship. This flexibility of operation is one of the advantages of embedding a reverse-mentoring session within a wider mentoring program where good relationships can be established before the reverse-mentoring sessions.

Discussion

In line with previous research on mentoring (Ford & Parsons, 2000; Gordon & Maxey, 2000; Wollman-Bonilla, 1997), the results of this study highlight the positive effects of being a mentor, enhancing as it does the mentor's self-esteem and reflectivity. However, the results of this study were also unique in that *both* parties could gain from the positive effects of being a mentor through the reverse-mentoring relationships. Both the junior-mentors and the senior-mentee revisited and refined their professional skills in advising by conducting dialogues and enhanced their reflective capabilities while simultaneously helping others to do the same. Meanwhile, the senior-mentee valued the opportunities to be listened to by a trained listener, demonstrating that at times a mentor also needs a mentor and that reverse-mentoring is an effective approach through which to achieve this mutual learning.

The reverse-mentoring sessions conducted in this study were successful in promoting mutual learning probably because the junior-mentors and the

senior-mentee had already established a strong, trusting relationship through the program's first five sessions. During this time, they shared their life stories and values, exchanged journals and reflected together, during which substantial emotional acceptance and acknowledgment occurred, as in Kato (2017). Therefore, although the role-switching sessions were a difficult challenge for several of the participants, the trusting relationship and atmosphere of goodwill and openness allowed them to face that challenge. This study suggests that rather than having a reverse-mentoring session from the beginning, it would be more effective if it were embedded at the end of a series of mentoring sessions where the junior-mentors are first able to learn the mentor's roles by experiencing the sessions as mentees. Moreover, all six participants expressed the benefits of the reverse-mentoring session in terms of being an effective form of professional development, as shown in the examples below.

Junior-mentor 3: I am very thankful that I had this opportunity. It was not only about learning skills but also connecting with myself more. I discovered what kind of advisor I want to be.

Junior-mentor 5: By conducting the reverse-mentoring session, I learned that in order to help others face their issues, one needs to know how to face oneself. Our job is to experience the speaker's world together through the dialogue.

Junior-mentor 1: I felt this mentoring program has benefitted me and my advisees. I find that I am able to be more present and in the moment with my students than before, especially when they are having an emotional moment.

Senior-mentee: Mentors need opportunities to become mentees. It was a brilliant experience for me to participate in the reverse-mentoring session as a mentee. I could reconfirm that reflection through dialogue helps us find meaning to the past experiences we had.

Conclusion

Previous studies have highlighted the lack of research relating to mentor education and professional development (Hobson et al., 2009). This study emphasizes the importance of implementing a mentoring skills development program, even for experienced advisors. It also demonstrates the effectiveness of embedding a

reverse-mentoring session at the end of the program, which can serve as a learning opportunity for both the mentor(s) and mentees. The qualitative data collected in this study suggest that the combination of traditional and reverse-mentoring introduced here could serve as a model for a professional development program where career-support, psychosocial-support, and mentor education result from mentor(s) and mentees establishing a complementary relationship by fully engaging in reflective dialogue.

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