

# **Assertive Mentoring- a valuable method of supporting vulnerable students?**

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## INTRODUCTION

In June 2010 I attended a seminar given by Eamonn Farrar and Dean Judson from Hurworth school in Darlington, County Durham. They spoke persuasively about how an Assertive Mentoring programme had transformed learning and attainment in their school. In 1998 38% of pupils achieved 5+ A\*-C GCSE passes, by 2009, following the introduction of assertive mentoring, 95% of pupils achieved 5+ A\*-C GCSE passes. In 1998, the school had been judged by OFSTED to have addressed its previous weaknesses: 97% of observed lessons were satisfactory or better and behaviour was good- yet the children (who were described by OFSTED as 'of average ability') were underachieving. The introduction of assertive mentoring precipitated rapid and sustained improvement in achievement.

Farrar and Judson observed that all schools set targets, mentor and intervene, yet this does not raise achievement; indeed in some schools, target setting and mentoring have a negative impact. The Hurworth model stresses the difference between *soft* (traditional) and *hard* (assertive) mentoring and sites this distinction as the key to improvement. The major distinctions as outlined in the seminar were as follows:

### Features of soft/traditional mentoring:

- Relationship based
- Intuitive ad hoc solutions formulated
- Open to manipulation- excuses half truths
- Optional responsibilities- built in toleration of failure and acceptance of low expectation
- Excuses tolerated
- Pupil led- pupil talks much/ explain problems and sympathy is given (counselling)

### Features of hard/assertive mentoring:

- Evidence based dialogue- pupil confronted with predicted grades
- Direct interventions- solutions based on evidence, focusing on causes of under-achievement
- Deals are struck- there is clarity as to who gains what in the agreement
- Expectations delivered- solutions are concrete and measurable- opting out is not an option!
- Mentor led- use of strong evidence gives Mentor plenty to talk about- in a business-like, authoritative manner

However, **all** mentoring meetings are: supportive, friendly, regular and foster mutual respect. In addition, the Hurworth model stresses the importance of placing the child at the centre of the process- there must be cohesion between the target setting and tracking activities. Furthermore, it is essential that there is much collaboration between the mentor and class teachers: the mentoring session must have a connection with what is happening in the classroom.

This all seemed to make very good sense to me, but the challenge was to implement a programme which would be effective in a post-16 setting. Eamonn Farrar was unable to put me with in touch with anyone who was using assertive mentoring in Further Education and searching the net also proved fruitless. I therefore devised a version of assertive mentoring which utilised College resources (namely the new *Cristalweb* review data which provided a dynamic, electronic method of recording on-going student progress) and depended heavily on the maxim, 'try it and if it doesn't work we'll change as we go along.....'.

## Literature Review

A number of sources proved useful in providing a theoretical framework to the study and in informing the mentors of possible strategies to be employed.

In addition to attending the seminar, I had read a research paper by Younger and Warrington (2009) which was the result of an action research project at Hurworth. The paper reflected upon the target-setting and mentoring programme at the school and used interviews with students who had progressed to higher education to consider the extent to which the initiative impacted upon their academic achievement at GCSE and their longer-term aspirations. Those students whose GCSE results indicated considerable '*value-added*' suggested that the initiative was most effective in children whose families had little expectation of them progressing to higher education. The paper suggested that the positive effects of the mentoring programme would be limited if schools did not adopt a *holistic and proactive* approach to subsequent careers education and widening participation activities.

Wallace and Gravell (2005) considered mentoring as a method of supporting teaching staff in Further Education- both in induction and as an ongoing process. Whilst not directly addressing mentoring of students, the authors do provide valuable insights into the skills needed for successful mentoring in a post-16 context and also explore the theoretical basis of mentoring. In particular, drawing on the work of Honey and Mumford (1992), the idea that a Mentee's preferred Learning Style may well be relevant in encouraging improvement and development: an 'activist' or 'pragmatist' may find mentoring the most effective means of achieving change in behaviour. In addition, Wallace and Gavell consider the work of Goleman (1996) and his emphasis on emotional intelligence which stresses the importance of relationships, empathy and thus mutual respect in mentoring.

Further reading of Goleman (1996 & 1998) revealed that he identifies four key competencies which together drive performance:

- Self-awareness – the ability to read one's own emotions and recognise the impact they can have on others. In addition to using subjective feelings to guide decisions
- Self-management – learning to control one's own emotions and impulses and adapt to changing circumstances
- Social awareness – the ability to sense, understand, and react to others' emotions whilst understanding how social relationships and networks work
- Relationship management– the ability to inspire, influence, and develop others whilst effectively managing conflict

Goleman contends that these competencies are not innate, but rather they can be taught and developed in order to raise achievement in every area of life; including academic performance. Thus, in the Mentoring relationship it seems essential that we should seek to facilitate the development of emotional intelligence as a key factor in both academic and personal success.

## METHODS USED

13 senior members of staff were identified as possible mentors and an initial briefing meeting was convened. I used material prepared by Farrar and Judson to explain the principles of assertive mentoring and then explained how I proposed to implement a Sixth Form College Farnborough version of the programme:

- Initially Personal Tutors ( teachers with pastoral charge of a group of students) would be asked to recommend suitable candidates- fairly loose criteria

- Student must agree – initial commitment is for a weekly meeting for 6 weeks
- I write to parents informing them of the mentoring arrangement
- I will prepare a briefing document briefly outlining the student's difficulties
- I pairs up mentor and mentee
- I contact all relevant subject teachers/CM's to inform them of the mentoring pairing and explain that they are required to update the *Cristalweb* review data every week. Also explain that additional comments (and particularly points for praise) are very welcome via email. The anticipated final grade will be entered only at the beginning of the 6 week period and then after week 5
- Mentor makes contact with all subject teachers to ascertain their perspective of the student and to discuss possible areas for action/intervention
- Mentor must immediately make contact with Mentee and agree an initial meeting time/venue

### **The first meeting**

- Time limited- 30 minutes maximum
- Explain what Assertive Mentoring is (hard v soft stuff!) Weekly meetings will focus around data provided by teachers and that there will be constant checking and non-acceptance of excuses
- Outline teacher's concerns and look at current review data (including previous week's attendance/punctuality if relevant)
- Agree realistic targets for the next week

### **Weekly meeting**

- Short (15mins?) sharp and to the point!
- Focused totally around latest data and agreed targets from last meeting- student given copy of the latest data
- Start with something positive if at all possible.....
- Set targets for next week and discuss possible strategies to achieve them
- Make a note of agreed action(s)- ensure that student also notes this Send a *Cristalweb* message to ALL the mentees teachers informing them of the agreed action

### **Between the Weekly Meeting**

- Check that agreed action has taken place eg has the hwk been handed in or the student is attending every lesson
- Intervene IMMEDIATELY if student has not kept to their part of the bargain
- Liaise constantly as required with teachers and tutors

### **Data collected**

- Two evaluation meetings of Mentors were convened throughout the year and feedback from discussion was used to modify the programme
- Student review grades: The new *Cristalweb* dynamic recording of review data provided a superb method of recording progress; particularly towards the end of the year when it was possible to view the history of a student's progress. It was therefore

a simple matter to compare grades at the beginning of the programme with those at the end.

- Diary- I kept a rather erratic and ad hoc diary throughout the year- recording random thoughts and developments
- All Mentors were asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of the programme
- All Mentees were asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of the programme
- Subject teachers emails provided a source of feedback data

## **FINDINGS**

### **Mentor meetings**

At the Mentor meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> January, there was general doom and gloom and a little encouragement! Generally the 'positives' were in the form of student's perceptions of their meetings which they generally rated as helpful and positive. However, the frustrations of the first few meetings were evident and Mentors outlined their main concerns:

- Attendance- students failed to turn up
- Snow before Christmas caused much disruption and therefore good practice was hard to establish
- Students lie/stretch truth/tell half truth etc and give varying versions of events to different teachers
- Not all teachers are thoroughly on board with the AM programme
- Data doesn't always correspond with teachers' expressed views- reluctance to be honest (?), and the review data is not updated often enough
- Some staff are not as assertive as the Mentor and student 'gets away' with poor performance
- There seem to be no consequences for non-compliance with the programme
- Referrals are flawed:
  1. Entrenched habits- students are referred when they already have a long history of difficulty.
  2. Tutors refer students who agree to the programme- however, 'agreement' may be rather co-erced!
  3. Some students seem to have overwhelming/emotional/health difficulties which are beyond the remit of the programme

In view of the considerable concerns, it was decided to amend the programme and a very fruitful discussion produced some excellent ideas for improvement:

- Texting could be used to remind student of meeting- the College's pilot scheme for this makes it a simple matter
- I agreed to endeavour to speak to staff when a pairing is made- to encourage them to enter into spirit of the programme and to understand the importance of communication and up to date data. Also to impress upon them the importance of consistency in tackling under performance
- I agreed to pursue the possibility of having a new section added to the Support Record on *Cristalweb*- thus providing a readily visible log for staff of all students on the programme- all staff could have the facility to see a list of all the students whom they teach who are on the AM programme

- For the foreseeable future, only first year students to be accepted onto the programme- hopefully they are less entrenched in their under-performance
- I agreed to impress upon tutors that Mentees must be true volunteers and view the programme in a positive/supportive way
- Students to be made aware from the outset that the programme is time limited and that if progress is not made, the agreement will be terminated
- 6 weeks will be the initially agreed period of the agreement but further weeks can be added by mutual agreement
- There will be no communication between Mentor and student's parents

A further Mentors meeting was held on 16<sup>th</sup> May when the mood was considerably more upbeat than in January! There were however, persistent frustrations:

- Students failing to turn up.....
- Some Mentors found that teachers gave little feedback and/or did not update review data regularly
- Possible role conflict with Tutors- general view was that the Tutor has an ongoing relationship with the student which is concerned with all aspects of their personal development, whereas the Mentor has a time- limited relationship which is target driven and concerned only with academic progress

Most Mentors enjoyed participating in the programme and wished to continue next year (other commitments permitting!) but there was agreement that modifications needed to be made:

- Criteria for selection- use mostly 1<sup>st</sup> years who are not as entrenched in poor habits- Mentors to be given more opportunity to consider a possible Mentee and whether it would be appropriate to enter into an agreement
- Aim to start 1<sup>st</sup> meetings at October ½ term
- Staffing- modify existing team- some existing Mentors may wish to discontinue their involvement and others will be asked to join the team
- Criteria for pairing must include concern in more than one subject

### **Student review grades**

The *Cristalweb* review data is obviously key to tracking the success (or otherwise!) of the mentoring programme; if students do not objectively improve there is little point in continuing to invest considerable time and effort in supporting them in this way. The review data so far indicates some success, some continuation of poor performance and sadly, some deterioration!

12 students took part in the programme (plus 2 who left after one meeting- due in one case to mental health issues and in the second to a realisation that he wished to do an apprenticeship). 8 students were male and 4, female. The 12 met with their mentors for between 8 and 16 weeks and 6 (thus 50%!) improved their overall anticipated final grade in one or more subjects.

In addition, their subject review data tracked their progress with regard to 6 areas of performance:

- Improvement in grades in one or more lessons: (deterioration in brackets!)
  1. Focus: 6 (2)
  2. Effort in lesson: 6 (3)
  3. Effort in hwk: 5 (4)
  4. Meeting deadlines: 4 (8)
  5. Consolidation: 2 (3)
  6. Exam technique: 1(3)

I also spent a considerable time analysing attendance data and in every case students overall attendance deteriorated during the course of their mentoring relationship.

## **Diary**

My diary is a somewhat ad hoc document which records some random thoughts; supplementing the reflections outlined in the accounts of Mentor meetings.

23/11/11

- There are insufficient Mentors- how to prioritise? First come, first served is as good a policy as any.
- How to pair up Mentor with Mentee? Random at first, but perhaps later on there may be pairing with regard to, for example, gender.
- There is a conflict of interest with 2 Mentors who are responsible for discipline in the College- their mentee could end up appearing before them in a disciplinary hearing. Decided not to use them as Mentors.

11/1/11

Christmas holidays, snow and my prolonged illness have played havoc with my monitoring of the Mentor programme. In addition, January exam season has now kicked in and most mentors are feeling that their support is fragmented and rather unsuccessful.

24/1/11

One member of staff's student is now turning up to meetings and is responding- he feels he's getting somewhere!

1/2/11

When pairing up Mentors and Mentees, I chose those whose Tutors appeared the most desperate- inevitable that they should be the most 'far gone'!

3/3/11

One Mentor says that after attending a coaching course, she is using coaching techniques in her meetings. In particular, students are setting their own targets and this is proving very effective.

4/3/11

Informal feedback from a Mentee- says the mentoring is really helping him.

## **Mentors**

All Mentors were asked to provide feedback on their experiences. Most reported an improvement in their student's confidence and motivation, whilst citing small triumphs as gratifying and rewarding. For example, 'Jonny started to hand his work in by the set deadlines' and, 'My Mentee completed Media Studies coursework on time. He also began completing additional past paper questions in each subject'.

When asked to state what frustrated or annoyed them, many Mentors reported Mentee's failure to attend arranged meetings and the difficulty in obtaining information and feedback from subject teachers.

Most Mentors felt that they had begun their meetings in an overly assertive manner and would adopt more of a coaching approach in the future. In particular, helping students to set *their own* goals was felt to be most appropriate in a post-16 setting.

Almost universally, Mentors believed that adopting a coaching approach to their meetings was the most appropriate overall strategy, whilst texting and using time planning grids were found to be useful specific strategies.

Mentors were of a mind that criteria for admission onto the programme need to be tightened as most Mentees already had a long history of poor performance and achievement. Supporting students before their negative behaviour was too entrenched was felt to be key to future success.

All bar one Mentor would like to continue with the programme next year, although several expressed concern regarding the amount of time input required.

## **Mentees**

Obtaining feedback from Mentees proved one of my greatest challenges; I sent out requests (with assurances of confidentiality) as soon as the mentoring agreement ceased but received no responses. By this time, study leave was looming and my attempts to track down students in Tutorial lessons proved fruitless. I was able to obtain feedback from one student only- a first year who was also my Tutee. Her opinion as to what was most helpful about her mentoring meetings was that her Mentor helped her plan her revision timetable and manage her time with regard to her Art coursework. Interestingly, her Mentor also cited these 2 things as successes in his written feedback. When asked about the character of the Mentor, the student stressed that her Mentor was easy to talk to and approachable- the very qualities which she believed I should look for when recruiting Mentors in the future.

## Subject Teachers

As I have already highlighted, one of the greatest challenges faced by Mentors was in getting information and feedback from subject teachers; it has therefore been quite difficult for me to ascertain the perceived efficacy of the programme in curriculum areas. Some emails to Mentors from colleagues provide some insight into the effectiveness of the programme:

- *I have noticed some changes in his behaviour since the process started in terms of a more mature and professional approach to lessons at times. He continues to have problems with motivation and there are serious issues at home that impact greatly on his learning (lateness/ attendance/ time- management/ focus).*
- *..what a great experience I have had with the Assertive Mentoring Scheme. One of my A2 students is being mentored by X and she has managed to get the student from having submitted no work in the autumn term to meeting all her deadlines and using her free time effectively. It has made such a difference, the student is like a completely different person.*

## DISCUSSION

I have to admit that I was initially rather disappointed that a miraculous transformation had not taken place in the lives of the Mentees; the amazing success of the programme, verified by academic research, was not being duplicated in The Sixth Form College Farnborough- why?! Whilst the January meeting of Mentors was somewhat gloomy, by the end of the year, most Mentors were feeling relatively optimistic and were able to cite anecdotal evidence of success. However, this was not translated into hard evidence of improvement. At best, only 50% of the Mentees improved in their final overall grade in one subject and every single Mentee deteriorated in their attendance record. This did indeed seem strange as all the research I had read suggested that coaching and mentoring were effective methods of supporting students. It seemed that staff had put much effort into a programme which produced a few 'warm and fuzzy' feelings, but little in the way of 'real' improvement. Given that the aim of the programme was to objectively improve performance, not to support students emotionally, it would appear that we had conspicuously failed.

However, on reflection, it is somewhat hasty to dismiss a programme which has a sound theoretical basis for success, without implementing changes which may well ensure future success. I think my main error was in attempting to import a programme developed for secondary schools, with little modification, into a post-16 setting. I was unable to make contact with any other colleges who were trying the assertive mentoring approach (as far as I am aware, no other colleges have tried the programme). In addition, I think I stressed the 'assertive' part of the programme a little too forcefully and encouraged an approach which was not appropriate for 16-18 year olds who have chosen to continue in education. The use of *Cristalweb* review data and close monitoring is sufficient; post-16 students do not require the same 'assertive' approach in their relationship with their mentor as secondary school pupils- not least because they can 'vote with their feet' if they so wish.

I was privileged to work with a group of Mentors who provided valuable feedback and much wisdom, thus informing (and forming) my thoughts on the programme. The major areas

which we identified for improvement were the improvement of the timing and criteria for referrals and the need for the Mentor to adopt a coaching approach in meetings.

In addition, as facilitator of the programme, I would identify the need for skilled pairing in the future- not all Mentor/ Mentee relationships were as fruitful as they could have been. In addition, it is evident that not all teachers are cut out to be Mentors...!

## CONCLUSION

My overriding conclusion is that I have been on a steep learning curve this year and that my initial thoughts and ideas have been challenged greatly- such is the nature of experiment and research! In summary, my initial conclusions are:

- The new review data on Cristalweb is a superb tool for the Mentor- it is precisely the tool which is needed to implement a target driven *assertive* programme of support.
- The Assertive Mentoring programme was developed in a secondary school and therefore requires modification:
  1. The 'assertive' rigour of confronting Mentees with evidence regarding their underperformance is essential- however, a 'coaching' approach is more appropriate in facilitating change in a post-16 setting
  2. Selection of Mentees needs to be more selective! A referral from a tutor is not sufficient
  3. It is not necessary to have only senior managers acting as mentors- most of our students had no idea that they were being mentored by member of the Senior Management Team!

I am still keen to continue with the programme for a further year and to explore the approach as a method of improving student performance; particularly as the existing Mentor team have identified several changes which may result in significant improvement in Mentee's review data. However, I am mindful of the need to be realistic and to balance the efficacy of the programme against the considerable expenditure in staff time.

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