

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Students as Partners Beyond Formal Education: A Mentoring Partnership in the First Year of Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

This co-authored reflective essay is a collaborative exploration of a mentoring partnership between a university teacher educator (Benjamin) and a first-year English language teacher (Melanie) from August 2018 to January 2019. It explores our collective attempt to build a partnership less like the traditional “unidirectional oversight and guidance” normally associated with mentoring and more like a reciprocal partnership in which both of us would gain (Cook-Sather, 2016, p. 1).

Upon graduation from my teacher education program, I (Melanie) took a position as an English teacher at a primary school in Ningbo, China, where I had previously completed a two-week teaching abroad program. I was given responsibilities not common for recently graduated teachers, such as developing a storybook-based curriculum to complement the school’s English curriculum. In addition, I was asked to support the professional development of my colleagues through observing lessons and delivering lesson demonstrations. The school leadership felt their teachers would benefit from my insights and experiences gained during my pre-service teacher education in Hong Kong.

The first year of teaching is a particularly challenging time as teachers negotiate their new roles and identities. Although school-based mentoring is common, the impact it has on teaching and learning is varied. It depends on the quality of support the novice teachers receive (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009; Gardiner, 2017). Richter et al. (2013) found creating opportunities for individual reflection, fostering experimentation with different teaching methods, and providing room for autonomous decision-making to be effective mentoring practices. However, mentors often do not have adequate time or training to support mentees effectively. In addition, mentees can be reluctant to share their challenges with more experienced or senior colleagues for fear of judgment or risk to their job security (Hobson et al., 2009).

I (Benjamin) already knew Melanie before our mentorship partnership began. I was her tutor for two university courses and mentored her during her eight-week teaching practicum in a Hong Kong primary school. Furthermore, I was the tutor for the teaching abroad program Melanie had participated in the school in Ningbo. I had an ongoing relationship with the school due to my active involvement in the teaching abroad program (Moorhouse, 2018), and so it seemed natural to form a mutually beneficial partnership, where Melanie could receive support in her new role and I could have an opportunity to

explore my mentoring practices and hopefully improve them. In my role as a teacher educator at the University of Hong Kong, I teach teacher preparation courses and mentor, supervise, and observe students during their teacher practicum in primary schools. I had been in this role for three years at the beginning of the partnership and had mentored many pre-service teachers. However, I felt I was still a novice and my practice could be improved.

The distance between Hong Kong and Ningbo meant that we had limited options to engage in the mentoring partnership “inside” class time through lesson support (Gardiner, 2017). Instead we engaged in a virtual mentoring partnership. This was made possible with the use of technology—we used weekly video chats, shared documents through e-mail, and regularly corresponded through instant messaging.

After every interaction, we would use Google Docs to record the date and main topics that had been discussed. We would then write down our reflections on the interactions. Both of us could see and comment on what the other had written. Google Docs became a shared space for us to deepen and engage in reciprocal reflections. We present our reflections in the following sections:

- Looking Forward, which discusses our reflections before the mentoring partnership,
- Looking In, which discusses our reflections during the mentoring partnership (drawing on the Google Docs’ data); and
- Looking Back and Forward Again, which shares our reflections after one semester of the mentoring partnership.

LOOKING FORWARD

Benjamin’s interest in the mentoring partnership

An important part of my role is the mentoring of my students during their teaching practicum. However, I have received little training or support in this role. I have regularly left students’ schools wishing I had said or done something differently. I noticed that I often dominated the lesson observation feedback sessions with my advice, leaving students with little opportunity to reflect on their own practices. Due to the related but distinct “hats” I wear—tutor (provider of knowledge and good practice), assessor (gatekeeper to the teaching profession), and mentor (guide, supporter, and prompter), I also felt that students tried to impress me and wouldn’t tell me if they were struggling as they worried that I would be disappointed in them or even reduce their grade (which I have never done). I have always wanted to find ways to improve my practice, but have had little opportunity to do so. I never prescribed to the “expert” and “novice” dichotomy inherent within the traditional mentoring relationship (Hobson et al., 2009), but I felt this was what was expected by my students and my role. By partnering with Melanie, I felt I would have the opportunity to learn more about my own practices and how they are perceived, outside of the hierarchical relationship of student/tutor. Melanie no longer had to worry about impressing me or about her grades. The use of Google Docs meant we would be able to share our thoughts and feelings after each interaction and that I could see the impact of my words and actions on her. Furthermore, I felt a sense of responsibility to Melanie. It was I who had introduced her to the school through the teaching abroad program and had encouraged her to work in the school.

Melanie's interest in the mentoring partnership

I wanted to be part of this mentoring partnership because I was tasked by the school with developing a new part of their English curriculum from scratch. I was given this role because the school leadership had seen my potential during the teaching abroad program I had participated in previously and felt I was capable. Since I was starting something new for the school in a new role as a recently graduated teacher, I felt I needed some support beyond the teachers in the school. Furthermore, the work environment is different from where I had received my education (Mainland China and Hong Kong, respectively). As a 'foreign teacher', I was unfamiliar with the local background and norms. I was both excited and anxious about this opportunity. Benjamin had been visiting and supporting the school for a few years, he has a better understanding of the school practices and personalities of the teachers there. I thought he could share with me his experience of communicating with them.

LOOKING IN

This was our first time engaging in a virtual mentoring partnership, so we had little knowledge of how the relationship would be different from our previous one. We both felt we were learning from the process—what and how to share and how to reflect. This was partly due to our conceptions of mentoring and our views towards each other's role.

I (Melanie) found it difficult to share things with Benjamin too frequently at the beginning as I was worried that I would be causing trouble. I believed that it was not one of his responsibilities to give me advice, since I had already completed my studies at the university and we no longer had a teacher-student relationship. I thought it would be a burden on Benjamin if he had to keep in contact with every single student he has taught.

At the beginning, I (Benjamin) felt that Melanie would probably want some space to discover herself and therefore did not contact her too frequently either. However, after she had not contacted me for two weeks, I realized that there was an expectation that I would initiate the interactions. While seeming like a traditional approach to mentoring, it turned out to be a good way to start the partnership. It seems that with virtual mentoring, it is important to check in regularly; if not, the partnership could quickly fade.

I (Melanie) gradually let go of my worries when I felt that Benjamin was taking more of the initiative to offer help and advice, such as asking how the activity we discussed went, or simply asking how my week had been.

As time went on, we adapted to each other and found ways to engage in the partnership that were comfortable for both of us. We both noticed and reflected on a change in the kinds of discussions we were engaged in, how the discussions were conducted, and who initiated them, as well as a power dynamic shift from one that was clearly hierarchical to one that was more equal.

The shift in our discussions were from predominantly instructional support during Melanie's initial teacher education to a combination of instructional and psychological support during the partnership (Richter et al., 2013). The following extracts, written after an instant-message communication about Melanie's weekend activities, illustrates this shift:

I feel comfortable with sharing my personal life with Benjamin and I feel this enhances our mentor-mentee relationship. . . . I feel this is slightly different from a teacher-student relationship? (Melanie)

It is nice to see what Melanie is doing outside of school. As she's far away from family and friends, her adjustment to life in Ningbo is important.
(Benjamin)

This was also evident in the kinds of advice I (Melanie) sought, as often there was a focus on professional relationships with colleagues within the school, particularly when there appeared to be a mismatch in beliefs. After observing some colleagues' lessons in order to provide professional development, I wanted clarification of my ideas and to seek advice on how to share my observations with my colleagues:

Why I asked for help is because I didn't know how I can change the teachers' belief, especially when the belief is the opposite of what I have learned in university. . . . It is very difficult to challenge one's teaching philosophy. (Melanie)

As I (Benjamin) was a third-party, Melanie felt comfortable honestly sharing her concern and seeking advice regarding her colleagues' practices. I felt I was able to guide her to consider different perspectives and help her construct her own knowledge. However, I did feel slightly uneasy after reading Melanie's reflections. I felt I had been too direct and put her in a difficult position with her colleagues. Google Docs allowed me to reflect on this and show camaraderie with Melanie when she expressed worry about talking to her colleague:

This is understandable. I am not brave enough either! We need to strike a balance and be collegial. Things like this take time. . . . This made me reflect on the advice I gave—perhaps I should be careful not to put you in an uncomfortable position. (Benjamin)

This experience reminded me (Benjamin) that I was still in a position of power and my advice may put Melanie in difficult situations. It is important to think carefully before offering advice.

We noticed that instructional support was focused mainly on the students' English abilities, teachers' expectations, and the contextual constraints of large classes (45+ students). An example of this was an activity involving group writing of menus with her Grade Three class. Melanie and her colleagues had felt it might be too challenging for the students; however, through discussion with Benjamin, she attempted it with positive results:

I was worried that the [menu] task was too difficult for Grade Three students. I was very proud of myself and my students for doing better than expected. (Benjamin)

I (Melanie) felt that without the partnership, I would not have attempted such activities with my students. Through discussing such issues, I was able to implement new teaching ideas and methods and gain greater confidence in my abilities.

The shift in power dynamics seemed to be the most striking thing we noticed. There was a shift from a more hierarchical transmission of teaching ideas and pedagogical skills as

tutor/student to a more equal and collaborative relationship that was seen to benefit both of us. After Melanie actively shared an activity she had done with her class and the work they had produced, we felt there was potential to share the work with Benjamin's class of pre-service teachers. Below are our thoughts after the video chat:

I like sharing students' work with Benjamin and I'm glad to know that he can use them as teaching materials. I think it is also good for student-teachers to see real students' works. They are also very funny and inspiring. (Melanie)

Seeing the students' work and how proud Melanie was of her students made me feel really positive about the changes she is making and the role she has taken in the school. I was naturally worried about her taking on curriculum development responsibilities, as I felt we do not prepare our graduates well enough for this. But seeing the students' work showed me that she is capable of it and we do more than we realise. . . . It was good for my students to see what a fresh grad can do given the right support and a more flexible teaching environment. (Benjamin)

As the partnership developed, we both started to learn more about ourselves and our roles. I (Melanie) continued to grow my confidence in teaching. While I (Benjamin) had a clearer understanding of how best to support and mentor Melanie.

LOOKING BACK AND FORWARD AGAIN

Benjamin's reflections on the partnership

After partnering with Melanie for one semester, I felt I gained greater self-awareness of the impact and power of my advice, the hierarchical nature of my current practices, and the need to move towards more dialogic and equal practices. I saw that Melanie benefited most when we were able to talk out the issues she found herself in rather than ones I identified. I also noticed that sometimes she was not looking for advice but instead a sense of camaraderie and understanding. Our interactions became less about tips and tricks for the classroom and more of a sharing of ourselves and our ideas.

I became more aware of the emotional and psychological part of teaching and the need to see Melanie holistically rather than just by her pedagogical practices. This is certainly something I will take into my role of mentoring pre-service teachers. Rarely, in the past, did I ask how my students were feeling and instead focused on how the lesson went. I will be mindful of this. I also saw the need to let students take ownership over their mentoring and ask them what they want to work on and improve rather than tell them what they did "wrong"—getting them to critique their own practice rather than critiquing it for them.

Melanie's reflections on the partnership

At the beginning, it was hard for me to accept the change from teacher-student to mentor-mentee because I felt like I was being reviewed and assessed like in university. But it changed when Benjamin showed that he was concerned about my personal feelings rather than just my teaching. I felt that he cared about my personal development and reflection. In university, tutors seem to only focus on how we achieve lesson objectives and show

evidence of student learning. Mental support and recognition from my mentor were the two biggest gifts from the mentoring partnership, which were both beyond my expectations.

As a teacher, I need to remind myself that I am the one who makes decisions; I am the one who knows the students best. In university, teaching a lesson might feel like a show to the teachers who observe the lessons. But being a partner in a mentoring relationship, I can make my students my number one priority; it is not about impressing the mentor. So even sometimes when I fail to achieve some of the lesson objectives that I have set, I am also happy and not afraid to share this with Benjamin, because it is a process of learning. This also gives me the bravery to try new things with my teaching. When I change my mindset, it gets easier to open up and share.

CONCLUSION

This has been a very worthwhile partnership that we will continue. We are aware that mentoring partnerships are complex and take time to develop and grow. We feel this partnership was beneficial as Melanie was able to get support in her new role that helped her adapt to its challenges, while Benjamin was able to reflect on and improve his mentoring practices. We believe these benefits were possible due to the voluntary nature of the partnership as well as to the fact that we both felt inexperienced in our respective roles and entered these roles with an openness to self-development.

We are aware that there are limitations to this kind of partnership, particularly with the use of technology. We both felt the opportunity to meet face-to-face regularly would enhance the partnership. However, in our case, technology made the partnership possible. We believe it is important for partners to check in with each other regularly to develop and maintain such partnerships over physical distances.

This experience shows the importance of creating partnerships between students, alumni, and staff to help cultivate mutual and reciprocal professional development. By building such partnerships with graduates who know the staff mentor and their programmes, staff can better understand their own practices and hopefully improve them. For recent graduates, these partnerships can help with their transition into their professions—a critical time when many feel anxiety and stress (Richter et al., 2013).

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

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