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THE CHALLENGES OF MENTORING: SOME OF THE TASKS, ROLES, AND DESIRED PERSONALITY FEATURES OF A MENTOR

Abstract: Provided they meet certain criteria, higher education teachers can also be mentors to students. The text focuses on the selection of the mentor, their tasks, which are listed in some legal documents at the University of Primorska, Faculty of Education. These documents refer to the production of the final work in the study, either at the first, the second, or the third level of the study. Based on the literature and the author's own practice some of the mentee's and mentor's expectations are highlighted. The central section of the paper is devoted to some roles the mentor performs, such as: provider of information and knowledge, adviser, expert, organiser, analyst, evaluator, assessor, advocate, reporter, coach, but also supervisor. Summed up after Mayer (204) some personality traits are also listed and include: intelligence, openness (extraversion), emotional stability, decisiveness, ethics, but also altruism and philanthropy. The paper concludes with the suggestion that mentors also need a special training for all the different tasks, roles, and challenges awaiting them in the mentoring process.

Keywords: mentor, mentee, roles of the mentor, legal documents, Univerza na Primorskem.

INTRODUCTION

With various changes in today's world of knowledge, mentors' tasks and responsibilities change as well, which is in accordance to different expectations of students. Mentoring has been becoming a very diverse and multifaceted activity and process, as the mentor must combine various roles and evolve through them.¹

The paper is focused on a higher education teacher in the role of a mentor and on the role of the mentor in students' final theses. At the University of Primorska, Faculty of Education these can be the graduation assignment, the graduation thesis, master's thesis, or doctoral dissertation. Legal acts of the University of Primorska, Faculty of Education (hereinafter: UP PEF) have been used as the basis.

1 If caricatured, it can be the role of an informer, but also that of a therapist.

Discussing mentoring, the role of the mentee, the student with whom the mentor the most frequently works individually, cannot be circumvented. In the paper other stakeholders (co-mentor/s, members of various committees, deans, employers, etc.) have been omitted.

The process of communication or interaction between the mentor and the mentee is one of the crucial elements of assessing the quality of lecturing or teaching at university level.

WHO IS A MENTOR?

Higher education teachers and associates can play the role of students' thesis mentors.²

McKimm & Jollie (2003, p. 21) state that:

"/.../ the concept of the mentor is that of a wise counsellor, a good friend, and a role model. The term mentor has traditionally been used in the business sector to describe powerful individuals who take a protégé under their wings with the aim of using their power and influence to shape and advance that person's career. When we use it, we imply something to do with the provision of support and being a suitable role model."

They (Ibid.) sum up that the key activities of a mentor can be described as providing academic, personal, and professional support to the mentee. Here we will also add administrative support to the mentee.

McKimm & Jollie (2003, p. 21) also wrote: "Mentors act as personal guides, often working alongside the student".

In the guidelines for theses (*Smernice za zaključna dela*, 2015) at the UP PEF four names are stated for the final product of the thesis according to the level of study and the range of the thesis is also determined. Final works at the UP PEF are:

- *Diplomska naloga* – graduation assignment, the final written product at a higher education professional study programme;
- *Diplomsko delo* – graduation thesis, the final written product at the first level of a university study programme;
- *Magistrsko delo* – master's thesis, the final written product at the second level of a university study programme; and
- *Doktorska disertacija* – doctoral dissertation, the final written product at doctoral study.

² The paper is mainly about the mentor and mentoring, although the same is also true of the co-mentor and co-mentoring.

At the first and the second level of schooling the final written product can be theoretical, practical or empirical, based either on quantitative or qualitative methodology. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology is also possible, which, however, is more frequent at doctoral study.

In consistence with graduation rules at the UP PEF (Pravila o diplomih Univerze na Primorskem Pedagoške fakultete, 2016) production of an artwork, didactic material, or of another product in relation with the area or content of study usually appears as a practical final product. A practical thesis can also be a design, implementation, and then evaluation of learning and teaching unit in which an innovative learning method, didactic approach or didactic means or tools have been used. Beside theoretical premises, a practical thesis also involves the description of the problem, the objectives, and research questions, followed by a presentation of the design, description of its implementation and finally the evaluation. Based on the interviews with students it is estimated that at undergraduate and master's level the students who are rather practically oriented and not really interested in scientific research see the greatest value and applicability in practical theses that can also be accompanied by an evaluation of the introduced novelty into practice. Close to such students could also be classroom research (Hopkins, 2008) or action research (Sagor, 2011), where, however, a definite methodology must also be taken into account.

The current researcher concludes, however, that theoretical and empirical theses are appropriate for the students who are fond of research work and possess well developed writing skills.

A theoretical thesis is about presentations and critical analysis of a theory about a certain phenomenon or a problem.

At the third level of study, at doctoral study, the thesis is in most cases empirical. It can also be theoretical, but at the UP PEF this is not frequently the case.

Empirical theses have a classical structure: in addition to the theoretical part there is a central empirical part, which includes the description of the problem, the purpose and the objectives, followed by the research questions and hypotheses, the description of methodology, and the results and discussion. The thesis closes with concluding findings. The references and annexes follow at the end.

At the UP PEF the guidelines for theses (Smernice za zaključna dela, 2015) include precise instructions describing components the thesis should contain and explain individual methodological concepts. Mainly due to insufficiently clarified methodology, students and mentors nevertheless continue to face problems.

It could be speculated that practical work is the easiest for students, being directly linked to practice. Theoretical work comes after. According to the current

researchers' experience empirical work is the most demanding, as it requires good theoretical premises and in addition to this appropriate and correct methodology, which is not very close to many mentees, not even to all mentors. Well-developed competences are expected both from the mentor and from the student in the area of the discussed topic as well as in the area of educational methodology, especially if the candidate chooses to write an empirical thesis.

Looking at the empirical research work itself, both the mentee and the mentor need good methodological knowledge, which has already been underlined, e.g.: in what ways the problem is defined, what the purpose and the objectives of the research are, how and what research questions are asked in qualitative research and how the hypotheses are designed in quantitative research, in what ways sampling is performed, how data are gathered, and diverse possibilities of processing the data. They must also know the specificities and possibilities of diverse types of quantitative and qualitative research studies.

For the attainment of the set hypotheses, for example, if they opt for quantitative educational research, the mentee expects from the mentor to suggest appropriate, usually multivariate data processing, even assistance in working with the statistical program and, of course with the interpretation of data as well. The mentor, on the other hand, expects the mentee to have already mastered all this and that he/she will only present his/her decisions and choices knowing how to justify them.

The current researcher believes that people must be aware of the fact that empirical research is neither simple nor easy and also not a quickly finished process and work if researchers wish for a quality concluding work. In the current researchers' opinion, the most difficult problem is if the student approaches the mentor with the wish to conclude and defend his thesis as quickly as possible instead of proposals concerning the topic and the type of the thesis.

CHOOSING THE MENTOR

Choosing a mentor is a highly personal thing, but a number of issues need to be considered whomever the mentee asks to be their mentor (McKimm & Jollie, 2003, p. 21). The current researcher believes it is good if the mentor and the mentee already know each other. Usually, it is the student who chooses the mentor, being guided in this by various motives – either by the course the mentor lectures, the attitude and the expectations the student has towards the mentor, etc. The mentor and the student can also start the joint work, but later one or the other withdraws from it. The reason a mentor does not accept a mentee can also lie in the problem of excess number of mentorships, as the mentor - if they are

self-critical - knows that quality work is not possible with more than a certain number of mentees.³

McKimm & Jollie (2003) highlight yet another criterion in the choice of the mentor, namely that the mentor needs to be accessible in both time and geography and respectful of confidentiality and autonomy.

The current researcher has experienced, in practice, that there are some, fortunately not many, mentees who speculate and calculate with which mentor they could most likely attain the desired title fast and easily, and who do not really care about the quality of their thesis. This will be neglected as this paper focuses rather on the tasks of the mentor.

TASKS OF THE MENTOR

Tasks of the mentor at the UP PEF are defined by various legal acts. Here we start from the UP PEF regulation that refers to the rules about written theses.

The graduation rules (Pravila o diplomu Univerze na Primorskem, Pedagoške fakultete, 2016) state who can be a mentor or co-mentor in higher education professional study programmes and in university study programmes, as well as the tasks that include feedback to the student about the appropriateness of the thesis regarding the methodology and content for the defence.

The rules of the preparation and defence of master's thesis at 2nd level study programmes (Pravilnik o pripravi in zagovoru magistrskega dela v študijskem programu 2. stopnje na Univerzi na Primorskem, 2015) include a special section titled *Mentor and co-mentor* consisting four articles. The conditions that they must meet as well as their tasks and competences are defined in the articles 9 to 12.

Among the tasks it is emphasised that the mentor must:

- monitor the work of the student;
- be available for consultations;
- be regularly in contact with the student;
- cooperate with the student in the exchange of information and views referring to the topic of master's thesis;
- take care of the appropriate professional level of master's thesis;
- guide the student and provide advice in the selection of sources;
- alert the student about any defects or inadequacies;
- judge when the master's thesis is ready for defense.

3 Article 19 of the rules on the preparation and defence of doctoral dissertation at the UP PEF (Pravilnik o pripravi in zagovoru doktorske disertacije) stipulates: "A mentor can simultaneously have maximum five doctoral candidates with doctoral theme approved by the University Senate."

The section (Article 11) also states that the mentor may require occasional oral or written reports about the progress and results of work from the mentee.

A sentence is also dedicated to the mentee saying the student must consult the mentor about the content, the method and the standards of the work (Ibid.)

Similarly, the rules on the preparation and defense of doctoral dissertation (Pravilnik o pripravi in zagovoru doktorske disertacije na Univerzi na Primorskem, 2005) define who can be a mentor and what conditions the person must meet. In relation to doctoral dissertation similar tasks are also stated as with master's theses. A further task is added (Article 23), that states the mentor is obliged to report on the progress of work on the dissertation to competent bodies and committees of the member of the University in the case the latter has expressed such requirement.

As previously mentioned, both in master's and doctoral studies withdrawal from mentoring is of course possible due to justified reasons.

THE MENTOR AND THE MENTEE

The current researcher has written that most frequently mentoring is individual work of the mentor with an individual mentee.⁴ In mentoring the mentor and the mentee are in a certain more or less personal relationship, they cooperate and communicate with each other, so between them more or less obvious conflicts may arise that result from differences in expectations. Different mentor's and mentee's expectations regarding the selection of methods with empirical thesis have already been mentioned, and there are also other mentor's and mentee's expectations where there are differences between them.

It can be summed up from literature (e.g. Light, Cox & Calkins, 2009) and from the current researchers' practice that students expect the mentor to:

- be quickly responsive to student's questions;
- quickly read their work and provide feedback well;
- be friendly, open and supportive;
- have relevant experience and knowledge of the research field;
- help them in defining the methodology, e.g. in defining the problem, the purpose, the objectives, and in the formulation of the research questions

4 To attain a graduation or master's certificate, at the UP PEF two or more candidates can also perform their work as a thematic group, each of them must, however, write and submit their own thesis (Pravila o diplomi Univerze na Primorskem Pedagoške fakultete, 2016; Pravilnik o pripravi in zagovoru magistrskega dela v študijskem programu 2. stopnje na Univerzi na Primorskem, 2015).

or hypotheses, in determining the sample, data processing, etc., as previously stated;

- help them locate resources;
- be involved and interested in their development, etc.

Certainly, mentors also have expectations from students (*ibid.*):

- to be independent;
- to study autonomously;
- to have a lot of initiative;
- to show uniqueness, originality, and creativity;
- to respect ethical principles;
- to be honest;
- to follow advice, especially when requested by the student;
- to know the rules of written language and suitable professional or scientific style of writing;
- to produce coherent and structured written work that is fairly polished;
- to be enthusiastic about the research, etc.

Given the different expectations, between the mentor and the student there must be good and primarily understandable communication acceptable by both. It has been said (McKimm & Jollie, 2003, p. 29) that poor communication can lead to mistakes, misunderstandings and time-wasting and can have a drastic effect on individual relationships, leading to general feelings of dissatisfaction which can result in poor cooperation. McKimm & Jollie (2003) also think, if their reasoning is applied to the mentor, that it is the mentor's responsibility to provide a secure atmosphere in which consultations may take place. They (*Ibid.*) also argue that it is very important that the mentor, acting in a support rather than a formal meeting capacity, has good communication skills because situations and topics that arise may require a discussion of problems of understanding, and may reveal embarrassment or confusion by the student.

SOME ROLES OF THE MENTOR

In view of the above tasks, which mentors have at the UP PEF and the various expectations of mentees, one can look at some of the roles in which mentors appear. What the current researcher has in mind here with the concept of role is a socially expected behaviour pattern usually determined by an individual's status in a particular society, behaviour, which is expected of an individual by those

for whom and with whom the person works (Goldhamer, Anderson & Krajewski, 1980, p. 16). Richards & Lockhart (2007) sum up that a role can be defined as the part taken by a participant in any act of communication. They (ibid.) add that roles have some common characteristics, because they involve:

- different kinds of work and different levels of responsibility;
- different kinds of relationship and different patterns of interaction and communication;
- and different power relationship.

Mentors similarly as teachers are (cf. Cencič, 2015) often in the roles of:

- informers, as they provide different kinds of information;
- teachers, as they must transfer a lot of knowledge;
- advisers, to know how to provide advice at different stages of the research process;
- experts or specialists for a certain area of research;
- methodologists, to know well educational methods of the research process;
- evaluators, to know how to evaluate and judge whether the thesis is appropriate and ready to be defended;
- analysts, to analyse the appropriateness of selected methods, presented results, interpretations, conclusions, etc.;
- assessors, to assess the thesis;
- companions, to monitor the work and progress of the mentee;
- workmates, to work with, occasionally also actively in writing the thesis;
- trainers, to point to any deficiencies and errors and to monitor the development of appropriate skills;
- facilitators, to encourage the continuation and completion of work;
- solicitors or advocates of the thesis e.g. before members of the committee;
- reporters about the work, and similar.

If the student is very autonomous, innovative, and competent in the area of the research and the topic, the role of the mentor can also be that of a coach or just of an “observer” of mentee’s work.⁵ A characteristic of coaching is leading without offering advice or providing recipes, it is more about listening, asking key questions that help individuals to arrive at the best solutions by themselves (Mentorstvo, 2008).

⁵ Although supposedly coaching has originally appeared just to promote practical skills, where the student or trainee is taken through the steps of learning how to do some action, and skills are developed mainly through practice (McKimm & Caroll Jollie 2003, p. 15).

One should also highlight the role of the supervisor and substantiate it a little more.

Speaking about supervision, different types are mentioned, for example: educational supervision (McKimm & Jollie, 2003), instructional supervision, clinical supervision (Goldhamer, Anderson & Krajewski, 1980), etc.

McKimm & Jollie (2003, p. 17) wrote: “There are many types of educational supervision, some of which are purely academic but many of which incorporate academic and/or pastoral tutoring. Supervisors and learners often have a close relationship [...]. Other supervision/learner relationships may be more distant.”

The authors believe (Ibid.) that the educational supervisor is some sort of consultant in the specialty or a principal in general practice. They say (Ibid.): “Educational supervisors are expected to oversee the education of trainees and to act as their mentors and are responsible for ensuring that trainees are making the necessary clinical and educational progress during the post.”

Here the current researcher sees the emphasis on the responsibility of the supervisor to bring the supervised person to the conclusion. As they wrote (Ibid., p. 3): “Support and guidance often involves giving advice, offering supervision, acting as an advocate or mentor and employing counselling skills [...]” Mentoring is thus also a kind of responsibility towards the supervisee, their defence, and of course advice and monitoring, what has already been emphasised in listing some of the roles of the mentor. Or, as we can read, in supervisory position, the collaboration is both an attitude and a repertoire of behaviours, where the outcome becomes a mutual plan of action (Treslan, 2008).

The authors (Goldhamer, Anderson & Krajewski, 1980, p. 16) also wrote: “The supervisor’s role is very often too generally defined.” If they transfer to university level, they can say, that it varies from a university system to a university system, from one faculty to another. University teachers can sum up that the supervisor can be referred to as a student’s helper, instructional specialist, master, coordinator, theme specialist, consultant, advisor, the responsible person, as already mentioned, assessor of student’s work and the similar. The mentor must support independent and autonomous learning and the work of the student, but also take care of cooperation and adequate relationship with the mentee. They must always be maintaining the balance between support and independence (Light, Cox & Calkins, 2009). Since mentors are professionals, it would be prudent for any supervisory assistance to emphasize collaboration and be as non-directive as possible (Treslan, 2008).

In the supervision process the stages or phases of supervision process are emphasised. In this section, however, the emphasis is primarily on the role of a supervisor / adviser that is often performed by the mentor, especially when the mentor and the mentee are both involved in mutual interaction and two-way

communication (Kobolt & Žorga, 1999, p. 135). Treslan (2008) highlights the specific components of supervision: interpersonal skills, knowledge and task area or topic. In the context of interpersonal skills one can list, for example: listening, clarifying, encouraging, reflecting, presenting, problem solving, negotiating, directing etc. (ibid.)

If summed up after Kobolt & Žorga (1999) this is transferred to the role of mentor, the mentor's main goal is to enable feedback and mentee's academic development, while the objectives are the following:

- To enable the mentee feedback on their work, putting the mentee “in front of a mirror” to see what they are really doing. This might be different from what the mentee thinks they are doing.
- The mentee must receive regular feedback, which for them is an impulse, strong enough to start the self-improving process.
- The mentor must facilitate the diagnosis and solving problems that arise in the process of the final work.
- The mentor helps the mentee develop the skills of diverse strategies of producing final works, while the mentee can try different strategies and obtain feedback on them.
- The mentor also helps the mentee develop positive self-image of continuous professional, academic, and career development.

Encouraging a dialogue (Light, Cox & Calkins, 2009) between a mentor and a mentee is also extremely important. Light, Cox & Calkins (Ibid., p. 167) wrote:

”Supervision is predominately about a dialogue. There is a need for constant adjustment to what each participant is saying, and the balance between giving and taking, listening and talking is crucial if the session is not to become a lecture in disguise. Although supervisors can and do learn a great deal from supervisions, the dialogue is not simply a friendly conversation.”

Probably the mentor is often really also in the role of supervisor, as they often have an additional formal role in monitoring progress (McKimm & Jollie, 2003, p. 21). In practice the mentor performs all this and more often also establishing a genuine relation of friendship with the mentee, which lasts and continues even after the end of mentoring.

Against this background, mentors too would probably need special training for all the different roles and challenges awaiting them in the mentoring process.⁶

⁶ Similar wish has also been highlighted by supervisors, educational supervisors must have courses on supervision in order to apply clinical supervision (Kayıkçı, Yılmaz, & Şahin, 2017).

In addition to the need for formal training we also emphasise personality traits and characteristics the mentor should possess.

THE PERSONALITY TRAITS OF THE MENTOR

Appropriate personality traits of the mentor are also very desirable and the current researcher thinks that they are also expected by mentees in the mentoring process. The mentor should be open to suggestions, ideas, and wishes of the mentee, and should not doggedly persist in their views, and above all, they must not be confined to themselves and into their perhaps even obsolete knowledge. The mentor must be ready to learn too.

Here is the summary of some of the personality traits that refer to successful leaders, and the current researcher considers them to be relevant for a mentor as well. Mayer (2004) lists the following personality traits:

- Intelligence as speed and adequacy of adaptation to changes.
- Openness (extroversion), which is the foundation of communicativeness, sociability, emotional expressivity, indispensable in the establishment of interpersonal relationships and cooperation, and strongly linked to the acceptance of diversity.
- Emotional stability, which prevents long lasting extreme expression of emotions and causes a person to return to a neutral emotional state relatively quickly. It works against stress, to which also mentors, not just mentees, are exposed.
- Creativity (and innovation) as the capacity of growing beyond what has already been created.
- Expressivity as emitting comprehensible, interesting, and convincing messages.
- Empathy as the ability of identification with others. Mayer (Ibid., p. 57) believes that empathy is given by nature and that it cannot be learnt. It can be summarised that empathy is especially important when the positions of the mentor and of the mentee are diametrically opposed.
- Positive self-image. Mayer (Ibid.) wrote: “Only a person who trusts in himself, who is predominantly satisfied, self-critical, and committed to progress, can successfully lead others, because a negative attitude towards oneself excludes affection for others as a basis for cooperation.”
- He suggests determination as the next personality trait, highlighting courage in this. He believes no one is courageous in all cases, as a certain decision can represent a huge emotional burden for someone whereas someone else will act indecisively.

- Ethical principles are, according to Mayer (Ibid.), the core of functioning leading to value – valence – the human. They include, however, also the feeling for good/bad, justice/injustice, etc. that can be learnt. Besides, they are also crucial for interpersonal relations. He adds that being a good human is the most relevant goal of ethical development. The current researcher completely agrees with this; acting ethically is also one of the most important characteristics of a good mentor.
- Mayer (Ibid.) also states altruism and philanthropy. This, transferred to mentoring, can be summed up for the mentor who stays in the background and only comes to the front if necessary, always taking care of the mentee. In this he highlights social responsibility, which is the personal belief that assistance must always be provided to the one(s) who depend(s) on us.

CONCLUSION

With this paper the current researcher wishes to emphasise that the tasks, expectations, and roles of the mentor are changing in the quickly changing educated society and welfare society as well. Mentoring has been becoming a demanding activity and process. The mentor no longer performs just one role, but must swiftly switch from one role into another and be competent for quite a number of diverse roles. Some have also been highlighted in the paper. The roles can cover some aspects of support: academic, professional, personal and administrative support.

The current researcher believes, however, that mentoring also requires certain personality traits of the mentor, among which one can emphasise ethics – the mentor as model or example to the mentee because of various unethical practices in higher education.

The current researcher concludes, with the words of McKimm & Jollie (2003, p. 21), that relationships usually “flourish when the mentor and the mentee have compatible expectations from the relationship and there is evidence that two elements which contribute to successful mentoring are mentors who are trained in mentoring skills and where the aims and outcomes of the mentoring process are clearly defined and agreed.”

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