

Mentoring as a Learning Process – relationships and communication

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Keywords: *mentoring, Emotional Intelligence, Spiritual Intelligence, relationships, communication, learning, culture*

Introduction

The article supports that mentoring, as a lifelong changing process, needs to take into account today's academic knowledge workers as continuous learners. Apart from associating academic mentoring with organisational learning, mentors should also reflect on the nature of intelligence(s). The mentoring process, as facilitator of personal and professional development in Higher Education, needs to build on Logical Intelligence (IQ) but most importantly on *Emotional Intelligence* (EQ) and *Spiritual Intelligence* (SQ). However these approaches are not a panacea for all pitfalls in the mentoring process because there are also relationships and communication barriers that might have both intended and unintended consequences for a successful outcome.

Mentoring in Higher Education

Mentoring and coaching (or skills development) approaches are increasingly required in organisational work and academic environments. The frequent job changes and alterations in knowledge-driven work procedures demand an ongoing adaptation to new skills and new working cultures. The speedy work processes together with the technological consequences in work tasks and personal life impose changes to the ways we think, react and behave in everyday and virtual life. Reality orientation can create conflicts and communication barriers because identity and personality change, whilst new work tasks might be fundamentally different from previous, and often more demanding.

Mentoring in HE, in the sense of enabling individuals to experience a smooth(er) transition to new forms of academic life, has increasingly become an adaptation requirement. Internationalization of knowledge and globalization of academic degrees require many changes in the ways university campuses and departmental life

are organised and on the ways teaching and learning are perceived. The growth in teleworking, virtual university teaching and cyber-learning, coupled with the personal consequences of such new forms of work and learning, sometimes impose an inevitable “corrosion of character” (see Sennett, 1998). In part, this “corrosion” is due to the reduced opportunities for socialisation and, of course, socialisation is a prerequisite for knowledge sharing (see e.g. Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Von Krogh et al, 2000). Mentors, as part of a socialising procedure therefore play a most important part in orientating newcomers at work through processes of internalisation and externalisation of knowledge creation and sharing.

Mentoring as Knowledge Enabler in Organisational Learning

Mentoring is associated with individual and organizational development. Knowledge enabling approaches in an organizational context have tackled the issues of familiarization with work processes within a framework of capturing tacit and explicit knowledge and training procedures (see e.g. Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Von Krogh et al, 2000). Thus, a newcomer to a working culture is considered a learner, since a specific profession has to be learned by acquiring general factual knowledge and social skills needed in the particular professional domain. Eriksson & El Sawy (1995), after a large survey they carried out involving many organizations, mention that strategies to introduce organizational culture and knowledge to newcomers include to assign him/her to a mentor, to give the new employee small and easy tasks to do first, and to offer internal developmental programmes and courses. These strategies were considered effective, but the following strategies were also mentioned as equally important:

- (i) getting the opportunity to learn to know colleagues in more unofficial settings (socialization);
- (ii) external training and development courses;
- (iii) working as apprentice.

Additionally, strategies that were used in the organizations and have been considered effective were showing what to do (close to apprenticeship), offering "I am a good guy"-image, so someone might go to ask (mentor-type) and showing personal interest for socialization. (Eriksson & El Sawy, 1995).

An academic environment is, like any organization, a place of work where there are missions, values, cultures, short term and long term goals. Mentoring remains a standard procedure followed by academic departments, aimed at the familiarisation of newcomers with other people, work tasks, procedures and schedule times, teaching and research activities and the physical and virtual environment itself. On the other hand, Higher Education, while sharing a number of similarities, differs from industrial work in the sense that academics have to deal with pressure from society and industry to produce academic degrees. Therefore, any new academic lecturer

faces the opportunities of a new job but set within a microcosm of worries, demands of other individuals and a wide workload of tasks.

Newcomers and Mentors in Higher Education

The first period of newcomers to the academic environment might prove critical for their adaptation, competence and well being at work. They might or might not be very motivated to lecturing and researching, while their problem solving approaches might sometimes be considered as rather intuitive; or might be extracted - sometimes successfully- from a variety of diverse paradigms. In many cases they might follow their own cultural teaching tradition or adopt the stereotype of their lecturers in their recent student years. In addition to training programmes, a more experienced person called 'mentor' is assigned to assist in orientation for socialization, internalization and externalization of knowledge through interaction among other academic staff.

The 'non-standardized' to the departmental culture, idiosyncratic attitudes and teaching styles of new lecturers sometimes alienate students and colleagues, who are familiar with different patterns of behaving, learning and teaching. This potentially leads to conflicts with the mentor or support tutor and early job dissatisfaction for new staff. Whilst newcomers are creative, enthusiastic and take initiative relating to their role and new tasks, they might sometimes boycott actively or passively the work procedures and could not accept constructive feedback. They might consider feedback as insult to their own knowledge and skills; often are very defensive or aggressive.

For instance - depending on the knowledge background - they might think that a report with constructive feedback on a teaching observation might represent disrespect for their expertise or a threat in the current work position. At the other extreme - depending on the cultural background - complete silence and obedience to whatever the mentor says might be the best approach to seem likeable and therefore acceptable at work. Consequently, there may be no engagement in discussion or stating critical opinions and there might be a gradual withdrawal from other academic activities.

Mentoring, Human Intelligence and Communication Relationships

Although intuitive ways for conveying knowledge in the context of organisational learning are important, still the criteria for successful employment depend on engagement and communication with other people at work. Moreover, except associating mentoring and coaching with organizational development, mentoring and coaching should closely be linked to personal development through the lens of *emotional intelligence* and *spiritual intelligence*. Both forms of intelligence share the belief that Logical Intelligence or IQ is not enough any more to assess and

understand human capabilities and skills. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is core to and a prerequisite of, relating to others, understanding others, having empathy and sympathy while discussing and interacting (see Goleman, 1995; Goleman, 1998).

Spiritual intelligence (SQ) is said to be the *ultimate* intelligence, set to be defined as a quotient for more conceptual and cognitive levels of thinking and reacting. Through, or by using SQ one learns to understand a person *holistically*; by consideration of personal values and cognitive or thinking processes in order to explain how to make decisions and react appropriately in judgement and reflection situations (see Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Personal values and “cosmotheories” will not be considered favourably in academic settings where an *acculturation* process is governed by the department's strategy. It will, however, be impossible to integrate and realize the EQ and SQ aspects in academic mentoring, as long as there is an emphasis to a pre-defined departmental working culture and to a pre-determined national Higher Education curriculum, which does not cater for creativity and innovation approaches in teaching and learning.

The founders and supporters of EQ (Goleman, 1995; Goleman, 1998) and SQ in particular (Zohar & Marshall, 2000) support that human multiple intelligence (Gardner, 1993a) could only be explained sufficiently when associated to spiritual intelligence, because this is the base for any intelligence to grow. Albeit there is not concrete research evidence to support their proposition, EQ and SQ have found a wide application domain in world-wide organizational settings. The combination of IQ and EQ (Elias & Arnold, 2003), for instance, is considered as the prerequisite for building smart, non-violent and finally emotionally intelligent schools.

Any person, being a learner, mentor or mentee in HE should be acquainted with the principles of EQ and SQ since the mentoring process – like reflective practice in teaching and learning - emphasizes individual development through self-knowledge of own strengths and weaknesses. In so acting, critical awareness can be exercised and opportunities for relating to colleagues and understanding others' worldviews (where IQ plays an equally important role!) can be increased. Hence, improved communication and opportunities to bring about changes and reforms in HE increase.

Limits and Limitations of Mentoring

IQ, EQ and SQ are deeply rooted to the knowledge, communication culture, ethics and social background of the individual. Nevertheless, feelings, language and culture might serve *intentions* that cannot facilitate communication in mentoring relationships. A mentor cannot simply foretell or advise on the consequences. The notion of 'intention' has been a philosophically dominant approach, becoming popular and influential when it comes to hidden agendas and unseen constraints.

Such constraints can be, for instance, religious and national differences, age and gender differences, humour perception and so on.

Many studies place obstacles for mentoring when it is in the context of intercultural negotiations and especially when collectivism-individualism are not the paths for integrative agreements (Cai et al, 2000; Drake, 2001). According to classical findings based on researching cultural consequences by comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations (Hofstede, 2001), masculine/feminine values and collectivist/individualist cultures influence the organizational structure and the different ways of work.

The use of humour, for instance, could have both intended and unintended consequences. A number of studies (Lynch, 2002; Martin, 2004) about the use of humour at work indicate that it can help tension and distressing. Non-thoughtful jokes and comments, however, might seriously damage the relaxing atmosphere, and the image of the person who makes the comments might generate distrust and sometimes group conspiracy. The semantics and pragmatics of language are unpredictable when it comes to written and oral communication; and abuse and annoyance are difficult to detect, especially in their verbal form. Work and relations dependence makes people vulnerable and they might not appreciate or even recognise the hidden respect or cultural perception in a humorous comment or the objectivity/subjectivity embedded in a good will joke.

Unintended consequences might also derive from the hidden word ambiguity or term polysemy of a language's use in a particular group culture, and might result in painful experience. No matter how much good will you have and no matter how well you know even your own culture, ambiguities exist in communication and can change minds, moods and perceptions quickly. The author has been in a very awkward position apologising to colleagues, project partners and mentor for - indeed unintended (!)- rudeness and ageism. Fortunately and *intentionally*, humour expressed by both sides proved to be a catalyst to improve the communication, but unfortunately, that only happened after the initial unpredictable reactions.

While being a new academic lecturer and participating in a course design for a Trans-European MSc among five different European Universities, a very uncomfortable situation arose. Having been brought up in Greece and knowing that respect means a great deal to Greek academics, I thought that I should - in words - show my respect. Since a picture is worth a thousand words, figure 1 depicts the unnecessary, unwanted but very useful after-all, experience! Participating in a tele-conference among Spain, United Kingdom, Greece and Finland's HE institutes, being in the physical environment of Greece and using the semantics of English language to communicate with older and more experienced colleagues from other European Universities, is not an easy situation after all!

SOME UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF VERBAL COMMUNICATION

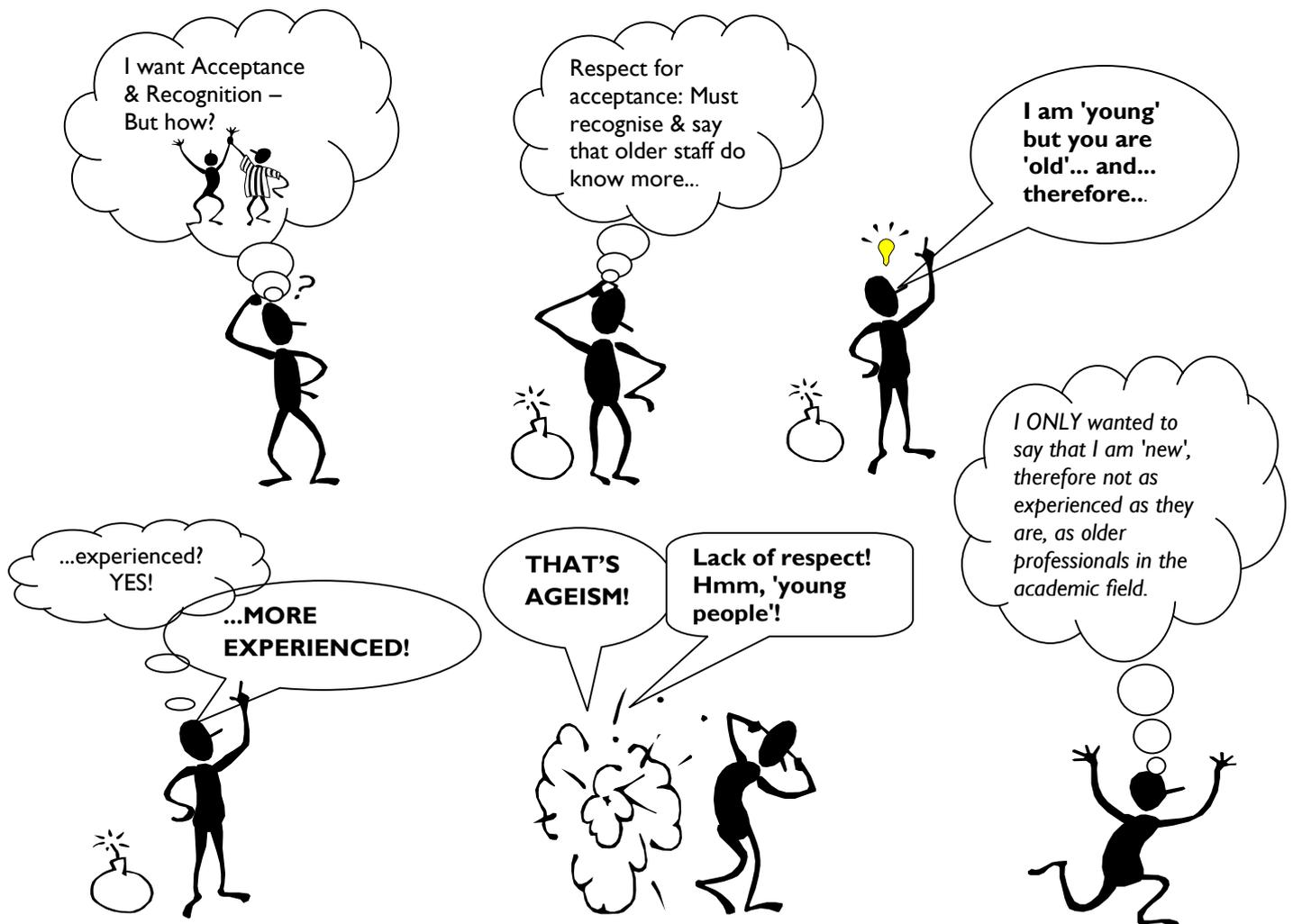


Fig. 1: Simple misunderstanding (!?) among colleagues: Different age academic groups, ambiguous language semantics and cultural barriers

It is doubtful if any mentor would think to inform a new colleague on the unintended consequences of verbal communication. In academic settings though, the multicultural, multilingual and multinational aspects of communication become increasingly important especially since open and distance learning, e-learning and tele-working have broadened the boundaries of academic activities and staff recruitment. Associating mentoring to EQ and SQ does offer a holistic picture of the person; but does it really equip the mentor with sufficient guidance and does it empower the mentee with self-knowledge and communication skills?

Concluding Remarks and Further Thoughts

New academic lecturers – like students - come from diverse knowledge, cultural and national backgrounds, and scientific disciplines. In addition to all the personal

adaptation problems and often non-compromisable work rules, new academic staff might be used to different interaction patterns. Mentoring can be an invaluable approach to inform on the departmental policies and organizational communication culture, but it cannot work miracles. A number of approaches place mentoring in the context of organisational learning but very rarely mentoring is placed in the context of communication and human intelligence, EQ and SQ in particular.

Mentoring can also be viewed through the lens of culture recognition or/and acculturation, and through conflict management resolution. On the other hand, a mentor might not even perceive the barriers of language, culture and the specifics of verbal and non-verbal communication of the mentee's personality and social background. Cultural recognition or acculturation processes in multilingual, multicultural and multinational departments depend on the policies, organizational culture and strategies. Learning styles and inclusive instruction are, nowadays, viewed more from a multicultural perspective, while new academics are required to interact in a scheme of intellectual, professional and ethical development.

Occasionally, however, mentoring has and should have its limitations. Perhaps in an academic environment, a mentor should not deal with *everything* that appears to be a difficulty for the mentee. Convincing arguments, brainwashes, propaganda, personal goals and intentions, personal offences, compromisable and non-compromisable changes, limitations of personal growth and willingness or not to change, simply cannot and should not all be at the focus of mentoring. Mentoring has limitations and it is situation-specific. Moreover, depending on the situation and the context it is used, mentoring could alleviate problems or choose to ignore them consciously. Though associated to the development of the mentee's emotional and spiritual intelligence worlds and communication skills, mentoring can no longer help when it comes to intentional actions of defensive and attacking strategies, because a mentor is simply not a know-all or all-action and advice person. There might be situations where the mentees should take sole responsibility to support their stance, positional statements and actions. These situations should serve as an opportunity for the newcomers to demonstrate their flexibility, personal maturity and growth and ability to resolve problems independently and not being over-dependent on the mentor.

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