Knowledge construction and personal relationship:

insights about a UK university mentoring and coaching service

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Abstract

This article examines interview data from twelve mentors/coaches and eight of their clients, in order to explore a mentoring and coaching service among UK university staff. Both mentors/coaches and clients were administrative or academic employees of the Institute of Education or affiliated colleges at London University, UK. Their roles related to the administration for, or leadership of, teaching programmes as well as educational research and consultancy projects pursued by the Institute. The mentors/coaches in this Service aimed to construct or co-construct knowledge with their clients rather than to transmit advice to them. In this article, the author explores the learning of mentors/coaches and clients, conceptualizing their 'co-construction' of knowledge as either collaborative construction or as participation. The link is examined between the construction of knowledge and personal relationship, considering the personal relationship both of mentor/coach with clients, and among mentors/coaches themselves. Additionally, the author draws on the divide alluded to by Fielding (1996) between functional and personal. She concludes by considering implications from the findings about mentoring and coaching. Emphasised is their potential to play a subversive role within the established functional systems of an institution, if mentoring and coaching prioritise personal relationship.

In this article, I draw on the investigation of a UK mentoring and coaching service among university staff, in which mentors/coaches aim to construct or co-construct knowledge with their clients rather than to transmit advice to them. I explore the learning of clients, and also of mentors/coaches in the Service, in particular conceptualizing their 'co-construction' of knowledge as either collaborative construction or as participation. I further examine the links between the construction of knowledge and personal relationship, considering personal relationship both of each mentor/coach with their clients, and among the mentors/coaches themselves. I conclude by considering implications from the research findings about mentoring and coaching.

For my exploration of knowledge construction and personal relationship, I draw on the divide alluded to by Fielding (1996) between teaching as a functional activity inspired by institutional organisation and teaching that develops as part of a personal relationship that is 'much more reflexive, much more informing of, and informed by, relationships' (p. 4). Fielding emphasises how in personal relationship we are free to be 'more fully ourselves, more fully human' and therefore potentially more open to creative individual construction and reciprocal co-construction of knowledge:

> In functional relations we relate to other people in terms of roles and specific
> purposes… it is these functional relations that comprise society (as opposed to
> community) and make up the reality of economic, social and political life... It is in
> personal relations, in relations of community (rather than society), characterised by
> the principles of freedom and equality within the context of care, that we can be
> and become most fully ourselves, most fully human. Here our relations with others
> are open and expansive ... (p. 51)

Founders of the Institute of Education's Coaching and Mentoring Service state that '*learning* is always the focus' in mentoring/coaching and that constructivist approaches to learning are 'more likely to support effective learning in coaching and mentoring' (p.6). This contrasts with 'instruction' approaches, in which skills or advice are transmitted wholesale to clients by the mentor/coach (Carnell, MacDonald, & Askew, 2006). The constructivist approaches the founders describe are based on, firstly, the 'construction model', which focuses on clients' agency as they take the lead in making sense of their own experiences; and, secondly, on the 'co-construction model', in which clients actively construct knowledge reciprocally through dialogue with others.

The concept of learning as construction alluded to by the founders of the Service has its roots in Piaget's (1970) description of the learner. The learner is as an active agent who pieces together evidence from previous knowledge and experience to make ever increasing sense of the world and take increasingly wise actions in that world. When learners construct knowledge they are often reflecting on pre-existing conceptions and taking an active role in reconstructing these. This view contrasts with the view expressed famously by Skinner (1954) and colleagues who emphasise that learning is a behavioural response to specific stimuli provided by the environment. This behaviourist view is associated with learners' accumulation of skills and retention of information given to them intact, by someone else. In contrast, Shepard (1991) describes the details of construction in these terms:

> Students take in information, interpret it, connect it to what they already know, and, if necessary, reorganize their mental structures to accommodate new understandings.

Learners construct and then reconstruct mental models that organize ideas and their interrelation. (p. 8)

Co-construction, as referred to by the founders of the Mentoring and Coaching Service, alludes to individual construction or sense-making, which happens when the learner engages with another or others. Watkins (2003) calls this 'building knowledge as part of doing things with others' (p. 11). In this sense, a co-constructive learning session is one where *collaboration* happens, in which all parties assist in sense-making. Co-constructed knowledge can be the outcome of dialogue in which all participants feel that their contributions are valued. The prefix *co-* does suggest the construction being made together, jointly, reciprocally, as a pair or group, rather than in subservience to another or others. When co-construction is at its most mutually beneficial collaborative learners complement and build on each others' views to construct shared knowledge.

The concept of co-construction can also be associated with sociocultural theories of learning which stretch the idea of collaborative-construction-with to participation-with. In these theories, learning itself tends to be conceived more as an *action* of participation than as a construction of some*thing* (Sfard, 1998). Edwards (2005) suggests two broad, yet sometimes overlapping, strands of ideas, each of which view evidence of learning as learners' appropriate *participation in* collaborative knowledge construction, rather than as the collaborative knowledge construction itself (pp. 51-54). One strand emphasises that learning by participating occurs when the self adapts to different social situations, as described, for example, in the work of Lave and Wenger (2001), Rogoff (1995) and Wells (1999). These authors view learning as occurring in social situations through interaction. On the other hand, the Vygotskian strand emphasises shared cultural

mediation as the means to transform the world, which is the purpose of learning, with the collective self inside the individual being the most important agent in learning and thus in transforming the world.

Herein I draw on interview data collected from eight clients of the Institute's Coaching and Mentoring Service and from twelve mentors/coaches. I use these data in an attempt to unpick the concepts of knowledge construction and, particularly, co-construction, to ascertain what these concepts mean in workplace mentoring/coaching interactions (both terms, *mentoring* and *coaching*, are used because of mixed conceptions about their distinctions). I also draw on interview data to reflect on the role played by personal relationship in mentoring/coaching within a functional workplace system, and the potential contribution of this personal relationship both to knowledge construction and to the transformation, rather than the preservation of that workplace.

Potential restrictions to learning through mentoring/coaching

All mentors/coaches and clients in this study were administrative or academic employees of the Institute of Education or affiliated colleges at London University, UK. Their roles related to the administration for, or leadership of, teaching programmes as well as educational research and consultancy projects pursued by the Institute. The aim of the Institute's Coaching and Mentoring Service was to offer all employees confidential mentoring/coaching sessions focused on work issues. Related goals were to help them explore possible choices and actions and to facilitate understanding and new insights about themselves at work. Establishing the Service involved the Head of Staff Development at the Institute identifying a team of twelve mentors/coaches including both academic and administrative staff. The Head of Staff Development then became

responsible for pairing any clients who applied to the Service with an appropriate mentor/coach from the team. The Service was advertised through posters across the Institute which invited employees to apply confidentially for a mentor/coach.

Mentors/coaches working within the Service assume that the key role of mentor/ coach is not to transmit expertise, but rather to facilitate a learning conversation in order to help the staff member to make sense of their own situation, with the ultimate aim of improving his or her own experience in the workplace, potentially even transforming it. Articulating with this role definition are certain assumptions about the mentoring/ coaching process, expressed in the work of Carnell et al. (2006), the founders of the Service. They suggest that it include maintaining a conducive learning environment, clarifying personal objectives relating to work based learning, joint planning and questioning, collaboration, risk taking and reflection, reviewing the effects of change in the workplace and promoting self awareness (p. 4). The authors insist that mentoring/coaching sessions include a cycle of reviewing a client's workplace situation, learning through new insights about the workplace situation, applying the learning to improve the situation in original ways and reviewing the learning conversation itself.

These assumptions reflect the constructivist conception of learning previously mentioned, as the mentor/coach mediates between the clients and the situation they have described, supporting them to negotiate meanings within their situation and to draw on the most effective resources available to work out original solutions for their difficulties. These assumptions, and the practice to which they lend themselves, contrast steeply with mentoring/coaching whose aim is the transmission of expertise from mentor/coach to client. Examples in the research literature suggest that this latter approach can lead to

highly directive mentoring/coaching, which at times can be destructively restricting (Rodger, 2006). Where this is the case, clients learn to undervalue their own agency in producing change and seek to appease the mentor/coach rather than negotiate a situation with them.

The Institute's Service rejects the transmission model of teaching in mentoring/ coaching as too restrictive. Mentors/coaches' skill in drawing on clients' agency and negotiating meanings and solutions with them is seen as fundamental to clients' successful learning. However, participants in the Service grapple with a different set of restrictions to learning manifested in assumptions held by the institutional workplace in which the Service operates. Whilst the Service was set up as institute-wide, available to all employees with the support of the Director of the Institute, institutional assumptions about relationships differ radically from the personal assumptions underpinning the work of the Service. Strategically, the Institute depends on functional relationships with market-driven intentions and the relationship hierarchy that accompanies these. Because of this, personal relationship, and the equality this implies, is not strategically prioritised across the Institute. Participants in the Service, therefore, may experience a tension between the hierarchical assumptions of the *Gesellschaft*, or wider workplace, and the equitable assumptions of the *Gemeinschaft*, or personal community, embodied in the Mentoring and Coaching Service (Sergiovani, 1994). This tension implies restrictions to the co-construction of knowledge. MacMurray reminds us:

> Equality is a condition of freedom in human relations. For if we do not treat one
> another as equals, we exclude freedom from the relationship. Freedom, too,
> conditions equality. For if there is a constraint between us then there is fear; and
> to counter that fear we must seek control over its object, and attempt to

subordinate the other person to our own power. Any attempt to achieve freedom without equality, or to achieve equality without freedom, must, therefore, be self-defeating. (cited in Fielding, 1996, p. 10)

Evans et al. (2006) illustrate the manifestations of some hierarchical, rather than equal, workplace relationships which might restrict freedom in learning within the workplace. These include low trust relationships, management systems that emphasise command and control rather than support, an underlying belief that people are disposable and not in need of nurturing, and a culture of blame where mistakes are punished, not learned from. MacMurray's words (cited earlier) seem to suggest that where such factors are at play in the workplace, freedom is curtailed. Equality in relationship, often associated with personal relationship, is more likely to allow the freedom necessary for the construction of knowledge.

A partial solution to the threats posed by hierarchical relationships in the workplace is the use of peer coaching/peer mentoring in the Coaching and Mentoring Service. The first employees selected to 'train' as mentors/coaches for the Institute's Service included a range of professional positions within the organisation (although no professors took part), which meant that non-hierarchical matches could be made between mentors/coaches and clients. Among the team of mentors/coaches were included the Head of Staff Development, four lecturers and seven administrators. Care is taken when clients are matched to mentors/coaches. For example, no client is linked to anyone connected to his or her everyday work and its management. Clients who hold administrative posts are sometimes matched to mentors/coaches who also hold administrative posts. The difference between client and mentor/coach lies in the latter skilfully managing the learning conversation instigated by the client, not in the mentor/

coach's superior professional status.

The research design

This research was commissioned in January 2007, originally as an evaluation of ways in which the Institute's Mentoring and Coaching Service was supporting work based learning. Methodologically this study had an interpretive framework, in that the social phenomenon of mentoring/coaching is '… given meaning by those who define and make [it] explicit. Thus different people will have different subjective understandings of social phenomena' (Everitt et al., 1992, p. 7). My own influence in the way knowledge about mentoring/coaching was ultimately constructed, as manifested in this writing, is also significant.

The principal method for collecting data was individual interview. Twelve mentors/coaches and eight clients were interviewed between January and June 2007. Interviews were chosen as the most effective means of making sense of individuals' learning and relationships during their mentoring/coaching experiences. By prompting and listening in the role of interviewer I aimed to help interviewees explore their insights as richly as possible. Each interview lasted about one hour. Interviewees were given a choice of quiet rooms and their seating in them. The calm and reflective tenor of the interviews allowed them to become a time for reflective sense-making. The following prompts made up the interview schedule for all clients and mentors/coaches of the Service: What did you want to get out of being involved with the Service? In what ways did you achieve the learning you hoped for? Can you give me one particularly good example of some learning that happened? What facilitated that learning? What hindered it? How could the Service be improved generally, to support work based learning better?

However, individual interviews were stand-alone and out of context. I entered the interviews with minimal prior knowledge of the person interviewed and the processes they had been through. This may have limited my capacity to make sense of what they said. In a future study of this nature, more extensive and perhaps repeated interviews might be more productive. It would also be beneficial to interview a larger number of clients who had taken more than one or two mentoring/coaching sessions. At the time of the current study there were no more such clients to ask. This addition might also lead to more extensive insight into the issue of whether the number of sessions taken was related to clients' observations about learning.

Interviewees were contacted by email or by phone after the head of Staff Development had asked their permission to be contacted. No mentors/coaches declined to be interviewed, and these included the Head of Staff Development, four lecturers, five administrators and two other members of staff in advisory roles, including one male. Three of the mentors/coaches had previous experience of mentoring/coaching, but all had been with the Service since its inception, when monthly training sessions began in November 2005.

Eight of the twelve clients agreed to be interviewed. One client declined to be interviewed because of an accidental breech in confidentiality, in which her name was exposed to some other clients; two other clients declined because they felt that the Service did not suit their purposes, and one did not explain why she declined. Those who declined included three research officers and one lecturer. It may be that, had these clients been interviewed, more negative aspects of the Service would have been exposed:

All but one of those who agreed to be interviewed were positive about their learning through the Service.

Of the eight clients who agreed to be interviewed, all were women even though there are no obvious reasons why the Service should be used more by females. Six clients came from within the Institute of Education and two from affiliated colleges of the University of London. The professional roles of the clients included seven administrative posts and one research officer and among the administrative posts represented, four were senior posts. Each had participated in between one and six mentoring/coaching sessions. The Service operated in such a way that a single one-hour session was considered sufficient to address certain issues. For others, two or more, up to a limit of six, might be desirable. Two interviewees had only wanted the one session and only one had wanted the full six. One client had decided to take two sessions. Of the remaining four, two had experienced three sessions and the remaining two clients had had four sessions each. A couple of the clients were expecting to engage in further sessions. Their comments later in the process might have contributed illuminating insights, since presumably their experience of personal relationship with the mentor/coach might have deepened over time. However, since each session was planned as a helpful learning experience in itself, regardless of plans for further sessions, comments made by all clients can shed some light on the investigation of knowledge construction and personal relationship.

Notes taken during mentor/coach interviews were fed back to the team of mentors/coaches, providing the opportunity to comment on how their words had been reported. No substantial changes were needed on the basis of their responses to the notes. Data analysis took place throughout the project through progressive focusing and

identifying new themes (Miles & Huberman, 1995). Drafts of analytic summaries were circulated among the Service founders who commissioned the research, before my own final write-up. Development of categories and models were shaped by theoretical schema already developed in the area and also by engagement with the data. As an example, the distinction between co-construction as collaborative construction and co-construction as participation became more defined during the analytic process; on the other hand, personal relationship as a purpose for, and an important aspect of, learning through mentoring/coaching only emerged as a significant theme after analysis had begun. Data from each case were analysed separately as well as in a cross-case phase, in which themes were compared and contrasted to draw out underlying patterns as well as differences in addressing the issue of knowledge construction and personal relationship within the context of mentoring/coaching.

Issues of confidentiality are generally important for mentoring/coaching processes, therefore sensitivity in this area was already developed among the clients and mentors/coaches. Clients were invited to interview without the knowledge of other clients (except in the one accidental case mentioned above) and all participants were interviewed individually. Clients were asked to not name their mentor/coach during interviews and mentors/coaches did not reveal names of their clients. All contributors were assured that their comments would be anonymised, and for this reason random numbers have been assigned to each participant in this report, with "C" denoting clients and "MC" denoting mentors/coaches. All participants gave their informed consent to be interviewed and were free to withdraw at any time. The purposes of the study were made

clear to everyone, including the emphasis on learning and the future improvement of the Service.

The learning of clients through mentoring/coaching

In some cases, clients of the Service wanted to be handed the 'gift' of advice (Askew & Lodge, 2001) rather than to construct knowledge, in order to improve their performance in some straightforward way. In this sense, they were using the Mentoring and Coaching Service as a vehicle for accumulating useful skills and information, rather than as an opportunity to construct or co-construct meanings. The emphasis here was on performing well rather than learning, and some clients preferred not to think of themselves as learners during mentoring/coaching sessions, despite the Service's espoused focus on learning. For example, client C4 sought advice on how she could progress with her career at the Institute, including information on which structured courses might be useful. Client C8 wanted advice on retirement planning and finances, and which skills she should acquire in the context of retirement. Another client perhaps saw the Mentoring and Coaching Service as a means through which to undergo therapy. She sought help in getting out of 'the very bad emotional state' she was in personally, but she said she did not have the strength to act on suggestions made by the mentor/coach (C9).

Another client (C2) approached the Service in a practical crisis, needing her mentor/coach to tell her what to do because she had only three days in which to prepare a Masters teaching session. In this situation, it seemed appropriate to the mentor/coach, who was an experienced lecturer, to give her direct advice, rather than encouraging a dialogue through which the client would develop her own solutions. However, the

mentor/coach did try to connect her advice to the client's 'tacit knowledge' (Evans et al., 2006, p. 11).

In these cases, clients just wanted 'to be told', although most of them took some responsibility for finding out the information they wanted and for acting on suggestions made. However, in these instances, they were not seeking to change or refine the meaning they attributed to their situations or their own roles within them. Only some basic construction in terms of sense-making was evident here. It seems most likely that their sense-making occurred earlier when they decided to ask for advice or later when they made a decision to act on it.

At least half of the clients said that they were indeed successful in accumulating these workplace skills and information through mentoring/coaching, and that they had powerful practical effects. For example, C4 received guidance on applying for new jobs, finding one soon after, and C8 took some useful financial steps suggested by her mentor/coach. However, the client (C9) who wanted help out of her bad personal state decided not to take action on the basis of the mentoring/coaching she experienced. On the one hand, she claimed that she had indeed made new sense: She came to see that she had to help herself. On the other hand, she said that the Mentoring and Coaching Service had been of no practical help to her because she did not feel in a position to help herself.

In these cases, despite the Service's espoused constructivist model of learning, clients chose to use the Service largely to accumulate information or skills rather than to construct meaning, perhaps because their 'learning careers' led them to expect nothing more (Ecclestone & Pryor, 2003). It may also be that, at the Institute, as a functional rather than personal organisation (Fielding, 2000), they expected to learn through being

told. Personal transformation in these cases appears to have been minimal, although practical effects were sometimes extensive, for example, in the case of the client who left the Institute after finding another job.

In terms of learning by constructing knowledge, however, clients also described learning in the workplace as having someone to talk with, to help them think about difficult issues, to discuss personal fear and to become focused (C2). Some clients did not want answers, but rather 'guidance in reaching solutions' (C3). A crucial feature of such guidance, however, was that it came from someone who was within the same workplace culture, but not connected to the client's professional hierarchy. Without hierarchical equality, they could not feel free to explore their concerns. Three of the eight clients interviewed said they needed to talk to someone who had no connections with their line managers because the latter were part of the problem. These interviewees did not want to be given information or skills, but rather to have the opportunity to talk with someone who could help them find distance from their situations and gain a new perspective on them; in other words, to explore with them different ways of seeing their situation and their own role within it.

For example, C7 sought an outsider view on what her new, increased role at work should entail, and whether she was right to stay in this job as administrator to several teaching programmes. Through the mentoring/coaching relationship she developed a new attitude whereby she learned to trust other people in the workplace, allowing her to delegate better and so deal more effectively with an increased workload. She found it particularly useful to be able to try out proposed strategies, and then feed back to her mentor/coach and discuss further action. Her learning became deeply embedded in

practice and in dialogue. Having a series of mentoring/coaching sessions proved, in this case, essential to her.

Client C12 found that her mentor/coach helped to bring calmness to her deliberations, which was necessary to consider action. Clients C12 and C7 had both felt that they were 'up against a brick wall' in their situations and that they could not change anything. Through the mentoring/coaching relationship, they changed this attitude and came to see that the obstacles were not so huge and that they were capable of dealing with the demands made on them by their line managers. For these clients, a change of attitude allowed for the possibility of action. On the other hand, C5 told us, 'There was no tangible product from the [mentoring/coaching] session, though it did help me gather my thoughts and become conscious of the issues'. Here the mentor/coach acted as mediator between the client and her problem of feeling under-valued in the workplace, challenging and supporting her as she reflected on and reconsidered her situation, encouraging her to notice its salient features. In this case it was not only her attitude that changed, but also her interpretation of the situation, in which she came to see how she herself has been contributing to the perception of herself as not valuable. This recognition did in turn lead to transformed action within her situation and then altered responses from others. For example, she took a more proactive and vocal role than usual at her next team meeting, and found that colleagues attending the meeting were interested to consider her suggestions.

Whilst a new perspective on the situation was one of some clients' explicit learning aspirations, a new sense of power in the workplace was an unexpected outcome described by several clients. Clients came to see themselves differently, as more

powerful, which gave them added energy for acting on their situation. Importantly, they began to construct new identities for themselves. For example, C2, in preparing to deliver her first Masters teaching session, described how the mentor/coach had pointed out the skills and knowledge she already had which helped her to think of herself more positively when faced with the challenge of teaching for the first time. This client told us that her line manager had often failed to recognise the knowledge she already had, which contributed to a sense of relative powerlessness. The power that she yearned for she found in her own construction of knowledge that had occurred in collaboration with her mentor/coach.

In these examples, the learning does not seem to be co-constructed in the sense of participation. The client and the mentor/coach did not learn as part of the same community of practice, nor were they grappling with the same dilemmas within the same perspective. The mentor/coach was not an 'old-timer' in a shared community of practice, to use Lave and Wenger's (1991) term, but a relative outsider who was brought in to support the client to be a better participant in his or her own community of practice. Learning in the sense of participation would have been more likely to occur among clients and their own workplace teams, if appropriate relationships had prevailed there.

Co-construction in the sense of collaborative construction (see Watkins, 2003) certainly did play a role, however, since together the mentor/coach and client developed a fresh picture of a situation, or of the client, or both. The client explained her picture, the mentor/coach introduced his or hers, and collaboratively they produced a new version of how things were. The client was able then to act on the situation differently, while the mentor/coach might gain new insights into his or her mentoring/coaching practice.

The importance of the mentor/coach and client relationship

Rodger (2006) suggests that the mentoring/coaching model that works best '… is the one underpinned by a secure personal relationship between mentor and trainee' (p.37). Where functional relations dominated, as was common in clients' work situations, it seemed that the relationship between mentor/coach and learner became particularly important for learning. The importance of a positive personal relationship was reinforced by the clients in this research who emphasized that their learning was facilitated when their mentor/coach had some special connection with them. Three clients, for example, had met their mentor/coach before joining the Service and learning was easier because the mentor/coach was not a stranger. Client C2 found it helpful that her mentor/coach had similar cultural origins to herself, as when the mentor/coach had told her empathetically, 'That can often be [*our*] way of doing things'. It appeared that, within a safe relationship, they felt free to be constructive. Bibby (2009) highlights how the personal connection between teacher and learner affects the subject learning of the learner. She illustrates that where no positive personal connection is present, subject learning is constrained and the aspiration for the personal connection can dominate over content aspirations. Others have suggested a range of personal qualities which help to establish this personal connection in the mentoring/coaching field (Carnell et al., 2006; Kay & Hinds, 2005; Rodger, 2006; Pennington, 2004). The eight clients interviewed felt that the following mentor/coach traits helped them: being approachable, empathetic, non-judgmental, calm, positive, encouraging, sympathetic, trusting, humorous, and a good listener, as well as having good eye contact.

The learning of mentors/coaches

Learning by being given skills and information

While co-construction in both its senses, as collaborative construction and as participation, was particularly evident in the mentors/coaches' monthly learning group (see next), mentors/coaches, like some clients, also wanted to accumulate skills and knowledge related to mentoring/coaching. Some skills and information were clearly not co-constructed, and in some cases not much construction was required at all. For example, mentors/coaches said they wanted to acquire improved talking and listening skills to improve their subsequent mentoring/coaching performance.

Learning as co-constructing knowledge

At the same time, the mentors/coaches' monthly group seemed to offer fertile opportunities for learning both in the sense of collaborative construction and as participation. Despite its professionally mixed make up, relationships within the group were described as 'very respectful, with a great sense of equity' (MC10). All members of this group had similar goals and most relationships within it were equitable and supportive. These aspects of the group seemed to make it conducive to the co-construction of knowledge. The two-hour monthly meetings were led by two leaders both experienced in mentoring/coaching and trained in counselling. One mentor/coach described the support of the two leaders as 'more than wonderful, it's brilliant!' (MC20), which she attributed to their being really interested in individuals' learning through knowledge construction rather than just 'training'. The leaders were credited with being calm, patient, approachable, and experienced. A crucial point in terms of co-construction

is that the leaders of the learning sessions themselves were still learning about the mentoring/coaching process, as well as about successful strategies for teaching other mentors/coaches. New issues were raised about mentoring/coaching at every session in which the team practised on each other and were able to reflect on their practice. Because the leaders genuinely believed themselves to be learners as well as teachers in the practice of mentoring/coaching, both learners and leaders contributed to the group's interpretations and constructions of knowledge around the same practice.

Learning as collaborative construction in the monthly group

The mentors/coaches described the group as 'nurturing, with a good climate of trust, and a harmony' (MC10). The group was 'open to sharing thoughts and ideas and trust' (MC5). In terms of collaborative construction, MC6 summarised her experience of learning in the group as follows. She emphasised the role of personal relationships among participants and her own sense of freedom:

> The most influential factor on my learning has been the group itself. … There is a good feeling when we get together – an atmosphere in which I feel comfortable expressing my thoughts and experiences without being judged.   Hearing the group's observations on my own contributions and listening to theirs has helped my learning enormously.

Mentors/coaches told us that learning was adjusted to learners' needs, and individuals' practical concerns were addressed in an unpressured, comfortable environment where people felt free to make mistakes or ask (MC7). Because all learners were equal in role and in status, mentors/coaches said they shared responsibility for each other. The monthly group therefore seemed to provide a fertile ground for the co-

construction of knowledge in the collaborative sense, allowing a more fully reciprocal learning experience than within the client-mentor/coach relationship.

The monthly sessions had been 'practice-oriented, hands on, right from the start, with the participants actually doing it themselves' (MC7). While this does not make the group a community of practice in Lave and Wenger's (1991) sense of people all using their skill alongside each other, the practice focus provided a rich source for collaborative knowledge construction around practice. During every group meeting, mentors/coaches practised mentoring/coaching on one another (although by the nature of the practice, they could never practise 'for real' together). Some mentors/coaches met together outside the group between sessions to practise. Later on, every group member mentored/coached clients who had applied to the Mentoring and Coaching Service, again outside the monthly group. During group sessions, reflection on all these aspects of practice provided the focus for dialogue among members of the group, in which they were encouraged to renegotiate the understandings they had made of these experiences in order to better their subsequent practice. This experience was akin to the learning of clients who 'tried things out' between mentoring/coaching sessions.

A process of constant iteration between practice and guided reflection was therefore key for members collaboratively (and individually) to build up their understandings. They described how they benefited from hearing about others' practice experiences and one another's constructions and interpretations, especially as the group was so mixed in terms of its personnel. One mentor/coach noted that she benefited most when the maximum number of people attended a session, because of the extended range of stimulation offered (MC2). The personal qualities of the members of the group clearly

affected how well learning happened through construction in the group, which was why the Head of Staff Development had selected members for the group she thought would contribute and collaborate.

Learning as participation in the monthly group

The mentors/coaches demonstrated from the start an inclination towards collaboration. They claimed an interest in being part of a new model of mentoring/coaching in which peers worked 'with colleagues in a supportive way' (MC5) rather than in the ways that might typify functional settings. Their aspirations were specifically for learning by interacting with work colleagues. Members expressed the desire to get to know others across the Institute, and to be known by them; to become confident in speaking with them (MC4), and to try to understand them (MC5). It is significant that at least two mentors/coaches expressed this desire for the kind of relationships that Fielding (1996) describes as '… reciprocal caring for, and enjoying, someone for their own sake; it is not about using others to achieve one's own fulfillment' (p. 9). This is significant because it implies that accumulating the skills of and constructing knowledge about mentoring/coaching were not their only purpose in being together. They saw mentoring/coaching as the means by which to experience new personal relationships. Fielding (1996) suggests that such relationships constitute a community which by its nature is one for learning through and of the very relationships it aspires to. Through participation in a group, whose aim is enjoying others for their own sake, learning can be equated with participating because participating in such a group *means* learning to be with others in a mutually supportive way. More measurable or

practical community goals, in Fielding's view, are expressions of community rather than the glue that binds it.

Some mentors/coaches themselves had been in workplace situations where they would have valued more supportive relationships. When these mentors/coaches described wanting to be able to listen properly to colleagues, and through listening learn how to challenge them and help them, they may have been glimpsing at a transformative ideal where there is reciprocal caring throughout the workplace, not just within the group. It is not surprising, therefore, that mentors/coaches described their learning from the mentoring/coaching group as learning about their own behaviour towards other people in their workplace. This could be described as learning through co-construction in the sense of participation-with, not just collaborative-construction-with.

One mentor/coach described her learning in terms of learning to be more open, friendly, empathetic and sympathetic; learning to concentrate on a single issue, and one individual person (MC6). Others learned the importance of adapting to workplace colleagues and of sometimes keeping silent to allow others space to express their own views. They learned that they could not change others but also that they might be able to empower them to deal with difficult situations. Another mentor/coach described her learning as a raised awareness of people, and a 'conscious engagement' with them, which involved listening to them and reflecting on what she had heard (MC20). Thus she learned by participating in the supportive and challenging group, to adapt herself afresh to her situation—within and outside the group and with a new attitude and different behaviour. This is what Rogoff (2008) describes as a process of becoming, a means by

which 'individuals transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities through their own participation' (p. 65).

Summary and implications

This study suggests that mentoring/coaching can be a powerful site for individual and reciprocal knowledge construction, and that when this happens its effects can be far-reaching, both for the individuals involved and potentially for the workplace itself. While some skills and information were usefully accumulated by clients and mentors/coaches during the mentoring/coaching process, positive changes to their daily experience of the workplace can be attributed largely to their active construction or co-construction of knowledge.

Co-construction, in the sense of collaborative knowledge building, was evident between clients and mentors/coaches as they negotiated their respective views about the clients' situation. The clients' aspiration was to feel some power of their own which could lead them to act more powerfully in their work situations. They seemed to gain this personal sense of empowerment as they constructed their own knowledge with the support of the mentor/coach, and sometimes in reciprocal collaboration with them. An equal, rather than hierarchical, relationship between mentor/coach and client allowed freedom within that relationship, which appeared necessary for the construction and co-construction of knowledge that could change the client's experience of his or her situation. The free and equal personal relationship contrasted with organisational functional relationships, allowing clients to construct knowledge about these functional relationships themselves and so to act on them. Thus, the process of constructing their own knowledge empowered clients to deal more successfully with the potentially

debilitating aspects of workplace relationships. At the same time, the mentor/coach-client relationship gave the mentor/coach insight into dealing with the new territory of another person's situation.

Co-construction as collaborative knowledge building was also evident within the mentors/coaches' monthly learning group as participants contributed to each other's understandings about mentoring/coaching. Equality and freedom in personal relationship were ingredients essential to mentors/coaches' knowledge co-construction, both through collaboration and as participation. Their engagement in mutually supportive relationships was itself an experience of knowledge co-construction through participation, which led to mentors/coaches becoming more effective mentors/coaches as they provided increasingly meaningful support to others in the workplace.

The classic Vygotskian concept of learning has been described as the collective self within the individual bringing about transformation in the world. Mentors/coaches' experience of personal, rather than functional, relationships within the *Gemeinschaft* of the monthly learning group raised their awareness of the potential for the Service to transform the wider workplace by their prioritisation of the personal over the functional. Two of the mentors/coaches and one of the clients described how they had now learned to express their intolerance toward those who did not act in empowering ways (MC1, MC20, C2). This increasing intolerance of restrictive and unequal relationships was one step in the direction of institutional transformation towards more personal ways of interacting. While changing the world through mentoring/coaching processes is perhaps too challenging an aspiration, transformation of the relationships among work colleagues could conceivably happen over time in the institution described in this writing, because

these participants had themselves become explicitly aware that their most constructive learning occurred in and through personal relationships.

This study suggests that other institutions across the world in which members seek to build or improve their own mentoring/coaching services would benefit from ensuring that those in the service value personal and reciprocal supportive relationships as the starting point and the goal for mentoring/coaching. This means that great care needs to be taken in matching mentors/coaches to clients so that the relationship between them is experienced by *both* as free, equal, and supportive. The account of the mentors/coaches also suggests that frequent, regular meetings will help to sustain the transformation that these mentoring/coaching relationships facilitate.

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