

## Considering cross-phase peer mentoring in ITE: what can each party bring to the table?

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### Abstract

Whilst the centrality of mentoring to successful outcomes in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England is uncontroversial and widely discussed, there has been less research on peer mentoring. Much of the literature that exists focuses on the role peer mentoring can play in helping tertiary students or beginning teachers to adjust to their new role and legitimise concerns (Draves & Koops 2011). However, there has been a dearth of research on the efficacy of peer mentoring in developing the subject knowledge and pedagogy of ITE students. This small-scale exploratory study looks at whether peer mentoring in ITE can be mutually beneficial in developing each member's subject knowledge and pedagogy, where dyads are training to teach different age ranges. This cross-phased pairing aims to provide a liminal space where the gap between theory and practice is negotiated, and individual goals can be addressed.

**Keywords:** cross-phase; peer mentoring; third space; virtual mentoring.

### Introduction

As a tutor of two humanities subjects in the Primary and Secondary phases of Initial Teacher Education (ITE), for me the ongoing development of students' subject knowledge is a continued concern. Prospective students on the (secondary school based) Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in Religious Education (RE) at the University of East London (UEL) frequently have not covered many of the 'big six' religions of the UK in their first degrees. Moreover, it is common for prospective students to have first degrees other than religious studies or theology. Nine-month PGCE courses in England, by the nature of their straddling the professional and academic spheres, are intensive, with students

often working for 60+ hours a week. With competing demands on students' time, subject knowledge development is often placed on the back-burner. This is particularly the case with Primary PGCE students who are training to be generic class teachers and need to spread their attention across the whole curriculum. With limited time for each foundation subject, it is inevitable that subject knowledge other than for mathematics and literacy is largely developed by students on a 'need-to-know' basis. Although this situation is understandable, it provides a shaky foundation for teaching. Providing feedback, addressing misconceptions and planning all become impossible with limited subject knowledge. This exploratory study looks at how subject knowledge might be addressed through peer mentoring. Bhabha's (1994) construct of a 'third space', will be used as a theoretical underpinning for the project, with peer mentoring identified as a space where the gap between theory and practice in ITE can be navigated. The aims and objectives of the project will be set out with context, pragmatics and limitations outlined. Finally, the project will be evaluated in terms of dyad satisfaction and achievement of the aims, with implications for future work raised.

### The theory–practice gap

A special feature of the Primary PGCE programme at UEL is that all students are expected to choose an additional 'route' to develop their interest and competence in a particular area, in addition to general Primary teaching. Whilst specific sessions are held each term, students are also expected to investigate their route independently. During informal interviews of Primary RE route students, several discussed their desire to develop their understanding of specific pedagogies to support RE teaching. This was especially in light of the practice observed during school experience, which frequently did not match the theoretical aspects and ideal practice discussed at university.

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Homi Bhabha's concept of a 'third space' may be helpful here in reconciling the tension between the academic and professional domains: where two different perspectives need to be spanned and integrated, a third, hybrid space is necessary where both perspectives can be recombined, navigated and negotiated, facilitating meaning-making (Bhabha 1994). The third space is one that is dynamic and malleable; it is a construct, although one that may also have a physical dimension. The intimation was that the 'first space' of school experience and 'second space' of university discourse did not necessarily cohere. This suggested that 'a third space' may be needed to help make sense of the different discourses.

Different possibilities currently occupy this liminal space between the conceptual worlds of practice and theory. Firstly, the tutor herself can provide an effective third space for navigating and reconfiguring ideas (Lewis 2012). However, this presupposes that sufficient time is available to focus on subject pedagogy. Other possible third spaces can be found in the different learning communities and communities of practice to which the student teacher belongs. As part of the Secondary PGCE programme at UEL, students are assigned to a Learning Community group to explore educational issues. Although groups were cross-subject, these did not fulfil the brief of helping students to bridge the theory–practice gap within their own specialism. Therefore, a subject-based wiki was established to provide the chance to explore ideas and process experiences in the light of research. However, during this study, numbers were very limited, impacting on the development and maturation of this fragile e-learning community.

For the Primary students, opportunities for third space activity were largely limited to the Progress Group they were attached to for university-based sessions. From this larger grouping, some student teachers formed their own friendship-based learning communities, providing a possible third space, whilst some student teachers also belonged to professional organisations which could add a new dimension to their thinking. Ultimately, whether these spaces constituted a 'third space' or not was determined by their use.

Where this occasionally happened, it was down to chance and circumstance, rather than a universal opportunity for all. Therefore, it was important that a third space, or spaces, could be located that were accessible to the RE Secondary students and those Primary students on the RE route. These spaces could be mutually exclusive, with membership limited to those on the same course. However, considering

the crossover of concerns from RE students from both phases, one space that could encompass all the ITE RE students would be the most desirable option. This was particularly tempting, given that both phases shared so much yet their differences were little understood by those outside a particular phase. It is those aspects of difference that could provide the necessary clash to reconsider pedagogy in a different light.

### Mentoring as a third-space activity

Mentoring might be considered a third-space activity, where concerns from the first and second spaces of the academic and professional field, respectively, can be negotiated with the aid of another. All trainees in England have traditional dyadic mentoring in their schools. Quality mentoring can be fruitful in providing student teachers with a foil to think through practice and pedagogy. The importance of mentoring in ITE in the UK is not to be understated. Whilst various support mechanisms for beginning teachers currently include tutoring and different permutations of learning communities, it is mentoring that has become the prevailing model of support in UK schools. This has been the case for several decades, but particularly since 1992, when the shift towards a school-based ITE necessitated the presence of someone in school who could support, induct and guide new teachers (Smethem & Youens 2006) as well as socialise them into the culture of a school (Rippon & Martin 2006). Successful mentoring has been regarded as the key to developing talent (Clutterbuck 2004) and teacher retention (Odell 1992).

Traditionally, mentoring in ITE conforms to an asymmetrical and hierarchical dyadic relationship. The more experienced partner mentors the less experienced protégé in order to help advance their skills (Kram 1985). The difficulty in considering traditional mentoring as a third space occurs where the mentoring partner is firmly located in one space – in this context, the professional space of the school. Moreover, the professional context is a very specific one. The mentor, working within the confines of one school, can be limited in perspective and experience outside the given context. However, even for secondary PGCE students working with a subject-based mentor who is sufficiently experienced in working in different school and pedagogical contexts, analyses of mentor meeting records and weekly training plans commonly reveal comparatively little time devoted to the development of subject knowledge, or even subject pedagogy development.

Mentors are usually suitably qualified and interested in teaching their specialist subject. However, in mentoring, as with the role of a teacher, priorities usually dictate how time is spent. With student teachers, this can often mean that subject knowledge development gives way to other concerns, such as assessment or behaviour management. Where subject knowledge and subject pedagogy is a priority in mentoring activities, problematically, there is an understandable tendency for the views of the department to be simply replicated, rather than allowing the trainee to make sense of theory and practice for themselves. Thus, traditional mentoring may fall prey to existing only in the second space, not reaching the necessary boundaries for reconfiguration, creativity and processing. However, traditional asymmetrical mentoring is not the only model available. In recent times, different models of mentoring have emerged, including that of peer mentoring. Peer mentoring is subject to many definitions: here, it is taken to refer to a mentoring relationship where both dyads share a non-hierarchical status and both take the role of teacher and mentor.

Given the limitations of traditional mentoring in providing third spaces, peer mentoring provides an alternative which could combine some of the benefits of traditional mentoring with the freshness and exploratory character of third spaces. Unlike traditional mentoring, peer mentoring is more likely to be mutually beneficial: there is a dynamic exchange of information through collaboration and problem-solving (Johnson et al. 2011), whilst retaining a familiarity of perspective. Draves & Koops (2011) show that peer mentoring can alleviate the problems that often occur with traditional dyadic mentoring relationships, including 'isolation and self-doubt'. The non-threatening spirit in which peer mentoring is usually undertaken should encourage honesty and an openness to consider alternative practices and ideas. This third space would be one where a peer-based community of practice would enhance trainees' abilities to negotiate and mesh the first and second space worlds of academia and professional practice.

### **The aim of the project**

An exploratory study into the benefits of peer mentoring was established, with each dyad comprising one primary and one secondary phase student. Given that students from both phases were facing an intensive year, it was essential that the relationship was reciprocal and non-hierarchical. Therefore two main aims were established: firstly, the project aimed to enhance subject knowledge

and subject-specific pedagogical competency for both primary and secondary phase ITE students in RE. The second aim was derived from the pairing of cross-phase students: to develop understanding of each other's context – the needs of pupils making the transition from Primary to Secondary at the end of Year 6, and the needs of both Primary and Secondary teachers of RE. From the outset, the non-hierarchical ideal of the peer-mentoring project seemed hard to achieve: Secondary and Primary trainees were unlikely to be on an equal footing when subject knowledge and subject pedagogy were considered. Secondary ITE courses are focused on students' development of understanding in the context of their chosen subject. This is unlike Primary students, whose curriculum spread will necessarily lead to a broader but more limited grasp of subject knowledge.

Given the likely different starting points and strengths, the intended aims and goals for the Primary and Secondary peer mentors would need to be differentiated and personalised. For primary trainees, these were relatively clear: to develop their expertise in teaching RE with a focus on subject pedagogy. However, it was essential that there would be benefits for Secondary RE students also. Whilst subject pedagogy was an ongoing focus in sessions, peer mentoring would provide a third space to reflect on, and process the pedagogical models of RE. The old adage, if you want to understand it well, then teach it, came through clearly in evaluations. Aside from the subject knowledge focus, the pairing of both phases lent itself to exploring, through professional dialogue, the needs, experiences and perceptions of teachers of each phase. For Primary trainees, this meant thinking through the experience of RE at primary level, the pressures on the subject and the preparation of pupils at Year 6 for transition to Secondary. For the Secondary trainees, the experience of teaching new Year 7s would inevitably become a focus area.

### **The peer-mentoring project**

Once students had been paired up, loose goals were set, with the understanding that the project needed enough input to make it productive, with students unlikely to have much spare time to devote to cultivating the partnership. Four main outcomes were expected: (1) Students were to maintain a professional asynchronous dialogue developing their understanding of subject knowledge and pedagogy. This would include an expectation that each member share RE lesson plans and provide helpful critique, comments or questions.

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(2) Critical incidents in RE teaching were to be explored using a wiki. (3) One peer observation for each student would take place at some stage in the year, with the focus for the friendly debrief on RE pedagogy. It was suggested that this lesson have some planning input from the peer mentor. (4) A transition project for Year 6/7 would be completed during a face-to-face synchronous session. These outcomes were set to address the identified issue of developing subject knowledge and pedagogy, with key criteria of manageability and reciprocity in mind. To support members in developing their 'mentor' role, some support with observing lessons and giving feedback was provided.

### Limitations of the project

The limitations of such a small-scale project, spanning two discrete courses with incompatible timings, were considerable. Peer-mentoring models stress the critical importance of building relationships between the co-mentors/mentees (Kensington-Miller 2010). Therefore it is not surprising that regular face-to-face contact predominates in the literature. However, from the outset of the project, it was clear that the luxury of regular meetings between paired student teachers could not be afforded, because of competing timetables between the Primary and Secondary ITE phases. Consequently, face-to-face meetings would be limited to one meeting where the transition project was planned, and two later meetings where students would be observed by their peer mentor. Therefore, the viable alternative was to facilitate peer mentoring virtually, using a wiki and email. A significant limitation was the size of the study; the size was limited by the numbers of those students who were on the secondary RE course, and on the Primary route with an RE focus. In the first year of the study, these numbers were five and four respectively. Of course, with such a tiny sample, results were subject to being skewed should the student profile not be representative of typical students in that phase. Thus, caution should be exercised before drawing any generalisations from the data, although questions raised from the data will inevitably feed into the future work of the project.

### Evaluation: dyad satisfaction

In first-year student evaluations of the project, there were mixed feelings about its usefulness. At one end of the spectrum, one student cited the project as providing a catalyst for the new direction she wished to seek in her future career: to become a mentor for student teachers. At the other end of the spectrum, one student claimed that he 'didn't need the additional

pressure' of having to take part. In between the two extremes, two Secondary phase students felt that they benefited from working with Primary phase students and had developed their understanding of pedagogy, but also reported frustration that their peer mentor could only be observed teaching very young pupils, hence the perception that the relevance of the content and pedagogy was less accessible. Positive comments received from Primary-phase students centred on the usefulness of lesson plan critique, in particular where underlying pedagogy was unpacked and areas for future development identified.

It is of little surprise that dyad satisfaction tended to correlate with dyad reciprocity and effort. Where pairs showed equal commitment in responding to emails, sharing lesson plans and communicating, satisfaction was high. Where effort and communication was not balanced, satisfaction was much lower. The dissatisfaction was twofold: it is understandably discouraging to make effort and not have this reciprocated; and where effort was not reciprocated, the loss of potential learning was considerable – the rich understanding developed through dialogue by some pairs was lost to those where only one partner was motivated. Looking at the correlation between students' final grades on school experience and project participation levels, results are unsurprising in that high grades correlated with high participation and vice versa. Those students with the lowest final grade scores were also those who were the least committed to the project (and whose partners scored lowest on dyad satisfaction levels).

### Outcomes

Outcomes were evaluated in relation to the four main objectives identified at the outset of the project. Where partners scored highly on participation and satisfaction, this correlated to an increased subject knowledge. In most cases this was limited to subject pedagogy development, rather than subject knowledge per se. Interestingly, the development of subject pedagogy was identified by both Primary and Secondary students. The Secondary students found the opportunity to critique each other's lesson plans helpful in thinking through their own pedagogical models and the competing aims of RE. The use of the wiki in developing a wider community of learning with all participants was not so fruitful, with the primary trainees offering little in the way of comments or engagement. There appeared to be two main barriers to full engagement with the wiki.

Firstly, the wiki pages for the peer-mentoring project were situated as a subset on the pre-existing Secondary RE group wiki site. Thus, an impression of Secondary ownership of the wiki may, inadvertently, have been given. Another possible issue was lack of familiarity with the technology: none of the Primary group members regularly used social media, and none had used a wiki before. This was in contrast to the Secondary group, who had been using the wiki for several months, in addition to several members who claimed to use social media regularly outside of university. The peer mentor observation was useful for both phases, although not many of the Primary trainees were able to take time to observe the Secondary trainee teaching Year 7, due to timetable constraints. The relaxed feel to the observation was noted by some, due partially to its being a peer observation, and the focus being only on pedagogy and developing specific RE skills. Where the observations were less well received, this again correlated to those who had the lowest final grades and where a lack of reciprocity in the partnership was identified. The joint planning process ahead of the lesson was identified as a positive and helpful feature, with the pedagogical focus leading to better, clear RE outcomes for the lesson. Secondary trainees commented that they enjoyed seeing their ideas taken on board and felt they had made an impact. They also highlighted that through explaining models and rationales for teaching with their Primary peer mentor, secondary trainees were able to clarify their own position and understanding.

Finally, the transition project session was useful in providing a time for peer mentors to get to know each other face-to-face, and for the start of a professional dialogue in considering the needs of teachers and pupils at transition. This occurred midway through the project, before observations had taken place. This is perhaps where a real two-way flow of information began to occur, and where real reciprocity in terms of new learning, rather than embedding learning, was felt. There was a deeper appreciation of the needs of teachers and pupils in each phase, which led on to a closer examination of what pupils needed to know before and after transitioning. Where Primary PGCE student teachers had been mainly teaching infant classes, this understanding appeared somewhat limited as they struggled to imagine where their pupils might be in four or five years time. In contrast, Secondary ITE students demonstrated an increased perceptivity of the level that Primary pupils were capable of operating at, leading to a critically reflective reconsideration of the levels at which Year 7 work was currently set.

## Conclusions

Several tensions have been apparent throughout the project. In particular, the need to strike a balance between providing enough structure for the project to be successful and not burdening already busy students with extra tasks has been present since the project's inception. Reciprocity seems key to any peer-mentoring endeavour, and where balance of contribution was out of kilter, satisfaction levels suffered, alongside learning opportunities. Inherent in these tensions are questions of how to motivate students to participate: the least engaged were those who might have gained most from a project such as this. Issues such as these have been exacerbated by fixed limitations such as the difficulties in scheduling meetings or observations, or as a consequence of the way in which the Primary School Experiences works, where teaching particular year groups or subjects could not be guaranteed. Answers to the above questions are not instantly apparent, although with larger numbers, different strategies will be tried, such as project membership being voluntary, rather than compulsory. Significant in peer-mentoring literature is the student's decision to become a peer mentor. Choice leads to greater rates of self-motivation (Deci & Ryan 1985), and this may in turn help solve problems of reciprocity. For the second year of the project, students will choose whether they wish to take part. This has been made possible with the expansion of the potential pool of membership; in both phases the subject criteria have been widened to encompass all humanities subjects.

Where limitations are fixed, such as scheduling, difficulties will persist. However, opportunities in the second year are being sought for joint meetings and teaching, including attendance at subject conferences where deeper discussions can begin.

Although not all students were able to fully enter and navigate the third space provided by peer mentoring, it is clear that some have. Whilst the project would have run into fewer difficulties if contained in one phase, the cross-phase element still offers more potential to the student teacher in their holistic understanding of their pupils. The balance between the similarities and differences of phases provides a fertile ground where practice can be problematised and accepted ways of doing challenged. Moreover, it can lead to a greater understanding that the outcome from one practice becomes the context for the other.

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