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ABSTRACT

Peer mentoring works— for mentors, partners, and programs

By *Sharyn Yanoshak*

Mentoring is typically defined as a relationship between an experienced and a less experienced person in which the mentor provides guidance, advice, support, and feedback to the partner (A. Haney, 1997). During 2004–05, Nevada implemented a peer mentoring program for teachers and tutors in ABE/ESL programs funded through the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Workforce Investment Act, Title II). The goals were:

- To provide individualized nurture and support for new instructors
- To strengthen instructors' skills
- To improve delivery of instruction to adult learners

The program has not only significantly benefited the mentored instructors and their students; it's been extremely valuable to the mentors and their program administrators as well.

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ARTICLE BEGINS NEXT PAGE

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By *Sharyn Yanoshak*

Like most states, most of Nevada’s ABE/ESL instructors are part-time and come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Frequently, they are hired and asked to teach on short notice. Many have other jobs, responsibilities, and limited time. It is challenging to provide them with timely professional development and the resources they need to serve their students effectively.

One-on-one peer mentoring matches a “partner” teacher with a more experienced one so that the partner can get individualized help targeted to specific needs in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Mentors are not supervisors and do not evaluate the partners in any way.

Mentors assume a variety of roles including coach, sponsor, nurturer, advocate, learner, leader, and guide. They are carefully chosen, as they must have strong interpersonal skills including relationship building, team building, and communication. Good mentors have a thoughtful attitude and look for ways to improve their own performance. They are trained to pinpoint their partner’s needs and to use reflective learning strategies such as role modeling, observation, and feedback.

Mentoring process

Programs match up a mentor with a partner teacher—usually one brand-new to the program, but sometimes one who needs some help or support in a particular area. A good match is important! According to a recent MPAEA Journal of Education article, “The most significant predictor of positive mentoring results is whether mentors and mentees share a close, trusting relationship” (Laughlin and Yopp, 2006). The program director talks with the partner beforehand, to be sure the partner understands that she’s been selected because she has promise and not because she’s doing anything wrong. Then the supervisor “gets out of the way” and the mentor and partner take it from there.

The mentor/partner relationship is different for each team, depending on what the partner needs at the time. It might be help with the registration process, assessment, classroom management, curriculum, teaching strategies, resources—or simply encouragement and validation.

For example, one partner was grateful for help with administrative issues:

“For a beginning teacher like myself, having an experienced teacher was a godsend! Our first conversations gave me needed encouragement and she answered questions about how to do the testing and paperwork that had me worrying.”

Many partners attest to the benefits of individualized attention to specific issues. One said, “Among other good ideas, my mentor suggested beneficial seating arrangements for the students and how the students could take turns being presenters during a class—all to

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the point of keeping the students interested and motivated.”

From another,

“He gave me ideas to use, helped me organize my multilevel students, advised me on how to assign my book levels with students whose scores range from 172–229, and many other things.”

Several particularly appreciated the moral support: “She calmed my feelings of insecurity” and “He gave me confidence in my teaching skills.”

The nonevaluative nature of the relationship facilitates mutual observations, which we strongly encourage all teams to do. Often mentors and partners teach a part of each other’s class; some of them do a team-teaching segment.

Partners are asked to complete a short evaluation after their mentoring session ends, to ensure their ideas for program improvement are incorporated. The only compensation partners receive for being part of the mentoring program is a small token of appreciation when we solicit their evaluation forms.

Mentors benefit as well

The mentoring process provides the mentor an opportunity to reflect on her own practice. This from one of our most experienced mentors, who also trains mentors new to the program:

“I think I have gained as much, if not more, from this mentoring experience than my partner teacher. My partner’s enthusiasm and real passion for doing a great job in the classroom has truly inspired me to revisit why I am teaching and caused me to reanalyze my own classes.

“Through the process we have both learned how to make each individual classroom situation work best for our students. Viewing the teaching process through her eyes has made me realize just how daunting a task the new teacher has ... there is so much to figure out!

“I look forward to sharing my teaching experience with new teachers, but just as importantly, I look forward to becoming more inspired by my partner teachers and their fresh perspectives on teaching.”

Mentors receive a stipend for their work, but that does not appear to be a prime motivator—we often have to remind them that an invoice is due! Many teams report developing a professional friendship that lasts long after the official mentoring process ends.

Programs and students win

Program directors appreciate the mentoring program because it makes their jobs easier and less stressful. Because the mentors were carefully chosen and fully trained, their supervisors know that the partner teachers are getting their needs met “in a quality way” almost immediately.

Perhaps most gratifying are the reports we hear from the classroom. For example, one supervisor told us about a partner teacher who had been an elementary school teacher—good at creating activities, following the curriculum, and adhering to administrative guidelines, but she tended to talk down to the students; she did not treat them with “adult” respect.

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A few students complained to the coordinator. The mentor worked with the teacher, who is now one of the best, with excellent retention and educational gains.

Teachers who have worked with adults have become better teachers through mentoring, also:

“We had an experienced teacher who showed excellent retention and gains, but while she was teaching ESL she used techniques more appropriate to a ...GED class. We matched her up with a mentor and within a few months she was A-1!”

Another program told us about an experienced teacher whose retention and point gains were lower than those of other teachers at the same site. His supervisors, who noted that he spoke in a monotone and was not very interactive, observed the teacher. He willingly accepted a mentor, made some changes in how he conducted his class, and increased his retention rate by 12–14%. And there were no more student complaints.

Recognition

We do an annual statewide mentor recognition luncheon for the mentors and their supervisors and program directors. Between e-mail, phone, and this regular face-to-face meeting, the mentors have become a team. An additional benefit and unintended consequence has accrued to the state: we draw on their experience, responsiveness, and motivation to brainstorm ideas and work out plans for implementing new ideas.

Peer-to-peer mentoring has been win-win-win for all involved. Partner teachers get the help they need when they need it. Their mentors gain insight into their own teaching practices. And—most importantly—students receive quality services.

Resources

The following resources provide additional information on peer mentoring.

Boreen, Jean & Niday, Donna. (October 2000). “Breaking through the isolation: Mentoring beginning teachers.” *Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy*. 152-163.

(This mentoring project was for K–12 and all the mentoring was done via e-mail. However, the piece describes Randi, an exemplary mentor; her communication style and strategies could be a model for any type of mentoring project, including face-to-face interactions when mentoring student teachers or teachers in their first through third years.)

Kerka, Sandra. New perspectives on mentoring. *ERIC Digest No. 194*. edres.org/eric/ED418249.htm

Laughlin, Kevin & Yopp, Martha C. “Mentoring makes sense: Try it.” *MPAEA Journal of Education* (Fall 2006). 23–35.

“Promoting mid-career growth through mentoring.” *Journal of Staff Development* (Spring 1997). 52–54.

Sherman et al. *Adult educators' guide to designing instructor mentoring*. (April 2000). edres.org/eric/ED454410.htm