Innovative forms of professional learning: supportive partners in teaching

Z. Kovács, *Faculty of Education and Psychology, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary*

ABSTRACT: After the favourable reception of lectures on "University of the Third Age" held by Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest), a pilot programme to provide active and participatory learning opportunities for elderly people (Wlodkowski, 2011) was developed. This programme was based on series of seminars organized for senior citizens by pre-service history teachers and MA and BA students (supporting peers).

Two dimensions of adult learning were identified in this pilot programme: (1) the continuous support of positive adult development through engaging elderly people in active learning, and (2) the professional learning processes of those pre-service history teachers who instructed these seminars. Also, a course to support the students holding the seminars for elderly people was organized. The role of these students, called "supportive partners" within the programme, was to join and observe the classes, give feedback among well-defined criteria and provide methodology information to their teaching peers. The main question of the pilot program was how could the two groups support each other's learning, what are the factors that support or inhibit this form of mutual support?

During the course development, two learning models were used, the co-mentoring model (Totleben, Deiss, 2015, Zucchero, 2011) and the peer-mentoring model (Thomas et al, 2015) as both the "mentor" and the "mentee" had little experience working with adult learners but both had the opportunity for learning in-practice.

The course activities offered a two-way, reciprocal learning process based on knowledge sharing, between the participants. At the end of semester semi-structured interviews were carried on with each group, in order to explore their learning experiences and professional identity development. Both pre-service teachers and their supportive partners considered this pilot programme a challenging and interesting learning experience that should continue. A co-mentoring program may offer the opportunity for students' to develop their self-awareness and growth in an experiential and meaningful manner.

1   INTRODUCTION

Traditional mentoring activities mostly emerge between inexperienced and experienced, knowledgeable professionals (Collins, 1994). In such relationships, the participants focus more on the mentee's areas for growth, development and gaps in knowledge, rather than on their contributions. The mentor's responsibility is to play a guiding role in helping the mentee to develop professional skills that are aligned with the mentee's professional goals or aspirations (Campbell & Campbell, 2000). By contrast in the co-mentoring process a co-learning relationship is formulating that would transcend any existing power differentials. Learning together could become a strong motivator for both partners as they move on to a new quality of mentoring relationship (Totleben & Deiss, 2015)

In the literature connected to mentoring in the context of educational development, experts point out that the benefits that mentoring provides for both mentor and mentee are bidirectional regarding professional identity development and this has outstanding professional advantages. Research reports that for example those doctoral students who had a mentor during training reported a greater level of satisfaction with the programme than those without mentors (Clark et al., 2000). Therefore, the co-mentoring model was created and used in different educational and faculty development programs (Murdock et all, 2013, Angelique, Kyle & Taylor, 2002 as opposed to a traditional mentoring approach in order to reduce power differentials and encourage collegial relationships.

Similar to co-mentoring but also an alternative form of mentoring is peer mentoring, which involves two or more persons of equal status (Girves, et al., 2005). Peer mentoring often combines both informal and formal characteristics of the mentoring process (Thomas, 2015) and has several

advantages for both women and men in academia. The first benefit is availability and access because an individual is likely to have more peers than supervisors/managers (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Another advantage is the ease of seeking support and guidance from peers and also information sharing in general or specifically about professional themes or more likely about personal relationships that extend beyond the boundaries of work (Angelique, Kyle & Taylor, 2002). Peer mentoring can also function in a group of people too, who support and advice one another in group rather than work in a one-to-one relationship. (Darwin & Palmer, 2009) Peer group members can operate as intellectual guides, collaborators, and information sources for each other as Limbert (1995) suggests and, it can also fulfil a variety of developmental demands similar found in conventional mentoring process.

We also have to mention the peer learning model, which can be perceived as a collaborative educational model, where students from the same social group learn from and with each other. The model emphasises that learning is constructed during social interaction in collaboration with significant others. The model is frequently used in the clinical placement model were two students are placed with one preceptor to overcome placement shortages (Sternberg & Carlson, 2015). In nursing programs, the most common model of peer learning is when a senior student acts as a tutor for a novice student although research suggest that it might be more effective to combine students from the same year as this permits students to alternate the roles of tutor and tutee, and motivates students to become more involved in their own learning.

2   THE PILOT PROGRAMME

The Third Age University programmes are mostly lectures that have been offered for several years at Eötvös Loránd University, in Budapest and were organized by the Institute on Research of Adult Education and Knowledge Management as part of the faculty of Education and Psychology. Along with the successful lectures, we decided to develop a series of seminars that could provide active and participatory learning opportunities for elderly people. The first seminars started in the fall semester of the academic year 2015/2016, and each semester lasted for 10 weeks. The seminars have been conducted by 3 student teachers for whom this activity was considered as teaching practice in their andragogy education. The methodological preparation of these student teachers had previously started with regularly held discussions on a weekly basis but in the second semester, we wanted to share these experiences and also to provide this situation as a learning opportunity for other students in andragogy education. Therefore, the student teachers were paired with BA and MA students (supporting peers) from the institute's andragogy education program both participating in a formal course named Supporting learning in adulthood. We have to mention that the students joined the program on a voluntary basis.

The following course aims were formulated:

- to develop new methodological strategies and techniques for the seminars of the Third Age University
- to support the teachers in their teaching duties and professional development
- to develop the professional knowledge of students in the Andragogy program through practice and active involvement

In order to accomplish the course aims the supporting peers had to do classroom observations by writing feedback, using a previously developed observation protocol and share their experience of the seminars with their pre-service teacher pair. It was expected from the peers to prepare short presentations on different methodological issues related to teaching in higher education, which were selected by the course instructor. The course lessons were then organized around the exposure of these short presentations and the discussion of the experience related to the seminars from both the teachers and supporting peers.

Along with the realization of the course, we planned a qualitative research, exploring the learning experiences of the two groups using semi-structured interviews with them. The questions focused on the professional knowledge they acquired from the course and from the seminars but we also asked them to reflect on the peer-mentoring system of the pilot programme.

3   RESULTS

Both the teachers and their peers considered this pilot programme a challenging and interesting learning experience that should be continued. The learning experience outlined from the interviews will be presented from three points of view: professional learning connected to the seminars for elder people, experience related to the course and experience from the peer-mentoring programme.

3.1   Learning experiences related to the seminars

The observation protocol developed for classroom observation on the seminars had those methodologies as main focus, which can assure the active involvement of elder participants. The observer's main task consisted of documenting the verbal and behavioural reactions of the participants that could indicate the extent of involvement (both cognitive and emotional) a method evoked from the participants. The supporting peers also had the possibility of participating in the planning activities of the seminar classes. This way they were able to get an insight into the professional work of designing and then realizing an adult education activity. We suggested that the observers write personal reflections in the feedback about the observation they had, which turned about to be the most important aspect of learning for the student teachers. After each seminar class, the pairs usually had a short exchange of experiences which then was supported by the written feedback of the supporting peer. A sense of familiarity was founded through these personal discussions as they both felt responsible for the success of the seminars: the student teacher for the teaching part and their peer for the relevant and proper feedback.

3.2   Learning experiences related to the course

As was previously mentioned, the course lessons functioned as case discussions for the experience the pairs gathered during the seminars. In this case, all three pairs shared their experience and had the opportunity to get professional feedback from the teacher and the others. Apart from the case discussions, short presentations were executed in order to develop the participants' professional knowledge about teaching adult learners in higher education. After this presentation we expected from the pairs to incorporate the methods and techniques discussed in the class and to reflect the success of the adaptation. The interviews revealed that the pairs encountered difficulties in the adaptation of new methodologies although they felt that we tried to resolve all the problems they faced during the seminars somehow. As the pairs had the same amount of practice in adult teaching, the methodological support was not as effective as we expected. Both the students' teachers and their peers felt that they had got effective support in their difficulties although methodologically they would have needed a more experienced and professional mentor.

3.3   Learning experiences related to the peer mentoring

The interviews revealed that the most important supporting element for the student teachers was the active and enthusiastic presence of their peer. A collegial atmosphere and relationship evolved between the peer mates that became a unique experience during their whole education. Although we planned for the supporting peers to have a primarily methodological support, it turned out to bring about personal sustainment for each other.

4   DISCUSSION

The experience gathered from this pilot programme raises some questions about employing peer-mentoring in professional development activities at universities.

- Can this model be used for less experienced student teachers for developing their skills and knowledge in methodology?
- What are the indicators of an effective peer mentor? Do they need to be trained for their role?
- How can the model be used in the development of professional knowledge about teaching adults?

The programme mostly focused on supporting the student teachers who teach in the seminars and assumed that the participation in the peer-mentoring model would be efficient for both parties. After analyzing the interviews, it emerged that a less balanced mentoring process was evolving on circumstances in which less input was obtained about the learning benefits of supporting peers than the supported ones. Therefore, this pilot programme showed that peer mentoring model is more

beneficial for participatory learning through different activities than for gathering new skills in designing these activities.

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