

Mentoring, Video and Reflection

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Giving developmental feedback is a fundamental mentoring skill in teacher education. The conception of mentoring as ‘the one on one support of a novice or less experienced practitioner (mentee) by a more experienced practitioner (mentor), designed primarily to assist the development of the mentee’s expertise and to facilitate their induction into the culture of the profession,’ (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009, p. 207) places spoken feedback at the centre of mentoring in teacher education. Clearly, this definition suggests ‘a hierarchical relationship in which the mentor is more experienced than the mentee, or that the mentor has or can provide knowledge and skills that the mentee wants or needs’ (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010, p. 43). These views on mentoring inform the considerations that need to be taken into account when giving developmental feedback chief of which, for this paper, is ‘how mentor teachers make pedagogical suggestions to beginning teachers during mentoring conversations and how beginning teachers respond,’ (Strong & Baron, 2004, p. 47). I am convinced that mentors’ skills in delivering pedagogical feedback in post lesson conferences and the interaction thereof, are key to the success of the mentoring relationship, hence it is the focus of this essay. My reflections are inspired by the Strong and Baron (2004) article cited above.

Considering its centrality to mentoring, it is important to explore the purpose of feedback before exploring the pedagogical dynamics inherent in the feedback exchange between mentors and preservice teachers. Wallace & Gravels (2007) contend that the mentoring process involves, ‘observation and feedback by the mentor in order to help with the development of practical classroom skills and professional practice,’ (p. 63) of the mentee. Hobson et al (2009) also believe that in oral feedback mentors should develop preservice teachers’ capabilities, especially their behaviour, classroom, time and content management skills. Therefore, in post lesson feedback sessions, the mentor and mentee focus on the job at hand with the primary goal of honing the mentees’ skills (Wallace and Gravels, 2007). Given my limited interaction with mentees: two pre-observation conferences (2 hours); two lesson observations (40 minutes) and two post-observation conferences (2 hours), the feedback mostly focused on basic pedagogical issues with the view of helping them reflect on their practice. Although we had substantial trust and respect for each other, we did not have much time to develop the relationship beyond observed lessons, which would ideally focus on building rapport, allowing the mentee reflective space, listening and questioning (Wallace and Gravels, 2007). When I reflect on my mentoring, I realise that most of what I did was ‘providing support, help, instruction and feedback’ (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010, p. 47) in varying degrees. I had limited understanding of the training the mentees had received prior to their practicum, as well as the teaching and learning culture of their targeted context: China. My views of their practice were heavily influenced by my own context: Zimbabwe and socio-cultural beliefs about language teaching and learning associated with Vygotsky (1978) that learning takes place within the zone of proximal development (ZPD):

the gap between what a learner knows and can do and what that learner can achieve in collaboration with a more capable mentor. (Walker & White, 2013). I was guided by the Vygotskian notion that 'collaboration that allows learning to take place within the ZPD provides a structure that supports the learner while the knowledge is being built.' (Walker & White, 2013, p. 5). Thus, as mentor, I sought to scaffold mentees and help them develop practical teaching skills.

Much of mentors' feedback is done through talk (Strong and Baron, 2004). The mentor-mentee relationship, as defined above, has inherent power differentials which must be negotiated in talk for progress to be made. In my interaction with mentees I, 'maintained a clear focus on classroom practice, rather than other aspects of working as a teacher in school,' (Hawkey, 1998, p. 661) for reasons outlined above. I was influenced by socio-cultural and reflective practitioner models of teaching which, 'are consistent with the 'developmental' notion of mentoring,' (Hobson & Malderez, 2013, p. 91) particularly the concept of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) cited in Hobson and Malderez (2013). Scaffolding is the pedagogical support that a mentor avails to mentees to help them arrive at their own conclusions and decisions about teaching through informed reflection (Hobson and Malderez, 2013). This pedagogical support is at the centre of spoken feedback sessions and is achieved through guided reflection on observed lessons. Wallace & Gravels (2007, p. 64) contend that in these sessions,

The mentor has more control over what is discussed, perhaps even complete control. Often the mentor will be referring to standards and competence matters in order to structure their feedback...the ensuing discussion will at best be only partly determined by the mentee.

I found this statement true, especially in the first feedback session because my mentees were passive, a position they claim they are socialised into in China, where teachers are revered and seldom challenged. Strong and Baron (2004) observe that in China, 'a very different conversational style that includes many more direct suggestions,' (p. 55) is common in post lesson feedback. I tended to offer suggestions and directly tell student teachers what to do to improve their teaching (Hoffman, et al., 2015), which they seemed to expect. However, this approach changed in the second session where mentees also suggested areas for discussion.

I began the first feedback conference with a general open question: 'What do you think about the whole thing?' In response, the mentee raised a matter that we had explored in the pre-lesson conference: time management. She said:

M: It's my first first lesson I've taught, at the beginning I was a little bit nervous and as I was talking and I gradually got used to it, at the beginning I think the talks a little bit too fast and then I tried to slow it

down but I still got a feeling it's ahead of the ending time.

C: Do you mean you ended your lesson, your session a bit early?

Here, I rephrased and asked for clarification from the mentee, who goes on to explain that her lesson had ended three minutes before the expected time. She then suggests that next time she will give learners 'more time to practice, to practice and prepare for teaching.' I respond to the time issue through an indirect pedagogical suggestion (Strong & Baron, 2004):

C: So, maybe time management is something that you need to work on for the next one.

Although this suggestion has the modal 'maybe,' it is a command that has face threatening overtones in the imperative phrase 'you need to'. I found my 'own experience of initial teacher education very influential' (Hawkey, 1998, p. 660) in my approach to feedback. This observation concurs with Hoffman et al's (2015) observation that mentors 'tended to rely on direct forms of feedback around management, procedures and pacing,' (p. 104) leaving little space for mentees to reflect on their own beliefs and practices.

After this instance, I drew to the mentee's attention my disapproval of 'spoon feeding' learners instead of presenting them with opportunities to think for themselves. I began:

C: There's a point when you put a question on the board in your PowerPoint, by the way the PowerPoint was very clear ... I think your use of the technology was actually quite good, but there's a point when you ask them a question and they all read from the board. Why did you put the question on the board?

Here, I softened my suggestion by including a congratulatory remark in what was a criticism meant to teach a technique. This is what Copland (2012) describes as a sandwich of criticism, praise and criticism, especially after the conjunction 'but'. Additionally, the question at the end is what Hyland & Lo (2006, p. 168) describe as 'confronting,' and 'authoritative.' Here my pedagogical feedback is caught in the trap of prescriptive traditional positions of successful teaching (Hoffman, et al., 2015) that mentors often fall into.

Dissatisfied with the mentee's explanation, the authoritativeness manifests again when I directly make 'suggestions of how to do things better' (Copland, 2012, p. 10) to the mentee:

C: What else could you have done... instead of giving them the question and asking them to read it out, what else could you have done ... in a manner that would make the students themselves actually create the question and ask...which I think could serve your communicative purpose better.

Here my pedagogic intervention is openly directive and prescriptive and a few lines down the exchange I add: 'I think it would have been better to ask them to create the question and then asking the question, it would challenge them and give them something to work for.' This confirms Hawkey's (1998) observation that instead of prompting mentees to think for themselves, mentors 'more typically tended towards fairly lengthy descriptions of telling the student teachers what to do in lessons,' (p. 662), which is common in my feedback data.

The criticism-complement pattern is further evident where I draw the mentee's attention to effective management of learner interaction. At this instance, I praise her for giving feedback to learners through: 'things like yes, okay, great, and so on.' I then add

C: 'And then the group and pair work. Did you check on any of them while they were discussing? I know it was a small class and you could literally hear what people were saying but in a proper class what would you do?

The first question is a criticism in the form of a 'closed yes/ no question' (Engin, 2013, p. 11): the mentee had not checked on learner discussions. The mentee responds in the negative after which I make another direct suggestion:

C: Yeah, and try to check on whether they are actually doing what you want them to do...it's just something you could have done because you are simulating a lesson and it could have made sense to move from group to group and check on what they were actually doing.

The lesson for the mentee, here, is delivered in a 'directive and advisory approach,' (Hawkey, 1998, p. 662), which Hyland & Lo (2006, p. 173) also found common in their research, 'where around 66% of...interactions were directive interventions, particularly those focusing on confronting, criticising and informing.'

Beyond this point, I comment on the mentee's use of pair work, particularly that she had only given one pair a chance to present their dialogue in the lesson:

M: I think one group. Only one group gave me feedback...

C: Could you've had feedback from more?

M: Yeah I could. I could ask one more person to answer the question.

C: Because I think we agreed at the beginning that your aim was to get them to actually practice using the verbs. *To think that was actually a missed opportunity to have them to practice* because I am also thinking about the students who'd have actually discussed something they could be eager to give you feedback on, but we got the feedback from just one pair.

Several feedback issues arise here. Firstly, my criticism is 'embedded within an expression of possibility or conditionality' (Strong & Baron, 2004, p. 50) as shown by 'could'. Secondly, I miss an opportunity to follow up on the mentee's second turn and have her reflect on how she could have conducted the feedback better. Instead, I judge her in the italicised part especially the phrase 'missed opportunity,' which is potentially hurtful. I lose sight of the affective caretaker role at this point and impose what I perceive to be best practice which is raised by Copland (2012, p. 160) in 'Whose knowledge counts?' and her observation that mentors often 'have strong views to language teaching which are shown in their talk.' (p. 160). In this first feedback session, it is apparent that I rely on directiveness to make the pedagogic points that I think mentees need to be aware of.

Closely related to the directive approach, is the issue of power inherent in the very definition of mentoring cited above. This is visually demonstrated by the frequency of back channels like 'yeah' and 'umm' by the mentee who seems to speak only when answering my questions confirming the submission that, 'Student teachers tended to take a rather passive role with a rather large proportion of their responses being either giving information (28.5%) or agreeing and accepting the tutor's comments (26.3%)' (Hyland & Lo, 2006, p. 172). An overview of the turn-taking in this session shows that my turns were far longer than those of the mentee showing my domination of the feedback conference, which was directive and full of 'straightforward pedagogical advice' (Strong & Baron, 2004, p. 53), which novice teachers might sometimes expect from mentors. However, this approach has obvious limitations in fostering reflective practice in student teachers. On reflecting on my data, as shown in the foregoing part, I concur that feedback conversations are neither random nor fully reciprocal because the mentor determines 'the format and topic of conversation and usually when it begins and ends,' Strong & Baron (2004, p. 55). All in all, the nature of my pedagogic feedback was more directive than reflective, a trait acknowledged and condemned by several writers as ineffective in developing pre-service teachers because it reduces them to 'receivers of knowledge in dialogue with their cooperating teachers.' (Hoffman, et al., 2015, p. 105)

After reflecting on the data referred to above, in my second feedback conference with the same mentee, I resolved to be a listener or critical friend and encourage the mentee to reflect on the observed lesson. I deliberately move away from 'showing and telling student teachers what to do and...focused on encouraging student teacher reflection and personal responsibility,' (Hawkey, 1998, p. 662). The mentee was more relaxed and forthcoming with issues to discuss. She pointed out some errors she had made and reflected on useful interventions, which I found encouraging. The second session was video-based which made it easy to walk through the lesson again and discuss pedagogical points that the video data presented. I found this stimulated recall more reliable and effective in unpacking the lesson and scaffolding the mentee's development.

In the second conference I relied on open ended questions and probing to facilitate reflection on the pedagogic points that I wanted us to reflect on. Firstly, I elicited an overall comment on the lesson from the mentees:

- C: Ok, yeah. That's interesting. Do you have like an overall comment on the way that you conducted that lesson, maybe comparing it with the first one that you did?
- D: Oh yeah. I made some change in the structure because last I did like a complete cycle of task-based learning teaching and from the pre-task to task and finally the language focus. But last time the time was limited so I a little bit rushed through so this time I cut like take the final part take the language focus part away and I only focused on per-task and the focus itself so this one only include two parts so ummm yeah I tried to make the best of the 20 min so I don't want to include many details so I want students to focus more on the task itself practising and interacting.

The mentee's observations here, covered what I thought were the overall learning points. Her management of the lesson had been a conscientious improvement from the previous one. I acted more as a facilitator and listened to the mentee while ensuring that our conversation remained more collaborative than directive (Hawkey, 1998). Although I was unsure of the effects of my directive feedback in the first session, I felt that it might have helped the mentee to focus on practical issues making her a thoughtful and reflective practitioner capable of adjusting her teaching processes (Strong & Baron, 2004).

An instance that demonstrates the more reflective nature of the second feedback session came up a little later. It was based on the physical movements of the teacher during the lesson:

- C: What was going on there? You turned away...
- D: (Laughs) Yeah, I was going to press the button and Keep going on the PPT then I remember that I have to ask more like invite more students to answer these questions instead I have only ask one student because I just...I only asked Peter to answer his questions so I think maybe I should give more opportunity to other students so I turned around and said, 'Anyone else, or what else?'
- C: Ok yeah, I think umm I picked on that as well because in the last one we had agreed that you'd probably focused on...you'd not given everyone a chance to speak.

In this episode the mentee highlights what she learnt from the previous lesson in which she had not provided learners sufficient time to engage with the target language through feedback. Her developing cognitive autonomy manifests in her self-correction during the second lesson. In this segment, in my feedback, I graduate from directiveness to 'promote thinking and elicit ideas from the teachers primarily by asking non-judgemental questions, listening and providing non-evaluative feedback.' (Strong & Baron, 2004, p. 53). Clearly, our relationship has evolved to regard 'oral feedback discussion as a joint exploration between student and tutor' (Hyland & Lo, 2006, p. 176). I engage the mentee who produces

elaborate responses and displays commendable ability to be 'reflective and self-critical' (ibid, p. 178).

Following this exchange, I deliberately posed a pedagogical suggestion in the form of a possible question to maintain the collegial balance of the conversation. I was being very sensitive to the mentee's feelings and wanted her to reflect on the learning point:

- C: I was going to ask as well, whether it was fair that Peter had gotten so much time.
- D: Yeah because he is active, he is the only one like willing to answer questions.
- C: Umm. And so, what's the lesson to learn from there, because in a real class you'll have students like that?
- D: Yeah, we have some of them who are very...active and some of them who are not, that's the question so I should umm nominate some of them who are quiet in the class.

My initial turn in this episode is a veiled question tactfully meant to draw a response from the mentee without putting her on the spot. When her answer does not show understanding of the point I am highlighting, I rephrase the question but still mitigate it by suggesting a 'real class' thus creating distance between the mentee and the current lesson. She then outlines a reflective answer that I find sufficient in dealing with the issue of equitable class participation.

What I find very encouraging, and a departure from the norm shown in most literature on oral feedback, is the mentee's pointing out of her own mistakes without fear of criticism. She willingly shares an error she made in the lesson, displaying independent reflection and developing critical awareness of the expectations of the job. She begins:

- D: (Laughs) Yeah, this part, I... did you notice that something went go wrong in this part because I forgot to...umm this slide I typed 'persuade' because I tried to elicit them to say the word by themselves but I forgot to did this part...
- C: Oh, ok, to ask them to read the word themselves?
- D: (Quickly) No, no, I umm...
- C: Oh, to ask them what word they, how...
- D: ...yeah what word what thing they are going to do without telling them, but I forgot to elicit them (laughter).
- C: I didn't notice, did you...
- J: No, I didn't...
- D: You didn't notice?

The mentee's self-criticism here confirms Ambrosetti & Dekkers' (2010, p. 49) claim that 'the mentee's role is one of an active participant.' Here the mentee boldly initiates a topic of discussion that the mentor had not even noticed in compliance with the active role that some mentors expect mentees to play in spoken feedback sessions (Hyland & Lo, 2006). While I was initially unclear of what she was driving at, her explanation of what went wrong with her plan led us to a lesson on keeping track of lesson proceedings. Later, she points out another aspect of instruction that she forgot, further prompting us to explore ways of staying on track during lessons. She suggests practising the lesson thoroughly, but I feel it is not good enough and I revert to a suggestion 'embedded within an expression of possibility' (Strong & Baron, 2004, p. 50):

D: Practise more and get more familiar with my own power point.

C: Yeah, even have a little piece of paper...

D: ...Paper to note down the points, I forget.

C: Where you say I've done that...

D: Yeah, I made the same mistake twice, the first one is 'persuade' the second one is this part, because I was kind of distracted by their performance. I was so concentrated on the conversation I forget what I am going to say next.

The mentee confirms Wallace and Gravells's (2007, p. 29) argument that, 'if we believe that responsibility for learning lies squarely with the learner, in adult education at least, then it follows that the mentee must also take some responsibility for the success of the mentoring relationship.' The pedagogical focus here came from the mentee, demonstrating her ability to reflect and self-correct, a good indicator of emerging maturity and autonomy. Similarly, Hoffman et al. (2015) suggest that mentors should 'create opportunities in post-lesson conferences for a pre-service teacher to raise questions and lead the conversation.' (p. 105).

In the first post-lesson conference I criticise the mentee for not making use of wait time to compel learners to think and respond to her questions. In the second lesson, she deliberately tries to do so, which I regard as evidence of her reflection and learning from the previous session. I ask a leading question, which is a good way of allowing the mentee to discover their growing strength and reinforce the idea of wait time in her teaching.

C: Can you go back to 4.33...That's the part that I wanted actually, what did you do well there?

D: I wait, I waited...

C: Yes...

D: I allowed some more time wait time.

C: Yes, yes, so that was one of the things that improved in this one. You gave them more time to think about the answers... that you wanted.

D: Yeah.

In the above extract, the mentee is very triumphant in the second and fourth turns. Evidently, she had learnt from our previous discussion and remembered to use the recommendations thereof. The leading question effectively guides her to discover the pedagogical point that I wish to make.

At the end of the second feedback session, which was our last one, I asked the mentees open questions to get their opinion of our experience. By that point, we had built sufficient rapport for them to be sincere in their feedback.

C: What would be your assessment of the mentoring, the mentorship, the whole programme? Has it been helpful?

D: With you, of course..

J: Of course, ...

C: Can you be specific?

J: Like you point out some areas, so this time, last time you mentioned that I shouldn't do like direct question or explanation of the grammar rules so this time I try to imbedded it in the games or videos.

C: Dora?

D: I think you are are very...careful with the details, you noticed a lot of things that I haven't noticed myself such as the wait time. The wait time I give this time compared to the last one, I didn't notice that myself but I kind of accepted your advice and improved my lesson, but I didn't really notice it. It's a really amazing thing.

Here the mentees seem to acknowledge having picked some useful skills during our short interaction. I certainly learnt a lot about mentoring and classroom practice through this experience. I also developed the capacity to reflect on my teaching and note areas for adjustment. For instance, in the second session I deliberately moved away from directive discourse to non-directive interventions with a bias towards praise and encouragement (Hyland & Lo, 2006). Thus, by the end of our collaboration, we had all gained something.

In conclusion, the process of giving spoken feedback is delicate, but highly effective if used judiciously and with clear pedagogical goals. As I highlighted above, the success of these feedback sessions depends a lot on the beliefs of the mentor about learning and teaching. I found my background, steeped in discovery learning and scaffolding approaches, at variance with the 'spoon-feeding' mentees seemed to trust which has its roots in the way learners are traditionally are instructed in China. My feedback approach shifted from a directive and prescriptive one to a non-directive discourse aimed at fostering reflective practice in mentees. What I took away from the experience is that giving spoken feedback is a highly technical and skilled enterprise. It is an art that mentors must deliberately develop over time.

[Essay 3063 words/ Data: 1373 words]

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