

LIFELONG LEARNING THROUGH MENTORING PROCESS AND ITS OPERATIONAL DIMENSIONS IN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Learning is an unending, abstract and invisible process that permeates everyone's life, whether young or old, rich or poor, educated or illiterate. Learning is also an embodiment of education which transcends the four-walls of the classroom. Therefore, education is an added knowledge to one's existing knowledge which is expected to lead to behavioral modification on the part of the educatee, whose efficiency and performance in his/her daily activities should consequently improve positively. In the same vein, mentoring has a multi-faceted dimension, not limited only to the education industry but also includes all other aspects of human development process.

Therefore, this paper analyses the varying dimensions of mentoring phenomenon which may be characterized by flexibility of learning process among different groups of people in any given society. The totality of such a learning encounter through mentoring process is aimed at achieving an all-round development of an individual, whether such is from cognitive, psychomotor or affective domain!

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring which assumes many different names across many sectors of society with diverse dimensions is as old as man himself. Mentoring has long been recognized to be a highly effective and proactive means of professional development for junior and inexperienced academics, the world over. It serves to enhance not only their pedagogical effectiveness but also their scholarly productivity in meeting the global academic standards.

From creation, mentoring was practiced. For example, even in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were mentored by God and they became closely related until the devil succeeded in deceiving Eve and thus ultimately brought a total collapse to the hitherto flourishing and mutual relationship. Even in those medieval periods, and of course up till today, traditional form of mentoring do occur between the parents and their offsprings in a deliberate rather than in a haphazard manner.

This process is done with the aim of producing children who would later in life serve as their 'ambassadors' in the different societies. Mentoring is a highly skilled activity which consumes time. However, for it to function effectively, some degree of commitment and fastidiousness may be required by both the mentor and the mentee or mentoree as it is often variously called. This is because, the relationship constellation involved in the process has been aptly described by Kram (1986) as quoted by Clulow and Brennam (1998:19) who opine that the activity:

"is the range of relationships with superiors, peers, subordinates, and (outside work) family and friends that support an individual's development at any particular time---. It reflects the fact that mentoring which functions frequently is embodied in several relationships rather than just one".

They went further to stress that mentoring relationships are generally formed between people with both a considerable age difference and a difference in status in terms of the situational settings. We are however, skeptical to imbibe this latter view wholesale, as age difference may not be a function of the modus operandi of mentoring. Rather, the varying individual experiences of life, environment, situation, maturity and competence levels and above all, the degree to which one develops and utilizes one's natural talents, may be some of the determining factors for mentoring process to start, in the first place. To Morgan and Smit (2001) the term mentoring has become something of buzzword in higher education in the recent years, following trends of business and industry where mentoring schemes have flourished for many years. This is mainly to support the training of career development of inexperienced staff--by those in more senior positions with relevant track record. This does not mean that mentors are extra-ordinarily too superior to the mentees or that they should be seen as 'tin gods'.

Rather, the mentoring process should be seen as a dyadic relationship where mentors too will often benefit from the mentees. The relationship will, *ispo facto*, keep the mentor alive and alert as a form of professional development that will enable him/her to discover new things through the critical analysis of the challenging questions from and through the exploration and dialogue with the mentoree/mentee.

It must be noted that the hallmark of any tertiary institution among other things, include the production of high quality human resources and the promotion of academic excellence in all its ramifications rather than the development of mediocrity. However, in this paper, we shall not limit our operational scope to the educational industry alone, but take a succinct bird's eye view of all other relevant sectors. This will help us to unearth the reality and significance of mentoring phenomenon, when it is particularly considered from a multi-dimensional focus. We should, at the same time, bear in mind, that the end result of such an effort is to breed responsible leaders who are able to understand and capably cope with the challenges of their daily life endeavors.

DIMENSIONS OF MENTORING

Learning is a continuous phenomenon and therefore, no one, irrespective of age, position, riches or popularity, will ever deliberately or inadvertently wish to stop learning. Please note that the learning encounter that we are subtly referring to here is not that kind of knowledge acquisition which is restrictively limited to the four-walls of the classroom in a formal educational institution. Even this notwithstanding, it is an undebatable fact rather than a fallacy, which traditional education which inevitably still thrives till today was the fore-runner of the modern education system. Our argument here is that mentoring maybe more recognized or even to that matter, become a unique concept of academic debate, amongst academics in higher institutions as well as in industrial settings. It must however, not be overlooked that there was and of course, still a traditional form of mentoring. Under this section of this paper, we shall succinctly review the types or dimensions of mentoring, *vis-à-vis* the flexibility of each learning encounter since that is what the paper is obviously set out to achieve.

Traditional Mentoring

In the pre-literate era, learning to acquire vocational skills took the form of mastercraftsperson versus apprenticeship guild process. This is done to acquire the cognitive, psychomotor and the affective domains of learning. For example, a child at home, grows to be nurtured and tutored by his/her parents and the immediate family members as well as the community people, who would jointly impart to him/her, the knowledge of how to behave and adequately integrate into the society as part of the process of growth and development. Later at youth, he/she is sent to learn a vocation under the care of a mastercraftsperson –where moral etiquette and skills acquisition also go on pari-passu. Such training may be carpentry, weaving, bricklaying, blacksmithing, shoemaking or even traditional medicine or hunting (Omolewa, 1980). This hypothetical learning is consistently making his/her mentor a looking glass self as a role model until such a time that he/she will graduate from this training process and become more knowledgeable and be independent to apply all the knowledge and skills that he/she has acquired. He/she is not only skillful in the vocation for which training was offered but he/she would also have acquired attitudinal formation which would make him/her a better person in the society.

Community and Work-based Mentoring

This is a process whereby, practical insights are given to the mentees on theoretical issues. In essence, it is a situation where programmes are designed to bridge learners' worlds of theory and practice. Again, this confirms the efficacy of the philosophy that "test tests knowledge", even though some people in different schools of thought may not be in agreement with this fact as they hold the belief that examination is basically not the true test of one's ability. Even if their standpoint is correct, it may have a limited applicability. For example, it may be disastrous for the society to take it on the face value that based on the length of years that one person has served as a nursing sister or an attendant nurse with a surgeon in the theatre, that such a person shall automatically be qualified to practice medicine or to perform, for example, a cesarean operation on human beings in the theatre.

In essence, a period of practical attachment for professionals is a sine-qua-non for building confidence, competence and consolidating professional development of such individual professionals. For instance, many of the student-teachers in Education must compulsorily undergo a teaching practice session for a period of time across their years of training in the university before they could be qualified to teach either at the primary, secondary or high schools. The same process goes for other professions, such as lawyers, nurses, doctors, radiologists, technicians including hotel management specialists. Panda and Jena (2001) in their study of mentoring of students in the medical continuing education programme at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) stressed that many of the first year students revealed that they needed additional support regarding study skills, approaches to study, motivation and personal problem solving and sought confidential support at a personal level. This can be an added mentoring process to their academic tutoring for them to stabilize in their chosen profession through confidence building and motivation so as to be able to cope effectively with shocks and professional hazards.

Staff to Staff Mentoring

Morgan and Smit (2001) claim that mentoring in higher education mostly occurs in a face-to-face setting and that such generally takes the form of either staff-to-staff mentoring, where experienced teachers provide support for new academic staff or student to student schemes, where on-campus students provide support to new¹⁸ learners.

This is because mentoring and peer tutoring schemes have become a familiar part of the educational scene around the world. The fact remains that there is no one that has a repository of knowledge, rather, sharing of experiences will lead to the generation of greater volume of ideas, achieve sharper focus and critical thinking as a result of collaborative relationship. This process does not in any way underrate or under-value the significant role that experience plays in human development. However, the fact that a new comer to any educational setting, fresh with theoretical ideas from the university even with a Ph.D. degree but who is devoid of any practical experience in teaching, research and academic publishing including handling of students, grading of assignments and examinations, will certainly need mentoring. We are also not at the same time implying that experience acquired in the university without a continuous research effort, to regularly update one's knowledge in the application of new teaching techniques and methodologies, is the best. This is simply because one will end up using the old ideas contained in the tattered lecture notes, regurgitating the same old ideas year in and year out, and thus by cynical reference, take two steps forward and three steps backward and therefore inevitably becoming an 'academic dam'!

Staff to Student Mentoring

At this point, we should be having in mind two groups of students. One classification falls within the conventional setting where F2F interaction is the case. The other format is the distance education (DE) mode where there is total or partial geographical and time separation between the learner and the tutor. One of the most cited problems of DE is associated with the application of print or new educational technologies for the delivery of educational content to the heterogeneous clientele in geographically dispersed areas. According to Evans and Nation (1989) and Morgan (1993), there may be the restrictions inherent in the one-way information dissemination of content using either the print or the electronic media with a delayed or sometimes a non-existent feedback facility.

This may be because of the learners' inability to understand the content of the print course materials very well to facilitate for comprehension or because of the digital divide between the distant learners and the tutors. It must be noted however, that at both levels of educational practice, learners need advice, regular counseling on social, personal and academic problems, particularly on one-to-one basis. This will help to overcome the learners' isolation, whether geographically, mentally or psychologically and thus reduce the level of frustration.

Staff plays a unique role model process for students and therefore, to avoid demoralization, demotivation and even dehumanization, cordial relationship, excellent mentoring techniques and frequent dialogue between the learner and the tutor must exist; otherwise, an imminent huge drop-out rate will set in.

Student to Student Mentoring

In Contrast to the belief that if an ignorant person should be leading some ignorant group of people, that all of them are doom to failure, paradoxically, the case of an on-campus student mentoring a sophomore is not similar by any reference. An old student in terms of long years of campus life can mentor a new student in many ways than one. Such may include study pattern, approach to handling assignments and limit to engagement in extra-curricula activities.

Others are the influence and consequences of wrong choice of peer groups on the academic progress including frugality in spending money on campus and so on.

These may be some of the useful hints that any of the new comers to tertiary institutions may require so as to be able to achieve the initial objectives of their going into the university.

These are issues that one may not be able to come across on the pages of course textbooks or any topic upon which any lecturer may want to dilate during the course of his/her lectures. This is with the understanding that those who are admitted into the universities are obviously mature people who should be able to chart their own path in academic environment. More often than not, this is a wrong supposition which generally runs counter to reality. Experience is the best teacher and through one's personal experience or the experiences acquired from others, whether of negative or positive nature, such will become more permanent in the learner and such can be recalled regularly for application in solving similar situations throughout the learner's life time.

Organizational Mentoring

As organizational hierarchical structures are changing as a result of the dynamism that characterizes any centripetal society, so also are the structures being replaced by flatter and leaner systems of operation. Thus, the new organization tends to operate in a systemic nature where the individuals participate in a co-operative, coordinated and interconnected ways (Limerick & Cunnington, 1993). Hence, mentors will be seeking to be transformational rather than directional, democratic rather than dictatorial, flexible rather than coercive, and forward looking rather than conservative leaders. All these will facilitate the growth of a mentoree rather than for the mentors to pass on the lessons from their own experiences, for wholesale consumption by the mentee as if it were, he/she is a zombie!

Mentoring in reality, should be seen as helping rather than supervising, guiding rather than assessing, empowering rather than managing. Therefore, a mentor has been variously described in the one-to-one relationship by several authors (Conway, 1995; Braimoh, 2000; Barbuto, 1992 and Watts, 1996), as a peer supporter, a coach, a teacher, a guide, a sponsor, a boss, a guru, a role model, a well wisher, an associate, a relative, a trainer and a benefactor. All these classifications may apply to different situations at different times or a combination of such may apply to a particular situation, depending on the individual mentor-mentee's personality and the objective to be achieved by engaging in such a mentoring process.

Leadership Mentoring

Many people get to leadership positions whether in a country, in an organization or a community from two basic ways. First, some people get to leadership positions by the principle of their birth rites. In essence, through traditional or constitutional provisions, they have the unquestionable succession right like in the case of monarchical government structure as Queens, Kings and Chiefs.

The other form constitutes in the result of the daint of hardwork to excel and therefore, climb to leadership position either as a professional politician, a successful businessman or an accomplished academic. Our major focus will however, be on the former with hereditary process, where a high degree of tutelage goes on as from day one of their youth and throughout their adulthood years, preparing them for the eventual succession to such various positions. Mentoring covers what to say, where and how to say certain things and to whom.

Included in the mentoring process is the mode of dressing, meeting with local and foreign visitors, addressing the press, making public pronouncements including how to demonstrate maturity even in the face of frustrating and provocative situations. Both psychological maturity and international diplomacy are some of the course curricula that traditional leaders would have to be mentored upon with regular daily role play processes as rehearsals to perfect such training and thus be able to avoid public embarrassment.

MENTORING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As we have earlier indicated, that before the advent of modern education system in Africa, there used to be a form of educational encounter, no matter how rudimentary it was, through which character formation, skills training and even traditional literacy used to be imparted to the learners. Such training was holistic and all-embracing but sometimes it might be referred to as dogmatic, repressive, authoritarian and chauvinistic. One could ask a score of questions to begin with on this concept of mentoring. Not many people believe or consider mentoring as anything of importance in education and let alone in distance education, through which permanent and flexible learning process could be undertaken for the simple advantage of socializing the mentoree to the expected attitudinal modification and in coping with the daily challenges of his/her professional calling. It is not out of place to mention that there exists some form of asymmetrical relationships between theoretical training at any form of "school" and the practical life realities. In essence, to balance the divergent outcomes between the two phenomena, it is pertinent for any trainee to consistently undergo some mentoring process as this will validate the philosophy of learning as a life-long process. Knowledge is power and therefore, it is necessary for one to undergo, indirectly, a period of tutelage, in any profession before acclaiming oneself as a master craftsman.

The unfortunate thing again is that many people who are expected to be mentors selfishly withdraw from or are resistant to share knowledge or experience with the junior and inexperienced people whom they see, sometimes, as threats or whom they believe should struggle on their own in "climbing the academic or leadership ladders". Based on a three-dimensional mentoring mode of Morgan and Smit (2001), experimented mentoring, could be of use in developing a mentoring system for professional growth in DE as well as in leadership programme. This model comprises of the key factors that distinguish mentoring relationship, viz:

- degree of power
- level of identification with the mentor and
- programme implementation by the involvement of the mentor and the mentee together.

They have also noted that mentoring in DE creates discourses, helps overcome isolation, facilitates development of work-based competencies, and ensures higher flexibility and bridges theory and practice. Based on this model and particularly in the context of what we noted earlier, that mentoring embraces multi-dimensional roles and perspectives, the process could therefore, be undertaken in a f2f, at a distance, on-line or a mixture of these processes. This issue of course, raises the question of who should be a mentor, and who requires mentoring. Experience, it is said to be the best teacher. Whilst this may apply to some sedentary occupations, it certainly does not apply to the academic profession.

If experience is synonymous with the number of years spent in any citadel of learning, teaching without embarking on research and publishing in learned international journals to update one's knowledge, one may soon be qualified more to be called a bureaucrat or at best, an armchair philosopher (Braithwaite, 1999).

In addition to this, is the issue of gender factor of mentors and mentees against the background of cultural norms and ethical considerations as well as the scope of mentoring? Should this exercise be between male and male or female and female or both male and female, should the process be limited to academic matters alone or should it cut across social, psychological and emotional areas? All these issues have been dealt with elsewhere, and therefore, we shall not replicate such points at this juncture. While one may be keen to help others to grow, an intimately close mentoring relationship may be misconstrued, especially when it involves two opposing sexes. Sometimes too, people allow themselves to be 'used by satan' by indirectly pressurizing the mentee, especially in the case of the opposite sex in mentoring process, to seek sexual gratification for the professional work done. On the other hand, a mentee, either male or female, may be a "Judas incarnate" and therefore, be malignant and tell false stories of sexual harassment against the mentor. Experience of the prevalence of these situations may serve as inhibition on both the mentor and the mentee to start the ball of mentoring rolling in the first place.

This brings us to the review of the attributes of mentors for leadership training programme. In the earlier cited study by Panda and Jena (2001) on mentoring in DE in the context of supporting practicing student doctors, it was found that the performance of those supported by mentoring service was superior in terms of depth of treatment, range of perspectives, and localization of diagnosis and treatment than that of those who never enjoyed mentoring. If one is not led by an unprogressive role model, certainly, the road to stardom should be smooth. The following are however, some of the suggested attributes of a mentor that a mentee should look for before plunging into the sea of mentoring, whose depth no one is sure of!

- willingness and ability to find time to help others
- clear, critical and objective mind
- a show of genuine concern
- accessibility to the mentor
- highly experienced and knowledgeable in his/her field
- honesty, frankness and openness
- ability to motivate and inspire confidence
- trustfulness and truthfulness
- commitment and selflessness
- acceptance and readiness to serve without strings attached
- empathy – deserving respect but not demanding respect

EMERGING DEBATE ISSUES ON MENTOR/MENTEE RELATIONSHIP

The following questions are challenges to us all, and for which no specific solution will be given in this paper. Rather, they are meant to stimulate academic discourse based on our varied experiences, so that we can come with a pool of knowledge based answers with regard to the concepts of mentor and mentee as this may apply to distance learning and leadership development programmes, particularly under different settings:

1. **Who is a mentor and why is mentoring important in academic and in any development oriented programmes?**
2. **Is mentoring a new phenomenon in Education, particularly in Africa?**
3. **Who requires mentoring in any development programmes and who should mentor who?**
 - men to men
 - women to women
 - men to women
4. **What should be the scope of mentoring for professional development?**
 - academic
 - social
 - psychological
 - others
5. **What are the effects of ethical considerations and cultural norms on mentoring process?**
6. **Under what settings can academic mentoring be done?**
 - f2f
 - distance
 - on-line
 - others
7. **Is there any likelihood for mentoring to be abused? For example:**
 - sexual harassment by and on both sexes
 - academic slavery
 - economic derivatives
 - dehumanizing consequences
 - pride and demotivation, leading to frustration.
8. **What are the qualities of good mentors or what are the features of bad mentors?**
9. **What qualities are mentees expected to possess in order to facilitate smooth and effective mentoring process under any of the dimensions discussed above?**
10. **What roles would the following variables play in the mentor-mentee relationship?**
 - knowledge base
 - experience
 - honesty
 - objectivity
 - accessibility
 - empathy
 - power and position
 - credibility
 - confidentiality
 - value orientations
 - communication
 - relevance
 - cultural diversity
 - acceptability

CONCLUSION

We have dealt with a gamut of issues which are deliberately meant to challenge us to reflect on our individual roles and positions as catalysts of development. As ambassadors of our respective organizations, be such an educational, service, governmental, manufacturing and commercial, we must lead by example, by promoting excellence and eschewing mediocrity, through active and consistent development innovations of ourselves and of others. These posers remind us that there is much research to be done in the face of expanding scope and popularity of development programmes globally. Therefore, as educators and development practitioners, we should use our institutional strengths to be at the forefront of the advocacy role with the different governments or our sub-regions or continents, to accord leadership and grassroots development their rightful places in order to achieve a peaceful, humane and egalitarian society. Mentoring is certainly not a new phenomenon in our society. However, its scope and modus operandi may become more discernible now in this 21st century. Obviously, mentoring is a useful informal and longlife educational process which is not only cost effective, but can also stimulate personal development, increase productivity and improve performance.

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