

‘Mentoring for Progression’: bringing the benefits of peer mentoring to non-traditional learners

Emma Thomas, Progress South Central and Karyn Buck, The Learning Ladder

This chapter reports on two interrelated peer mentoring projects managed by Progress South Central in partnership with training and mentoring consultancy The Learning Ladder. These two projects, along with a third, were run on The Learning Ladder’s established ‘Mentoring for Progression’ model and have aimed to bring the benefits of the mentoring relationship to new groups of people. In the projects reported in this chapter, two distinct groups of non-traditional learners benefited: learners enrolled on vocational further education (FE) programmes in Progress South Central’s partner colleges, and young offenders at HMYOI Reading.

The projects have built on previous projects delivered by The Learning Ladder for Aimhigher (Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire). The projects used a specially designed set of thought-provoking exercises and planning tools to facilitate the mentoring process and have brought the benefits of the mentoring relationship to people from different backgrounds, ages and levels of previous achievement.

Background and context

Mentoring generally, and peer mentoring in particular, has been promoted in recent government initiatives. The Government’s 2003 Green Paper *Every Child Matters* recommended increasing the number of learning mentors as a means of improving school attendance and behaviour (DfES, 2003: 27). The subsequent Green Paper *Youth Matters* stated an intention to promote peer mentoring in schools, colleges and universities as part of encouraging young people to support other young people (DfES, 2005: 7). It also stated its intention of expanding opportunities for peer mentoring:

“[Peer mentors] can act as role models, raising aspirations and achievements and exerting a powerful influence on young people. They can be particularly effective with those who have become disengaged from their communities or from learning.”
(DfES, 2005: 41)

As an outcome of the recommendations in *Youth Matters*, the then-DfES contracted the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, the national strategic body for practitioners and organisations working in mentoring and befriending, to manage a national peer mentoring pilot project, which subsequently established a formal peer mentoring scheme in 180 secondary schools across England. Mentoring is an important element of the Aimhigher programme as part of its overall brief to raise the aspirations and develop the abilities of young people from under-represented communities with regard to accessing higher education (HE).

Much of the available documented evidence for the benefits of mentoring, and particularly peer mentoring, in the educational context relates to schools (Knowles and Parsons, 2009; Nelson, 2003; Dearden, 1998; Younger and Warrington, 2009 – the last is interesting from

an LLN point of view as it cites evidence for the beneficial effects of mentoring on the subsequent progression to FE and HE of students from non-traditional backgrounds). An independent evaluation of the government's Formalised Peer Mentoring Pilot project in secondary schools in England, referred to above, showed that 97% of participating schools reported improved pupil ability to cope with school life and 96% recorded improved pupil confidence. Mentors and mentees were reported to have responded overwhelmingly positively to the experience and schools reported a number of beneficial outcomes (DCSF, 2008).

Evidence at a local level for the success of Aimhigher's mentoring activities in schools has come from focus groups held with school students in years 9, 11, 12 and 13 (Aimhigher MKOB, 2010), which have provided evidence for the success of mentoring in helping students gain an increased awareness of FE and HE and some increased understanding of the various progression routes possible. Beneficial effects on general motivation and aspirations were also reported.

Moving beyond the school context, there is documented evidence on the success of peer mentoring schemes among university undergraduate students (for example Bakhshi et al, 2009; Hixenbaugh et al, 2005; Fox and Stevenson, 2006; Hill and Reddy, 2007; Page and Hanna, 2008) but less in the FE college context. A Memorandum submitted by the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation to the House of Commons Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families in 2009 noted that many schools had introduced peer mentoring schemes as a direct response to the *Every Child Matters* and *Healthy School* initiatives. A survey undertaken by the Foundation with FE colleges in 2007 found that 30% of those who responded operated peer mentoring projects and of those that did not, 54% expressed an interest in setting up a programme.

Mentoring in the prison context was discussed in the Seventh Report of the Select Committee on Education and Skills (2005), which cited beneficial effects of those prison mentoring schemes that had taken place and urged the Government to look at significantly increasing the role of mentoring in prison education, including supporting existing successful programmes on a national basis. Irwin (2008) has cited evidence for the importance of learning from peers and claims that her interviews with inmates showed evidence of peer mentoring practices (informal, in this instance). Currie et al (2002) reports on a project to widen access to FE and HE for ex-offenders, and one Lifelong Learning Network has sponsored a project aiming to identify offender and ex-offender aspirations and barriers to accessing HE (Hampshire & Isle of Wight LLN, 2009). Evidence for the benefits of mentoring in the prison context includes, at a local level, the work of The Learning Ladder at HMP Spring Hill near Aylesbury (Aimhigher MKOB, 2009). This has been a significant success, with (as at July 2009) over 1000 prisoners engaged with and more than 140 personal development plans delivered. 98 prisoners are known to have progressed or to be planning to progress, including 44 progressions to college courses and 19 to university. In 2009, 36 ex-offenders took up a college or university place, more than double the number the previous year. The re-offending rate for those involved in the project has been measured at under 6%, around one-tenth of the national average.

More widely, peer mentoring projects in prisons have been run by Prisoners' Education Trust, which claims that peer mentors play an invaluable part in encouraging prisoners to

start, persevere with and succeed in education and learning and issues a plea for more resources to help more prisons make use of peer mentor roles for learning support (Prisoners' Education Trust, 2010).

Relevance of mentoring for the work of Lifelong Learning Networks

While obviously fitting in with Aimhigher's brief to raise aspirations, mentoring is also consistent with the aim of Progress South Central which, as a Lifelong Learning Network, has progression as its central focus. As noted above, there has been substantial recent government focus on mentoring within schools. Progress South Central has aimed to focus on learners outside the school context taking less traditional routes into HE, via providers of work-based learning, via FE colleges and, potentially, via prison education. The LLN works closely with the Aimhigher partnerships in the region and were aware of the 'Mentoring for Progression' model as one that had already been piloted and was achieving good results. The LLN's aim in the projects discussed here was to apply a tried and tested model to a wider range of beneficiaries over a wider and more diverse geography. These projects have aimed to address potential barriers to progression from vocational FE into HE by helping potential HE learners identify progression routes that will help them achieve their aims.

Involvement in prison mentoring is appropriate given the plea from the Seventh Report of the Select Committee on Education and Skills (2005), referred to above, urging an increase in the role of mentoring in prison education, which coincided with the first year in which Lifelong Learning Networks were funded. However, a search of the Lifelong Learning Networks National Forum's research repository¹ suggests that mentoring projects have not been widely undertaken by LLNs – curriculum development projects and studies of student progression dominate. Progress South Central's involvement with 'Mentoring for Progression' has aimed to explore another avenue through which learners can be encouraged to progress to the next level.

Peer mentoring in college

This project aimed to train pairs of Level 3 vocational students to mentor one another with the aim of inspiring Level 3 students to progress to Level 4 and beyond. The expectation was that the students would commit to an ongoing mentoring relationship. The impetus for this project was a similar project delivered by The Learning Ladder on behalf of Aimhigher MKOB and the opportunity to introduce peer mentoring and its benefits to colleges that had not previously experienced it.

Sessions were planned as half-day workshops, delivered on the colleges' premises by The Learning Ladder. The workshop was delivered in three stages over approximately 3½ hours. The sessions were interactive and required a high level of participation from the students, and it was intended that they should seem informal and fun. Participants were trained to mentor each other to identify life goals and aspirations, to research solutions and to produce an action/progression plan. Students were given the chance in the session to carry out internet research, utilising a designated web page², to assist them in producing an action

¹ www.lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk/research-evaluation/

² www.thelearningladder.co.uk/student_links

plan. Students used the links provided to access websites where they could review job profiles, HE institutions and courses and student finance.

Students worked in pairs to produce a mini Personal Development Plan (PDP) document. They worked through some 'Life Plan Questions', which included asking about their interests, their favourite subjects at college, what they did and didn't like doing, and their ideal job. This then led on to producing a summary of their abilities, experience and areas of interest enabling a more informed decision about what they wanted to achieve and, importantly, how they would achieve it. The final stage was to log the results of their internet research into job profiles, possible progression pathways and finance options and to note where they felt they needed additional support and information.

Five of Progress South Central's partner colleges took part in the mentoring project and a total of eight half-day peer mentoring sessions were held; details are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of participating institutions and numbers of participants

COLLEGE	NUMBER OF SESSIONS HELD	DATE	NUMBER OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATING
Abingdon & Witney College	1	May 2009	15
Aylesbury College	3	May 2009	37
BCA	1	June 2009	14
Bracknell & Wokingham College	1	November 2008	14
Newbury College	2	October 2008	31
TOTAL	8		111

111 students took part in the peer mentor training, and 106 of these provided feedback after the session. Of those who provided feedback, 30 students said before the mentoring session that they were planning on going on to HE, and this had risen to 43 students after the session. After undergoing the training, 90% of respondents felt that they had learned more about how they could progress to HE, and around 85% felt that they had learned more about achieving their career goals. 70% responded that that taking part in the session had made them feel more positive about studying to get further qualifications.

The session leader's impression was that most delegates came away better informed and with an understanding of tools that could help them with future options and decisions. Some problems were encountered which the 2009-10 iteration of the project is aiming to address. Although the intention had been for colleges to advertise the flyer prior to the sessions and for those students who attended to have voluntarily decided to attend, in most cases sessions appeared to have been organised at the last minute and scheduled within class time, with the result that students were a 'captive audience' rather than necessarily willing attenders.³ A booking form is being used this year in an attempt to address some of the

³ The student feedback reported in the previous section can be viewed as even more positive in the light of this.

issues that arose in 2008-09, for example requesting that the session takes place in a classroom or similar environment (as opposed to an open area such as a library) and that a college tutor is present throughout the session, as sessions were found to work better when a member of college staff was present in addition to the trainer. The requirement to sign and return a booking form has also helped to reduce the number of last-minute cancellations by colleges.

One of the stated aims at the outset of this peer mentoring project was that the peer mentor 'pairs' would commit to an ongoing mentoring relationship. It is not yet clear whether this has occurred, but Progress South Central is in the process of contacting the students concerned as part of the Student Voice project that forms part of our impact measurement strategy. The project has served to raise awareness of peer mentoring in the colleges concerned, which was another intended outcome.

This project was rolled out in 2008-09 to five FE colleges in Progress South Central's region, and, due to its success, is being rolled out again in 2009-10. At the time of writing, ten mentoring sessions in the colleges have been completed and five FE colleges have taken part, including three who did not take part in 2008-09. Lessons learned from the first iteration of this project have helped to inform the second, with the result that colleges have been engaged and sessions booked in earlier in the academic year.

Mentoring in prison

This project aimed to train and empower prisoners at Reading Young Offenders Institution, between the ages of 18 and 21, to enable them to reach their full potential by gaining relevant qualifications, including progressing into HE where appropriate. It built on previous work at HMP Spring Hill in Buckinghamshire which had suggested that an effective way of empowering prisoners through mentoring was to move as quickly as possible to a situation where prisoners themselves are acting as mentors.

Fourteen prisoners applied to take part in two preliminary IAG sessions that acted as a screening process for subsequent participation in the peer mentoring. These sessions aimed to 'sow the seed' in prisoners' minds regarding taking advantage of educational opportunities during their time in prison. Examples were presented of former prisoners who had 'made it' in terms of gaining qualifications and subsequently obtaining productive employment. The aim of the sessions was to set a positive and encouraging tone regarding the options open to the young men, while balancing this with setting out realistically what employment options would and would not be open to them on release – for example, making it clear that convictions for violence and sexual offences debar one from working with children or vulnerable people. As a result of prisoner demand, a further half-day weekend IAG session was run, in which eleven prisoners participated.

As a result of the screening, seven prisoners were chosen to participate in peer mentoring sessions. In these, prisoners were given the opportunity to understand and appreciate the benefits of mentoring, experience the benefits of receiving a mentoring session from one of their peers, put their mentoring skills into practice by delivering a peer mentoring session and to build a personal action plan.

The methodology used in this project was based on that used in previous 'Mentoring for Progression' projects, with adaptations made to reflect the particular context. The mentees completed action plans similar to those completed by the FE college students as outlined above, with the addition of some context-specific questions around their educational experience prior to coming to prison and their expected release date. Because the prisoners were not able to carry out their own research, due to lack of access to the internet, the research component was carried out on behalf of the prisoners by The Learning Ladder and the information then fed back to the mentor-mentee pair.

In deference to the amount of form-filling that it was felt the young offenders already have to do in prison, evaluation of this pilot initiative took the form of a semi-structured focus group of participants. The focus group, run by Karyn Buck and Learning Ladder team member Sven De Caeter (himself a former prisoner at HMP Spring Hill⁴), was attended by three Reading prisoner mentors:

W, 19-year-old male, previous education 12 GCSE's A to C. After participating in the mentoring for progression training, W has decided that upon release he will start an engineering course or apprenticeship at college.

A, 20-year-old male, expelled from school at the age of 14 in Year 9. A re-entered education doing a motor mechanic's course at college, which he passed. During his time in prison A has completed various general courses. However, by completing his personal development plan, A has now passed his Level 1 in English and Maths and also has completed a Level 1 in Music Technology.

M, 20-year-old male, had a very inconsistent school education and does not participate in education in prison. However he has decided to have a further look at the possibilities of becoming a tree surgeon or going into the Army.

The outcomes of the focus group are reported here in the form of responses to selected questions:

1 Did you enjoy the training session?

W *"I did really enjoy the training as we have experienced the mentee/mentor process from both sides."*

A *"I found it very interesting not just work and work."*

2 What would you like added to the training?

A *"I don't think there are any improvements needed to the training. Maybe a few more game time activities."*

M *"I found the handouts really easy to understand and very helpful, books, ruler, note pads were all very clear and useful."*

3 What did you find the most useful?

M *"How to mentor someone and the constructive and honest feedback from Karyn."*

A *"All the communication skills we have learned, assertiveness and listening skills."*

⁴ www.independent.co.uk/news/education/higher/going-straight-the-exconvict-signing-up-other-prisoners-for-degrees-1880710.html

4 Do you know stuff now you didn't know before?

M *"Yes. How to mentor someone and motivate them. How to be more assertive, and personal people skills."*

A *"I have gained a lot of self-esteem and have realised that I can achieve much more than I thought. I have got much clearer career ideas and now know my goals and ambitions."*

5 How has Sven helped in being here?

A *"By seeing Sven we know that it is possible to change. If he can do it so can we. He is a positive role model and he knows how it feels to be in here."*

M *"Sven gives us hope and ambition. I find it very important to have a good role model."*

The difference being trained as a peer mentor can make is evidenced by feedback from those taking part. This also demonstrates, in the words of the prisoners, the importance of the mentoring being carried out by fellow prisoners rather than members of staff or external mentors:

"If the governors tried to do what we do then the prisoners wouldn't listen, they would just see it as lecturing – but we are in the same position so they are more likely to listen."

"Having you has been great cos you don't work for the prison."

"Because you are not from the prison I concentrate more."

The extent to which the mentors have learned the skills needed to take on the role and to work with fellow prisoners is also demonstrated by the comments they made on the mentoring sessions they have already done:

"One lad, he seemed alright. The other lad – we chatted in his cell for 40 minutes and got nothing, it was like trying to get blood from a stone. He said he wanted to go to college but he didn't have good motivation. The first lad was on the ball really. He wanted to be an electrician. He already has some GCSEs. He had made a silly mistake that cost him 18 months of his life. He was from a decent background and a caring family. Or he wanted to be a plumber; he was very motivated, his ambition was to own his own house and have his own business like his dad. So I reckon he will do it and get what he wants."

Encouragingly, the feedback also highlights the difference peer mentoring can make to self-esteem, confidence and, critically, the prisoner's attitude to their own potential for re-offending:

"I look differently on how I spend my time and help myself for when I am released so I don't come back."

"You challenge us more to think differently, it has made me take more responsibility for my actions and staying straight."

"More of this should happen because you are giving people a future, who thought they never had a future."

Some changes were made to the original aims in order to tailor the project to better meet demand – given that this was a pilot project, it had been noted at the outset that it might be

subject to change as it progressed. It had originally been intended that the project would involve external mentors conducting intensive one-to-one mentoring with prisoners from the Kennet Unit (a rehabilitation wing), but given that prisoners in this wing already have access to prison-provided opportunities along these lines, it was decided that the project team could best provide value added by delivering a more general IAG session to Kennet Unit prisoners. A half-day session was duly run at a weekend and eleven prisoners attended. Feedback was positive, with nine out of the eleven attendees expressing keenness to progress their education further.

The pilot peer mentoring project appears to have been extremely successful and there is interest in embedding the scheme in the prison. The seven prisoners who took part in the peer mentoring sessions are now equipped to act as mentors for fellow prisoners and have already run personal development sessions themselves. The prison as a whole is much further along the road to embedding peer mentoring thanks to the decision to equip a number of prisoners with the skills to act as peer mentors for other prisoners. With this in mind, The Learning Ladder are now, sponsored by Progress South Central, running a further round of peer mentor training sessions in the prison.

Given the way the project has demonstrated the importance of using peer mentors rather than external mentors, embedding this in the prison will require enough prisoners equipped with the necessary skills to work with all of those who are committed to coming into the project. The Institution has a high turnover of inmates so that the project will need to identify new potential peer mentors and equip them with the necessary skills. Another lesson from the HMP Spring Hill project, evidenced by the feedback from the Reading project, is that regular update sessions with the Learning Ladder team are greatly valued by the peer mentors. The sessions are an opportunity for them to refresh their skills or learn new ones and to have a sounding board for any issues they have come across in their peer mentoring work.

This pilot project was intended to be a positive experience for the prisoners that would enable them to plan a successful future and see the benefits of further study including, potentially, HE. The project also has the potential to assist with the reduction of re-offending rates, based on the previous project run at HMP Spring Hill. During a recent European Social Fund project, the prison kept in touch with ex-offenders after they'd been released. The re-offending rate for those involved in the project – i.e. the percentage of offenders who commit further offences on leaving prison - was under 6%, around one-tenth of the estimated national average figure.

Conclusion

The Mentoring for Progression projects form one aspect of the LLN's work that will hopefully be sustainable beyond the end of our funding period, given the evidence for awareness-raising and embedding in the institutions that have participated. Embedding of aspects of the Mentoring for Progression projects has already taken place, as reported above, and follow-up of the participants is taking place during 2009-10.

Tentative recommendations, based on the outcome of these projects, would include:

- Mentoring, particularly schemes involving the training of in-house and peer mentors, have obvious potential for embedding and are therefore a viable way of ensuring sustainability of LLN initiatives.
- The enthusiasm with which the project has been received at HMYOI Reading, and the success of the previous project at HMP Spring Hill, suggest that there is mileage in peer mentoring schemes being rolled out more widely within the prison service, particularly given the recommendation of the Seventh Report of the Select Committee on Education and Skills (2005).

The aims and outcomes of the Mentoring for Progression projects are consistent with several of the original aims for LLNs as set out by HEFCE (2004), especially the brief to provide support for learners on vocational pathways, and to value vocational learning outcomes and provide opportunities for vocational learners to build on earlier learning. They form a complement to the creation of progression opportunities via curriculum development and progression agreements. They are 'on the ground' work at an individual level to clarify learners' goals and increase their awareness of the progression opportunities, including the HE opportunities, open to them. It is hoped that this work has played a part in creating a culture of peer support and of increased awareness of the potential for progression among those institutions that have participated.

Progress South Central www.progresssouthcentral.org.uk

The Learning Ladder Ltd www.thelearningladder.co.uk

REFERENCES

Aimhigher MKOB (2009) *The Impact of Mentoring on Increasing Access to Higher Education*

Aimhigher MKOB (2010) *Focus Groups 2008/09: Final Report.*

Bakhshi S, Harrington K and O'Neill P (2009) Psychology students' experiences of academic peer mentoring at the London Metropolitan University Writing Centre *Psychology Learning and Teaching* 8 (1) 6-13

Currie D, Norman B, MacLeod L and Tunnock J (2002) College Wouldn't Touch Me With a Barge Pole: The 'Think Again' Project Widening Access for Ex-offenders. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* 4 (1) 36-39

Dearden J (1998) Cross-age peer mentoring in action: the process and outcomes. *Educational Psychology in Practice* 13 (4) 250-257

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) *Formalised Peer Mentoring Pilot Evaluation* London: DCSF

Department for Education and Skills (2003) *Every Child Matters* London: The Stationery Office

Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Youth Matters* London: The Stationery Office

Fox A and Stevenson L (2006) Exploring the effectiveness of peer mentoring of accounting and finance students in higher education *Accounting Education* 15 (2) 189-202

Hampshire & Isle of Wight Lifelong Learning Network (2009) *Offenders into HE: An Investigation into the Aspirations of Offenders for Higher Education*

HEFCE/Learning and Skills Council (2004) *Lifelong Learning Networks*. HEFCE Circular letter number 12/2004

HEFCE (2008) *Guidance for Aimhigher partnerships* HEFCE February 2008/05

Hill R and Reddy P (2007) Undergraduate peer mentoring: an investigation into processes, activities and outcomes *Psychology Learning and Teaching* 6 (2) 98-103

Hixenbaugh P, Dewart H, Drees D and Williams D (2005) Peer e-mentoring: enhancement of the first year experience. *Psychology Learning and Teaching* 5 (1) 8-14

House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee (2009) *Young People not in Education, Employment or Training. Eighth Report of Session 2009-10 [HC 316-I and 316-II]. Memorandum submitted by the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation.*

House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2005) *Prison Education. Seventh Report of Session 2004-05 [HC 114]*

Irwin T (2008) Cell stories: informal learning in a custodial establishment *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* 10 (2) 18-29

Knowles C and Parsons C (2009) Evaluating a formalised peer mentoring programme: student voice and impact audit *Pastoral Care in Education* 27 (3) 205-218

Nelson A (2003) Peer Mentoring: a Citizenship Entitlement at Tanfield School *Pastoral Care in Education* 21 (4) 34-41

Page D and Hanna D (2008) Peer mentoring: the students' perspective *Psychology Learning and Teaching* 7 (2) 34-37

Prisoners Education Trust (2010) *Peer Support for Learning: Adding Value* Learning Matters Briefing Paper 2

Younger M and Warrington M (2009) Mentoring and target-setting in a secondary school in England: an evaluation of aims and benefits *Oxford Review of Education* 35 (2) 169-185