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Mentoring Music Teachers – Statement

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If we follow Peter's description mentoring might mean a lot for the development of persons, institutions and for the understanding of learning in general. I would like to add some thoughts on this based on my work in the training of music teachers for secondary schools in the field of general music education. Together with some colleagues I tried to find effective ways to develop teacher's competences in peer-mentoring as to make them mentors for each other. Thus mentoring was and will always be an experiment field for me.

1. The attitude and the key competences of mentors are needed in all learning stages

Mentoring needs an attitude that emphasizes the expertise of the learners for their learning process. That challenges the mentor enormously because it is rooted in an understanding of learning and development that conflicts with usual rituals in formal learning institutions and with the widespread understanding of apprenticeship.

Peter's definitions of various functions and roles within the framework of mentoring, such as shadowing, counselling, instructing, facilitating, coaching ... provoke questions about the understanding of learning in general. His reflections are related to adult learning, but from my point of view the full range of learn promoting roles he mentioned is needed in all stages of development from children to seniors – naturally the weight of the different roles will differ but they all should be fostered from the beginning of formal learning processes. It is very contradictory to try to implement a mentoring attitude in an institution with strong emphasis on more strictly guided teaching activities and less attention to dynamic and non-directive ways to support learners. (For example: to build up teachers competences in peer mentoring mostly means a conflict with the learning rituals in the schools of these teachers).

2. Mentoring means to foster reflexive transformation processes

Ortfried Schäffter, expert in advanced learning, discriminates the following crucial learning modes or in his words forms of transformation.¹

1. Linear transformation

Linear transformation means a learning process from a known point A to a known point B, e.g. a very simple music-technical exercise to get something in your fingers.

2. Transformation with open goal

The starting point is known and regarded as dissatisfying, poor, obsolete, but the goal is not yet known. It lies in a field of possibilities and depends on the learner's special learning way and his or her appropriate solution, e.g. many convincing interpretations can be created for one special music piece.

3. Reflexive transformation

¹ See Schäffter, Ortfried (2001): Weiterbildung in der Transformationsgesellschaft. Zur Grundlegung einer Theorie der Institutionalisierung. Schneider Verlag: Hohengehren, 19-29

In this case the starting point is not yet known, it is to be developed and still part of the learning process. From this chosen point the learner develops his or her solution which again can be the initial point for a new learning process. E.g.: Imagine a music teacher who is supported by a mentor to find one of his or her current learning issues, to accurately define it and to build up a personal experiment field of observation and feedback to develop new possibilities to act as a teacher.

From my point of view especially this third transformation mode is to be fostered in a mentoring process. By the way and relating to my prior notes I am convinced that each form of teaching should continuously have this third level in mind. Linear transformation processes are necessary through the whole life – this is out of question – but they should be seen as a means to get to higher learning levels and not as the central learning strategy.

3. Mentors who support novice teachers have particular tasks

There is one stage in the development of teachers I am especially interested in: I mean the first years of the professional life, a very fruitful and crucial learning phase if supported by experts in mentoring. It was interesting for me to relate Peter's very fundamental approach to mentoring to my experiences with novices in the music teacher profession. In this crucial stage some tasks seem to be particularly important for mentoring.

- Slowing of time

Beginners often get the impression to be a source of irritation for the institution and they feel implicitly forced to get rid of their novice status as fast as possible. Adaptability pressure may cause learning but often I observed that important learning steps were skipped. Over-challenging situations may produce forms of regression. Persons fall back to modes of acting which they would never have consciously chosen and which actually contradict their values. (Imitation of someone's own teacher who wouldn't explicitly been taken as a role model). Mentors can help to create learning space, to identify important steps and to trace back to the actual values of the mentee.

- Focusing on individual important learning issues

A lot of issues from music as learning subject to personal, social, and institutional aspects enormously challenge beginners. Mentors can help to make differences and to prioritise.

- Building on the mentee's resources

In new working and learning contexts the awareness of person's strengths is crucial to help them to build up a self-conscious and reflected teaching style. Mentors should be specialists in detecting and communicating the mentee's resources.

- Bringing into a wider context

Mentors can help to bring actions, situations, estimations, feelings, evaluations of their mentees in a greater context and to make them less absolute.

Example: Experienced teachers are aware that their actions and reactions in school touch different levels from the inner level of being a special person to the outer level of incorporating roles and functions in an organisation. They are trained to discriminate these levels and to find a convincing teacher identity. Beginners tend to act and feel mainly on the

person level and the whole framework of their profession is to be unfolded and as far as possible to be created. Mentors can bring such perspectives into the dialogue.

- Nurturing visions

Why do I what I do and what vision do I want to foster? – Questions like this can help to bring superficial necessities and long term goals into balance.

- Encouraging mentees to experiment and to fail

“Mistakes” are made and they are needed in teacher’s development. The development of tacit knowledge or action knowledge needs both the experience to succeed and to fail – or better lots of them. Against the strong tradition of judging and suppressing mistakes in schools mentors can help to transform them into a source of learning.

The mentioned aspects focused the beginner’s perspective but they may in variations also be important for further developmental stages of teachers (“crisis” in the sense of Erikson). Additionally these points may underline that mentoring addresses both individuals and organisations.

4. Humility as a core competence of mentors

In Peters research report “Lifelong Learning for Musicians: The place of Mentoring” much emphasis is laid on the attitude of mentors and on personal and social competences. I want to underline the mentor’s humility as a crucial basis for dialogues with the mentee and give one more reason to maintain this attitude.

Recent neuro-physiological research nurtures the certainty that we learn from birth to death and that the brain stays plastic. It is also evident that learning always means unlearning, that through the whole life development means both acquiring and loosing. Thus it is not only the question what do we learn but also what do we unlearn. Insiders loose the awareness of little but important atmosphere creating aspects of a learning environment which can be easily recognised by an outsider. This should have consequences for the relationship of newcomers and experienced practitioners, of mentors and mentees and hopefully for the valuing of beginners in an organisation.