Discursive Mentoring Model in Action Research as a Teacher Empowering Practice: An Interpretative Study

Shoba K.N.

Abstract
In an attempt to understand the available approaches to mentoring, several models were scrutinised and it was found that most mentoring practices involved transmitting acquired knowledge to teacher-participants who were mentored in a structured or unstructured format helping them connect theory and practice in the classroom. This article answers the primary research question ‘How is the Action Research Mentoring Process contextualised in this background?’ and also examines secondary questions such as ‘What model of mentoring emerges from the present context of Action Research Mentoring? Is it formal, informal or does it offer a third space? How discursive is the experience?’ An opinionnaire with questions pertaining to the discursive experience of being mentored was used to gather data along with interpretation and analysis of excerpts from the reflective journals shared by the teacher-participants.

Keywords: action research mentoring, models of mentoring, mentor, mentored teacher-participants

Introduction
Mentoring comes in many models: depending on the individual or the institution, mentoring is conceived diversely in frameworks suitable to the context. Sometimes frameworks are readymade and implemented unquestioned in the process of mentoring. However, they are mostly tailored to address the need of the context. Engaging in the Action
Research Mentoring Scheme (ARMS) between 2018 and 2019 funded by the British Council, New Delhi, India opened up possibilities of exploring mentoring and reflecting on mentoring practices retrospectively. Periodic discussions between mentor-super-mentor, mentor to teacher-participant and mentor to mentor created spaces of observation which elucidated models that were vertical, horizontal and otherwise. How could this ‘otherwise’ be labelled? This article tries to answer that question.

Background of the Study
Six teachers of tertiary level learners of Engineering colleges in and around Chennai, Tamil Nadu evinced interest in participating in action research to study their own classrooms, to identify problems and find solutions. The mentor, the author of the article had one responsibility—to lead towards questions and travel with them in their journeys towards answers. There were no right or wrong directions to lead them to—both the mentor and the teacher-participant shared a space that was, to use the most appropriate word—discursive—constantly checking each other, not arguing but trying out possibilities only under the assurance that, if the answer does not satisfy the problem identified, they had the freedom to go back and do it all over again. Action research offered the luxury to plan, design, implement, reflect and revise. It was this cycle of learning that drew these six teacher-participants together, who agreed mutually to undertake the serendipitous journey. In order to understand the model of mentoring that emerged out of the engagement in ARMS, it is necessary to revisit the key terms used in the title of this article. A discursive approach refers to a method or style that provides the space for dialogue. It is fluid and elastic accommodating ideas, arguments and perspectives without being judgemental helping the teacher arrive. It has been well-established and recognized in academia that discursive processes create a significant impact on cognitive processes and actions (Balslev, Vanhulle & Dieci, 2015, p. 23). Research has proven that dialogic engagement by mentors and the teacher-participants about classroom issues spring up and synthesize diverse forms of pedagogical knowledge in their discussions which are discursive in character. This is also exactly the process by which professional knowledge is created. Bromme & Tillema (1995) examine the link between discursive practice and professional knowledge and reinstate that
Professional knowledge is developed as a product of professional action and establishes itself through work and performance in the profession, not merely through accumulation of theoretical knowledge but through the integration, tuning and restructuring of theoretical knowledge to the demands of practical situations and constraints. From a socio-historical point of view, professional knowledge evolves gradually in a process of enculturation of the professional within a working context which is in itself part of a certain culture. (p. 262)

The Action Research Mentoring Process is facilitated by stimulating the teacher-participants to identify, define, understand and confront methods of problem solving in their respective classrooms.

Existing Models of Mentoring

Mentoring emerges from the idea of the ancient Greek tradition of coaching by goddess Athena who portrayed herself as a man named Mentor and nurtured the son of King Odysseus. By taking the role of the surrogate parent in the absence of the king, Athena mentored the protégé to realize his full potential. This model of a higher entity, leading someone from the unknown to known or vice versa was established and well-accepted in the Western European knowledge forms. Gradually, in the modern Western models, this paternalistic trend metamorphosed into offering guidance to someone to attain an agreed level in a given context. The concept of emulation and the effort to achieve the mentor’s position one day has become the base of the mentoring practice (Kumar, 2018, pp. 24-25).

Formal and Informal Models of Mentoring

These are widely accepted models and they are designed based on the intentionality of purpose. As the figure given below demonstrates, once the intentionality of purpose is established, planning of the whole process of mentoring is done and is structured in a way that lends itself to effective administration. The execution of it may exhibit differences in the informal model as it involves spontaneity in forming relationships and sometimes be random in aspects of planning, structure and administration. Moreover, the relationship may or may not be structured and can originate from sharing common interests and the strong motivation to work in tandem at the personal and professional levels (Armstrong & Allinson, 2002, p. 77). Friendship is another characteristic
feature of informal mentoring. They do not demarcate between the personal and professional and can have lasting positive relationships.

Figure 1

On the other hand, the importance of structure and administration assumes a much stronger role in the formal mentoring model. There is a greater interventional body that initiates and facilitates the matching of mentors and the teacher-participants in this model. Objectives, time, accountability and outcomes are clearly laid out before involving people and their roles (e.g. Armstrong et al., 2002, p. 69). Thus, the formal mentoring model adheres to “clear proposes, function, defined aims” (Morton-Cooper & Palmer, 2000, p. 46).

The Knowledge Transmission Model

This practical and efficient model emphasizes more on predetermined knowledge and the skillsets required to mentor, being passed on to the to-be mentors, so that they do not face unseen challenges during the process of mentoring. Mentors acquire knowledge in the form of discrete concepts, skills, and techniques” (Wang & Odell, 2002, p. 525). Well ahead of the mentoring journey, the mentors attend workshops for understanding the rules of the games and are asked to adhere to it. There are occasions when no experimentation is allowed and it is therefore simply a process of knowledge transmission without a critical dialogue. ARMS began with a workshop for mentors negotiating the meaning of mentorship and the process involved. However, there was complete room for freedom for mentors to experiment, to learn by trial and error and find the solutions that best suited them.
The Theory and Practice Connection Model

This model emerged as an attempt to fulfil the gap posed by the Knowledge Transmission Model and is generally based on the assumption that mentoring skills and knowledge of mentoring should be actively constructed by mentors and then modified through integration of their practical knowledge of teaching and learning, with the support of another higher level of mentors (Wang & Odell, 2002, p. 528). ARMS created opportunities for exploring this model as it helped mentors construct and reconstruct their knowledge and skills in their specific mentoring practice context while the mentor trainers play key roles as sounding boards. By constant and consistent training, the mentors had sites to explore by themselves related to mentoring and also the action research their mentees were involved in. This model also necessitated sustained effort from the mentor-trainers to keep the mentors afloat while mentoring the mentees.

The Collaborative Inquiry Model

In the spirit of a unified learning community, the mentor-educators, mentors and the teacher-participants work on the same plane to explore the context and create shared knowledge (Wang & Odell, 2002, p. 528). Practice-centred conversations form the foundation of the collaborative enquiry model. Mutual trust, understanding, effort, time and resources are the essence of the model (Nguyen, 2017, p. 234). ARMS exhibited aspects of this collaborative model, where the mentor-educators were available for clarifying doubts, constructing explorable questions and helping the teacher-participants conduct classroom studies in their own contexts.

It is evident from the above explanations that each model has its own pros and cons. Every model perceives the process and practice of mentoring differently and they complement each other in order to execute effective mentoring. Moreover, the cultural context plays a key role in determining the patterns of mentorship nuances and thereby, slight variations in mentoring models can be identified in contemporary times. The ARMS project in India manifested a model that reflected the Indian mosaic cutting across borders revealing interesting and imperative questions to explore. This article poses a vital argument of examining mentorship spaces that accommodated and oscillated
between the combining forces of authority and friendship, as well as counsel and commitment (Clutterbuck, 2014, p. 34).

Participants’ Profile

Six teachers of tertiary level learners of engineering colleges in and around Chennai, Tamil Nadu were the participants of the study and they had teaching experiences ranging between 3-15 years. All the teacher-participants had an educational qualification of a postgraduate degree in English and one teacher was a PhD degree holder. These teacher-participants expressed interest when they were approached with the research proposal and were inclined to conduct action research projects in their classroom for reasons of Continuing Professional Development and understanding their learners better.

Research Question

This study investigates the model that emerges in the ARMS context, characterized by a discursive structure percolating the layers of mentor-educators, mentors and the teacher-participants. By adopting the case-study approach it examines a particular group of teacher-participants mentored by the author.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data required to study the nature of the model of mentoring that emerged out of the ARMS context, emanated from the experiences of the teacher-participants throughout the process and were collected by select utterances through data coding from multiple sources like individual interviews, reflective journals and an opinionnaire.

Individual Interviews

Open-ended questions related to the models of mentoring that are already in practice, their knowledge about it, their experience on the ARMS project and comparing it with the existing models to compare and identify the differences were mostly used. The interviews were all semi-structured and about 5 questions were asked individually. They explored the participants’ perception of the ARMS model as an open and flexible space mostly characterized as a space where questions were welcome, dialoguing for progress in research and the relationship shared by the mentor and the teacher-participant. The questions posed
during these interviews are as follows:

1. Were you familiar with any of the existing models of mentoring currently before engaging in the current study? Elaborate.
2. Do you see a defined model of mentoring emerging from the current practice? What do you think are the key features of this model?
3. How will you describe the relationship between the mentor and the teacher-participant in the present research and guiding process?
4. What are the advantages of being mentored to conduct a classroom action research?
5. How has the Action Research Mentoring Scheme offered a space to construct, negotiate and dialogue practitioner processes including the challenges and takeaways?

The teacher-participants documented their answers through emails, and some were available for a direct interview. The data collected through the interview was coded accordingly to examine the recurring themes and perceptions pertaining to the overall model of mentoring with reference to the Action Research Mentoring Scheme.

**Reflective Journals**

Mentor-educators introduced to the mentors the concept of journaling reflectively both for themselves and sharing the knowledge with their teacher-participants. Mentors usually reflected after every session of discussion with the teacher-participants. Similarly, the teacher-participants shared their reflective journals through documenting them in reflective diaries, some audio-recorded their doubts, fears, evolution and growth. These reflective reports also contained how these mentoring activities influence their teaching practice both from the perspectives of the teacher-participant and the mentor. These were the richest source of data repository as it revealed how ARMS was discursive in nature and were analysed using the data coding method. The findings section have highlighted the observations made by the teacher-participants about their own practice.

**Opinionnaire**

By the end of the entire project, once the teacher-participant have completed their classroom studies and showcased their findings through a disseminating event where they all gathered and also learnt
about everyone’s experiences, an opinionnaire was shared to collect their responses to find their understanding about the bigger picture, the model that the entire ARMS project had followed. To facilitate analysis that would best help in collating all the utterances that directly suggested the overall framework of the mentoring model, a coding method based on the study of Jay & Johnson (2002) was used. All entries that contained instances of a reference to the overall experience and framework were collected and carefully analysed using the interpretative approach.

**Findings and Discussion**

Interpreting these utterances uncover a whole gamut of justifications that prove that the ARMS model is highly discursive in nature. Examining discursive practices in mentoring and being mentored does not only refer to examining the contextual production of meanings by the teacher-participants as they employ in their utterances with reference to the action research takeaways from their classrooms but also throws light on how such utterances reflect and create the processes and meanings of the community in which the research is undertaken. Structuring the contents of the reflective journals retrospectively, it can be interpreted that the teacher-participants have been in the ‘practice’ of teaching. However, what makes the entire experience ‘discursive’ is their informed observation of their own practice, situating it in the history of the practice of their community. Many teacher-participants also reflected on how by making direct or indirect observations, they subjected their practice to conscious introspection and articulating them in the oral or written form infusing the discursivity of their practice.

The following are some examples:

- “I can see how there was a lot of space to speak, we spoke whenever possible about our classrooms and one interesting thing about the entire process was it was completely non-judgemental”.
- “Our mentor understood that we as teacher-researchers need to share our challenges not only with her (the mentor) but also among ourselves because each of us were facing similar or more problems in varying intensities”.
- “It was all horizontal mostly and our mentor would pitch in sharing her experiences. So, there was also vertical intervention at times when required”.

Shoba K.N.
“The entire experience was very flexible with regard to the types of questions we could ask, the problems we could explore. The time frames to a certain extent, of course, there were reminders for deadlines but I did not feel the pressure. I think this was also a major reason that I learnt a lot during these days”.

“I knew that my mentor was younger than me in age and experience but the new ideas which I was blind to all these days helped me understand the relationship better. There was a certain degree of formality and informality in all our discussions. After all, we are all humans”.

“We sometimes sent requests for answers to certain questions but received questions that directly led to the answers. This back-and-forth questioning practices opened up space for us to think by ourselves and we understood that mentors also do not know the answers always. That was quite reassuring”.

“As teachers, there are times when we need psychological support, and nobody speaks about it. During the project, we discussed several ideas that helped us understand our learners better and these also helped us become better practitioners”.

These utterances are resources for proving how the present ARMS model is a conglomeration of the best practices found in the established models discussed in the earlier sections of the article. During the entire period of mentoring, the participants’ production of reflective documentation via the interviews, journals and opinionnaires also support the idea of how such discursive processes can have a significant impact on the cognitive processes and future actions (Balslev, Vanhulle & Dieci, 2015, p. 58). While the Formal, Informal, Knowledge Transmission, Theory-Practice Connection, Collaborative Inquiry models focused on various aspects of mentoring from different angles laying stress on diverse aspects, ARMS offered a third space that is much evolved and discursive in nature.

The different interactions among teacher-participants and their individual observations through the oral and written formats is interactional in nature. Though at the superficial level, it appears to be ordinary conversations, it deeply affects the process of knowledge construction in a discursive manner. The outcome of this experience can be dynamic and completely unpredictable (Crasborn et al., 2010, p. 45), because knowledge construction is a discursive process and occurs differently
for every individual. Such verbal interventions gradually transform into professional knowledge that contribute to the holistic growth of the teacher’s positive attitude towards research and collaboration.

Conclusion
This study has demonstrated the discursive model of mentoring that surfaced organically through the Action Research Mentoring Scheme. Professional knowledge and development is the culminative output of such a discursive nature of interaction and dialoguing. By enunciating the utterances in the interviews, reflective journals and opinionnaires, the teacher-participants engaged in knowledge construction from their own contexts. The study also upholds the idea that professional development emerges from the understanding and questioning of specific situations within one’s orbit of experience and practice. The cogency of discursive mentoring model that emerges in the current study is also substantiated by S. Vanhulle (2005) whose work underlines the significance of knowledge that is developed through one’s own words. He states, “Human consciousness can develop when words—and others’ words—become meaningful concepts that generate a transformation of thoughts and actions” (p. 292). Undoubtedly professional knowledge and development is shaped by language and is constructed through discursive communication.

References


*Shoba K.N.* is Assistant Professor of English in Anna University, Chennai. Her research interests include teaching and learning of the English language, researching diverse practices of teaching English, teacher research and education. 

shobaknau@gmail.com

shobakn@annauniv.edu