The Power of Students on Practice Placements: Discursively Uncovering Power Dynamics in Mentoring Dyads

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Contribution

Mentoring practice is a widely established practice in preparing students for professional practice in various professions (Peiser et al., 2018). This is translated into extended placements in the field setting with formal mentorship opportunities; providing the integration of theory and practice (Orland-Barak, 2010). Mentoring practice typically has set roles: the mentor as the experienced expert whose role is to support the student's development, and the student as inexperienced professional who needs to build her/his professional and personal skills (Kram, 1985). Mentoring practice is therefore inherently hierarchical, with the mentor as powerful and the student as less powerful.

In uncertain times with changing roles, the roles of mentor and student, respectively, are also at a tipping point. It is true that the mentor exercises power, but, what is often overlooked is that the student also can exercise power: that in and by his/her speaking and acting s/he also directs the conversation and thereby influences the learning. In line with recent work (e.g., Ben-Harush & Orland-Barak, 2018; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021) that urges to redefine mentoring, focusing on a more dynamic relationship and bidirectional learning; the purpose of this study is to uncover if and how students can (also) be powerful in mentoring practices and influence the focus of their learning.

To explore this, power was discursively conceptualized. This means that power is viewed as the effect of how actors interact with each other (Martín Rojo, 2001). Actors *do* power, resulting in a continuous flux of power in interactions (Hayward, 1998). Power is thus not conceptualized as something that an individual possesses (or lacks), but rather as something that is performed relationally. It is about 'power to' rather than 'power over' someone (Hayward, 1998).

Such a discursive approach to power is operationalized further using a combination of positioning theory (PT) (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) and frame analysis (FA) (Dumay, 2014). Central to PT is the idea that actors continuously position themselves and others in interaction (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). 'Positioning' entails a continuous dynamic, relational process wherein the actors assign specific rights and duties to themselves and others (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). These positionings are then interpreted from the frame on which they are looking at the placement. Frames are defined as cognitive structures that actors bring to a situation but always evolve and develop in interaction with others (Dumay, 2014). Actors' frames are linked to their prior experiences, informed by their beliefs and expectations for (mentoring) practice, and help them to explain and make sense of the situation they find themselves in. FA provides the tools to see how frames over time emerge,

gain meaning, adapt, merge or clash. As such, the combination of PT and FA results in a better understanding of the flow of power dynamics.

This resulted in following research question: (How) Do students exercise power based on the confluence of positionings and frames, and how does this influence the focus of their learning?

Method

Empirically, the study draws on extensive observation of two mentoring dyads (mentor-student) in medical education during their six-week placement period. These students were in their third and final year of their master's prgramme in medical education, doing their final elective placement in general practice before specializing. The context of mentoring in medical education in many ways mirrors the 'standard' practice emerging from the literature: an experienced professional with several years of experience as a doctor, supervising a junior colleague on placement. Central to the research design were weekly non-participant observations of workplace practice (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). We observed interactions during workplace practice (i.e., a mentor interrupting a mentee or inquiring his/her mentee's decision-making process while s/he is performing) as well as their interactions away from or about workplace practice (i.e., feedback and evaluation meetings). Repeated observations afforded insight in the development of mentoring relations over time, as well as shifts in the nature and focus of the mentoring activities and conversations (cfr. positionings). The observations were supported through extensive field note writing, used to document (non-)verbal language use and important contextual information (Montgomery & Bailey, 2007). Periodic, focused ethnographic interviews with both mentors and students focused on building a better understanding of their developing expectations and goals for mentoring practice (cfr. frames) and communicatively validating preliminary insights and reflections from the analysis (Reeves et al., 2013). Participants were further invited to make sense of their experiences by asking them to document critical incidents that occurred in the absence of the researcher in an audio diary shared before each interview (see e.g., Wijbenga et al., 2021). For the analysis, field notes, interviews and audio diaries were first thoroughly read through and memos on initial interpretations and power dynamics (positionings; frames) were written (Miles et al., 2014). A detailed analysis of the positionings (field notes) followed later in the analysis by identifying micro-identities as positionings (Kayı-Aydar, 2019). These specific positionings were then clustered and deepened in dialogue with the larger dataset over time. The interviews were inductively coded to identify expectations and goals of the individual actors, resulting in identified frames. These frames were subsequently re-ordered and interpreted over time. The final step in the analysis specifically related the identified positionings and frames to the focus of learning, starting from the interviews.

Expected Outcomes

In the first dyad, the student was allowed to do consultations largely independently from the beginning, with the mentor insisting on discussing the diagnosis and treatment each time. This allowed the student to practice indepentenly while the mentor maintained control over what happens to "his patients" (frame). However, in order to gain self-confidence, the student experessed the wish to complete consultations completely independent (frame). At some stage in the placement, the student starts enacting this frame by not calling up on the mentor for confirming the diagnosis and treatment. Increasingly, the student positions the mentor as a supporter (or supplement) rather than a supervisor: she decides when to call on the mentor for help. Learning eventually focuses more on personal (self-confidence) rather than academic development (perfecting her content knowledge), consistent with the student's frame. In the second dyad, the student indicates from the beginning the importance of getting along with the mentor in order to achieve

good results (frame), positioning the mentor as a friend. During placement, the student increasingly initates informal conversations, replacing more case-driven or substantive conversations. As a result, feedback and information on the student's performance diminishes over the course the placement; in line with the student's framing of the placement as about good grades and enjoyment rather than learning. These cases show that students can effectively exercise power in the mentoring dyad, directing their learning. This highligths that the interplay between the mentor and student within the specific time-spatial context determines how mentoring practice takes shape and thus what is learned, more than the capacities of the individuals involved. These results imply that, beyond existing research in which power is a fixed characteristic, the roles of mentors and students should be viewed critically and dynamically.

References

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