



Ideas for training providers

Making the most of student learning in
field-based, practical experiences.

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This publication is intended to be used in conjunction with *Five habits for effective mentors* and *Ideas for learners* as a set of resources developed from the Ako Aotearoa-funded project *Maximising Learning Dialogue in Professional Field-based Experiences* by Dr Andrew Smith *et al* – funded in 2009 through the National Project Fund.

More information, the full report and all three resources are available at:

www.ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/learning-dialogue-in-field-based-experiences

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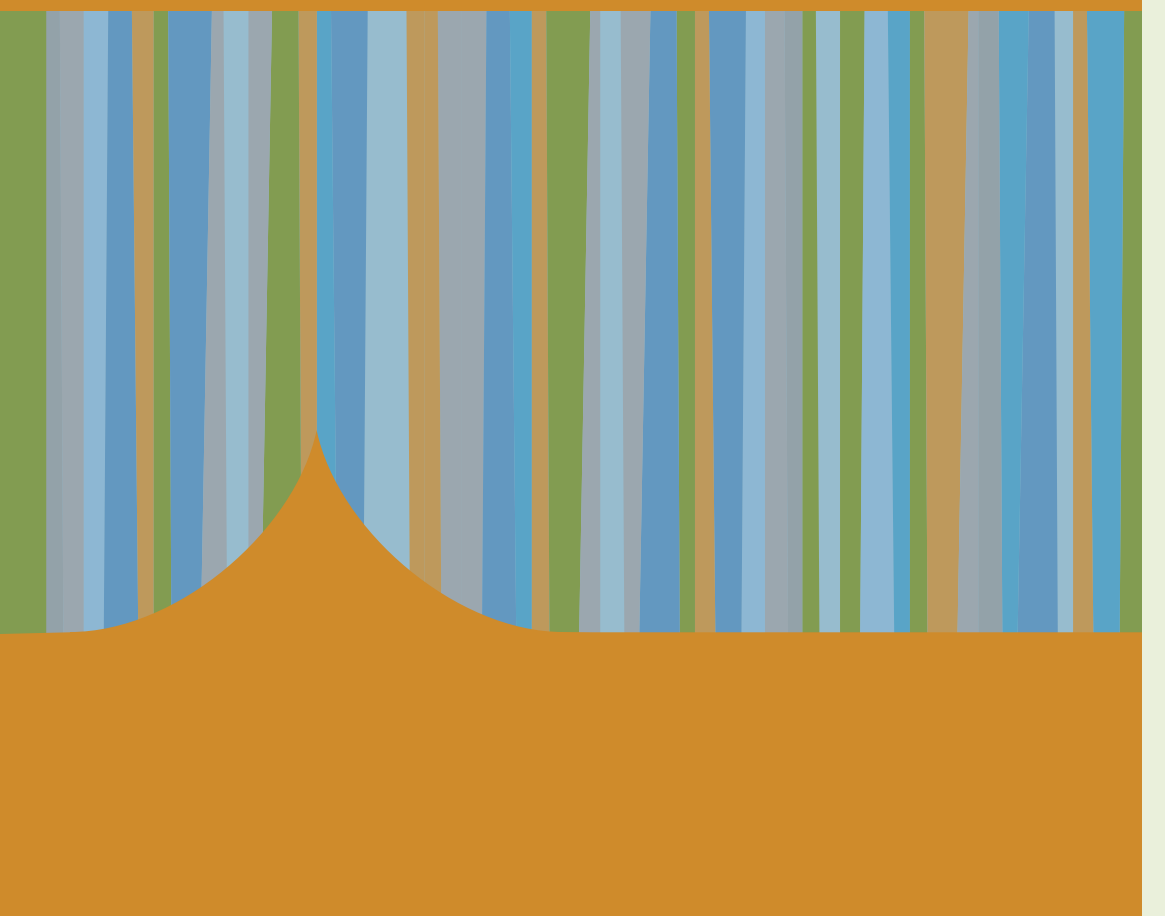


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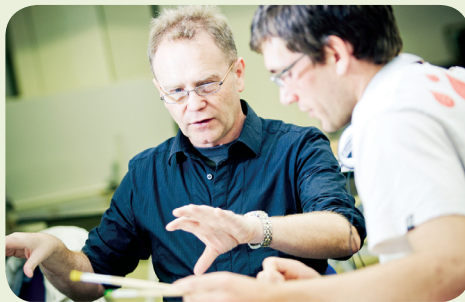


Introduction

We don't really have meetings...she has said she is available when needed, but I have not requested a meeting and neither has she.

The purpose of this resource is to provide support for training providers in professional and vocational areas. The tips and suggestions described here are based on the findings of a larger project supported through the Ako Aotearoa National Project Fund in 2009 *Maximising Learning Dialogue Opportunities in Professional Field-Based Experiences*. Two other resources are available relating to this work that support mentors and learners in field-based settings. The full report and additional resources are available at www.ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/learning-dialogue-in-field-based-experiences

We encourage all providers to consider their structures and practices in relation to the suggestions in this resource.



Overview of the Research

[Supervision] really helps me become more aware about the way I do things and how I could do things differently. Therefore, it helps me to not fall into ruts...it constantly challenges me to keep growing and developing.

The research project on which this resource is based investigated ways to develop genuine learning dialogue between practicum mentors/supervisors and their students. Genuine learning dialogue is when the conversation between a supervisor/mentor and learner is characterised by genuine professional co-enquiry.

Data was gathered from 16 participant pairs in early childhood education settings (associate teachers and student teachers) and 11 counselling settings (supervisors and student counsellors).

These participant pairs were asked to trial four interventions to enhance practicums: A partnership map, a belief inventory, a critical incident discussion, and a research journal article discussion (see page 7).

Training providers for both professional and vocational areas recognise the importance of field-based learning. Usually the tutor or mentor with whom the student is linked in these situations is not a part of the core teaching team at the training institution. This can create some communication challenges for both parties, in terms of expectations, reporting and awareness of what is actually happening in the placement.

Findings from this research revealed that while the training provider may consider the placement to be of great significance for student learning, it is possible to make inaccurate assumptions about what is actually happening. Sometimes students are not actually meeting with their mentor because one or the other is too busy, or the practicalities of making time to talk at any depth are too difficult, and some students experience their mentor as disinterested in them. We also found that both students and mentors tend to veer towards supportive rather than challenging learning dialogue.

While mentors are often experts in their field many have not had any professional development around how to best enhance student learning. We believe support and professional development for mentors is crucial.

Key findings

from the Research

[My supervisor] reminds me that I am learning and mistakes are ok; it's learning from those mistakes that really matters.


- The most important factor when working with a practicum tutor or mentor is the existence of a relationship of trust and openness with them.
- The foundation of the relationship needs to focus on learning. It can be helpful to use specific tasks or strategies to scaffold conversations. A strong relationship makes the tasks more effective – using the tasks builds on and helps develop a depth of relationship.
- It is important to overtly place great value on the opportunity to spend time with a mentor. This means being intentional about making time to talk, and then using that time well. Failure to do so results in the busyness of life and work eroding time together.
- It is helpful to be really clear about the ideas and expectations that everyone involved has about how times together are going to work – and to regularly check how things are going. It is also important to ensure all parties are satisfied with the work that is being done, and whether the desired learning is being achieved.
- In terms of educational conversation, there is a spectrum with 'supportive' at one end and 'challenging' at the other. The tendency is for conversations to be either superficial and affirming, or critical. The best learning comes from both: challenge when it takes place in an environment of support.



What ideas

can training providers take from these findings?

[Using scaffolding] tasks has greatly broadened and clarified the quality of general dialogue and, therefore, made possible a far better level of relationship at all levels within the work context.

- The careful pairing of student and mentor is important. If there is a lack of trust in the relationship, learning will be compromised.
 - The provision of clear expectations and professional development around the mentor role to tutors, mentors and supervisors is crucial.
 - Overt valuing of the mentoring role and positive and regular communication with mentors are important for all concerned.
 - Providing structured collaborative tasks for use by students and mentors can be very useful. The tasks can either be aimed at developing a relationship – learning what is important for both, for example. Or they can be aimed at developing the specific knowledge or expertise of the field.
 - It is wise not to assume that the student/mentor contact is happening in the ways expected. A clear process for review and evaluation is important.
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- It is important that both students and mentors talk about expectations of the relationship early in the process. Regular reviews of what is happening help to ensure that maximum benefit is being achieved.
 - Reinforce the idea that it is important that conversations contain a good balance of support (affirmation of the student and their work) and challenge (what needs to be worked on and how to work on it).

Strategies and tools

to help build learning relationships

[The Partnership Map] was a tool, a pathway that opened up discussion [and built] a solid professional relationship.

Student

Professional decisions will be determined by underlying beliefs, so it is important to be quite clear what these beliefs are founded on.

Mentor

PARTNERSHIP MAP

This is a visual record of a mutual narrative between mentor and student about how the practicum will play out. It covers such topics as roles, expectations, protocols, assumptions, timeframes and feedback strategies. The map can take the form of overlapping circles, lists etc. If used early in the practicum, a partnership map can contribute to an effective learning relationship. Both the mentor and student contribute their ideas to the map.

BELIEF INVENTORY

Both the mentor and the student independently complete a belief inventory, presented as 10 linked items related to beliefs and attitudes about their professional area (either the mentor or the student can construct the inventory). When the mentor and student have completed the inventory, the items become the basis for a dialogue that uncovers theoretical foundations, clashes and professional language, and makes assumptions explicit. All of these discussions build the learning relationship.

RESEARCH JOURNAL ARTICLE

The mentoring pair agrees on a relevant professional article to read individually. The student then formulates some questions relating to the content of the article, which, with the mentor's help, guide the learning dialogue that ensues. This tool generates in-depth learning dialogue as each one digs deeper into their professional knowledge.

CRITICAL INCIDENT REPORT

A critical incident is a specific event that results in a shift in thinking. A written report on this incident is discussed with the mentor. This has the potential to bring powerful growth and understanding. Discussing relevant, real life events promotes critical thinking, honest reflection and an increased sense of congruence between beliefs and practice.

The student's report includes:

- a clear description of the event or incident
- a summary of the response
- a comment on the theoretical understandings of the incident
- a reflection on what can be learned.



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