

## From teacher to mentor: a case study on the development of mentoring skills

### De professor a mentor: um estudo de caso acerca do desenvolvimento de habilidades de tutoria

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, based on a literature review, the characteristics of a good mentoring practice are presented; and second, based on an action research I analyze how one teacher developed these characteristics (or not) during the process of becoming a mentor. Concerning the first objective, several researchers (MAYNARD, 2000; ORLANDI, 2001; RANDALL; THORNTON, 2001) have addressed the mentoring process. Considering their findings, it is possible to devise a list of good mentoring practices, consisting of characteristics, such as sharing expertise, developing an interpersonal relationship, understanding the mentoring situation, challenging and supporting, among others. Regarding the second objective, the data presented here are transcripts of the interactions between a novice mentor and student-teachers. These interactions show that even though all the characteristics of a good mentor were displayed during these sessions of mentoring, the extent to which they were displayed varies considerably.

**KEYWORDS:** Teacher training. Student-teachers. Mentoring.

**RESUMO:** Esse trabalho tem dois objetivos. Em primeiro lugar, baseado em uma revisão da literatura, são apresentadas as características de uma boa prática de tutoria. Em segundo lugar, a partir de uma pesquisa-ação eu analiso como um professor desenvolveu (ou não) essas características durante o processo de se tornar um mentor. Levando em consideração o primeiro objetivo, diversos pesquisadores (MAYNARD, 2000; ORLANDI, 2001; RANDALL; THORNTON, 2001) já abordaram o processo de tutoria, combinando as suas conclusões é possível conceber uma lista de características de um bom mentor, consistindo em características como: compartilhar conhecimento, desenvolver relações interpessoais, compreender a situação de tutoria, desafiar e apoiar, entre outras. Considerando o segundo objetivo, os dados apresentados aqui são transcrições das interações entre um mentor iniciante e professores-estudantes. Essas interações sugerem que ainda que as características de um bom mentor sejam apresentadas em reuniões de orientação, a medida em que elas aparecem varia consideravelmente.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Treinamento de professores. Professores-estudantes. Tutoria.

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to report the author's participation in an action research project on mentoring and discuss the process of becoming a mentor based on a literature review on the topic. In this paper, the word mentor is used referring to the person who provides support to teachers in pre-service and in-service contexts as defined by Randal and Thornton (2001). This paper is divided into five sections. The first part (sections one and two) focuses on my motivations to explore this issue as well as the context in which the research has been conducted. In the next section (three), a literature review on the terms related to mentoring is presented and in the following section (four) the characteristics of a good mentor are explored. Finally, in the conclusion, I discuss how the outcomes of this experience can be applied to different contexts in which mentoring occurs.

It is worth mentioning that the investigation presented here is categorized as an action research in the sense that it represents a reflection of the author's own practice as a novice mentor and the author's development in this position. According to Vial (2014), action research is considered a process of structured reflection that entails data collection, analysis and reflection of the data, and a return to practice based on this reflection. Action research is usually associated with professional development and changes in the context in which the researcher is inserted.

### 1 The Languages without Borders context

Nóvoa (2009), in his article *Para una formación de profesores construida dentro de la profesión* [Towards a teacher training developed inside the profession], presents five aspects of teacher training that should be taken into account in order to improve the teaching practice. The first aspect stipulates that "teacher training should contain a strong practical component, focus on student learning and study specific cases, with reference to school work" (NÓVOA, 2009, p.208)<sup>1</sup>. Discussing this aspect, the author compares the training of teachers of English as an additional language (EAL) to the training that medical students receive, since the latter engage in professional practice in hospitals early in their training, while the former only

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<sup>1</sup> All translations in this article are my own, unless otherwise stated. Original: "La formación de profesores debe asumir un fuerte componente práctico, centrado en el aprendizaje de los alumnos y en el estudio de casos concretos, teniendo como referencia el trabajo escolar."

encounter usually small amounts of professional practice in schools at the end of their training (RANDALL;THORNTON, 2001, p.11). The second aspect discussed by Nóvoa refers to the proposal that “teacher training should be done within the profession (...) giving more experienced teachers a central role in the training of novice teachers” (NÓVOA, 2009, p.210)<sup>2</sup>. Although the other three issues are also relevant to teacher training, these first two are the main guidelines for the teacher training in the context of Languages without Borders (heretofore, LwB) at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS).

The focus of LwB is, first, to offer English classes for university students and academic staff, and, second, to improve initial teacher training by combining teaching practice with teacher development. Therefore, LwB encourages the improvement of initial teacher training by employing undergraduate (or recently graduated students) who are taking (or took) an English teaching degree. Hence, these student-teachers<sup>3</sup> do not have previous experience in teaching.

In order to fulfill the goal of the Program of encouraging teacher development, the pedagogical coordinators at the LwB UFRGS have implemented a peer-mentoring scheme in which more experienced student-teachers work with novice student-teachers, preparing and observing classes. Both experienced and novice teachers discuss their classroom experiences with a pedagogical coordinator. Therefore, there are two hierarchical levels of training: the first one is between experienced and novice student-teachers, and the second one is between the pedagogical coordinators and both groups of student-teachers.

As can be noticed, this context represents a mixture of in-service and pre-service training, since it is possible to find characteristics of what Delaney (2012, p.186) describes as in-service, “newly hired language teachers (...) who have varied experiences or knowledge about language learning and teaching” and also elements of pre-service, as teachers are placed in a regular classroom and they receive feedback from the pedagogical coordinator and peer mentors (DELANEY, 2012, p.186). However, this peer-mentoring scheme presents two problematic issues: the ‘more experienced’ teachers have limited experience (1 year or less), and there is no

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<sup>2</sup> Original: “La formación de profesores debe pasar a ser realizada desde dentro de la profesión (...) concediendo a los profesores más expertos un papel central en la formación de los más jóvenes.”

<sup>3</sup> In the context described here student-teachers are understood as students of an English teaching degree acting as teachers.

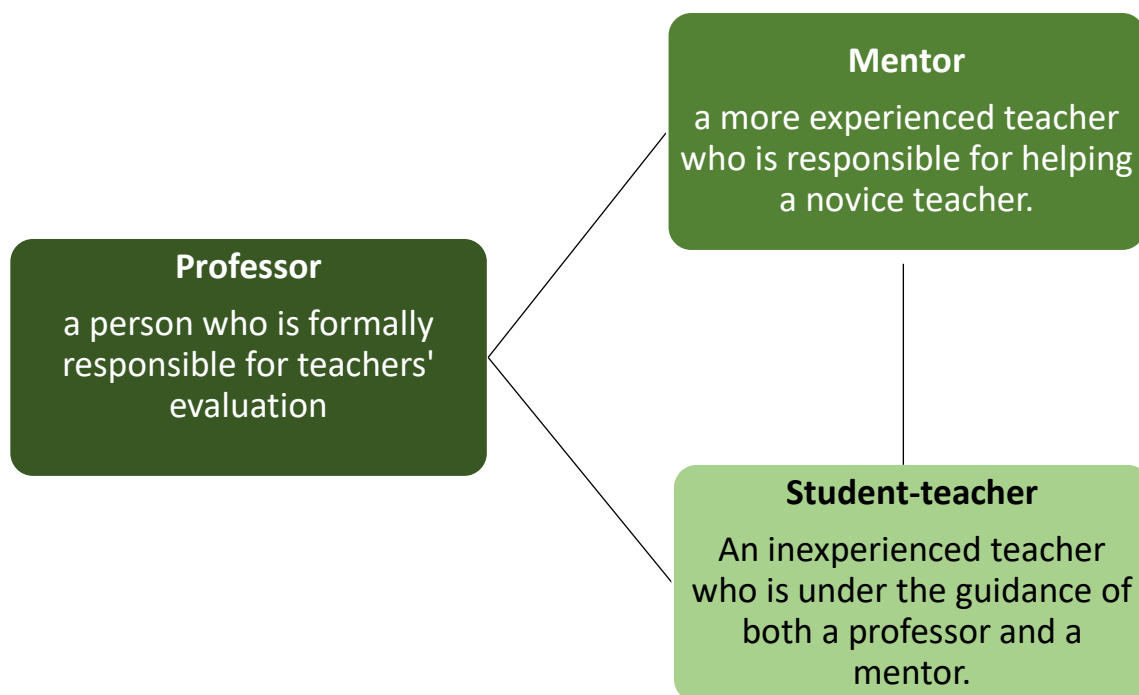
mentorship guidance or training for the mentors. In this context, I acted first as a teacher and later as a mentor for the novice student-teachers. Hence, as a novice mentor I was interested in exploring the literature in the field of mentorship and the characteristics of a good mentor. While investigating this topic, I had the opportunity to work on an action research project at Warwick University, in England, which explored the issue of how teachers progressed to become mentors.

## 2 The Warwick context

At this university, my role was to mentor a couple of novice teachers who were taking a practicum course in their Masters in English Language Teaching (ELT) while also having guidance from a more experienced mentor. The practicum course at the Masters in ELT had 20 student-teachers from different nationalities who did not have previous experience in the classroom. In the course of this Practicum, student-teachers had to prepare and deliver classes in pairs with the help of the professor and one mentor. In this context, I acted as one of the mentors. A pair of student-teachers were assigned to me, and we had to work together in order to develop their teaching skills. These student-teachers were from different cultural backgrounds, namely Chinese and Lebanese.

In this mentoring project, I encountered some differences and similarities to the mentoring scheme carried at LwB - UFRGS. One of the differences between the two contexts was the fact that student-teachers at Warwick were from different cultural backgrounds and, thus, had distinct mother languages. One of the similarities was that a professor was responsible for my mentees' evaluation; hence, my role was to help them improve their teaching skills, but also to meet the professor's expectation of a good lesson. This threefold scheme seems to be common in several teacher training contexts (DELANEY, 2012; RANDALL; THORNTON, 2001), especially in pre-service training. The figure below depicts this scheme.

**Figure 01 – mentoring in pre-service teaching<sup>4</sup>**



Finally, in this paper I describe the process of becoming a mentor in the context of the mentoring project at Warwick. The next section focuses on the characteristics of a good mentor based on the literature in the field of Language Teacher Education (LTE) and compares these characteristics with those presented in my experience as a novice mentor.

### 3 What is a mentor?

Randall and Thornton (2001), D’Abate, Eddy and Tannenbaum (2003) and Vonk (1998) discuss different definitions of mentors. The following figure presents these definitions and definitions of other roles involved in teacher development provided by these researchers.

<sup>4</sup> Figure 01 was created by the author of the article based on Delaney (2012) and Randall & Thornton (2001).

Figure 02 – Definitions of a mentor<sup>5</sup>

	Randal and Thornton (2001)	D’Abate, Eddy and Tannenbaum (2003)	Vonk (1998)
<b>Mentor</b>	“[...] teacher who accepts a novice in their classroom for a period of teaching practice” (2001, p.13).	Mentors have a general goal of promoting long-term professional development.	“[A] mentor is a person assigned only to guide the novice” (1993, p.32).
<b>Inspector</b>	Inspectors “monitor the provision of educational services and provide support to the teacher” (2001, p.19).		
<b>Trainer</b>	Advisors that work on an “intensive post-graduate training program ran largely by private institutions” (2001, p.15).		
<b>Critical Friend</b>	“a colleague who is chosen to work with a teacher” (2001, p.20).		
<b>Coach</b>		Coaches are strongly associated with a specific goal situated in a teaching context to improve performance in a task or skill in a short-term framework.	
<b>Manager</b>	The one who might provide teachers with different kinds of feedback.		
<b>Supervisor</b>			“[A] supervisor combines guidance and assessment” (1993, p.32).

As we can notice, for Randall and Thornton (2001), mentors are more experienced teachers working in schools or language institutes that will receive student-teachers, while trainers are responsible for an intensive course on teaching

<sup>5</sup> Figure 02 was created by the author of the article based on a literature review.

and, as a result, develop a more informal relation to student-teachers. On the other hand, for D'Abate, Eddy, and Tannenbaum (2003) mentoring relates to continuous development or teacher education, while coaching focuses on one specific issue that requires improvement or teacher training. Finally, for Vonk (1998) mentors support student-teachers with bureaucratic and technical issues of their new contexts while a supervisor provides support to these novice teachers. Based on these researchers we can notice that the literature on LTE attributes different meanings to the terminology of mentoring.

Wright (2009, p.102) points out that in the past people who became mentors were good teachers who “progressed to become teacher educators, as models of good practice”; thus, the title of mentor came as a “recognition of classroom teaching expertise”, but this role did not require any teacher education training. However, Wright (2009) observes that this situation has changed recently and that, in order to become a mentor, educators are required to have some form of professional development, whether formal or informal. Orland (2001), in her research on ‘becoming’ a mentor, also addresses the necessity of mentor training by stating that “learning to become a mentor is a conscious process of induction into a different teaching context and does not ‘emerge’ naturally from being a good teacher of children” (ORLAND, 2001, p.75). Vonk (1993, p.33) also points out that experienced teachers when selected to become mentors “will need substantial training to be able to act effectively as a mentor.” Moreover, Orland (2001) argues in favor of embedding aspects, such as the importance of reflection – how to reflect and how to participate in observation feedback in initial teacher training courses.

It is important to notice that the characteristics of good mentoring mentioned here are related to different interactional exchanges between the mentors and others involved in teacher training, since the role of a mentor is established through the interaction with a teacher, by giving advice, supporting, challenging, etc. In this respect, Delaney (2012, p.186) says that “mentorship is perceived as a personal and professional relationship in which both participants co-construct their professional identities within a specific context.” This interaction between mentors and student-teachers can take place in instances, such as a pre-observation conference, the lesson and a post-lesson feedback session. Randall and Thornton (2001) focus on characteristics of good mentors related to these interactions, while other researchers (ORLAND, 2001; ORLAND-BARAK; HASIN, 2010; MAYNARD, 2000) focus on other

interactions that occur in the mentoring process. Thus, the next section will present the characteristics of a good mentor.

#### **4 What is a good mentor?**

The first subsection refers to characteristics applied to different interactions whether between student-teachers and mentors, mentors and mentors, or professors and mentors. The second subpart focuses on characteristics of good mentoring for each mentoring stage.

##### **4.1 General characteristics**

This subsection presents characteristics of good mentorship encountered in all interactions related to the mentoring situation.

###### **4.1.1 Sharing expertise**

Good mentors should be knowledgeable about their content area, know how to teach it, and share this expertise with their mentees. Barak-Orland and Hasin (2010, p.431) interviewed school principals in order to understand what the characteristics of good mentors were. They discovered that “school principals, and supervisors alike mentioned professionalism and knowledge (which they identified as content and pedagogical content knowledge).” Vonk (1993, p.32) reinforces this aspect by saying that “mentors (...) must have insight in the essentials of the teacher’s professional learning process.” Thus, these authors stress the idea that mentors need training on teacher education as well as meaningful experience in the classroom in order to share this experience with their mentees.

In the case of my action research, the student-teachers under my supervision opted for a different approach to teaching than the one I usually use; therefore, I expected to have few, if any, insights about the class plan. However, from this experience, I learned that even though our class plan was different, I still had knowledge about class management and the student’s level of English, as can be seen in Extract 01 line 03 and 05. In this extract, I discussed with the student-



teachers how an intermediate student might react to the text they were going to use in their lesson.

### **Extract 1 – Pre-observation session (06:34)**

3. Mentor: You can have more of these questions to check if they really understood the text, because you are going to do this for intermediate, right?
4. Mentee 01: Yes
5. Mentor: So, if you ask their opinion about it, maybe you are going to discover that they didn't actually understand the text the way that you thought. I would have more questions to check if they understood the text, OK?

#### **4.1.2 Developing interpersonal relationship**

Miller-Marsh (2002) argues that establishing a good interpersonal relationship with mentees may be crucial to the student-teachers' development (and the mentor's). Miller-Marsh's experience as a mentor exemplifies the fact that mentoring can be a delicate situation if the mentor does not establish a good interpersonal relationship with the student-teachers, since mentors might need to deal with different aspects of learning to be a teacher, such as emotional, social and professional issues (EVANS, 2000).

Orland-Barak and Hasin (2010) mention "developing a warm bond" as a reference to the interpersonal relationship between mentors and student-teachers. However, these researchers also refer to the boundaries of the relationship built between mentors and student-teachers as they report that the latter might encounter some difficulties to accept openness from their mentors. Regarding this aspect, it is the mentor who has to perceive what is more adequate for their mentoring context since, as Randall and Thornton (2001) argue, mentoring is a very culturally specific issue, and sometimes what is appropriate in one culture might not be in others. Thus, being a mentor involves having a good understanding of personal relationships, taking into account cultural aspects. Moreover, ideally, mentors would personally know their mentees in order to determine the best way to give feedback.

In my experience as a mentor, this was one of the most difficult aspects to develop. As the student-teachers with whom I was working came from two different cultural backgrounds, I did not know how this affected our interpersonal relationship

and our communication. Sometimes, I felt that the student-teachers understood a question as an affirmative sentence. Because of that, I tried to emphasize that I was giving suggestions and not making demands about their lesson by using sentences as the ones presented in the extracts below.

### **Extract 2 – Pre-observation session**

7. Mentor: yeah, it is just an idea, ok? If you don't like it don't use it.

### **Extract 3 – Feedback session.**

3. Mentor: I have one suggestion, but it's just a suggestion, ok?

### **4.1.3 Reading the mentoring situation**

One relevant characteristic of good mentoring to Orland (2001) is learning to read the mentoring situation. In other words, it is understanding what is required of the student-teachers, what other issues might be relevant for them besides what the mentor can see in the lesson and in the context of teaching. Orland (2001, p.85) argues that this helps mentors to “form a holistic idea of how the teaching conditions can affect the situation in general”. Understanding the mentoring situation is especially important for those mentors who are not in the teaching context where the mentee is allocated, as these mentors need to form a general understanding of the aspects influencing mentees practice based on few hours of observation.

In my experience as a mentor, at first I lacked the understanding of what was required from the student-teachers who were under my guidance. In my first feedback session I started giving advice for my mentees as if they were going to use the same class-plan in their next lesson. For this situation, it was important to check (Extract 04) with the mentees my understanding of how the following class was going to be organized. However, this might not always be possible, since there may be other issues that can affect their practices. That is why, when possible, mentors should have experience in the same teaching context as their mentees.

### **Extract 4 – First feedback session**

1. Mentor: because for your next class you are going to, like re-plan your class, right? But are you going to use the same material? Or are you going to do it differently?
2. Mentee 02: Not, it's not compulsory, you can choose another one.

#### 4.1.4 Challenging and supporting

Daloz (1983) argues that good mentoring requires two basic elements: challenging and supporting. Lasley (1996, p.66) discusses the importance of challenging student-teachers in an article about his experience as a mentee. He claims that the role of a mentor “is to enhance the personal power of others (mentees) through a belief system that challenges them to grow beyond what they are to what they can be.” Teacher trainers challenge student-teachers in practices, such as asking them to think critically about their lessons, discussing research articles about teaching with them, suggesting new activities that they might implement in their practice, etc. Mentors challenge student-teachers to become better teachers while supporting them when trying new practices.

Randall and Thornton (2001, p.70) argue that “there are two aspects of support: one is being supportive and the other is providing supportive interventions.” In this case, providing supportive interventions is not only challenging the student-teachers, but also guiding them in these challenges. In Maynard’s (2000, p.23) research, student-teachers indicated that they wanted to feel supported by their mentors and that mentors should help them become successful teachers. These student-teachers’ understanding of supportive practices was related to giving classroom advice before they attempted a new activity. Student-teachers want to feel safe with their students; hence, they prefer that mentors give advice on how to conduct the activities before the class, rather than reflect on what went wrong after class.

In the mentoring situation I was involved in, I tried to challenge my mentees to reflect on their experiences as learners in order to try different approaches from the ones they used to have as students. The extract below represents part of my interaction with one of my mentees regarding her lesson plan. In the beginning of our pre-observation session, she demonstrated a desire to teach grammar through the exposition of rules and structures.

### **Extract 5 – First pre-observation session**

1. Mentee 02: So first, my plan is to point out the structure of the present perfect simple. It is a very traditional methodology, you know?
2. Mentor: yeah
3. Mentee 02: This will be on power point. Present perfect simple, subject, auxiliary have and so on. I will give them some examples of the sentences. Besides the examples, the function of each sentence, for example, this “Mr. Peter” is a recent action that has just finished. They will talk about experience where have you gone, cities you have visited and so (...). Then, after that, for the second slide I will go for the continuous, so that I explain the structure or the form of the continuous form (...)

However, after her explanation I asked how she and her colleagues would feel as a student in this lesson. Then, based on how her classmates would feel in expositive grammar lessons, she decided to make some adaptations to the original lesson plan. The outcome of this lesson was interesting because although the student-teacher perceived expositive grammar lessons as a positive practice for herself as a student, she understood that students from different cultural backgrounds do not feel the same.

## **4.2 Technical characteristics**

This subsection presents characteristics of good mentorship encountered in the three mentoring interactions described by Randal and Thornton (2001).

### **4.2.1 Pre-observation conference**

Randal and Thornton (2001) emphasize the importance of a pre-observation conference for two reasons. The first one is that student-teachers prefer receiving advice on the class plan before putting it into practice. Furthermore, this pre-observation conference should take place far enough in advance so that student-teachers and mentors will have time to discuss the plan thoroughly rather than mentors checking the class plan before the lesson as this might undermine student-teachers' confidence (RANDALL; THORNTON, 2001, p.58). This aspect was the focus of my pre-observation conference with my mentees.

The second one is that mentors and student-teachers should choose together one aspect of the teaching practice that mentors will point out and emphasize during their observation (RANDALL; THORNTON, 2001, p.73). Regarding this aspect, my mentees and I never agreed on one issue on which to focus in the observation. However, I tried to work on one aspect they wanted to improve, for they did not know what aspect to choose or how this would be relevant to them. I believe that this happened because of the specificities of this mentoring situation: since a lecturer would evaluate these student-teachers, they may not have wanted to focus on only one aspect for development.

#### **4.2.2 The lesson**

Signaling effective attention during the lesson is important to give student-teachers' confidence in the feedback afterwards. Mentors who submerge in note-taking during classroom observation might lose important aspects of the lesson and, more importantly, might harm teachers' confidence in delivering the lesson (RANDALL; THORNTON, 2001, p.89). Therefore, mentors should remember that during the teaching practice, they are there to listen attentively to the lesson. Furthermore, mentors should not observe a lesson with a pre-conceived idea of what the practice ought to be. The emphasis should be on looking at the lesson with the teacher rather than at the teacher (RANDALL; THORNTON, 2001, p. 49).

Regarding this aspect, during my mentees' practice I tried to take as few notes as possible about the lesson. However, this was only successful because I could review the lesson later on based on the recording. I also think that it was helpful to participate in the class as a student, especially to prepare for the feedback session, as this gave me a broader perspective of the lesson.

#### **4.2.3 Post-lesson feedback session**

Feedback sessions are the main part of a mentoring situation. They tend to be particularly difficult for novice mentors as they involve face-threatening acts. They serve as opportunities for student-teachers to reflect on their lessons and for mentors to scaffold them. The first aspect of the feedback session addressed here is to know how to conduct it. Randall and Thornton (2001, p.63) argue that mentors need to "let

the teachers guide the discussion as soon as possible” and focus on listening “to the teacher’s account of how the lesson went” (p.91) instead of imposing their views about the lesson on the teacher. Additionally, student-teachers should first discuss their perceptions of the lesson so that mentors can build on based on student-teachers’ reflections and promote their critical thinking by questioning their understanding of the lesson. Randall and Thornton (2001) also argue that in order to promote critical thinking mentors should start from the concrete (the lesson recount) to the abstract (reflection on the whys of the lesson). Hence, the feedback session should be conducted in a way that teachers perceive that their views of the teaching practice are being taken into account.

Regarding this aspect, in the feedback session I wanted to avoid asking direct questions about the mentee’s lesson, such as, “What did you think of the lesson?” Therefore, I asked two different questions trying to elicit the teacher’s views of the practice. The first one was about their first feedback session with their professor and the second one about the assignment they would have to write focusing on their lesson. I thought that these two questions would encourage student-teachers to discuss their perceptions of the lesson without imposing my agenda.

**Extract 6 – First feedback session**

1. Mentor: So, have you already talked to Peter, right?
2. Mentee 01: Yes, it was yesterday.
3. Mentor: So how was it?
4. Mentee 02: It was good.
5. Mentee 01: Peter says something that needs to be improved is how to raise some follow up questions.

**Extract 7 – First feedback session**

3. Mentor: Do you already know what you are going to analyze?
4. Mentee 01: Maybe how to raise some follow up questions.

Randall and Thornton also discuss the developmental aspect of the feedback session. They suggest that (2001, p.115) “the end point of any feedback session should be the transfer of what has been discovered to future actions.” Thus, feedback sessions should promote the production of an action plan that will focus on how to put the issues discussed into practice. However, as previously mentioned, this

mentoring situation is different since student-teachers only have to teach two classes. By the end of the first feedback, we reviewed the topics discussed in the meeting.

### **Extract 8 – First feedback session**

1. Mentor: If you were to do this class again, the things that I would think about and maybe this is valid for all classes is to call students by their names.
2. Mentee 02: Yes.
3. Mentor: Ask students to read, for example, when you are reading the explanation. Students can read too and you can ask about what they understood.
4. Mentee 01: Uhum.

In this section I have discussed the characteristics of a good mentor based on a literature review and reported the interactions with the student-teachers in the context of the mentorship project at Warwick. Based on the literature review it was possible to perceive that mentoring interactions should be structured as to provide support for student-teachers; in other words, student-teachers should know that a mentor is available to discuss the lesson plan with them before the actual class and after the class. Furthermore, it is the mentor's role to give student-teachers the opportunity to reflect upon their own practice as teachers and to encourage them to seek for academic papers and seminars that will help them improve their classes.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to present the skills and characteristics of a good mentor according to the literature in LTE and to compare these with my experience as a novice mentor. I hope that the reflections presented here can be used by other researchers and teachers interested in the development or improvement of peer-mentoring schemes. This paper focused especially on the more experienced teachers in their roles as mentors. Nevertheless, further research is necessary regarding the role of the novice teacher and how mentoring can help them grow in their profession.

Considering the experience as a mentor described here and its application to the context of LwB – UFRGS, I believe that the general characteristics of a good

mentor presented in section 4.1 could be explored through workshops and group discussions to novice mentors, while the specific characteristics, relevant to each interaction with student-teachers, could be implemented as part of the Program. It would also be beneficial for the mentors to receive feedback from the pedagogical coordinators in order to develop the mentor's own practice based on the comments of a more experienced teacher trainer. Regarding the role of mentors, as Wright (2009) discusses, nowadays mentors are generally required to have some kind of education in the field of teacher training. Thus, I agree with Orland (2001), who suggests that aspects of mentoring should be part of initial teacher training. This could be fostered through class planning by student-teachers who would provide suggestions and feedback for classmates in their teaching, thereby, promoting an early reflection on the role of mentors.

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