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Mentors' Perceptions of Mentoring as a Process of Learning and Knowledge Creation

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Abstract

The mentoring process aims to promote learning and competence and support professional growth. The mentoring process inherently includes elements of learning. However, mentoring is not viewed from the perspective of learning and knowledge creation. This research examines mentors' perceptions of mentoring as a learning and knowledge creation process. The data consists of qualitative interviews with 10 mentors, which were analysed using abductive content analysis. The results show that mentors' perceptions of the mentoring process as a learning and knowledge creation process are mixed. A narrow perception is that mentoring is a monologic transfer of information from mentor to actor. A broader, dialogical view is that the mentor and the actor interact to solve problems that are perceived as important. In a triological mentoring process, the mentor and the actor create new knowledge together as equal partners. The research suggests that the mentoring process should be viewed more deeply through the processes of learning, so that it is meaningful for the participants and reinforces the current enabling of continuous learning.

1. Introduction

Numerous and rapid changes in working life require a broad range of skills and active participation [8; 5]. Strengthening skills requires continuous learning and updating [15; 8]. Continuous learning at work can be supported by mentoring [6], as a significant part of learning takes place informally in the work context [13]. Mentoring is defined as reciprocal skills development in an interactive process [1; 20]. The mentoring process is always unique as the participants in the mentoring process, mentor, and

actor, always bring their individual starting points to it [2].

There are many levels of learning processes involved in the mentoring process. In fact, recent research suggests that mentoring is seen as an educational process, where mentoring is seen as an interactive learning process for both the mentor and the actor, enabling both parties to grow and develop professionally [12]. To our knowledge, little research has been conducted on mentoring from a learning theory perspective. Therefore, we look at mentoring from the perspectives of knowledge creation and learning. We examine mentoring through triological learning and its associated learning dimensions, or metaphors: monological knowledge transfer, dialogical participation and triological knowledge creation [18]. The monological view of mentoring emphasises the role of the mentor in transferring knowledge to the actor. The dialogic view of mentoring recognizes the importance of an interactive, equal mentoring relationship in which learning is essentially a shared activity [7]. The triological conception emphasises the innovative dimension of learning, i.e. processes in which knowledge is consciously created and developed [9] reflecting the mutual opportunity for professional growth that mentoring can most ideally create [12]. From these theoretical premises, we have set the research question: What are mentors' perceptions of mentoring as a process of learning and knowledge creation?

2. Theoretical framework

In the theoretical framework, firstly, the starting points for mentoring and the diverse objectives of the mentoring process are examined. Second, a triological model of learning and knowledge creation is

presented, through which the learning process in a mentoring relationship can be analysed.

2.1. Mentoring as learning process

The prevailing view of mentoring is that it is a process-like experiential learning that is built in a mentoring relationship [4; 19]. The mentoring relationship typically lasts for a year, with various stages of growth and development. Mentoring is often described as a professional interaction between a more experienced and a less experienced partner, with the aim of supporting the development of the actor. According to Kram [10], the mentoring process is divided into the three distinct, albeit often overlapping, phases: initiation, clarification, and termination. However, how the mentoring relationship is constructed is essential, as an interactive mentoring relationship generates new perspectives for both the actor and the mentor through dialogue [1; 20].

Mentoring is a reciprocal development of skills in an interactive process [1; 20]. The participants in the mentoring process, mentor, and actor, always create an individual mentoring process to which each party brings their own diverse starting points [2]. In the mentoring process, the participants reflect on their ideas and experiences related to their working life and seek to develop alongside each other [13]. The benefits of mentoring include strengthening work-life skills, establishing contacts with the world of work and understanding work-life change [6; 2]. Mentoring enables smooth and continuous learning and skills development [8], also highlighting the sustainability perspective [13].

2.2. Trialogical model of learning and knowledge building

Trialogical theory is an approach to learning that examines learning through three interconnected learning metaphors: the metaphor of acquiring knowledge, the metaphor of participation and the metaphor of knowledge creation [16; 17]. The first metaphor of knowledge acquisition emphasises learning as a process in which knowledge is transferred to the mind of the individual. It is based on the idea that knowledge is a property of the individual's mind, and that the human being is the basic unit of knowing and learning. This view represents a "monological" view of human cognition and functioning [17]. Another metaphor for knowledge acquisition is the metaphor of participation, where learning is seen as growing and socialising in a community. This means that participation in different cultural practices and shared learning activities shapes cognitive functioning in a variety of ways. From a participatory perspective,

learning is about growing into a full member and gradually moving towards full participation. In this context, knowledge is understood simply as part of cultural practices. The third metaphor of knowledge creation combines the two previous metaphors. It emphasises the exploratory approach of building innovative ideas, tools, and practices, rebuilding knowledge or seeking to change what is already known. [7.]

3. Data and method

This research examines mentors' perceptions of mentoring as a learning and knowledge creation process. The research question is: What are mentors' perceptions of mentoring as a process of learning and knowledge creation? The focus group of the research were mentors (N=10) who were interviewed about their perceptions of mentoring. Mentors have academic degrees with varying levels of experience in the working life. Mentors had attended a mentoring induction and their previous mentoring experience was varied, some were mentoring for the first time, and some had years of mentoring experience.

The data consists of ten interviews with mentors. The interviews asked about mentors' perceptions of the mentoring process, its objectives, and opportunities. Mentors expressed a wide range of perceptions about mentoring and the associated process of learning and knowledge creation. The data allows for an interpretation of the mentors' perceptions.

The data was analysed using a phenomenographic content analysis [3], which was based on the theoretical framework of mentoring and knowledge creation in learning and is therefore abductive. The aim of the analysis is to highlight the diversity of mentors' perceptions of the phenomenon under examination. Phenomenography is based on the premise that perceptions are understood as relational, socially constructed in context [14]. Mentors' perceptions are individual, but they are constructed over time and are influenced by both previous contexts and perceptions and experiences during the mentoring process.

The analysis process began by interpreting the data in terms of the dimensions of perceptions and their meanings. In the second stage of the analysis, more specific descriptive categories were created from the material, which were formed in dialogue with the research question and theoretical framework. The data were used to interpret mentors' perceptions of mentoring from the perspective of the learning and knowledge creation process. Mentors' perceptions were divided into three categories: 1) monologic mentoring, 2) dialogic mentoring and 3) trialogical mentoring. Within the different categories of description, variations in mentors' perceptions are described.

The validity of qualitative research can be strengthened by triangulation and self-critical observations by researchers at different stages of the hermeneutic research process. The article highlights the starting points and context of the research, allowing the reader to position the meaning of the research [3]. The data is comprehensive and quantitatively typical of qualitative research [11]. A critical reader can make independent interpretations of the data and its meanings and mirror them against the research objective.

4. Results

This section describes in more detail the mentors' perceptions of mentoring as a process of learning and knowledge creation. The results are described using the categories of the triological approach to learning and knowledge creation: 1) the concept of mentoring as monological information transfer, 2) the concept of mentoring as dialogical participation and 3) the concept of mentoring as triological new knowledge creation.

4.1. The concept of mentoring as monological information transfer

According to the results, some mentors understood mentoring as a monologic transfer of information from mentor to actor. According to these mentors, mentoring is about transferring the previous solutions of the more experienced mentor to the similar situations of the actor. Mentoring emphasised the notion of individual learning, i.e., as a monologue process within the mind.

Mentoring was perceived by these mentors as a learning platform that allowed knowledge to be shared and absorbed. The mentors presented monologic premises related to the mentoring process and learning: the specific things they wanted to teach the actor and what they perceived to be the most important aspects of mentoring. These included, for example, how to write a good job application and how to succeed in a job interview. *"We've just gone through how to do a job interview and even simulated it, and how to make a good CV."*

The mentors felt that they had a comprehensive set of answers to the different questions asked by the actor and to situations that arise in the workplace. However, the mentors did not express any perceptions of a deeper discussion and the possibility of finding new perspectives together with the actor. The monologue mentors' perceptions did not include the idea that they themselves could learn something new from the actor about typical phenomena related to the time. *"It's good to teach younger people not to repeat the same mistakes."*

In mentoring, learning was seen as an individual process and a way of acquiring knowledge. Mentors'

perceptions of mentoring as learning and knowledge creation supported their internal cognitions, they were not able to question their understanding of the nature of learning through participation or knowledge creation dimensions.

4.2. The concept of mentoring as dialogical participation

According to the results, some of the mentors' perceptions emphasised mentoring as an interactive collaboration. Their perceptions of mentoring emphasised collaboration as an important opportunity to participate in the learning process and joint discussion. Mentors' perceptions emphasised the possibility of pushing the boundaries of individual learning by engaging in a new and dialogical mentoring relationship. Such an inclusive and dialogic mentoring relationship emphasises the social cognition and process of learning.

These mentors' perception of mentoring as a process of learning and knowledge creation is situated between monologic and triological knowledge creation: mentoring was seen to them first and foremost as an equal and dialogic participation. According to the mentors' perceptions, mentoring is also a great opportunity for them to update their own understanding of current issues in working life and to maintain a renewed perception of mentoring. *"I found it extremely interesting to have the discussions and useful to think about the concrete issues myself."*

Mentors were willing to engage in dialogue and update their own perceptions. However, their perceptions did not reflect a desire to go beyond their own knowledge and the possibility of discovering completely new perspectives. Mentors' perceptions emphasised development, application and collective participation in the learning and knowledge creation that takes place in the mentoring relationship.

Dialogic mentors understood mentoring as a continuous process of learning and knowledge creation. Mentoring had many important meanings for both mentor and actor, it enabled both participants to be part of a process of continuous learning and development.

The mentors felt that they were able to offer perspectives to the actors that reflected their own past experiences, but the mentors recognised that the answers required application to the actor's context and current situations. Direct instructions or tips were not, according to the mentors' perceptions, the aim of mentoring. What was essential in mentoring, according to these mentors' perceptions, was learning to strengthen the actor in a deeper way. *"Bringing two different people together on the same topic to work together for a longer period of time, no two life paths are the same. What has worked for me may not work for him."*

The dialogical conception of mentoring allowed for participation in collaborative activities, but learning was perceived as a social cognition. In the mentoring process, learning was seen as knowledge acquisition through participation and co-creation of knowledge. It emphasised dialogical or interactive models.

4.3. The concept of mentoring as trialogical new knowledge creation

A few mentors' perception of mentoring as a process of learning and knowledge creation acquired features of the trialogical dimensions of knowledge creation. These mentors' perception of mentoring was very much on a par with that of an actor creating new knowledge. Mentoring was perceived as a meaningful opportunity to create new understanding of current challenges and solutions in working life together with an actor. The experience of working and learning as a mentor opened new perspectives on the possibilities of mentoring and strengthened the mentor's own knowledge of working life. *"Expectations of learning from the actors themselves and seeing how they think, the future working experts of the world and of working life. Frankly, I was surprised by how much you learn and get different perspectives."*

According to the mentors, the mentoring relationship consisted of two equal and active interlocutors who solved work-related problems, seeking to exceed each other's existing knowledge and skills with new insights. The mentor and the actor had their own strengths, which they brought to the table as common capital. According to the mentors, what is essential is that mentoring aims to enable the participants to be truly involved and that it significantly expands their understanding of work contexts.

Trialogical mentors reflected on the importance of mentoring bringing genuine dimensions to learning about pressing issues in the world of work. Mentors emphasised their own and the actors' active role as community innovators and creators of new practices in line with trialogical knowledge creation. The mentors' perceptions highlighted the perspective that mentoring is at best a long-term collaboration and a future-oriented work that strengthens the actor for the future. Trialogical mentors aim for a longer-term sustainable goal, rather than supporting the pursuit of a single skill or position of the actor. *"An actor's competence is not whether he or she can perform individual high-level specialist tasks. An actor's competence is much more: the ability to solve problems or see the big picture."*

The learning approach of the trialogical mentors supported deep actor learning and the importance of equal new knowledge creation in the mentoring process. This was, according to them, particularly important at a time of rapid change in the world of

work. The ability to innovate and to think differently were valuable skills to learn, according to the mentors, as these skills will support the actor in the future. Mentors whose understanding of mentoring was based on trialogical knowledge creation identified their own role as a key enabler of collaborative learning for the actor. *"We were able to connect and talk openly about the direction we wanted to take the mentoring process. We focused on each other and the feedback from the actor was that I had accepted him as a person and appreciated him."*

Being a mentor was also an excellent learning and knowledge creation process for the trialogical mentors themselves. They took their role as an honor and an opportunity to learn, perhaps even something completely new and surprising. These mentors showed by their own example how respectful and open interaction in a mentoring relationship can enable deep learning and proactively create new practices. The mentors stressed that the mentoring relationship is a free-form one and that its nature cannot be predetermined. For mentoring to reach its trialogical dimensions, the attitude and goal of both parties, was crucial.

Trialogical mentors highlighted that work, work contexts and the meaning of work are inevitably changing as part of societal change, and that the courage to innovate and renew is essential. These insights also inspired the mentors themselves. According to the mentors, continuous learning and renewal was an essential starting point for an actor's working life. The mentors also linked the big and sustainability-enhancing goals of mentoring to ethical issues, the importance of cooperation skills in wider networks and the importance of perseverance. This, in their view, could be used to develop not only work communities but also work culture more broadly. From a trialogical learning perspective, the aspect of inclusion and development was justified.

5. Discussion

In this article the mentors' perceptions of learning and knowledge creation as part of the mentoring process were examined. In this research, mentors' perceptions of learning and knowledge creation as part of the mentoring process were examined using the main themes of the trialogical view of learning: monological knowledge transfer, dialogical participation and trialogical knowledge creation [18]. The monological view of mentoring emphasises the role of the mentor in transferring information to the actor. The dialogic conception of mentoring recognizes the importance of an interactive, equal mentoring relationship in which learning is fundamentally a shared activity [also 4; 19]. The conception of trialogical mentoring reflects the process of striving for deep learning and new knowledge creation through social interaction.

The results show that mentors had a fundamentally positive attitude towards the process of learning and knowledge creation as part of mentoring. However, the way in which mentoring opportunities were identified and put into practice varied qualitatively. According to mentors' perceptions, mentoring can be used to shape social practices, including work-related ones. According to mentors, a rapidly changing working life requires flexible and sustainable solutions, which can be considered together with the actor in the mentoring process [also 6; 2]. Mentoring, according to the mentors, is strongly about learning, but their understanding of the process of learning and knowledge creation was mixed.

In the future, the potential of mentoring appears significant in the light of the research. The rapid and numerous changes in work contexts challenge continuous learning, for which mentoring is one low-hierarchy solution [also 13; 6]. It is therefore essential to pay attention to the qualitative aspects of the mentoring process and the participants' perceptions of learning. We propose a more in-depth research of the mentoring process, training mentors to understand the learning-theoretical underpinnings of mentoring and to perform their valuable role even better.

10. Conclusion

This article explored mentors' perceptions of mentoring as a process of learning and knowledge creation. The research combined the perspectives of mentoring and dialogical learning and knowledge creation. The data consisted of qualitative interviews with 10 mentors, which were analysed using abductive content analysis. The results showed that mentors' perceptions of the mentoring process as a learning and knowledge creation process were mixed. A narrow perception was that mentoring is a monologic transfer of information from mentor to actor. A broader, dialogical view was that the mentor and the actor interact to solve problems that are perceived as important. In a dialogical mentoring process, the mentor and the actor created new knowledge together as equal partners. The research suggests that the mentoring process should be viewed more deeply through the processes of learning. The meaningful mentoring process is learning for both participants and reinforces the continuous learning in working life contexts.

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