

Reflective journey of mentoring exploratory action research

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1. Abstract

Classroom based research, commonly perceived as action research in Nepal, is a mandatory task to be carried out to complete the Teacher's Professional Development training. After completing 10-day face to face training teachers are assigned a piece of action research. This is a school-based task to be completed within eight weeks. At the end, the teachers are required to submit an academic report. However, training centre records show that only 50 percent of teachers submit reports. Unfortunately, some copy-paste reports are also found being submitted. One of the reasons behind this is that the teachers are neither followed up nor mentored. This paper reflects on the author's reflective journey of becoming a mentor while mentoring ten teachers carrying out their exploratory action research (all of whom completed it) in Surkhet, Nepal under the BC-ARMS project. This paper also embeds the reflective experience of the author (in the first person) as a roster trainer at the Human Resource Development Centre, Karnali Province. The paper focuses on his experience of mentoring teachers along with being mentored himself. The process and positive impact of close observation and feedback with mentoring and research output are analysed and explained in this paper. The author highlights the fact that teacher researchers need to be mentored. The mentor's frequent communication not only builds rapport between mentor and mentees but also encourages them to complete their research in time. The mentor's questions guide the researchers to shape the process and outcome of their research.

2. Sub-theme

This paper is categorized under the conference theme "observation and feedback methods and techniques". It focuses on the mentoring aspect of the sub theme.

3. Story

What I was not satisfied with?

I am a permanent teacher of English at the secondary level. I have worked as an English teacher for a decade. For a tenure of five years, I also worked as a Head Teacher. During the tenure, my major responsibility was administration. I worked as a resource person (RP) at Birendranagar Resource Centre, District Education Office Surkhet for three years. My major responsibility as an RP was to provide technical support to teachers in planning and teaching. I had to observe teachers' classes and provide feedback and sometimes I had to demonstrate model lessons. I supervised

schools, too. I am also a roster trainer of the Human Resource Development Centre Surkhet. As such, I used to ask the trainee teachers to complete their action research on self-selected topics and submit reports in an academic way. It was directive and I felt I was forcing them to do the action research. I focused on completing the action research. The aggregate submission rate of action research report at HRDC is 50%; and primary teachers rarely submit.

I was also aware of hierarchy in my behaviour and language between my persona as head teacher/ resource person/ teacher educator (as senior) and the teacher (as junior). I was seeking respect and superiority in a hidden way. I felt, I was not mentoring either as a teacher, a head-teacher or as a resource person. I was aware that I was supervising the schools and the teachers, reporting on the positive and the negative, and advising on improvements. I was not friendly; I was authoritative like an administrator or a government school supervisor; and I was directive while giving feedback. I rarely asked open ended questions to enable them to reflect on themselves and the probable improvements they would like to carry out by themselves.

After attending the AINET International Teacher Research Conference 2017 Nagpur, India, I began to think "Am I doing my mentoring job as it should be done? Am I behaving as my mentor does with me?" I also thought about my mentees attitude to how I was doing my mentoring job: as a usual extension of the resource person's job or something different. I decided that I was not satisfied with my behaviour and attitude as a mentor.

Exploration

After this reflection, I thought I would carry out some exploratory action research over my own journey of becoming a mentor of exploratory action research. I prepared exploratory questions:

- (1) What do I know about mentoring and how do I feel about it?
- (2) What do my mentees and colleagues think about mentoring and how do they feel about the way I mentor?
- (3) How can I better support my mentees and how can they benefit more than they do at the moment?

I found a definition of research mentoring on Wikipedia. It is an interactive process that supports individuals to develop and maintain their research profile and activities. A mentor is someone who takes a special interest in helping another person to develop into a successful professional.

I prepared and administered a set of questionnaires to the teacher mentees as a baseline to find out how they felt about my mentoring skills. I worked with 10 mentees. My mentees, who were familiar with me responded positively. There were another 10 mentees being mentored by a fellow mentor called Janak in the same location. To make the study impartial, I asked Janak to conduct a survey on my behalf as a baseline.

The results can be seen in the table below.

Mentoring skills:	Rating (average mentees)
Communication through calls, SMS, e-mail skills	2
Questioning skills like eliciting	1.5

Support in teacher research providing materials design tools etc	1.5
Language and professional behaviour	1.5
Lesson observation and feedback skills	1

Based on this I felt I needed to make some developmental changes in my mentoring skills at all stages of the exploratory action research process that my mentees were carrying out and only then would they benefit.

Focus: How can I develop myself as a mentor?

I decided on an objective: to develop my research mentoring skills (effective communication skills, questioning skills, rapport building, observation and feeding-back skills).

What I did?

I had the benefit of being mentored by my mentor, Dr Richard Smith, Reader at Centre for Applied Linguistics, Warwick University. I had seen him facilitating a workshop to mentors in Nagpur in India. We had webinars, WhatsApp chats and e-mails. He used to ask various questions about my journey and my mentees' journey e.g. exploratory questions about research and about developing research tools. He used to attach reading materials and links in the email. I learned a new way of communication using the available tools and asking a variety of different kinds of questions and applied it. I learned how I should empower mentees with materials and then supply them. I learned about the balance between choice and freedom that a mentor should give to mentees, while still asking for a reason for every action. I became open minded and developed intimacy to break down the hierarchy.

I conducted five workshops in eight months. The first workshop was for an exploration of issues, the second workshop for data analysis and interpretation, the third for data comparison (in exploration and after the implementation of action), the fourth for ways of sharing exploratory action research and the final one for a poster/report presentation. I noted down the main points of the workshops on all occasions for both research and report purposes. I individually met the mentees two times during the period in which they carried out their exploratory action research. This included visiting their schools, observing lessons, and talking to them and their head teachers. I asked them about the options they had for conducting their research and enquired about their reasons for their choices e.g. finalizing the questionnaire, analyzing the data, preparing the poster, etc.

Methodology and tools

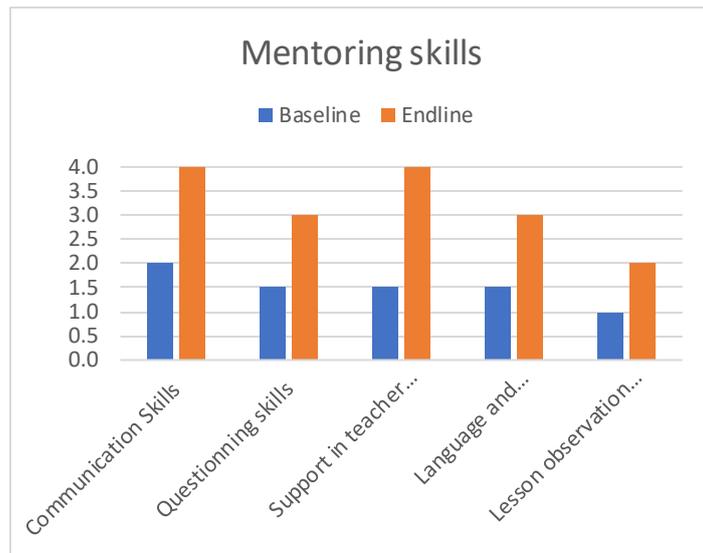
I mainly kept a reflective diary (of both being mentored and mentoring teachers) following my mentor's instructions. I filled up a questionnaire and asked my colleague Janak to fill in the observation form. Then I triangulated data and responses of mentee teachers and my colleague including my own and my mentor's.

I used the following tools: questionnaires, talks/interviews, observation forms and rating scale, webinars and workshops conducted by my mentor and myself to mentees.

What I found?

I used the same tool (that I used in exploration) to find the difference in my mentoring skills. The comparative result is as follows:

- 1) The bar shows that the frequency of communication was doubled.
- 2) The questioning skills and behavioural skills also changed.
- 3) The technical and material support was also doubled.



My co-mentor and colleague Janak also said that my mentoring skill had improved over this period.

4. Lessons and/or Recommendations

I learned that classroom-based researchers should be provided with support to carry out action research. This can take the following form: -

- There should be frequent communication, whatever mode is available e.g. telephone call, SMS/WhatsApp, email etc.
- The mentor should be good listeners for to the researchers. They should listen to the details and keep a record of what is shared.
- Researchers should be asking questions rather than giving direct solutions. The questions may range from elicitation to open ended probing questions.
- The mentor should build a good rapport with his/her mentees. Polite and professional behaviour encourages the mentees to complete their research.

The implications of this reflective research were as follows:

- All ten mentees completed their exploratory action research. They shared their research findings in the form of posters and submitted the reports which were published later.
- The mentees expressed commitment to carry on other classroom-based research.
- One of the mentees became a mentor: one of the mentees (Prem) became BC-ARMS mentor 2019/2020.
- The Birendranagar Municipality Education Unit is promoting the Exploratory Action Research and mentoring scheme. Two of the mentees (Krishna and Shasidhar) have been nominated as mentors by the municipality. The municipality has also published their reports as reference material (see the link in references).
- The mentoring technique and report sharing technique are applied in the Teachers' Professional Development training.

The process and outcomes of BC-ARMS have been widely shared over a large audience in different forums. It was first shared at the 23rd NELTA conference in 2018. There was a wide poster presentation in the Education Symposium organised by British Council Nepal in 2019. Finally, my own experience was shared at the Sri Lanka English Language Teacher Educator Conference (SLELTEC) in March 2020.

I have also shared mentoring and classroom-based research among my school colleagues. The administration has agreed to support interested researchers. I am planning to carry out one (Exploratory) Action Research myself and to join hands with the school administration to support teachers.

5. References

www.bit.ly/champion-teachers

www.bit.ly/handbook-EAR

<file:///C:/Users/AB/Downloads/Reports%20of%20Exploratory%20Action%20Research%20published%20by%20Birendranagar%20Municipality%20Surkhet.pdf>