

Cultural Mentoring – A Reflective Insight into the Real Process

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Abstract. This paper outlines experiences from a cultural mentoring project. It addresses the issue of sustainable intercultural competence acquisition and successful integration of students in transnational traineeships. While students studying abroad can usually draw on a number of preparatory and accompanying measures including mentoring from their own and the host university, this aspect has often been neglected with students on traineeships abroad. Here we discuss the SKILL2E model for mentoring of students in enterprises in 6 European contexts and the focus here is clearly on the outcomes of cultural mentoring and the suitability on the model that was built up. The outcomes are based on interviews, documentation and researchers participatory observations. The discussion reveals that the model works well but that one could even more emphasize the preparation and training aspects of cultural mentoring.

Keywords: Cultural Mentoring Model, Traineeships, Enterprises, Higher Education, Experiences.

1. Introduction

Globalization, movement of work force, trade of goods around the world, companies with branches on different continents, and curious open-minded people who want to get to know other cultures by studying and working in other countries, have led to a situation where people in many companies need to cope with, manage and co-operate with others from several cultures under the same roof. In a world where cultural boundaries are dissolving as the result of new media, migration and globalization, intercultural competence is seen as crucial to business success (Guffey, 2007, Hilton, 2007, p.34-36 in Tigerstedt & Fabricius 2012). Both the student and the enterprise, usually focus on the job to be done during the traineeship. In many enterprises, therefore, training with regard to intercultural competence and attention to cultural issues is often only considered on managerial levels and for employees on international assignments. On the other hand one can also see that mentoring usually is something that takes place between new employees (not students) and more experienced employees. We suggest that cultural mentoring is one way of minimizing cultural boundaries and difficulties in workplaces and we also suggest that the cultural mentoring model built up in SKILL2E project (www.skill2e.fh-salzburg.ac.at), an EU-funded multilateral university-enterprise cooperation project with partners from Austria, England, Finland, Romania, Spain, Turkey and the US can be used for this. (See also Tigerstedt & Fabricius, 2012 and Tigerstedt, Tanase, Tabuenca Cuevas & Streitburger, 2012.)

Our aim in this paper is to reflect on the outcomes from the piloting of the cultural mentoring program that took place within the SKILL2E project and to reflect on the suitability of the model that was used.

1.1. Concept Definitions

Mentoring can be seen as a one-way road. The mentee is the receiver and the mentor is the giver. This is somewhat an old-fashioned way of looking at today's mentoring. Nowadays it is important for both parties to have mutual gain from the process. It is a two way learning experience where knowledge is exchanged. In addition, mentorship should be seen as a relationship, instead of a top down process where both parties can freely express their feelings and co-operate with respect to one another. (Shea, 2001, p. 81-84; Conway, 1998, p. 15-16). We have chosen to use the word *mentee* here since it was most frequently used in the literature we reviewed. (Tigerstedt & Fabricius, 2012) Mentees often later become mentors themselves, and this cycled process instigates and leads to changes in management (Conway, 1998, p.17, 22). The mentee in SKILL2E,

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was a student studying in one of the consortia universities. It was a student who went on a traineeship (practical training/work traineeship, practical part of studies) abroad in a pre-chosen enterprise. The cultural **mentor** was a co-worker in one of the partner enterprises.

Good **cultural mentoring** gives advantages to both mentor and mentee. Well-functioning mentoring programs can even have long term advantages since today's mentees can be tomorrow's mentors (Becket, 2010). If a mentee had experienced a successful mentoring relationship that has helped to develop his or her own professional competence, it is more likely that the mentee would share knowledge and help other mentees when s/he becomes a mentor. (Tigerstedt & Fabricius 2012.)

1.1 Cultural Mentoring

One always needs to adapt to the existing organizational culture when starting to work in a new place. There might even be the new national culture to adapt to. The adaptation process can take a long time and can be very stressful and difficult if one cannot find help early on in the process. This is where the cultural mentoring program comes into picture for all newcomers. This kind of program would help the new comer, the mentee, in getting to know the organizational culture and the national culture with the help of a mentor.

Employees who are sent abroad for a work assignment often find themselves in a stressful situation where they feel a pressure to contribute well in the new surrounding that they do not yet understand completely. This is when a cultural mentoring program can help. Good mentors work with mentees' resistance rather than try to overcome it. They use resistance to help the mentee to clarify their values and their goals. The framework for the change process provides movement and direction. This is because mentoring journey is about change in relation to the mentees agenda. The framework provides a map for this journey, for both mentee and mentor. The effective mentor uses skills which bring to life the coaching framework and enable the mentee to develop the insight and release his/ her potential. The distinctive style, personality and values of the mentor are appreciated by the mentee. The qualities of the mentor affirm, enable and sustain the mentee. The mentee is safeguarded if ethical principles are applied in informing and guiding practice. Such principles might include: respect for the mentee's autonomy; faithfulness to promises made; acting in ways which are beneficial to the mentee; not doing harm and acting fairly. (Connor & Pokora, 2009, p. 6- 11, Crawley et. al. 2009, p.32). A good and trusting relationship between mentor and mentee is important. Clear goals and expectations of the mentoring program with mentees should be established. It is also important that mentees have an access to the mentors. This could be done as regular meetings, face-to-face encounters or by phone. An open workplace culture of practice contributes easily also to be successful mentoring. Organization needs to be used to developmental practices as well. However, both mentors and mentees have responsibilities in managing the relationship and working together (MacGregor, 2000, p.248. in Tigerstedt & Fabricius, 2012).

Crocitto et. al. 2005 use the term global mentoring for more or less the same thing as we here call cultural mentoring and they mean that this is something that companies should take more into use since there is a high rate of failure among people who work abroad because they have never learned enough about the new culture. It is also proven that companies who put efforts on this are more successful. (McKinsey & Company, 2011.)

There are six major career issues that the mentee (expatriate) must manage during the stay in the host country (according to Crocitto et al, 2005, p. 528). Three of them are mentioned below. In each stage the three mentioned major career issues that the mentee has to manage during the stay in the host country should be considered: 1) Establishing relationship with the mentor(s) and seeking help with cultural issues 2) Learning job tasks and seeking help with job-related issues 3) Learning the cultural norms, organizational norms and his/her role in to host organization. (Tigerstedt & Fabricius, 2012.)

In the next section we will discuss the model that was built up in SKILL2E. (For more details see other articles about the project and the SKILL2E project website.)

2. Cultural Mentoring in Skill 2e

The project we included cultural mentoring as a support for the intercultural understanding and development between enterprises and their trainees (on transnational traineeships). The SKILL2E mentoring

concept has been designed on the basis of literature research and enterprise interviews across the consortium cultures. Involving the important stakeholder group of enterprises in the design process, was therefore one factor that was seen as contributing to the validity and credibility of the concept. This is one way that successfully can improve the knowledge and the tools of communication in foreign cultures. The model of cultural mentoring discussed here was piloted in university - enterprise cooperation throughout the project consortium (SKILL2E website: <http://skill2e.fh-salzburg.ac.at/>). The unique context is important when planning on the concrete implementation plan for a cultural mentoring. The context is also to be considered when specifying the qualification and task profiles of the mentors. (Tigerstedt, Tanase et al, 2012.)

Within the project we trained both mentors and mentees according to their needs. The training was to take place in two parts. The second one was more hands on and happened when the selection of mentor mentee pairs were final. Below we have an example of how a mentor training within the project could be outlined:

Learning outcome and target group for the Mentee training: 1) Target group: all mentees 2) Method: IDI, briefing (<https://www.idiinventory.com/>) 3) Time/Length: varies 3) Identify the tasks and roles of the mentor 4) Understand the mentoring process and the necessary steps 5) Recognize the relevance of taking ownership of the mentoring process Assess and reflect on the mentors own cultural orientation and its possible impact on the mentoring process (IDI).

Below a SKILL2E model showing how the mentoring can be done. Adjustments can and should be done to fit the needs of the parties involved: interns and company. (Tigerstedt & Fabricius, 2012.)

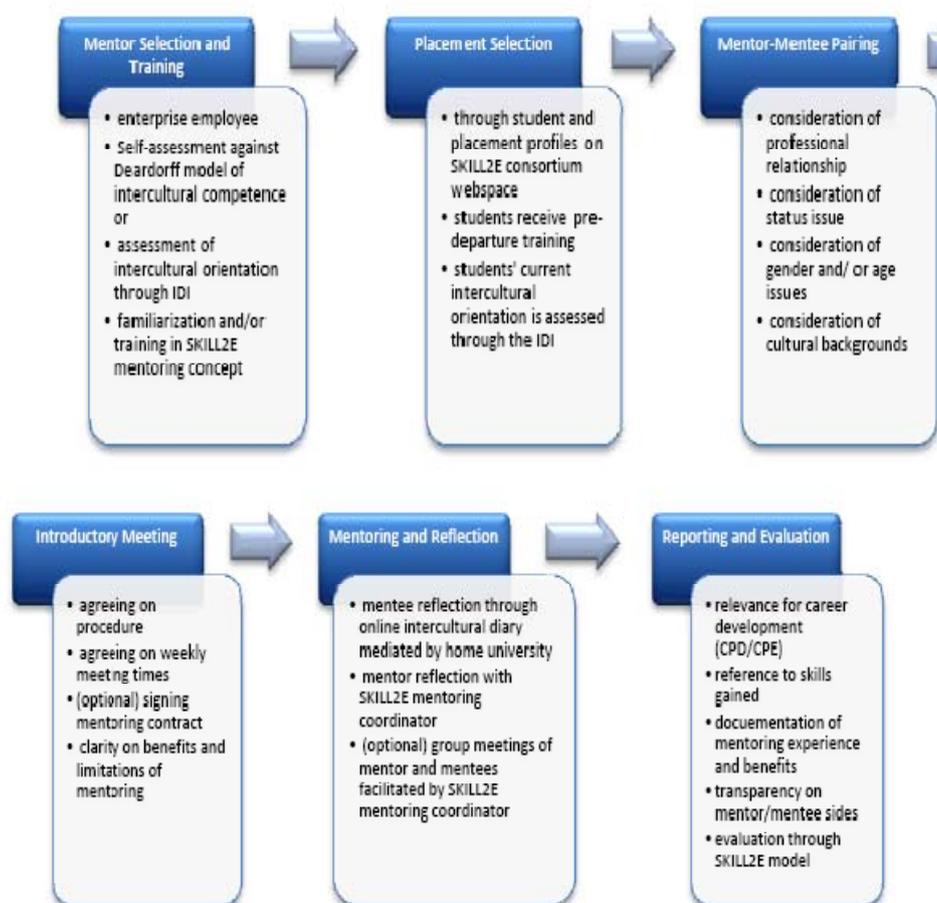


Fig. 1: A process model for cultural mentoring (Tigerstedt & Fabricius, 2012).

3. Analysis and Reflections

The material analyzed in this article are based on interviews with mentors and mentees after finalizing the cultural mentoring and on other project documentation as well as information from formal and informal feedback sessions. We also base our findings on the insight we have had as members of the project

consortium. This means we have been acting as participatory observers as well as concept developers and mentor/mentee trainers.

3.1. The Interviews with the Mentors

All in all the mentors saw the experience as a good one. They learnt about being a mentor, what is, to be open and they learnt about another culture. Below one example of learning:

“As a mentor I benefited from the interesting perspectives experienced during our mentoring meetings.”

“The most important thing I learned is to be open-minded.”

Trust was identified as challenging in our initial stages and this was discussed by one of the mentors as crucial. The challenge was however overcome with time:

“The level of trust improved over the time the mentoring process took place. As we got to know each other better, more sensitive topics became open for discussion.”

More training and preparation was requested by all mentors. The mentees seemed to have been better prepared for the mentoring. It was difficult to arrange the training needed at the right time in some cases in this project. Timing between the university (trainers), the enterprise and the time for the traineeship was difficult to manage and training was sometimes offered early on in the project and at this stage neither mentors nor mentees were assigned to participate. Below some examples regarding this:

“In retrospect, occasional consultation of both mentor and mentees with the team who drafted the process would be beneficial.”

“What I feel is that we should have discussed more about his working task before he came to the company.”

3.2. The Interviews with the Mentees

The mentees also had a good experience in all cases. This does not however mean that there were no challenges on the way. Challenges were however solved with very good mentors' help, said the mentees.

Very concrete things were included in the mentoring:

“My mentor came with me to take my ticket for internal transportation for first time and when I paid my deposit my mentor was with me and also showed me where can I eat, see, spend my time. That kind of small thing is quite important for a foreigner.”

Cultural mentoring for the mentee was very often related to practical things. Generally speaking one can also say that both mentors and mentees favoured a very informal way of cultural mentoring. Open and honest discussion when they were needed. The mentoring pairs had made formal agreements as recommended, but stuck to the informal ad hoc meeting structure once they got started.

4. Conclusion and Final Reflections

In the early reporting and concept building stage challenges in reaching the goals had been identified together with enterprises and in the interviews some of the initially identified challenges occurred as well:

- Dealing with conflict and lack of trust
- Raising awareness for diversity
- Dealing with clash of expectations
- Making time and resources available for mentoring

Our recommendations for cultural mentoring based on the insight and evaluation of the cultural mentoring in the SKILL2E project are:

- Timing: carefully plan the timing of the traineeship, recruiting and selecting the mentor and the mentee as well as the start and end of the cultural mentoring.
- Matching: it is important to take into consideration the skills and the personality of the mentor and the mentee
- Time: both parties should allocate enough time for the actual mentoring
- Preparation and training: more training is needed according to the participating mentors in this project

From this project one learned that it was not always easy match the schedules of the enterprise, the student and the assisting HEI (trainers in this case). The concept developed here is proved to work very well. However what it really means to be a cultural mentor needs to be stressed more for all parties in the beginning of the process. All parties also need to commit and take part in training. Continuous work on the model will be fruitful for further implementation.

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