



# EMCC Research Review

Issue 5: Advice giving in mentoring

## Introduction

Dear Reader,

The previous issues of EMCC Research Review have focused on outcomes of mentoring and ethics; all rather broad topics. In this issue, however, we are going to take a deep-dive into a very common topic in mentoring, advice giving. Not only, is it commonly practiced, advice giving is even described as one of the main tasks assigned to Mentor in Homer's The Odyssey.

Nevertheless, advice giving is also contested by some, who argue that advising prevents mentees' own thinking by imposing the perspective of the mentor. In this issue I will attempt to add some evidence-based nuance to the discussion.

Anyone who has ever engaged in advice giving, will know that it is a notoriously difficult and relationally sensitive practice. When giving advice, one makes at least 4 basic assumptions:

1. I know something you do not know
2. You need said knowledge
3. I am the one to deliver said knowledge
4. Now is the time to do it

If any of these assumptions do not hold true, the advice is not going to get a particularly positive response. Much like telling a joke that no one laughs at, giving advice that is not accepted can be rather awkward for both parties.

To address this interactionally complex issue, we will look at 3 studies. The first study by Son and Kim takes a quantitative approach and investigates which relational preconditions are conducive of advice acceptance on the part of the mentee. The two next studies by Hansun Waring take a more fine-grained, practice-based approach. Based on video- and audio observations, her studies analyse the micro-level interactional practices that constitute advice as an interactional accomplishment. The assumption here being that for advice givings to succeed, it requires both parties; one doing advice giving and one doing advice reciprocity.

In her first study, she addresses the role of advice giving in stimulating reflection, and in the final study she analyses how advice reciprocity is used manage asymmetries and relational dynamics.

I hope this issue will spur reflection and curiosity about this complex topic.

Sincerely  
Content writer  
Leo Smith, EMCC Denmark

## **Relational preconditions for mentees' advice reception**

*Study: What makes protégés take mentors' advice in formal mentor relationships?*

*By: SuJin Son and Do-Yeong Kim*

*Published in: Journal of Career Development, 2013, vol. 40(4), pp. 311-328*

### **Introduction**

The study aims to uncover the macro-relational preconditions that foster mentees' advice acceptance. They hypothesise that advice acceptance is not just a matter of advice quality, it also depends on how mentees perceive the mentoring relationship-

### **What did the researchers do?**

The researchers surveyed 183 mentees from two Korean construction companies. Using structural equation modelling, they measured how mentees' Perceived Relationship Quality, Trust in Mentor and Commitment to Mentor relate to Mentees' Advice acceptance behaviour. They also controlled for mentorship duration, gender and which organization the respondents belonged to.

### **Main Findings**

Below, I have summarised the findings:

- Protégé commitment is positively related to protégé willingness to take mentor's advice
- Relationship quality was positively related to protégé commitment
- Protégé commitment mediates the relation between relationship quality perceived by the protégé and his/her willingness to take mentor's advice
- Protégé's trust in mentors mediates the relation between relationship quality perceived by the protégé and protégé commitment.

Evidently, commitment and trust are relational preconditions for advice acceptance. The more trust and commitment, the more likely mentees are to accept advice

### **Why is this interesting?**

The study is interesting because it highlights the relational dimension of advice giving and proves that advice giving is not just about the quality of the advice. No matter how good advice you give, it is not going to make much of an impact if your mentee is not committed to the relationship and does not trust you.

### **How can you put this into practice?**

The most important practical implication of the study is that mentors need to build rapport if they want to impart their wisdom onto mentees through advising. Thus, investing in relationship building is going to improve your impact as a mentor.

At the same time, however, it is important to bear in mind the ethical concerns relating to advice giving. More specifically, as we investigated in issue 4 of the EMCC Research Review, the notion of theoretical abuse is important. When mentees are more likely to take your advice because they are committed and trust you, you have all the more responsibility not to impose your perspective onto mentees and prevent them from exploring their own views.

### **Drawbacks**

The study is limited methodologically as it is based on survey data. The respondents are asked to think back on their mentoring relationships and address advice giving and relational factors as macro-constructs. Therefore, the data only offers a simplified retrospective account of what the mentee thinks happened in general terms. As we will see in following studies by Waring, advice giving always occurs in some specific context. Thus, local contingencies concerning the concrete advice giving are omitted from the this particular study.

Nonetheless, Son and Kim's study offers important insights for practice; build trust and commitment before jumping into advice giving.

## **The reflection-prompting capacity of advice giving**

*Study: Two mentor practices that generate teacher reflection without explicit solicitations:  
Some preliminary considerations*

*By: Hansun Zhang Waring*

*Published in: RELC Journal, 2013, vol. 44(1), issue 3, pp. 103-119*

### **Introduction**

The point of departure for this study is that mentoring should generate reflection, which is something most readers of this research review is going to agree with. The focus of the study is to unpack specific micro-level mentoring practices, which achieve this goal. The specific context of the study is something called post-observation conferences with teachers and their mentors. Prior to these conferences a mentor has observed a teaching session with the mentee/teacher. The conference itself is a mentor conversation in which the observer/mentor and mentor/teacher talk about how the observed teaching session went. The goal is to encourage reflection and improve teaching skills.

### **What did the researcher do?**

The study follows a methodology called Conversation Analysis rooted in sociology and linguistics. The researcher video-recorded 4 post-observation conferences and transcribed them following the Conversation Analysis convention. This means that seemingly minute details such as inbreaths, 0.1 second silences, overlaps in speech, and phonetic information such as stresses, volume, and change in speed are noted. Having transcribed everything, Waring then collected all the sequences in which the teacher/mentee engaged in reflective talk without explicit elicitation, that is, without the mentee being asked directly to reflect. Then she turned her attention to the turn at talk that facilitated said reflective talk. All sequences are then analysed to identify patterns in these turns. This very scientific approach has a tremendous strength in that it relies on naturally occurring real-life practice. It examines what actually works at the interactional level in ordinary mentor conversations, and the analysis is not guided by theories but by the data.



## **Main findings:**

Waring found 2 categories of actions that facilitated reflective talk without explicitly elicitation, Assessments and Advice. The latter is of course the theme of this Research Review, but the former is quite interesting too, so we will take a look at it as well.

### *Assessments as reflection prompts*

The analysis elaborates on 3 types of responses, 2 of which follow positive assessments and the last one following a negative assessment. In the first example, the mentee reflects on why the positively assessed activity (a spelling bee) worked so well and her reason for engaging in it to begin with.

In the second example, the mentor offers a positive assessment of the mentee's strict time management during a teaching exercise. The mentee responds with reflective talk pertaining to how she should have given them more time. Thus, the mentee implicitly rejects the premise for the positive assessment and reflects on how her practice can be improved.

The final case shows how a mentor's negative assessment may spur reflection. Following a negative assessment pertaining to controlling student activities, the mentee produces an account of her efforts to minimise the negatively assessed action. This account is not necessarily defensive but may be explored as an opportunity to analyse and reflect on what happened and why.

### *Advice giving as reflection prompts*

For advice givings, a rather similar structure emerges. In response the advice, the mentee may engage in accounting work, explaining why or why not the advice is useful and why he/she did what she did in the first place. Again, these accounts are often quite reflective in nature and may be explored to prompt further reflection.

## **Why is this interesting?**

Die-hard dialogic mentoring proponents have long argued that mentors should refrain from explicitly assessing and advice giving, as both will impose the mentor's perspective and restrict the mentee's own thinking. This thorough, empirical study falsifies that hypothesis. Indeed, it shows how assessments and advice givings can offer a room for reflection. Looking at the interactional properties of these two practices it makes a lot of sense. As shown in previous conversation analytic studies, assessments call for the recipient to take a stance towards the assessment in the response turn. Advice givings also call for a response, namely some variation of an acceptance or a rejection, and the accounting practices that may be involved can be seen as a reflection space.

Finally, it interesting to see how mentees are not passive recipients of assessments and advice. They are quite capable of taking their own stance and articulate it.

### **How can you put this into practice?**

One of the most important insights to be drawn from this study is that assessments and advice givings do not impose meaning onto the mentee. Indeed, they may in fact create a reflective space. This is not to say that assessments and advice givings are always the right thing to do.

### **Drawbacks**

The main drawback of the study is the rather narrow setting of the mentor conversation. Given that the mentor has observed the mentee's behaviour and that these observations are the formally agreed upon topic of the conversation, it may limit the generalisability of the finding to other forms of mentor conversations. Specifically, both the mentor and the mentee have first-hand access to the topic on which they are reflecting. In a broader mentoring context, mentors often rely on mentees' accounts of what happened, having not actually been there when it occurred. Having first-hand access to the behaviour is likely going validate the mentor's point of view and make the mentee more willing to listen and reflect, especially in the case of assessments.



Also, the study is based on a small sample which also limits generalizability in the statistical sense. But it was never the point of the study demonstrate what all mentors do. Rather, it shows how mentors can prompt reflection, under certain circumstances.

## **Advice acceptance and asymmetry**

*Study: Complex advice acceptance as a resource for managing asymmetries*

*By: Hansun Zhang Waring*

*Published in: Text and Talk, 2007, vol. 27(1), pp. 107-137*

### **Introduction**

In this study, Waring again investigates the micro-relational dynamics involved in advice giving in mentor conversations. More specifically, she investigated how advice acceptance does a lot more than just accepting advice. Mentees do advice acceptance in very specific ways to address to the asymmetry inherently established by the advice giving.

### **What did the researcher do?**

As the previous study, the data consists of observations of naturally occurring real-life mentor/tutor conversations. This study however draws on 8.3 hours of audio-recordings of academic writing tutoring sessions in which a tutor helps a student improve their academic writing skills. The tutor thus functions as mentor in a rather narrow sense. As with the previous study by Waring, she uses Conversational Analysis and investigates the most fine-grained interactional details.

### **Main findings:**

Waring identifies two types of advice acceptance patterns, which she calls simple advice acceptance and complex advice acceptance.

*Simple advice acceptance:* These are the prototypical form and are typically centred around "Okay" usually associated with other acceptance tokens, such as "got it", or preceded with an understanding display such as "that should be there, okay". What is interesting here is that these responses are treated as rather unproblematic, and they themselves treat the advice as unproblematic and acceptable. These types of acceptances are the the "seen but unnoticed" default format of advice given, that is, what mentors and



mentee orient to as the standard procedure. Knowing this, it becomes quite interesting to investigate sequences that deviate. And this is the case for the other type of responses.

*Complex advice acceptance:* These responses do more than just accepting and take on a more elaborate form. Although they validate the advice as such, they also do important relational work. The first complex acceptance form is labelled "Accept with claims of comparable thinking", for instance "Yes, that's what I thought". What is particular about this type of acceptance is that it claims to validate what the advice recipient was already thinking, rather than the simple acceptance, which acknowledges the newness of the advice. Thus, this acceptance form minimises the assumed knowledge asymmetry. Moreover, Waring also shows that these are often produced in overlap with or as potential completions of with the advice production, thereby making a strong "I knew it" claim. Another version of this form is centred around "I agree with that", which positions the advice recipient as someone competent to form his/her own opinion on the matter, which happens to align with the advice just given. The upshot here is that the advice recipient manages asymmetry by claiming competence and knowledge.

*Advice acceptance with account:* These also do more than mere acceptance. In these sequences the advice is ultimately accepted but with an explanation of why the advised action has not yet been done. One of the meticulous examples offered in the paper is initiated by a tutor pointing to a paragraph that fits better in another section of a paper, thus advising on where it should have been. The student responds with "okay, yeah I saw it in someone else's piece, then I thought maybe it is time to remind the reader" to which the tutor cements the original advice, after which the student responds with a "got it". What is interesting here is that although the advice is accepted at least conditionally, the advice recipient still engages in an explanation of why they did what they did. What is particularly important about these accounts is that they present the advice recipient as someone with her/his own intellect and agency, not just idle and mindless acceptors of other people's directions.



### **Why is this interesting?**

The is interesting because it brings to the fore just how delicate advice giving can be due to the inherent asymmetries it creates. It also shows that advice acceptance is about more than just taking in and acknowledging the relevance of the information offered. These sequences constitute micro-arenas in which advice givers and recipients position themselves relative to each other and the subject matter of the advice. Finally, it shows that advice recipients are not just passive receivers, but active co-creators of their own position.

### **How can you put this into practice?**

As a mentor it is important to take note of the specific advice acceptance form. Too much of one type of response would be something to consider. For instance, if a mentee only does simply acceptance, one should wonder why and maybe even ask why. The same goes for complex advice acceptance. The fundamental reflection stemming from this article would then be, "what is the pattern in my mentee's advice acceptance and how come that is the case?"

### **Drawbacks**

Although the study is very detailed, it relied on audio recordings meaning that the embodied behaviours of the observe participants are not accounted for. Since the tutor sessions were held face-to-face, non-verbal behaviour as gaze, gestures and so on were part of the conversation but not available to the researcher and us as readers of the study.

### **Conclusion**

Advice giving in mentoring is mentoring is a contested matter. Different school of thought have adapted different position, so depending on whom you ask mentoring may seen as an essential component in mentoring or something to be avoided entirely. These positions are typically grounded in theories and not empirical evidence. The goal of the Research Review was to start with the data.



The first study showed that advice acceptance is not simply a matter of advice quality. Relational factors, in particular trust, is an important driver of advice acceptance as well. The next two studies by Waring took a micro-interactional approach to the matter and showed the interactional complexity involved in advice giving. The first study showed that mentees are not just passive advice recipients, and that they are quite capable a voicing their own perspective on the matter. Therefore, advice may trigger reflection. The second study from Waring showed that mentees may use the advice reception to do some positioning work, that is, portraying themselves as someone with agency, capable of trying and reasoning themselves. As an advice giving mentor, these response patterns offers important insights into the relation.