

Gender-Sensitive Mentoring of Modern Languages' Women Teachers in UK Higher Education - Marion Coderch, Durham University, UK



Online



Group of 2



Staff



Modern Languages

Can be applied to different: **Teaching contexts** **Cohorts** **Disciplines**

What They Did

The activity took place within an institutional mentoring scheme, in which any member of academic staff at or above a certain professional grade (equivalent to “lecturer” or “assistant professor”) can act as a mentor, as long as they have passed their probation. Since there is no formal training for mentors, the approach to mentoring is reasonably flexible. Mentors are assigned mentees in similar roles or areas of work. Every newly appointed member of staff is automatically assigned a mentor, regardless of professional experience. In addition, the mentoring scheme is available on a voluntary basis to all staff beyond probation. In the context of this activity, the mentees had been working at the institution for periods of time ranging between 9 months and 9 years.

This approach to mentoring focused on the specificity of women's experience in modern languages' teaching departments. Women's experiences in this context are defined by the low expectations placed on them by colleagues and managers and by frequent challenges to women leadership. The aims of the mentoring meetings were:

- to help women teachers identify opportunities for career development and progression.
- to provide psychosocial support in the process of establishing their professional identity within the department.

The action focused on the two first stages of the ‘feminist algorithm’ proposed by Chandler (1996, pp. 96-97) to help improve the professional lives of women in academia:

- Name the problem (acknowledge the specific difficulties faced by women in academic departments).
- Raise the consciousness level (provide a space for the discussion of women's experiences in these departments).

The discussions held during mentoring meetings were guided by Lunsford's recommendations with regard to mentoring of women staff in academia: mentoring should focus on affirming the identity of mentees both as professionals and as women. The three dimensions of mentoring identified by Lunsford (psychosocial support, career support, personal growth; 2020: p. 151) were taken into consideration during interactions with mentees.

Why They Did It This Way

The academic work of women teaching staff has long been associated with service activities, or with the ‘caring script’, as Acker and Feuerverger put it (1996, p. 401; see also Guarino and Borden, 2017).

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The work of women teachers is often perceived as being vocational rather than academic, with the implication that serving and caring for students, or for other members of staff, will fulfil their professional ambitions. The prevalence of this notion, based on traditional gender stereotypes, results in low expectations towards the professional aspirations of women in teaching roles: since it is assumed that caring for others will make them happy, there are no opportunities for them to progress academically, or to develop leadership skills. As a consequence, women are often left out of the circuits of promotion and progression, or simply not given the choice to take on more challenging assignments, on the assumption that they must already be either satisfied or overwhelmed with their existing duties of teaching or low-level administrative work.

In addition, there is reluctance among colleagues (both men and female) to accept women in leadership roles. In the field of modern languages' teaching in UK Higher Education, where women teachers are predominant, women who aspire to occupy positions of leadership are often faced with the resistance of their less experienced colleagues, who refuse to acknowledge the authority of a woman figure (Eagly and Carli, 2007). There is little hope for these aspiring women leaders to gain support from other women members of staff in senior management positions, too, as these often tend to reproduce the existing gender hierarchy to protect their own perceived characteristics as the only representatives of a minority group (Derks, Van Laar & Ellemers, 2016).

How it Went

It is too early to formally assess the impact of this approach to mentoring, as the development of the professional profiles of the staff involved will have to be monitored over the course of months or years. Informally, though, the women teachers involved in the mentoring discussions said these had allowed them to gain a wider perspective of their potential for growth in the academic communities where they belong.

References

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