Case study
Supporting tomorrow’s managers: the Coca-Cola and Schweppes in-house degree programme

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Abstract
This article describes the support provided to FrontLine students involved in a unique scheme run by Coca-Cola and Schweppes, the University of Bradford and the National Extension College, Cambridge, where participants combine a job with a fully supported distance learning course leading to a degree in management. Focussing on the position of tutor mentor, this case study emphasises the vital nature of the role in supporting the learning of students on the programme. A model of effective mentor-student relationships developing and responding within a dynamic system is presented. Some evaluation of student feedback leads to consideration of such questions as: are tutor mentors effective? What type of student needs their tutor mentor most/least? How do the students perceive the role of the tutor/mentor? The paper concludes that the tutor mentor provides the “stability” factor within this particular degree programme.

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Introduction
Creative learning programmes to enable students to study for university degrees through non-traditional means of attendance are becoming more and more popular. In such cases, it is crucially important to have a “mentoring” figure; someone who takes an overview of each individual’s learning programme, liaising with each student on learning and teaching issues that could affect their progress towards his/her desired goal. This paper highlights the role of the tutor mentor in a unique degree scheme run by Coca-Cola and Schweppes, the University of Bradford and the National Extension College, Cambridge.

The mentoring role
The Greek poet Homer told the story of Ulysses and his son Telemachus in the Odyssey, describing how the son was entrusted by his father into the care of Mentor (Clutterbuck, 1991; Rosenbach 1993). Mentor was old and wise and helped Telemachus to mature, to learn courage, prudence, honesty and a commitment to serving others. Thus, the word “mentor” was derived. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term “mentor” was used in the title of books aimed at helping young people in specific areas of learning (Woold, 1993). There is the long-standing definition, which involves the older experienced individual passing down their knowledge of tasks and how to work with other people (Clutterbuck, 1991). Other opinions have described the mentor as “an ambiguous authority figure” (Stodgill, 1968) and a “mixture of parent and peer” (Levinson et al., 1979). A more up-to-date definition (Burlew, 1991) is “anyone who provides guidance, support, knowledge and opportunities for whatever period”.

Despite the abundance of literature on this subject area, there is little agreement on the essential characteristics of mentoring, the methods by which it should be conducted and who should undertake it (Stead, 1997). Clutterbuck (1991) states that the vital component of the mentoring relationship is inequality in terms of age and experience and that it needs to be a one-to-one relationship, while Gay (1994) discusses the different types
of roles that mentors may be required to play, e.g. supervisor, negotiator, teacher, counsellor, entertainer and coach.

There have been several papers written on the subject of mentoring applied to various working situations. Woodd (1993) considers there to be three main areas of mentoring in post-16 education. The first is the mentoring of students, where the mentor forms the link between the workplace experience and the theoretical study of the student. This is called the “professional qualification mentor” by Parsloe (1992) and is primarily the main focus of the study for the Coca-Cola programme. The other types of mentoring are mentoring of trainees studying for a qualification and also the support of teaching staff as they enter a new place of work.

Study programmes of this type, involving academic study alongside professional work, have been outlined in several case studies previously published (Pollitt, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1998d, 1998e).

The FrontLine Programme

The FrontLine degree programme is designed to provide junior merchandisers, working for Cola-Cola and Schweppes beverages (CC&S) throughout the UK, the opportunity to study for the BSc (Hons) Business and Management degree at the University of Bradford, while gaining four-and-a-half-years work experience in a commercial environment.

Students are referred to as “FrontLiners” as they work in the “front line” of the business, selling products to local shops, newsagents, restaurants, service stations and various other outlets. Students are recruited directly onto the degree programme, usually from school or colleges, rather than transferring onto it from inside the company. Students must have university entrance qualifications and the application to work and study at the same time. FrontLiners are funded by CC&S to study as students of the University of Bradford Management Centre (UBMC) with a supported degree programme developed and managed by the National Extension College (NEC).

UBMC’s full-time modular undergraduate programme, with some changes developed for FrontLine, is studied by FrontLine students over a four-and-a-half-year period, using the teaching and learning methodologies of distance learning. The teaching and student support is planned, organised and administered by the NEC. Each UBMC academic year of study is therefore spread over 18 months. This is broken down further into study blocks of which there are two per year. Each module carries ten credits, and is studied over a six-month period. In each six-month period, students study four modules. Thus, a study block is made up of four modules. Students study 12 modules (three study blocks) in each “stage” or “level” of their degree. There are three stages to the degree (120 credits at each stage), and students must satisfy UBMC academic standards to progress from one stage to the next. Nine study blocks have to be studied to complete the degree.

FrontLiners will typically work a 35-hour week for CC&S with a further full day a week designated as a study day. They are expected to put in a minimum of 20 hours of private study time per week at stage 1 and up to 39 hours at stages 2 and 3 of the degree programme. CC&S allocates additional study time around examination periods for revision and preparation as well as releasing FrontLiners for residential schools. Study and work clearly requires a considerable amount of motivation and commitment from students.

Developing and delivering the FrontLine degree programme is a partnership of three – CC&S, the NEC and UBMC. Each partner has different aims for the programme. CC&S wishes to expand its merchandising capacity, develop and “grow” their own future managers, and satisfy their training and skills needs. Moreover, as the sponsoring partner, it wishes to achieve its goals with a programme that is consistent with its company image – modern, innovatory and unique. However, it has never had the desire to control or determine the curriculum – a concern that has been expressed about these types of company-sponsored degrees. By providing the means for young people to study and work on a company-sponsored programme, the FrontLine degree programme exemplifies the NEC’s mission to widen access to learning opportunities through innovation in open and distance education. UBMC has a long tradition of collaboration with industry and the professions. The development of an off-campus, sponsored programme is well suited
to the UBMC’s approach to higher education.

The FrontLine degree programme uses the methods of distance education, although it is perhaps more accurately described as a mixed mode programme in that there are compulsory residential schools with face-to-face lectures, seminars and workshops. In this version of distance education, the curriculum is delivered by turning the majority of lectures and tutorials into study guides, and by using assignments as a means of applying and consolidating understanding and giving each student detailed, individual feedback on their assignments. Thus, assignments are not simply ways of checking and grading what students have learned. Rather, they are central to the learning process itself. They are used to offer each student individualised tuition. Each module on the UBMC on-campus degree, which is offered on this programme, is turned into self-study guide, which is studied at home by the individual FrontLiner.

In each six-month block of study, students study four subject modules. Each subject module is presented to students in the form of a study guide, and the four study guides are placed in a ring binder. Thus, students have one ring binder for each study block, which also contains a study planner for that study block. The module study guides are developed in close collaboration with the sponsoring discipline at UBMC. Each study guide:

- Sets out the study aims and learning outcomes for that subject.
- Gives clear guidance on learning activities and tasks.
- Gives self-assessment exercises to encourage students to learn actively and is divided into three units of study, with each unit having a related assignment.
- Gives the assignment task and submission date at the end of each unit.
- Gives a specimen examination paper.
- Gives recommended additional reading.
- Is accompanied by the key textbook.

**Supporting the learners**

A danger with this type of approach – off-campus, distance education – is that students become isolated. Indeed, on this programme, this could be exacerbated as FrontLine students live all over the UK and are home-based for their employment. However, FrontLine students are not isolated. A great deal of thought has gone into providing learning support for the students and attempting to integrate this with the company’s management systems. Thus, the line manager is required to work with the tutor mentor to help FrontLiners maintain an effective balance between work and study commitments, and, as the degree forms part of a FrontLiners’ employment contract, it is a manager’s responsibility to deal with and address poor performance and underperformance. However, the key people supporting and mediating student learning are their tutors and tutor mentors. They provide regular, structured support to FrontLiners. Tutors are appointed to tutor on specific modules and therefore may be involved with FrontLiners for a relatively short period – i.e. the presentation of one module (six months) – although a cadre of skilled and experienced tutors has been built who tutor on a range of modules in their discipline. However, the key role is that of the tutor mentor. Tutor mentors provide the ongoing, integrative educational guidance that is imperative on this type of programme and the individual personal knowledge of students that provides continuity over the four-and-a-half years of work and study.

**The tutor mentor**

The tutor mentor is an educational counsellor. One simple definition of educational counselling is “the advice, help and support given to students to enable them to make satisfactory progress in the system” (Robinson, 1981). The tutor mentor sees the FrontLiners holistically – that is, the tutor mentor understands that a FrontLiner’s learning takes place in the context of their past experiences, their present circumstances in particular work related – and their future hopes and aspirations. Students in distance education need ongoing, personal support. This support will need to take account of a whole range of new and difficult changes that FrontLiners experience – combining the competing demands of work and study, encountering an initially confusing learning system and learning method, and learning to become independent and resourceful learners. Tutor mentors come to know their FrontLiners very well and it is from this base that FrontLiners can study modules with
different tutors who may not know them as individuals.

Specifically, the role of the tutor mentor is:
• To be the one constant academic and educational point of reference and support for each FrontLiner.
• To induct their FrontLiners in the distance education mode of study.
• To facilitate the academic and skills development of their mentees.
• To monitor the progress of each of their FrontLiners, thereby enabling individual students to identify and achieve their learning potential and providing feedback on each student’s progress to the company, NEC and UBMC.
• To provide a link/bridge between the FrontLiners and their tutors, the FrontLiners and UBMC, the NEC and CC&S.
• To be the person in whom the FrontLiner can confide.
• To be an advocate for the FrontLiner.
• To provide educational advice and guidance for each FrontLiner.
• To provide feedback on the programme to the NEC.

The tutor mentor attends all residencials and runs group and individual sessions. The tutor mentor must be available on the phone at agreed, specified times. The tutor mentor should be in regular contact with their mentees and the NEC. They also have to write academic reviews on each of their mentees twice a year.

**Tutor mentor relationships**

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships that the tutor mentor must establish to support each of their students. The relationships are demonstrated in the shape of a pyramid with triangular sides with the student at the heart of the system. The figure aptly portrays the role of the tutor mentor as he/she liaises with the members of the team supporting each student. Showing the tutor mentor at the top of the pyramid, without necessarily any hierarchy intended, it emphasises that this role facilitates the vital overview of each student’s progress, providing the necessary stability throughout the duration of the degree course.

**Students on the programme are able to reach for support on many fronts – their subject tutors, their team manager, their family and the NEC/UBMC. However, this can all be quite daunting for students when they commence their studies. They often require help from their tutor mentor in order to generate an organised system to enable them to satisfactorily reach academic deadlines.**

**Students need to be highly organised in order to manage the communication from many sources at any time. Each student can access each member of the system for support. Also, in considering a wider aspect, peer group support among students is a vital ingredient to success and one which is actively encouraged. Whether it is within the region, work team or just among the members of the mentor group, student-to-student support has invaluable benefits for all concerned.**

**Tutor mentor/tutor/team manager relationship**

The pyramid face (Figure 2) involving the relationships between the tutor mentor, the tutors, the team manager and each student is of primary importance.

Each tutor mentor works with a different group of tutors for each set of modules within every study period. Therefore, the corresponding diagram needs to be dynamic, i.e. depending on the number of subject tutors in each study period, the number of tutors will vary.
Figure 2 The tutor mentor/tutor(s)/team manager relationship

Much of the contact between tutor mentor and the tutors concerns the progress of individual students, transfer of assignment marks and comments on overall student progress and is carried out throughout the study period. Students approach their subject tutors if they experience difficulties with their work and arrangements are made accordingly. Marks from each tutor are collected together by the tutor mentor who oversees the progress of the student and passes the information to the appropriate team manager. The tutor mentor produces regular academic reviews for each student at the end of each study period.

Students need to know when and how to contact their tutor mentor and it is primarily their responsibility to let their tutor mentor know when they are encountering problems. However, it is important to remember that these students are young adults and they may be inexperienced at handling such problems. The tutor mentor tries to keep up-to-date with the students’ progress through their work and can suggest additional study skill techniques if they are having particular difficulties. Using several means available, the tutor mentor looks for a poor assessment grade, signs of illness or other information from a team manager or student. This system depends on regular, honest and good communication between each student and all concerned.

Each student has a team manager and, within each mentee group, there can be several different team managers with whom to liaise on various matters. The team manager is the line-manager for the student in their work environment. Some team managers have studied for a degree and are familiar with the pressures of higher education. However, some managers do not possess degrees themselves and are themselves on a learning curve in their efforts to support the FrontLiners on their team.

Contact with each team manager involves the transfer of marks following assignments and a regular discussion on student progress. If any student is having particular difficulties in submitting assignments on time or appears not to be progressing satisfactorily, then assistance from team managers is readily sought as they have the most day-to-day contact with the students.

Being a tutor mentor requires precise and methodical organisation to ensure that each student is adequately supported, both academically and personally. After each module (approximately every six months), the student changes modules and hence subject tutors and, from time to time, team managers also change. This further highlights the crucial role of the tutor mentor as they provide vital stability for the student throughout their degree programme.

The day-to-day involvement of a tutor mentor

A tutor mentor has responsibility for the educational welfare and guidance of approximately 20 students throughout their degree course. It can be compared to the role of a personal tutor in full-time higher education but involves much more commitment to constant and direct communication with each student as well as liaison with their managers.

The tutor mentor is the key person monitoring an individual FrontLiner's overall performance on the academic programme. With any issues concerning an individual student, subject tutors contact the student's tutor mentor. He/she will then advise on a plan of action and inform NEC and the team manager. Similarly, issues arising from a FrontLiner’s employment performance will be passed from the team manager to the tutor mentor for information and then to subject tutors as appropriate.

Tutor mentors are selected for their wide knowledge of academic life and employment experience. The role is challenging but rewarding. Since 1994, the role has developed and adapted to the new challenges presented
to the company. Particular aspects of the role are discussed below.

**Information handling**
Following each assignment, information on marks and feedback comments are sent to the tutor mentor to assimilate. The quantity of information for each mentee group is vast and requires a conscientious approach from each tutor mentor to manage and coordinate the information successfully. The tutor mentor has to analyse the information to recognise any learning and teaching deficiencies that may be apparent for each individual student. FrontLiners are working under constant pressure, whether from the work or academic side, and it often falls to the tutor mentor to encourage reflection on the feedback comments to learn from, not only the content analysis, but also feedback on the approach to learning and teaching. Liaison with each team manager is also useful following analysis of the assignment information as they like to keep up to date with any issues that their FrontLiners may have.

Using this information, each tutor mentor compiles a report for each student every six months which forms part of their regular appraisal process. This is another indication of the intense pressure that these students are placed under to achieve both in the work and academic environment.

**Liaison with FrontLiners**
Tutor mentors are expected to have regular contact with their students. The pattern for this liaison is often set during the first few months of the programme when students are expected to contact their tutors and tutor mentor regularly in order to receive the full learning and teaching that they are entitled to.

The form that this contact takes is left to each individual tutor mentor. At the commencement of the FrontLine programme in 1994, the contact was predominantly by telephone and letter. Nowadays, e-mail is regarded as the principal form of communication although this is often supplemented by telephone calls to ensure that the most appropriate form of communication is used. However, there are a small number of students who use online technology reluctantly and prefer to use the more traditional means of communication.

Ideally, contacting students should be relatively easy as they have a designated study day each week. At the beginning of the degree programme, this was on the same day each week. Nowadays, it changes from week to week. Therefore, trying to contact a student by telephone is usually possible by using their mobile telephone and by contact at home during the evenings. The transition from letter to e-mail has certainly improved the speed of communication between NEC, tutors, tutor mentors and students.

Telephone contact with a group of 20 students can involve a substantial amount of time on the telephone. The increased use of the technology has become the arena for routine messages and has enabled the telephone contact to be used for more particular areas of discussion.

The priority is that regular communication takes place to ensure that the students can progress with their studies with enhanced learning skills. It is the responsibility of each student to contact their tutor mentor and subject tutors regularly. The role of the tutor mentor is there as a support; not a policing presence who constantly checks on each student. That role is undertaken by the company which regards attendance, contact and punctual submission of work as serious issues within the employment contract.

In practice, the level of student-initiated contact often mirrors the motivation and conscientious attitude of the students. Many of the students who are likely to achieve a high standard of degree contact on a regular basis, whether they have a problem or not. However, a number of those students who are likely to obtain a lower level of honours degree or an ordinary degree often do not maintain regular contact and it is often the responsibility of the tutor mentors to “chase” them in order to maintain contact and a regular dialogue on the progress of work. Despite regular prompts and reminders, this situation does not differ markedly throughout the course.

**Residential schools**
At the residential schools, each tutor mentor runs workshops on aspects of study skills that currently are of interest to their group, i.e. writing essays, assessing statistical information, bibliographies, examination technique, working in groups, studying alone. In addition to this, students have short individual meetings with their tutor mentor to discuss their progress and any particular study
problems that they may have. In practice, students prefer to have a short, discussion-style group session to deal with business matters and more time to be seen individually.

In supporting distance learning students, it is important to realize that the tutors and tutor mentors work alone as well. To assist with this, regular communication is encouraged between tutors and tutor mentors. Residential schools provide an important opportunity for subject tutors and tutor mentors to meet face to face to discuss particular issues regarding students and the modules. In particular, discussion between tutor mentors at residential schools is particular enlightening in considering various styles of solving study problems concerning students.

Setting boundaries

Although the tutor mentor role concentrates on the academic aspect of the FrontLine role, other aspects of the day-to-day lives of these students inevitably enter into the discussions from time to time. Tutor mentors develop a far more knowledgeable relationship about their mentees than can be the case in a similar full-time course. Although they may meet them less face to face over the length of the course, they have far more intense contact with them through e-mail, telephone and letter than is often the case in a full-time environment. It is important, therefore, that the tutor mentor establishes clear boundaries themselves over where their role finishes and points the student to advice from other sources.

From the student point of view

Any examination of the role of the tutor mentor would be incomplete without also considering the students’ views. Data were collected from the Level 2 students of FrontLine ’96 on their perceptions of the level of support provided by tutors, tutor mentors, parents and partners. The data were subdivided into three groups:

(1) Level 2 average results <50, i.e. those students in the third degree class category.

(2) Level 2 average results above 50 and less than 60, i.e. those students in the 2:2 degree category.

(3) Year 2 average results above 60, i.e. those students in the 2:1/1st degree class category.

In the first category, i.e. those students expected to obtain a third-class degree, Table I provides an overview of the results.

In the third category, i.e. those students who are expected to obtain a 2:1 or 1st class degree, the results had a different focus as shown in Table II.

By comparing Tables I and II, it is interesting to note that the more successful students perceived that their tutor mentor provides the most support in their studies, whereas the weaker students perceived this to be more moderate. Also, the weaker students perceived that parents and partners, i.e. girlfriend or boyfriend, provide the most support, whereas the more successful students rate this at a much lower level. This could be due to a more career-focused approach towards their work and studies.

Conclusion

FrontLine students have to deal with considerable pressures placed on them from work and academic study, as well as perform as normal young adults in a fast-changing commercial world. The students who undertake this challenging and demanding programme need to possess academic and personal skills to help them be ultimately successful.

Since the conception of the programme in 1994, the role of the tutor mentor has been one of constant change, moving boundaries and new challenges. Eble (1988) highlights that “Learning and teaching are constantly interchanging activities. One learns by teaching; one cannot teach except by constantly learning”. Tutor mentors have to be learners themselves and demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to adapt throughout.

The tutor mentor provides the “stability factor” within this particular degree programme. Indeed, it has been shown that those students who are performing well on this study programme overwhelmingly value the support provided to them by their tutor mentor. This is the key pivotal role to enable these future managers to fully embrace this unique academic and employment career opportunity.
Table I Students’ perceptions from the perspective of third degree class students

| Third class students | Tutors | Tutor mentor | Manager | Parents | Partner
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Notes: *Figures in percentages; *missing data; 1 = most important; 6 = least important

Table II Student perceptions from the perspective of 1st/2:1 degree class students

| 1st/2:1 students | Tutors | Tutor mentor | Manager | Parents | Partner
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Notes: *Figures in percentages; 1 = most important; 6 = least important

References


