

TLRP Meeting of Minds Fellowship. Mentoring partnership between Allen Thurston (University of Stirling) & Prof Christine Howe (University of Cambridge)

The Fellowship started in September 2007. I have had the opportunity to work with a number of talented and experienced researchers as a co-applicant on three ESRC funded bids over the past four to five years. However, up until this point in my career I had been unsuccessful in my attempts to secure funding from one of the research councils as a principal investigator. Whilst I had support from within my institution (at that point University of Dundee) then I felt that the Meeting of Minds Fellowship would give me the opportunity to have a more experienced external mentor cast an eye over my research application. At this point I approached Christine Howe to see if she would be prepared to mentor me. I had worked with Christine on the SCOTSPRING project. This was a TLRP/ESRC funded project on primary school science. She had an expertise in peer learning and cognitive psychology (the foci of the bid). In addition Christine was very experienced and successful at obtaining money from ESRC. Perhaps most importantly, I knew that Christine always was willing to give straight opinions, was someone who one could trust to give honest opinions and was someone whose opinion I would be able to value and have confidence in.

The outcomes from my Fellowship would be:

- Two meetings will take place between myself and my selected mentor (Christine Howe) during which I would receive feedback on a research bid
- A funding bid would be developed and submitted ESRC

The meetings with Christine proved very informative and fruitful. She was able to give me critical insights into how a reviewer might respond to specific sections of the bid. She helped me fine-tune the research questions and adapt the balance of the information contained within the bid, tightening up the methodology sections and ensuring that the originality of the proposed research was highlighted where appropriate. She was able to provide me with just the sort of critical review that I was unable to obtain within my own institution. This was of course, the great draw of applying for a Fellowship in the first place. To have the opportunity to work with Christine and draw on her experience was fantastic. I am obviously exceptionally grateful to her for agreeing to give up her time to support me in this manner.

My bid was developed between September and March. I took my time developing it and attempted to address the challenges and issues that Christine had raised during our meetings. It was submitted to ESRC in June 2009 and I recently heard that the bid has received funding. The project will start in May 2009 and will focus on peer tutor status and outcomes in primary mathematics. However, achieving the aims of the Fellowship was not the only outcome from our meetings. During our discussions I had the opportunity to discuss with Christine my career plans and aspirations. My time at University of Dundee had been fruitful for me, but Christine's ability to enhance my work had given me an

appetite for receiving critical feedback on my work. Opportunities for this would be limited in Dundee and I was able to discuss with Christine the potential benefits of thinking about changing my employer to one that had a more research-orientated outlook. To my delight a post came up in such a University and in September this year I moved to The Stirling Institute of Education, University of Stirling. I was grateful for the development opportunities that were provided as a result of the Fellowship. On the one hand it provided me with a world-class colleague who would be willing to give critical analysis on my work and help me improve it. On the other hand, it gave me occasion to reflect on my career and make some critical decisions about what sort of location may best be able to challenge me to improve my research standards whilst also being able to meet my aspirations in terms of providing an infrastructure that could support my development.

In conclusion I would say that the Meeting of Minds Fellowship had positive outcomes on a number of levels. Not only did it enhance my current abilities to articulate my ideas as a researcher, but it also has led directly to a career development opportunity that otherwise I may not have considered. I am very grateful to the TLRP scheme for funding the mentoring scheme provide and I would recommend it to other academics wishing to enhance the quality of their research work.