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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the importance of teachers mentoring one another, exploring what mentorship means and reviewing literature that examines its different stages, benefits, and pitfalls. After presenting two teachers' stories of being mentored, the paper describes mentoring relationships, then highlights the stages of mentoring: invitation stage, when beginning teachers are introduced to veteran teachers; sparkle stage, when mentors and proteges try to please each other; knowing stage, when mentors and proteges begin to learn about one another; action stage, when work gets done; emancipation stage, which is the beginning of letting go; and transformation stage, when mentors and proteges redefine their relationship. The paper examines benefits of mentoring, which include feelings of rejuvenation for mentors and exposure to experts' thoughts and ideas for proteges. Pitfalls of mentoring include mutual dependence that can be hard to break and an expectation by mentors that their proteges become virtual reproductions of them. Twelve qualities of good mentors include: having sincere interest in their proteges as human beings; being other-centered; believing in inclusivity; and being dynamic. Ten qualities of good proteges include: considering hope and optimism; being open to continuous learning; being able to let go; and valuing humor. (SM)

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# Teachers As Mentors

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## What is a Mentor?

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Homer's epic *The Odyssey* gives us the first written account of a mentor. When Odysseus left to fight the Trojan War, he gave the responsibility of nurturing his son, Telemachus, to his loyal friend, Mentor. Athena, in the guise of Mentor, became the guardian and teacher for Telemachus and for ten years guided him physically, intellectually, socially, and, spiritually.

Like Telemachus, most of us have at some point been mentored. For some of us, it was a teacher. For others, it was an employer or a friend. But, the bottom line was always the same. Someone considered us worthy of attention, even admiration. The fact is, if we did not have people to look up to we would have to invent them. We need mentors and mentors need us. The journey of personal and professional growth is an endless seeking, and the quest is inevitably difficult and lonely unless it involves others we esteem. We need to learn from their experience, because they have something we have not. No wonder authors have written epics on quality mentorship, and no wonder mentorship is a recurring buzz word in education.

The purpose of this article is simple. We hope to encourage teachers to mentor one another. To do so, we will explore what mentorship means, and review some of the literature and research that examines its different stages, benefits and pitfalls, and revisit, maybe at times redefine, what it takes to be a good mentor. Our purpose in supporting mentorship is not simply to encourage learning. Teaching, as you know, can be a lonely job. A mentor is nothing if he or she is not a friend.

**Jim's Mentoring Story:** My first year of teaching was difficult. I had never done teacher education, and my first time in a class was really my first time in any class. In addition to this lack of experience, I was teaching in an inner-city school in a southern state in the United States during a time of racial tension, bussing, and strife. The school and the

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students were tough, and I was over my head. It was, quite simply, a difficult and completely unrewarding year. One light kept me focused through the storm. Her name – her real name – was Teal Bagby. She was a teacher. Almost every day, she would come by my classroom door after school and say this simple sentence. “Jim, one day you are going to be a great teacher.”

Until this moment, I have never thought this; but, thirty some years later I hope I have made her proud. I think I am a good teacher; and I have dedicated myself to the wonderful and necessary vocation of teaching. Her words, so simple and elegant, made me return for a second “I’m-smarter-now, and have learned from my mistakes” year. I stayed because I responded to her caring. Simple words really, but it was just what I needed. She obviously knew I needed her, because (at least in my memory) she never missed a day. Wherever she is, I love her for her caring. She was one of my mentors.

**Dawn’s Mentoring Story:** Nothing could have prepared me for my final term of student teaching at a large high school. I knew it would not be easy being a language arts teacher; at least I had heard this. But I really had no idea. The late nights of research and lesson preparations and the weekends of marathon essay marking were almost more than I could handle. Sometimes I wanted to cry, because I did not think I would be able to get through the amount of evening work and still be fresh to teach in the morning. And I was afraid that my own family would suffer.

But one person – my cooperating teacher – guided me through this. Brad Smilanich is the funniest and most caring teacher I know. During my time as his student teacher, he made me laugh hard every day, the kind of deep belly laughter that makes you feel fresh and alive. He taught me how to energize my lessons with this humor. Brad also showed me that you can never care too much. His students felt this care when they walked into our room. It was a safe and warm place to be. Everybody was learning, and everybody was having fun, me included. Looking back now, I know that the humor and warmth Brad esteemed me during my student teaching was real magic, the kind I hope I will pass on to others. I thank him for this. He is one of my mentors.

### **Mentoring relationships**

Plato tells a famous story about Socrates leading an untutored slave to discover his own knowledge on the construction of a square. Socrates questions the slave at each step until the slave solves the puzzle. Socrates turns to Meno, “note that I am teaching him nothing, only asking.” The Chinese tell the same story with fish – give a person a fish and he will eat; teach him to fish and he will never be hungry. (Of course, this story was told before pollution and the over-fishing of the Grand Banks.)

Had Socrates simply given the slave the answer to the square, both would have remained static, one a passive teacher and the other a passive learner. Instead, the relationship between the two is dynamic, where one is first guided towards discovering personal wisdom and second encouraged to believe that he has the power to discover. The Socrates story is an old one, echoed throughout teaching classrooms as a model for discovery learning. But it clearly illustrates the basic tenet behind mentorship. A wiser and more experienced person guides a less knowledgeable one and, in the process, both change and grow as a result of having known one another, however briefly.

More recently, researchers have likened the mentoring relationship to a journey, where the mentor helps the protégé become a competent traveler. The mentor journeys with the protégé and acts as a guide, challenging the protégé to solve the troubles of the travel and offering support when the person stumbles. Although perhaps a bit trite, the popularity of the story titled “Footsteps” has inspired both religious and non-religious people. In this anonymous story, a person dreams of walking on the beach beside God, and in each dream he sees two sets of footprints. However, when the person is at his lowest, he sees only one. He asks why God deserts him just when he needs him most. God replies, “during your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”

Many find this story overly sentimental and even downright sappy. However, the fact that it hangs on millions of walls throughout the world says at least two things. First, lots of people feel low. Second, many people are inspired by the simple idea that there is another – somewhere – who, when they need it most, will carry them. Sappy or not, the story inspires. And, perhaps a single important aspect of such inspiration is that the

person being carried learns two things – someone cared for me and someday I might be in a position to care for others. This second point is the true wisdom that philosophers, educators, storytellers, poets, and theologians advocate. In any good mentoring relationship, two things happen as those being mentored search for and find their own wisdom. On such journeys, mentors act as guides, counselors, coaches, teachers, advisors, and friends. They foster the search for inner wisdom, always prepared to support, even carry, those they mentor through shaky times. The vision is always thus – one day the mentor passes on and a new mentor emerges, one who has learned and benefited from lessons taught well. The circle is complete.

### **Stages of mentoring**

Mentoring relationships do not happen overnight. Two initial things happen. First, mentors and protégés must somehow find one another. Second, at some point they must agree to enter into a mentoring relationship. This relationship may be agreed upon formally or informally. The best and most long-lasting often just happen. Some may be a formal part of a corporate or school support plan; some may be a simple, unspoken agreement between two people. Regardless, most mentoring relationships inevitably happen in stages. Phillips' (1977) study of mentoring in the business world identifies six stages in a mentoring relationship. We have adapted these stages for education. Although we find his titles for the stages a bit “goofy,” they do suggest that mentoring relationships are not always easy transitions; and, the reasons Phillips gives make sense to us.

#### **1. *Invitation Stage***

In the invitation stage, aspiring or new teachers are introduced to veteran teachers. Sometimes this initial match is short-term simply because the two have been connected by outside parties. Ideally, however, this leads to a mentoring relationship. The mentor typically, but not always, invites the protégé to participate in a mentoring relationship. For both mentor and protégé, an invitation can be exciting. There is, for both people, great anticipation – sometimes even apprehension. Forming new relationships can be heart-pounding.

## **2. Sparkle Stage**

The “sparkle stage<sup>1</sup>” can be a time of side-stepping, where both mentor and protégé try hard to please one another. Both may be so anxious for things to work that encounters are filled with a heightened sense of cordiality and congeniality – too politically correct to get much work done. Mentoring teachers want to show their best, most professional and even ingenious sides, and protégés are overwhelmed and in awe of their mentors – especially if the relationship is between teacher and student teacher. They fear they cannot live up to the high standards – and, it’s true. Little in teaching can replace experience. This stage may be best described as exhilaration caressed by occasional trepidation.

## **3. Knowing stage (Phillips calls this the “development” stage)**

During the “knowing” stage, the mentor and protégé begin to learn about one another – to really know one another. They share life stories, strengths and weaknesses, philosophies, and ideologies. Each begins to see the other’s human side. Both mentor and protégé teachers begin to relax, because they see that the other is not perfect. They may sigh with relief because of this newfound knowledge. They are becoming friends, and their communication becomes more relaxed.

## **4. Action stage**

The action stage is one of intense activity. Work gets done. Protégés go about their days facing the new challenges of teaching and constantly communicating with their mentors. Mentors give “homework” assignments. They watch their protégés teach and interact with students. All the while, they encourage, guide, and sometimes correct as their protégés journey towards their goal.

## **5. Emancipation stage**

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<sup>1</sup> This reminds us of the movie *Office Space*, where a server in a fast-food restaurant is hassled by her geeky boss for not wearing enough “sparkle” – the presupposition being that the greater the sparkle the more the fun.

The emancipation stage is the beginning of letting go. Phillips calls this natural stage the “disillusionment” stage, because he suggests that the protégé begins to see mentoring as unnecessary. We see this stage more positively than Phillips because, unlike Phillips, we believe that the protégé is growing and accepting – not rejecting. Eventually, part of the growth includes, first, freedom for both mentor and protégé and, second, the protégé’s growing desire to become a mentor for another person. At any rate, the emancipation stage suggests an end to a mentor-protégé relationship. Sometimes, each person has learned what is needed from the other. Sometimes, like any growth process, protégés feel summoned to “test their own wings.” While mentor and protégé often remain lifelong friends, both understand that ties need to be looser.

## **6. Transformation stage**

During the transforming stage, the mentor and protégé redefine their relationship. The protégé begins to accept and embrace the newfound equality of the relationship. With feelings of dependence relinquished, protégés grow more confident and independent, assured of their own self worth. Mentors often respond in two ways – with sighs of relief or sorrow, sometimes both at once. Each person emerges from the relationship having, in some way, grown more human. And each is a better teacher for it.

## **Benefits of mentoring**

It is important to extend Phillips' stages by discussing the benefits or pitfalls of mentoring. Mentoring is like any other human relationship. When things work well – when relationships are good – everyone benefits and grows. Mentors typically experience aroused enthusiasm for their profession. If they are new to mentoring, they may suddenly feel that someone is looking at – is watching – them. As a result, they sense the need to renew themselves. These feelings can rejuvenate a career, especially if teachers are older and have been feeling that the “world” has passed them by. The result of mentoring is a lifeline from potential feelings of isolation and age.

For teachers, being a model means that they are being looked up to them, and they may see themselves with new eyes – the eyes of their protégés. They may regain insights into their own strengths and weaknesses. As a result, they begin to build upon these. A renewed sense of self emerges because the path they have chosen, however much they may struggle with it, is once again validated. It is like remembering the first love that led them to choose teaching as a vocation. Somebody likes and even wants something they have – wisdom. The feeling is refreshing and invigorating. Mentors may feel reenergized and more ready to continue the path they have chosen; or, they may feel encouraged and ready to pursue a new, more challenging path.

Protégés grow as they are exposed to the thoughts and ideas of their mentors. They begin to see things in new ways. Their creativity awakens. Sometimes the slightest nudge from mentors can send protégés on exciting new quests. These quests are safe because, if the relationship is supporting, protégés are more comfortable if they know where they are going and if they know someone is watching, ready to shield them if risks become threatening. Like their mentors, protégés' feelings of isolation are combated by feelings of companionship. Because someone believes in them, they begin to believe in themselves.

### **Pitfalls of Mentoring**

Although the benefits of mentoring can be great, a few pitfalls are worth noting. Clearly, close relationships can foster a mutual dependence that is hard to break. Protégés, instead of becoming more independent, may come to rely on their mentors so much that their decision-making skills weaken. Likewise, the mentoring relationship is often intense, and inexperienced mentors may seek disciples rather than protégés. If mentors tend to be egocentric, they may “get off on” their protégés’ praise. They may come to expect their protégés to hang around them constantly, “wowing” the things they do, however insignificant. When this happens, and it sometimes does, mentors' egos become inflated to the point of boorishness.

Mentoring relationships should not be like cloning. The job of the mentor is to see, respect, and encourage individuality and creativity. When the relationship fails, often

this failure is the result of mentors who, rather than encouraging protégés to evolve into unique individuals, expect their protégés to become virtual reproductions. Instead of growing towards independence, protégés may regress into childlike incapability where they can no longer take a step without their mentors. A poisonous cycle begins, and mentors may become overpowering and controlling. Finally, each may become possessive and begin to feel an ownership of time and expectations. In mentoring, when things go wrong, they really can go very wrong.

### Qualities worth seeking

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Often these pitfalls can be avoided simply by being aware of what it takes to have a healthy and gratifying mentoring relationship. Being an exemplary mentor or a model protégé demands certain characteristics. The list below highlights qualities we believe are *ideal*. Although few of us will ever truly actualize all these ideals, they are, we think, worth reaching for.

### Quality mentors

1. ***have a sincere interest in protégés as human beings.*** Good mentors are interested in others as humans. They see the mentoring relationship not as a way to control another person, but as an opportunity to journey with and explore another's individual humanness.
2. ***are other-centered.*** Good mentors are able to put aside their own needs and focus on the needs of others. They seek to abandon egocentricity and strive for selflessness.
3. ***believe that living should center on openness, growth, and development.*** The key word here is "openness." Rather than fixed in one mindset, good mentors are open to the possibilities around them and encourage this openness in their protégés.

4. ***believe in inclusivity.*** Good mentors constantly challenge their own biases and strive for acceptance of all people. They are warm and inviting; they include rather than exclude.
5. ***are people of character.*** Good mentors exhibit integrity, uprightness, equity, virtue, and goodness. Simply put, they are regular people trying to do and be good.
6. ***are dynamic.*** Good mentors are active and dynamic, visionary, knowledgeable, and skilled leaders who guide others toward fullness of life and vision.
7. ***see something in others they cannot always see themselves.*** Good mentors look at their protégés and envision them, beyond the moment, doing things and doing them well.
8. ***communicate hope and optimism.*** Simply put, good mentors help their protégés see how things *can* be done rather than why they cannot be done.
9. ***are skilled at communicating continuous learning.*** Good mentors never claim to have all the answers. However, they do model the belief that life is best lived as a place of unending learning, without boundaries.
10. ***believe in and value humor.*** Humor is at the heart of any healthy, enriching relationship. Good mentors show protégés how to laugh at themselves and the situations they get “stuck” in.
11. ***believe that a mentor should grow smaller as a protégé grows larger.*** Good mentors gradually and gently watch their protégés grow larger while they choose a diminishing role in their protégé's life.
12. ***celebrate their protégés' success.*** Good mentors embrace and delight in watching their protégés succeed. They realize their contribution to the growth of their protégés; however, they do not demand retribution. Their joy comes from the success of those they mentor; and they are fulfilled simply because they have been part of the journey. When the time comes – when their role is complete – they are able to graciously step aside.

## Quality protégés

1. ***have a sincere interest in mentors as human beings.*** Protégés are interested in their mentors as humans rather than as a rung on their career ladder. They want to learn from mentors, because they see human qualities they believe to be valuable.
2. ***believe that living should center on openness, growth, and development.*** Again, the key word here is “openness.” Protégés need to be open to new insights and ideas if they are to grow. They need to overcome narrow thinking and embrace possibilities.
3. ***believe in inclusivity.*** Good protégés are open to and consider their own biases. They welcome constructive criticism and correction from mentors who can see these biases.
4. ***are people of character.*** Like their mentors, good protégés strive for integrity, uprightness, equity, virtue, and goodness. They strive to be good people.
5. ***consider hope and optimism.*** Protégés avoid the cynical, pessimistic thinking that threatens to retard their growth. They choose to get things done rather than finding ways to explain how things cannot be done.
6. ***are open to continuous learning.*** Good protégés are open to the infinite possibility of learning. They believe they will never stop learning.
7. ***believe in and value humour.*** Good protégés laugh at themselves when they are most tempted to cry. They embrace the “gift” of laughter as a means to a healthy relationship with their mentors.
8. ***accept that their mentors are human.*** Protégés accept their mentors unconditionally, respecting that these humans have human faults that can and should be forgiven.
9. ***are able to let go.*** Good protégés do not cling too tightly to their mentors. When the time is right, they are able to let go of their mentors. They welcome independence.

10. ***expect someday to become a mentor themselves.*** Good protégés see the value of mentoring, and eventually learn that there is a cycle. They are willing, when the time comes, to accept the role of mentoring another. Thus, the first mentor produces more mentors – each one accepting the role as the time comes.

Inevitably, we all need help. We all need to be mentored. For Plato, it was Socrates. For Aristotle, Plato. Telemachus had Mentor. And most of us have, at some point, had someone guide and even carry us through the challenging and turbulent times in our life.

Our response? If we are teachers, our role is clear. We all have special relationships with students – although some are easier and richer than others. Many of us will be fortunate enough to help another teacher along the way. Clearly, no education is complete without a mentor, and clearly the relationship between mentor and protégé needs to be faithfully revisited. The stages of mentorship, the benefits and pitfalls of mentoring, and the quality characteristics of both mentor and protégé need to be examined and redefined so we can continue to grow personally and professionally. An old saw suggests that each of us is a composite of all those we have met. This is good if those we meet along the way can somehow teach us to be more human. Pray we meet the right people.

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