

Commentary on Mentoring:  
The Advantages and Disadvantages for  
the Mentor and the Mentee in a  
University Setting

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## Abstract

It is important that professionals, especially at the university level, use their expertise and experience to become mentors to their colleagues and students. The literature on mentors focuses mainly on professional mentor-mentee relationships but there is much to be gained from fostering more informal mentoring relationships especially at the university level. These informal mentoring situations arise when colleagues are willing to discuss their own experiences, in the classroom, to help others navigate their own practices. Similarly, professors can informally assist their students to develop both professionally and personally by offering guidance where required. Eby et al. (2010) discussed the different stages of mentoring that most people go through in their lives and how the type of mentor that a mentee requires changes over time depending on the circumstances. There are, of course, both good and bad mentoring situations that arise in everyone's lives and it is important to realize that not every situation is going to be a positive one. In order for a mentor-mentee relationship to work there needs to be mutual respect on both sides.

When I first began teaching at the university, I was very lucky to have a mentor who not only advised me on what to teach in the course I was hired for but who also gave me pointers on how to teach. He was my boss, but he was so much more. From him, I learned how to engage the students in the material, how to grade papers, and how to speak to the students and teaching assistants. Without his guidance, I would not have had as much confidence to tackle whatever came my way as I did before I listened, observed, and learned. However, a good mentor does not just tell you what to do, but he or she listens to your issues, without criticism, and just quietly asks the right questions to get you to think for yourself. Of course, mentors can also be mentored, and I like to think that I made him question some of his own teaching decisions, as well. That's what mentoring is all about. We are being mentored at the same time as we are mentoring.

Having a sounding board is one of the best ways to question what you are doing, in a safe environment, and to come to some conclusions about how you can change or adapt your approach to just about everything you do in life. Just knowing that you have someone to confide in and discuss your worries and challenges is worth the time it takes to find a good mentor. When looking for a mentor, you want to choose someone who is non-judgemental, who does not make you think that something is wrong with you if you are having problems with a student or with a colleague, who knows just what to say to make you feel better about yourself, and who allows you to make mistakes and learn from him or her. It is not a stretch to say that we all need mentors and that we all must do our part to be mentors, as well.

The topic of mentors and both what having a mentor and being a mentor means has been at the forefront of my thinking for the past several months. It all began when two of my first-year students sent me emails, after the term ended, telling me how much they had come to rely

on my guidance, and they thanked me for being their mentor. To be honest, I had never thought of myself as a mentor until that time. Then last week, a colleague phoned me, very distressed, and asked me for my thoughts on something that had happened in her classroom with a student. I listened to her and gave some suggestions regarding how she could rectify the situation. She thanked me and said I had given her many good ideas about how she could go back to the classroom and handle the situation. She said that she also knew how she would handle a similar situation if it came up again after our conversation. I told her I was happy to listen to her anytime. Then she sent me a text message telling me how lucky she was to have a mentor like me. That got me thinking. I did not see myself as a mentor. I was simply someone who was willing to listen and discuss my own experiences over the years. I guess that is what being a mentor means.

It also made me think of all the mentors I have had over the years. My initial mentors would have been my parents. I went to them for advice about life, and they listened. They didn't tell me what to do, but they always supported me in my decisions even if they might have made different decisions. Then, when I started school, I had some good teachers who mentored me along the way. Now that I have had time to think, I realize that one teacher, in particular, who taught me in grades four, five, and six was perhaps my most influential mentor. He made me believe in myself and my abilities. He, like my parents, always told me that I could do and be whatever I wanted to be, that there were no limits. When I got my PhD, he was the first person, besides my mom, that I wanted to tell. Unfortunately, I had lost track of him and could not find him despite all of the technology available today. It made me sad that I had never gotten the chance to tell him what a difference he had made in my life.

Byrne and Keefe (2002) defined mentoring as “voluntary alliance between an experienced senior professional and a less experienced one, for the dual purposes of career development and enhancement of the profession” (p. 391). This definition is one that I purposefully chose because it reinforces my own experiences that mentoring is a voluntary alliance meaning the mentor and the mentee chose each other based on need at that particular time. Also, it stresses the importance of making the relationship one that enhances a profession. I like to think that my mentoring has been born of a mutual need and was not only voluntary, but also allowed each of us to develop professionally. Mentoring is considered an important attribute of learning and development especially for people who are just entering a new profession, but this does not mean that more seasoned professionals would also not be able to benefit from forming a mentorship. It is a learning experience when one can discuss topics related to what one is doing regardless of the profession, but I have found this is especially important at a university level. Mentors are good sounding boards for ideas and for discussing similar experiences.

I have found that speaking to colleagues about some of the issues I encountered in my own classroom helped me realize that we all had the same concerns; this helped me solidify my own thinking and led me to realize that I was not the only one having issues with my students. Nothing can quite compare to being able to articulate and discuss one’s frustrations regarding students with someone else who has experienced similar frustrations when dealing with his or her students or other colleagues. It is this ability to have back-and-forth discussions that characterizes an effective mentor relationship. Eby et al. (2007) posited that “across areas of research, scholars agree that mentoring can be associated with a wide range of positive outcomes for protégés (p. 254). In my own case, I have found that my protégés, who were once my

students, have continued to keep in touch and that the relationship is rewarding for them, as well as for myself. I always enjoy reading their updates about their studies and lives, and they continue to ask me for my thoughts on what they are going through. This is part of being a mentor at a university level to students who need that sounding board, as discussed, regarding what they are going through and how they can navigate the institution. The same can be said for finding colleagues who are willing to share their experiences and who are willing to help their less-experienced colleagues by explaining that everyone has similar concerns. Sometimes that is all people need—to realize that they are not the only ones and that everyone has the same anxieties regarding students. It can be very freeing, and I have often felt, after one of these sharing conversations, that it energizes me to continue doing what I am doing. We can all benefit from these mentoring experiences to help us validate our own teaching practices.

It is important to keep in mind that mentoring can be both formal partnerships and more informal associations such as the ones between me, my students, and my colleague. Eby et al. (2007) hypothesized that there are three distinct life stages where people enter mentoring situations. The stages are (1) youth mentoring where a trusted adult serves to help children and adolescents mature personally, emotionally, and physically; (2) academic mentoring where a faculty member not only provides academic knowledge, but also provides guidance for non-academic growth; and (3) workplace mentoring, which occurs in a professional setting as a way to help new employees learn about the workplace, so they are able to grow professionally and personally.

I had never given much thought to how the mentors we come across change during one's lifetime. It makes sense, as Eby et al. (2007) outlined, because each time we encounter mentors, we have different needs, and the person who mentors us provides what we need at that time.

This is why we often outgrow our mentors as we become more proficient in our own abilities and learn to trust our own decisions without the need to have someone validate our choices all the time. When I looked back at my own life journey, I realized that my grade four to six teacher was my youth mentor. I do not recall having an academic mentor until I reached the graduate level of my studies and my advisor became my mentor, and my university workplace mentor was my first boss. This progression of mentors brought me to where I am today. I am now confident enough to act as a mentor to others.

The literature on mentors and the definitions of mentors is diverse, but most of it is focused on workplace environments where the mentor acts in a more formal capacity. I refer to Kram (1983) who came up with a definition that is perhaps the one that best encapsulates what a workplace mentor is when he said, “mentors are more senior individuals who provide various kinds of personal and career assistance . . . psychosocial and career support to a less senior or experienced person in the role of a protégé or a mentee” (as cited in Ghosh & Reio, 2013). This support has been characterized by Kram as a willingness, on the part of the mentor, to provide a scaffold in terms of advancing an individual’s competence and effectiveness in his or her position. Keep in mind that mentors should not just give orders to their mentees; instead, they should provide an atmosphere where the mentee can become more independent. It is important that mentors accept that their mentees should be treated as competent professionals even if they have set-backs in their professional careers. Some mentors even become friends with their mentees, especially if they are on the same level, but it is important that the mentors continue to be professional in their dealings so the mentees feel comfortable discussing any issues they might be having with others in the organization. The mentors that are the most successful are those who maintain ethical integrity in their dealings, especially when they are in a position of

authority (Kram, 1983 as cited in Ghosh & Reio, 2013). This can be an issue in a university setting where the professors are in a position of authority over their students and they must, therefore, continue to be professional even once the students leave their classrooms. It makes no difference that it is no longer the teacher-student dynamic, because the relationship was first formed in that setting and, therefore, must continue to follow the rules of engagement where one person was in a position of authority at one point. The professors can continue to be mentors, but within the parameters of that initial position.

This balancing act of providing assistance and yet recognizing the mentee as a professional in his or her own right is often hard for some professional mentors who want their mentees to listen to them unconditionally without having their own opinions. In such a situation the mentor-mentee relationship can become an unhealthy one where the mentee just becomes a pawn for the mentor and is not allowed to develop professionally. This sometimes happens when the mentor feels threatened by the mentee and, instead of trying to assist the mentee to take on tasks that will allow him or her to grow professionally, the mentor tries to keep the mentee subservient. As Eby et al. (2010) found in their research of mentoring and mentee relationships, one of the issues that protégés reported regarding their mentor was that “my mentor takes credit for my hard work” (p. 84). It is unfortunate that among the mentors will also be people who take on mentees not to provide guidance but to see how they can be used for the mentor’s purposes.

I can appreciate the finding by Eby et al. (2010), as it was very common in my own professional mentor-mentee relationship. In my situation, with my work-place mentor, the relationship turned toxic when my mentor took advantage of my work-ethic and increasingly had me do his work for him. This led to an imbalance in power when his personal projects were increasingly turned over to me and when he would take credit for work that he did not do; it was



further exacerbated by his refusal to acknowledge publically my contributions. His level of professionalism also deteriorated when he no longer had any more use for me as I had already finished the projects that got him his promotion. Then, he froze me out of jobs that would have showcased my talents and, instead, sided with our respective boss to have me ousted from the department by saying I did not follow directions despite my following his orders. He would refuse to admit that he told me to do things that ran counter to what the boss wanted; instead, he threw me under the bus to save his own reputation. These were not just my observations, as other people in the organization would say to me, “I thought you two were friends”, and I would say, “We are”, and they would say, “He has a funny way of showing that”.

The psychological abuse that I endured also escalated when he would no longer speak to me except when I asked him specific questions and he would not address me by my name. Taking away someone’s name is tantamount to erasing that person, and that is what I felt like—erased as though I never existed. The problem for me, as I saw it, was that I was very good at my job, but he didn’t care that I was one of the best employees in the department, as evidenced by my student evaluations. As a matter of fact, I think that worked to my detriment, as he seemed to be jealous of the respect I had earned from my students and the teaching assistants that worked with me. He took exception to my growth away from his control when I was no longer as compliant as I had been at the beginning, and he appeared annoyed when I expected that he would support me, since I thought we were friends. At the same time, he also sided with someone who plagiarized one of my articles because she had become indispensable to him in being able to continue to work in his position. It became apparent to me that he had found a new protégé to do his work for him. It got so bad that he would rather have had someone work in the

department that was not as accomplished as I was just to get rid of me. He needed me gone, and I was gone.

Eby et al. (2010) discussed some of the same issues I had with my mentor and boss in their study when they found that mentors who became disgruntled with their protégés worked to sabotage their careers by speaking negatively about them to their superiors, by misusing their power and authority over their mentees by berating them to others in the organization, and by taking credit for their hard work. Because the mentor controls work assignments, pay, and promotions, the mentor is not affected like the protégé is and does not suffer any consequences. Thus it is the mentee that experiences more damaging effects as a result of bad mentoring experiences. This shows the relative vulnerability of protégés in a mentor- protégé relationship as the mentors have all the power and can easily distance themselves from the relationship. However, since two people make up the relationship, the mentors also reported issues with their mentees and, as reported in Eby et al. (2010), the mentors explained that their mentees at times exploited the relationship, and they sometimes sabotaged their mentors' projects due to jealousy and competitiveness. The authors suggested that this scenario where the mentee tried to cause problems for the mentor were few and far between, while the opposite where the mentors actively worked to discredit their mentees were more common in the workplace.

As Ghosh and Reio (2013) caution, the mentoring relationship will be positive only if mentors also strive to develop professionally and endeavour constantly to update their own knowledge and skills about their subject so they can continue to mentor their mentees; without this desire to develop, they will no longer be good candidates to be mentors. It is also important that mentors model appropriate behaviours related to their attitudes to their mentees and others in the organization, their own professional skills, and personal values to their protégés without

overstepping the bonds of professionalism. If these are not met, then the mentoring will not be positively accepted by the mentee and this could lead to the mentee leaving the organization.

In the seminal study by Kram (1985) on mentors, he argued that mentors can feel a deep sense of satisfaction from being a mentor. He found that mentors reported deep personal satisfaction from being able to assist others and that they felt a deeper sense of purpose for their profession. This emotional bond develops through mutual respect between the mentor and the mentee so that they are learning from each other through discussion and role modelling on the part of the mentor. In my own experience of being both a mentor and a mentee, I would say that the emotional bond does develop over time. This bond is one that carries over for years after the initial encounter. I still find myself thinking about my first mentor and wishing I could share my successes with him as I know he would be very proud of me and would celebrate who I have become. This bond is still strong, considering I was a child of nine to eleven years of age when I first encountered him.

This talk and reminisces of the mentors I have had in my lifetime, both good and bad, made me think about what makes a good mentor. These are the qualities that I think make a good mentor and that I try to uphold in my own dealings with others.

1. Knowledge: In order for mentors to be effective, they have to have a great deal of knowledge about their field of expertise and a willingness to share that knowledge. Eby et al. (2010) discuss the importance of mentors' enthusiasm to continue to grow professionally. Ineffective mentors are those who are not willing to help others. These mentors would be reluctant to help others because they would consider them to be a risk to their own jobs. In addition, mentors must be willing to keep up to date in their

respective fields. It is not enough to know something without making the effort to learn and keep up to date with new developments in the area. Personally, I spend a good amount of time reading about my area of expertise so I can continue to grow professionally.

2. Experience: I think it goes without saying that mentors must have a great deal of experience in their chosen profession. Mentees are looking for assistance in their jobs and mentors must be able to call on their own experience to help their protégés with the breadth of their experience learned over the course of their careers. Mentors with enough experience can also discuss things that worked for them and things that didn't work so that the mentee can learn from those experiences. This is especially important in the classroom where the professor-mentor duo can share some of the problems they had in their own under-graduate and graduate courses so that students know they are not alone in having issues. It not only humanizes the instructor, but also encourages students to keep working towards their goals knowing that things do get better.
3. Self-Confidence: It is important that mentors be self-confident, but not arrogant. Self-confident mentors are not afraid to admit that they do not know something, and they have the confidence to help others navigate new situations. The more self-confident the mentors, the more the mentees will feel comfortable taking risks in the workplace because they will know that their mentors will help them get up if they fail. Learning how to fail, in a safe environment, will help mentees gain their own confidence to tackle new projects and avoid over-thinking or dwelling on self-doubts. When a mentee feels confident, he or she can become more motivated to suggest changes to the department that could work to improve the work-place environment. In a university setting, mentors

can speak to their students with confidence, because they have the knowledge and experience to be able to advise their students.

4. Ability to Listen : Mentors have to be willing to listen. There is nothing worse than a mentor who does all of the talking without listening to the input of their protégés.

Mentors who are not good listeners tend to pontificate to showcase their own importance by holding forth to their audiences and lecturing them. In this situation the mentees are required to just sit and listen and learn from the knee of the more knowledgeable. This type of scenario does not help the mentee learn and grow as a person or as a professional. In these cases, the mentee often becomes subservient to the mentor and will not do anything on their own because they do not have the confidence to be able to function on their own. They become very dependent on their mentor, and just repeat what they have been told, which is not what an effective mentor-mentee relationship should involve.

5. Non-Judgmental – It is easy to judge others. Think of social media and how people judge others for their postings and pictures. A good mentor does not judge their protégé as they remember what it was like when they first began their own profession. If a mentor becomes judgmental then the relationship will become one where the mentor just talks at the mentee and not with the mentee (see ability to listen). A relationship that is based on reprimanding will never be successful as the mentor will get in the habit of finding fault with everything the mentee does. And, the mentee will begin to try to only do what the mentor does and will not benefit from trying their own way to solve problems.
6. Giving Helpful Suggestions – I think this one is very important. It is one thing to give suggestions but the suggestions have to be good suggestions. What do I mean by good suggestions? For me, good suggestions are things that the mentor can use in their own

dealings with others whether that is in the classroom, dealings with colleagues, or bosses. As an instructor it involves helping students become more confident in their abilities. Mentors do this not by telling others exactly what to do but instead by listening, and providing commentary and letting the others come to their own conclusions. Mentors can provide suggestions of what worked for them but they may not work the same for everyone. It is important that the mentor realizes that. So much of what we do in the classroom depends on our own personalities. But, that does not mean that the suggestions will not be useful. It just means that each person has to learn how to adapt them so they work for them.

### Conclusion

Mentors are important at all stages of life. The type of mentor determines how successful the mentee will be in their chosen profession. A good mentor can encourage and promote their mentee in growing not only as an individual but also as a professional. Good mentors are not scared of their mentee's successes but instead also learn from them. Mentors are only successful if they continue to develop their own expertise as well and if they maintain a sense of professionalism. Based on my own dealings with mentors, at the university level, it is apparent that there are many of my colleagues who are not comfortable assuming a mentor-mentee relationship as they are not willing to share their knowledge and expertise with their less accomplished colleagues. As Eby et al. (2010) pointed out the mentor-mentee relationship only works if both parties are willing to share knowledge and best practices. The relationship between a student and instructor can only develop into a mentor-mentee relationship if there is mutual respect between the instructor and the student, and if the instructor maintains a professional relationship with the student in all dealings. At the university level there are many

opportunities to become a mentor to students and colleagues but again only if both parties are open to the suggestion.

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