Mentoring University Teachers: A Sound Investment
University of Sydney
June 1, 2009
Duane Roen, Arizona State University

What Is Mentoring?

*American Heritage Dictionary:* “A wise and trusted counselor or teacher.” [Latin *Mentor*, from Greek *Mentor*, name probably meaning ‘advisor’ or ‘wise man.’] It includes the Indo-European *men-*-, which means ‘to think.’

As many people in this room know, the character Mentor in *the Odyssey* was the son of Alcumus and the friend of Ulysses. During the Trojan War, Ulysses asked Mentor to watch over his household and his son, Telemachus. Mentor wasn’t all that diligent, though, so Ulysses’ home was flooded with suitors of Penelope, Ulysses’ wife. Also, because of Mentor’s negligence, Telemachus left home to find his father. However, the Goddess of War and Wisdom, Athena, helped Telemachus by appearing in various forms, including the form of Mentor.

Our modern use of the term *mentor* can be traced to the 1699 book *Les Aventures de Telemaque, fils d'Ulysse* (*The Adventures of Telemachus, the Son of Ulysses*) by the French writer François Fénelon. The lead character is named Mentor, who is a counselor. The popularity of the book in the eighteenth century apparently made the word “mentor” common in modern times.

"Telemachus and Mentor"
Illustration for "Les Aventures de Télémaque"
According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term first appeared in English in the mid-eighteenth century. On March 8, 1750, Lord Chesterfield included it in one of his widely read letters to his son Philip. While encouraging his son to spend time productively, Chesterfield offers this guidance:

If you have but an hour, will you improve that hour, instead of idling it away? While you have such a friend and monitor with you as Mr. Harte, I am sure you will. But suppose that business and situations should, in six or seven months, call Mr. Harte away from you; tell me truly, what may I expect and depend upon from you, when left to yourself? May I be sure that you will employ some part of every day, in adding something to that stock of knowledge which he will have left you?

After giving his son a little more advice on how to spend his time, Chesterfield comments on the nature of the relationship with the mentor:

This, I am sure, is not talking to you like an old man, though it is talking to you like an old friend; these are not hard conditions to ask of you. I am certain you have sense enough to know how reasonable they are on my part, how advantageous they are on yours: but have you resolution enough to perform them? Can you withstand the examples, and the invitations, of the profligate, and their infamous missionaries? For I have known many a young fellow seduced by a 'mauvaise honte', that made him ashamed to refuse. These are resolutions which you must form, and steadily execute for yourself, whenever you lose the friendly care and assistance of your Mentor. In the meantime, make a greedy use of him; exhaust him, if you can, of all his knowledge; and get the prophet's mantle from him, before he is taken away himself.

Some people don’t care for the term *mentor* because of its associations with the less-than-admirable character from the Odyssey. Others think that the term suggests an unequal power relationship between participants in a professional relationship. For these and other reasons, I will use a variety of terms this morning to discuss the kinds of professional assistance that people
our field and other fields need throughout our their careers—from the undergraduate experience until retirement. Although none of the following terms probably works in all settings, each of them works in particular settings: mentor, supporter, coach, guide, helper, collaborator, counselor, teacher, friend, colleague. In the end, though, the terms that we use are less important than what it is we do.

When I think about the effective academic and career mentors I have known, one characteristic stands out: They invest time and intellectual energy in students and professional colleagues because they want them to succeed. This desire to foster success in others can result from a host of motives, ranging from altruism to, as some have claimed, selfishness. In the end, though, I’m not certain how much the kind of motive matters.

**Why Should We Mentor?**

Catalyst ([www.catalyst.org](http://www.catalyst.org)), an organization that conducts research and advises businesses, strives to develop more opportunities and more inclusive work environments for women. In 2001, Catalyst published *Women of Color in Corporate Management: Three Years Later*, a follow-up to an earlier study. Among other things, Catalyst researchers found several key strategies for women of color in management. One was mentoring. Sixty-nine percent of the women who had a mentor experienced one or more upward corporate moves, while only 49% of those without a mentor experienced such a move. The Catalyst team also found that there was a positive correlation between the number of mentors and the number of upward moves for women in management.

In my own professional experience, I often see all the positive outcomes of what can happen when people mentor effectively, and I too often observe the devastating consequences when people mentor ineffectively or not at all. I see graduate student who don’t get the jobs they seek because academics fail to help them prepare job-application materials. I also see too many instances where early-career academics don’t earn tenure because colleagues, including supervisors, fail to guide them making smart choices about balancing teaching, research, and service. I am infuriated when I see assistant professors carrying heavy service or administrative loads at institutions that require substantial peer-reviewed publication to earn tenure. In some cases supervisors—usually department chairs—not only fail to advise against such loads; they sometimes even assign loads that make it impossible for assistant professors to earn tenure. At
times, these supervisors act in these ways because they don’t care. At other times, they haven’t bothered to learn what they can do to help untenured assistant professors. Still at other times, they don’t have the courage or the leadership to stand up against senior academics who should be stepping forward to carry heavier service loads to protect early-career academics. Such behavior—whether the cause is ignorance, sloth, or lack of courage—is irresponsible, unethical, and immoral.

Who Can Mentor Whom?

The simple response to that question is that anyone with more experience can mentor someone with less experience. The differences in experiences might be slight. In *Mind and Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Lev Vygotsky describes the zone of proximal development: “It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (86). Further, notes Vygotsky, “what a child can do with assistance today, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow” (87)

Even though Vygotsky describes children’s learning in *Mind in Society*, my sixty years of experience as a learner suggests that the zone of proximal development is a relevant concept for learners of all ages. As a sixty-year-old academic with many years of administrative experience, I still benefit from mentoring. At times that mentoring can come from other unit administrators who have previously solved problems that I am facing for the first time. At other times, though, an administrator higher in the institution’s organizational chart can help guide me through a thorn problem.

For graduate students, the mentoring can come from university teachers, but I frequently see other graduate students providing professional assistance as well. Age is often not the most crucial factor, but experience is almost always important.

What Are Some Forms of Mentoring?

There are many forms of mentoring. I’ll describe some that I are familiar to me. In a conversation with Alice Horning, a professor at the University of Oakland, a few years ago, I
asked her, “What is effective mentoring?” She replied by saying, “Good mentors share their stories and experience, including their failures.”

**For Graduate Students**

- Lots of one-on-one conversations with knowledgeable, caring university teachers
- Collaborating with university teachers on research and publication
- Group workshops on professional-development topics (e.g., preparing CVs, letters of application, teaching portfolios)
- Formal graduate courses on professional-development topics (e.g., courses on writing program administration)
- Dissertation and thesis writing support groups
- Team teaching
- Peer observation of teaching
- Supervised internships in diverse settings—e.g., other kinds of post-secondary institutions, secondary schools, businesses, non-profit organizations

**For University Teachers**

- Engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning
- Developing learning communities for university teachers
- Peer observation of teaching
- Observing and mentoring new teachers
- Resources to participate in conferences, professional development, and scholarship
- Conversations with chairs at the time of hiring to discuss criteria for tenure
- Tenure workshops conducted regularly by senior administrators—e.g., vice presidents for academic personnel
• Annual evaluations that include candid assessments of progress toward tenure
• Regular conversations with colleagues who are in the same field to learn more about the culture of that field
• Early-career writing groups that meet regularly to discuss drafts of manuscripts on their way to publication.
• External evaluators who, when they write reviews for tenure, explain the field to tenure committees who often do not know the field. (That is, external letter writers need to mentor department, college, and university tenure committee members.)
• Writing groups that provide feedback on drafts of scholarly papers

For Department Chairs
• Regular conversations with the supervising dean
• University workshops for new and continuing chairs

Some Concrete Examples
• I have been meeting with early-career academics every two weeks, twelve months a year for the past three years. Approximately a week before each meeting, one or two academics send drafts for colleagues to read. Before the meeting, each colleague offers written feedback on the drafts. During the meeting, colleagues discuss their feedback in an effort to offer consensus feedback.
• Susan Thomas and I are both members of a professional organization called the Conference on College Composition and Communication, often referred to as CCCC. The organization provides several forms of support for members. First, under the leadership of Paul Puccio, a professor at Bloomfield College, CCCC offers a series of events and services for newcomers, sponsored by the CCCC Newcomers’ Orientation
Committee: (1) an information booth especially for newcomers at the annual convention each March; (2) an orientation session in the evening before the convention begins; (3) a newcomers’ coffee early in the first morning on the first day of the annual convention; and (4) a special session late in the conference where newcomers can meet at tables with senior members of the organization to discuss ideas for proposing papers for the next year’s convention. In the weeks before proposals are due for the following year’s convention, senior members of the organization serve as coaches who offer feedback on drafts of proposals. Also, attached to the annual convention there is the day-long Research Network Forum, a preconvention workshop founded in 1987. As noted on the RNF blog (http://www.rnfonline.com/blog/), “The RNF is an opportunity for published researchers, new researchers, and graduate students to discuss their current research projects and receive responses from new and senior researchers.” Further, each year the workshop includes an Editors’ Roundtable, in which a wide array of editors in the field discuss opportunities to publish in the journals that they edit.

- Susan Thomas and I are also members of another professional organization called the Council of Writing Program Administrators, often called WPA. Under the leadership of the current president, Joe Janangelo, WPA offers support for members. Throughout the year, the organization’s Listserv, WPA-L, is a site for exchanges in which Listserv subscribers generously share ideas for solving problems that members are addressing at their home institutions. There is also mentoring at the annual convention. For example, at this year’s annual convention in Minneapolis there will be sessions in which journal editors and acquisitions editors discuss publishing opportunities, ones in which administrators discuss strategies for building successful tenure cases, ones in that help
new administrator find ways to keep there publishing agendas alive, and a session on grant writing.

- Peer review of teaching should be a way of life in higher education. When I visit colleagues’ classes and they visit mine, I learn much about the teaching practices that others use and I gain fresh perspectives on my own teaching. Effective peer review includes pre-visit conversations about learning goals, syllabi, lesson plans, teaching materials, and activities. During the classroom visit, I find it helpful to record a narrative of what happens in the classroom from the moment the teacher arrives to the moment the teacher leaves. After the visit, I find it helpful to begin the debriefing by asking the colleague, “What are your thoughts about the lesson that I observed?” because that gives the colleague agency in the conversation. In the written review that follows, I like to emphasize the strengths of the teacher but also suggest other approaches that the teacher might consider using. I have read some materials about your grant funded project titled “Systematizing Quality Enhancement and Assurance Processes to Better Support Student Learning,” As described in the grant proposal, “the sponsors are introducing a voluntary, optional, and self-directed Peer Observation of Teaching model, which would complement USE data. In this model, staff members would invite a peer into their classroom to comment on previously agreed points of observation on their teaching practices. The staff member might also ask the peer reviewer to comment on teaching curriculum and resources, and it would be up to the staff member whether this information was shared with others. The sponsors believe that this model would facilitate what Stephen Brookfield identifies as the ‘peer’ lens of critical reflection—a current gap in the USE, CEQ and SCEQ data. This additional dimension or lens would complement
and strengthen existing data, encourage further reflection on teaching and support the development of feedback-driven models of good practice.”

- From 1999 to 2004, I directed the Center for Learning and Teaching Excellence (CLTE) at Arizona State University, which had as its mission the responsibility to mentor university teachers to become more successful in teaching. I will mention some of the ways that it supports university teachers. For example, each fall CLTE offers a series of meetings called Rookie Camp, designed for new university teachers. In Rookie Camp, new academics read and discuss Wilbert McKeachie and Marilla Svinicki. *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers.* Of course, they also discuss other topics as they arise during the sessions.

- Summer Institute on College Teaching. CLTE offered week-long summer workshops for college teachers. We attracted teachers from Arizona State University, local community college teachers, and graduate students. The topics included, Classroom Assessment Techniques, Writing Across the Curriculum, Course Assessment, Learning Portfolios, Collaborative/Cooperative Learning, Critical Thinking, Active Learning.

- CLTE also is responsible for the Distinguished Teaching Academy, which consists of Arizona State University’s most celebrated teachers. Members of the DTA engage in the following activities (http://www.asu.edu/dta/activities/):
  
  - Foster best practices in teaching evaluation.
  - Promote visibility for excellent teaching.
  - Help strike a balance between teaching and research.
  - Enhance the use of technology for effective teaching.
- One-on-one consultations: When I directed the Center, these consultations book various forms. Sometimes I worked with effective teachers who simply wanted to chat about teaching. At the other end of the spectrum, I sometimes worked with academics who had been identified as teachers in need of special support to regain their effectiveness in the classroom. In those cases, there were many hours of reviewing teaching evaluations, visiting classes, and facilitating mini-focus groups with students. By the way, we never told students the actual reason for the focus groups. My usual story to them was that I was writing an article about teaching and that I had chosen their class at random. I’m pleased to say that our success rate in these cases was very high.

- Helping university teachers interpret “unit of study” evaluations. I am impressed that your grant-funded project titled “Systematizing Quality Enhancement and Assurance Processes to Better Support Student Learning” devotes attention to helping university teachers interpret USE data. Too often in my career, I have seen university teachers obsess over a single negative comment in USE data, while not seeing the overall picture that the data revealed.


- Wakonse Arizona (http://wakonse.asu.edu/) : Wakonse is a national organization (http://www.wakonse.org) that focuses on the inspirational aspects of teaching. The word
Wakonse (wuh·kon·seh) comes from the language of the Lakota Sioux. It translates variously as “to influence, to inspire, and to teach.” Each year just after the spring semester ends in Arizona, college and university teachers from around the state spend three intensive days at a camp to share and discuss best practices in teaching. This year, Arizona Wakonse is encouraging teachers to participate in the national gathering, scheduled for May 21-May 26, 2009, at Camp Miniwanca in Shelby, Michigan.

- The Arizona Master Teaching Seminar (http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/azmt/) is modeled on similar seminars in other states such as Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, and New Jersey. It attracts secondary and postsecondary teachers from around the state who gather for five days early in June to share their teaching and learning philosophies and their most effective teaching practices with one another.

- Workshops on an array of teaching-and-learning topics, with an emphasis on best practices. When directed the Center for Learning and Teaching Excellence, approximately 2,400 ASU teachers participating in workshops dealing with topics such as course and syllabus design, classroom assessment techniques, writing-to-learn, effective writing assignments, interactive lectures, classroom discussion strategies, collaborative and cooperative learning, learning portfolios, teaching portfolios, crafting effective test questions, course and program assessment.

- Stanford University’s Center for Teaching and Learning (http://ctl.stanford.edu/) sponsors “Teaching Lunches” (http://ctl.stanford.edu/Faculty/workshop/), which are organized under broad collections of disciplines—science and engineering, humanities, and social sciences. The lunches are billed as informal conversations among university teachers on topics such as "Science Education in the 21st Century: Using the Methods of
Science to Teach Science,” “Teaching Advanced Undergraduates and Graduate Students Together,” and “Designing Survey Courses.”

- The Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas hosts a “Course Portfolio Gallery” (http://www.cte.ku.edu/gallery/), which illustrates what university teachers are doing in the courses and what students are learning in those courses. University teachers can be mentored without ever talking directly with a mentor.

- Cornell University’s Center for Teaching Excellence offers a range of teaching materials (http://www.cte.cornell.edu/campus/teach/faculty/TeachingMaterials.html) that are useful to university teachers in any field. The Center offers ready-to-use or easily adaptable materials in the following categories: “Course Design and Planning Materials,” “Active Classroom Teaching Methods,” “Assessing Student Learning,” and “Professional Development.”

- The Maricopa Center for Learning and Instruction (MCLI)(http://mcli.maricopa.edu/) serves the ten community colleges in the Maricopa Community College District in metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona. Each year the Center offers a mid-May conference on Teaching and Learning with Technology. The keynote speakers this year were Howard Rheingold (http://rheingold.com), the founding Executive Editor of *HotWired* webzine and Sarah Robbins (aka Intellagirl) (http://www.intellagirl.com). Intellagirl’s talk was especially thought-provoking—she used the Battle of Agincourt (1415 CE) as a metaphor for how we as teachers should be using Web 2.0 technologies. That is, if we don’t use these technologies in our teaching, we risk becoming as obsolete as the French knights were in the face of more agile technologies. The rest of the day was spent in highly interactive workshops conducted by Maricopa Community College District academics.
who use Web 2.0 technologies in engaging ways in their courses. One particularly helpful session, titled “The Wide, Wide World of Web 2.0,” was facilitated by Mary McGlasson, who teaches at Chandler-Gilbert Community College. She engaged participants in hands-on engagement with and conversation about Web 2.0 technologies that can enhance our teaching (http://marymac.pbwiki.com). What I find most compelling about this conference as a site for mentoring is that peers are mentoring peers. Those chosen to lead the interactive sessions may be experienced or early-career academics. What they all have in common is a commitment to being on the cutting edge of using and promoting technologies that facilitate teaching and learning in the 21st Century.

- The Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education—often referred to as “POD,” (http://www.podnetwork.org/) is a wonderfully supportive, interdisciplinary organization for those who work in centers for teaching and learning. However, it is a wonderful resource for university teachers in general. Its annually published monograph, To Improve the Academy, is filled with helpful strategies for teachers. Its annual conference is the most user-friendly gathering that I have ever attended.

Resources for Mentors


Eble, Michelle, and Lynee Lewis Gaillet, eds. Stories of Mentoring: Theory and Praxis. West


**Books for Reading Groups**

There are many useful books that work well in reading groups focused on teaching:


Testimonies

*Duane Roen, Arizona State University*

**Joyce King**, my eighth-grade language arts teacher, helped me develop confidence in my abilities. She made her students feel valued.

**Claire Stein**, my eleventh- and twelfth-grade English teacher, demanded a lot from me—more than I thought I could do.

**Nick Karolides**, my master’s degree advisor and thesis director, spent countless hours discussing teaching and writing with me. Through our conversations and through his modeling, he helped me understand what it means to be an effective teacher.

**Gene Piche**, my Ph.D. advisor and dissertation director, was simultaneously rigorous and supportive.

**Mike Graves**, one of my Ph.D. professors, collaborated with me and other graduate students on several research projects, which gave all of us the confidence that we could do research.

When I was a beginning assistant professor in 1981, **Les Whipp**, who was then the Director of the Nebraska Writing Project, worked closely with me to help me see connections between the fields of English education and writing.

I consider the collective membership of **CCCC** and **WPA** as mentors. From my perspective the members of these two organizations are strongly committed to the success of other members, as well as colleagues and students back home.

Works Cited

to His Son. Release Date: October 12, 2004 [EBook #3361].
http://snowy.arsc.alaska.edu/gutenberg/3/3/6/3361/3361-h/3361-h.htm