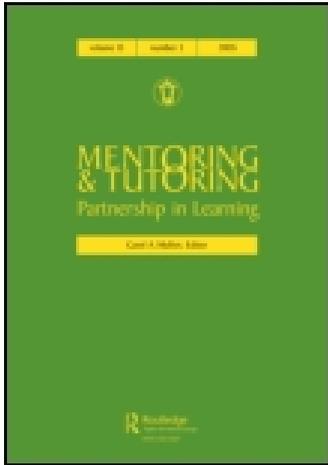


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Publisher: Routledge

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Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cmet20>

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Published online: 23 Jan 2007.

To cite this article: Jo Barkham (2005) Reflections and interpretations on life in academia: a mentee speaks, *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 13:3, 331-344, DOI: [10.1080/13611260500177468](https://doi.org/10.1080/13611260500177468)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13611260500177468>

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Reflections and interpretations on life in academia: a mentee speaks

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Using personal autobiographical data collected over the course of an academic year, this article reflects the experiences of a new teacher educator entering higher education. Emergent patterns are examined and illuminated using the discourse of mentoring, and this discourse is, in turn, challenged, in part for the imbalance in the voices recorded, and at times for its masculine nature. The notion of a mentee's role being in any way passive is dismissed, and the relationship between mentor and mentee is examined for reciprocity and negotiation within a structured, supportive framework. Questions are posed regarding the benefits and costs to mentors, citing research that exposes how even the most successful women in academia may suffer negative emotions. In analysing one mentee's journey through a year in academia, a struggle with a changing and contradictory self-image is exposed. Having a sense of ownership in a learner-driven mentoring process is acknowledged, and some suggestions on the qualities of a successful mentee are offered. The paradox of who mentors the mentors is also examined. The process of mentoring is viewed as an investment in staff and the constantly evolving institution.

Introduction

As I stand here,
on that pinpoint of time between yesterday and tomorrow,
I look back.
What I remember is but a shadow
of all I forget.
Finding myself through stories
of a fragmented past,
I find myself empowered
to move forward.

(Inspired by a poem sent by Catherine Wilson to the editor,
Feminism and autobiography: Cosslett, 2000)

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This paper explores some of the influences that have supported one relatively successful mentoring relationship within the field of education. This is a woman's story—the first draft of which was told as a mentee at the end of her first year as a 'new academic', guided throughout that year by Heather (a pseudonym used to respect her request for confidentiality). The story is told entirely on my own terms, supported and inspired by my mentor, who was the first to suggest there was value in a reflection of this kind. I make no claim of typicality or generalizability, but seek to 'explain the patterns that exist, certainly not to discover general laws of human behaviour' (Schofield, 1993, p. 92).

Method: private diaries and public records

My own autobiographical account is at the heart of this narrative, containing data on which I base my reflections. I always keep a rough journal of notes, which is, in effect, a personal diary; but these were extended as a result of an early conversation wherein Heather and I had discussed the merits of my keeping a more reflective account during my induction to academia. I was able to use these reflections in written assignments, forming part of a taught course, which the institution requires those new to academia to undertake in their first year of service. My own recollections and those of others (including Heather's) support these private notes.

This is a subjective realm, not the 'naïve delusion that one has tapped the bedrock of truth' (Plummer, 1983, p. 14); yet, using my own story gives rise to particular questions of ethics around confidentiality—my name is not anonymized, and therefore friends and colleagues might be identifiable. There are particular tensions when writing an open and honest account about the institution within which a researcher works, though a positive account is comfortable to write; I doubt that I could have been encouraged to write this paper had my experience been otherwise. It was during my second meeting with Heather when, deep in discussion about the processes we would go through during the year, we reflected on our previous experiences of mentoring. Heather expressed her interest in my insights and told me, 'There's a paper for you to write here'. We both agreed that the voice of the mentee, sometimes silent in the literature on mentoring, should be heard (Mullen, 2005).

A mentee in academia

I began my new career just two days before my 50th birthday, feeling strangely lost, as I knew no one with whom to share my celebrations. Having spent much of my working life teaching in the primary school system in England, I had left in 2000 to take up a one-year contract as a consultant with the National Literacy Strategy, which the New Labour government had imposed somewhat controversially on schools throughout the country. My experience prepared me well for my next change of career. I arrived in academia, in 2001, with a desire to educate students aspiring to become teachers of children aged 5 to 11. I came also with a strong sense of my own identity, deeply rooted within my life experiences.

Heather and I first met at length during an induction meeting. I remembered her from my job interview and recalled her incisive and intelligent questioning. We found we had much in common—both women with families, although her children were younger, Heather being some years my junior. But the obvious difference that became apparent in our first meeting was that I was a talker while Heather was a listener. Galbraith (2001), who identifies the characteristics of a good mentor as having strong communication skills and a good mentee as having strong listening skills, might have questioned our effectiveness. Heather, initially, came across to me as very quiet, reflective, and somewhat reserved. I was momentarily unnerved; I wondered what she was thinking. I recognized that I was very pleased to be appointed, and rather excitable, which is not uncommon for me. My talkative nature was also a disguise for my nervousness about the challenges I faced ahead. I began to wonder how such a mentor might react to my capacity to be, at least outwardly, relatively confident and somewhat ebullient.

Heather was most helpful as I asked her for a general overview of the nature of the work I would be undertaking. She gave me course documentation and answered my many questions about the nature of the teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. I realised that I had much to learn about working in higher education (HE), and I was worried that I did not even know what questions to ask: I certainly 'lacked experience and organisational knowledge' (Roberts, 2000, p. 153). If knowledge and power are inextricably related, as Foucault (1977, p. 27) reminds us, then my feelings of bewilderment and vulnerability at this point are unsurprising. As our first meeting developed, however, I began to recognize a particular strength within my mentor, born of the expertise she began to share with me and the provisional nature of her advice.

My mentor would quickly build upon what I already had to offer, rather than ever giving a definitive answer from her own experience. Heather assured me that my experience of working with young children, together with my experiences of engaging with the continuing professional development of practising teachers, would be an ideal grounding for my new career when leading seminars and lectures. Working effectively in facilitating students' learning was my first concern, and my mentor proved to be reassuring. Heather appeared quite knowledgeable, empowered with a deep and extensive insight into the workings of academia. This gave me a sense of security as I gained faith in her ability to support me in meeting the unknown and, therefore, daunting challenges ahead. Her nonjudgmental manner left me with the feeling that I could trust her with my candid responses in future. I left the first meeting with some sense of relief at having an effective mentor on whom I could call for support and who would guide me in the months ahead.

Reorientation: changing in a world of change

Induction into my new role had begun at the very beginning in September at the start of a new academic year. It was followed by three weeks that proved both disorientating and disconcerting. I had a sense that my change in career had taken place at a

significant time in both my own and others' lives. The entire faculty of education had relocated to a new, purpose-built accommodation on the main university campus during the summer before I arrived. The building was unfinished, and my new colleagues were in disarray as they settled into their offices with their possessions in packing-crates. My diary entry for the day I moved into my own room reads, 'Today the world is changed forever; I now truly know the meaning of the word *evil*'. It was 11 September 2001, and I was not the only one feeling disorientated. I wondered briefly if this were some sort of personal omen.

Speaking to other colleagues who are new to higher education, the sense of uncertainty on entering the complexities and relative freedoms of HE institutions is quite common. Knight and Trowler (1999, p. 21) confirm that 'new academics welcomed the freedom ... and were also worried by it, feeling isolated and uncertain about what they should be doing'. That is why I appreciated the tireless responses of my mentor and needed to ask her *so many* questions, some of which may have seemed trivial, but they were all important to me.

Questions of survival: feeling foolish

Seemingly small and inconsequential details are of major importance to new staff. Feeling disempowered and inadequate at times, I needed information about the mundane. I feared becoming a burden to busy and sometimes preoccupied new colleagues, and felt it important not always to rely on my mentor, however approachable. Examples of early questions were how to use the photocopier, how to read the very complex timetable, and to whom I should go for travel expense claims. I also needed advice about responding to my colleagues, which helped me to establish good working relationships. I had to be sensitive to a number of academic colleagues who were intending to take early retirement following changes in their working conditions.

My concerns for the patience of my mentor were quickly dismissed, together with my apologies; Heather always left me with the impression that she was pleased that I had contacted her. The success of my approach as a mentee laid in the apology, appreciation, and avoidance of being over-demanding. My mentor's success laid in her willingness to respect each question as having merit and being responsive and reassuring. She also demonstrated her respect for me and my willingness to expose my ignorance, which we both agreed was a gift to be used to enhance what was becoming a journey together. Heather made it clear that we should analyse my questions and use the experience to engage further with the process of mentoring.

'Big picture' questions: untangling the knitting

The courses I teach offer students opportunities to study within the university and also in professional practice placement in schools. There are several programs, all modular in structure. Teaching a variety of different undergraduate and postgraduate courses was confusing. Some students similarly demonstrated their opaque understanding of how their programs were structured: my diary describes the complexities

as 'tangled knitting'. I did not know who to inform when concerns arose, or who to approach for the answers to questions about a particular aspect of a course. As an active listener, Heather did more than simply respond with answers. She offered me a 'map' of courses and associated responsibilities—again suggesting, not assuming or imposing.

Heather went on to gather key information for me and demonstrated where I could go for more detail within a particular program: leaders of modules, courses, and subjects. This was empowering, as I was then able to decrease my dependence on my mentor and seek information from others and, I felt, with fewer apologies. Sometimes documentation seemed inadequate; thereafter, I felt justified in seeking out that which I needed to know and, furthermore, began to question the quality of documentation. My organizational knowledge and influence was growing; Heather had succeeded in making me a more autonomous learner. As we both recognized more fully what I needed to know, my questioning from that point began to change. This was the point when the seemingly trivial questions were seen as triggers for broader discussion.

Tutoring in schools: out of the frying-pan

One of my new responsibilities was to observe students working as trainee teachers and give them feedback on their performance in the classroom. I was very aware of the responsibility I would bear for my students' professional careers and, in turn, the impact that would have on children's futures. While my previous experience had prepared me for a role where I was a welcome visitor within another place of work, I also recognized the potential difficulties of working alongside professionals in the classroom who are supporting the trainee. I was concerned how I would be received as a tutor in schools: would my judgments concur with a class teacher's?

There was no formal training at that time for this aspect of my role, which I found disconcerting, despite my experience from my previous position. I therefore requested that I be permitted to accompany my mentor on a visit in order to shadow her practice. Heather agreed and was generous with her time, once again, as we discussed the tensions that exist when tutoring students with limited time for observing their practice, reviewing their considerable files of evidence, and then giving them sensitive, constructive, and challenging feedback. Her advice was pragmatic as well as principled. In particular, I was able to observe her debriefing students on their performance and began to understand the depth of her insight and ability to empower students with her approach. Once again, the quiet mentor was listening first, then gently probing her students' understanding and provoking them into dialogue. Through asking them questions such as: 'Why do you think this happened?'; 'How might you solve this?'; and 'How would you do it differently next time?', Heather supported her students through a process where they were able to reflect critically and constructively on their own practice. She also demonstrated her respect for my interventions when asking me to advise a student on a point of mathematics that I had noted and discussed with her.

Lecturing or training?

Heather welcomed me to sit in the audience of one of her lectures, and she was present in two of my early seminars. Again, she was supportive and congratulatory. She reflected upon the usefulness of my previous experience in delivering courses as part of the continuing professional development of practising teachers. Heather had not had this kind of experience herself prior to entering higher education; she had previously been a very successful class teacher, school manager, and researcher. She commented, ‘I can tell you have done this sort of work before—it shows’.

Heather allowed me to become self-critical and share my sense of weakness within seminars. I found that encouraging the quietly passive student to contribute was particularly difficult. Instead of imposing an approach of *how to teach*, Heather helped me realize that I was entering into a discussion about *how I teach* and, more importantly, *how the students learn*. The debriefing became a professional dialogue where we agreed that we were learning from each other. I noted in my diary: ‘I came here to train teachers, but Heather educates students. I still see myself as a trainer and Heather as an educator. Perhaps I will change.’

Structure as security and support

Heather is not my line manager, and, according to the university’s own documentation, ‘not involved in formal procedures leading to decision on the outcome of probation’ (UWE, 1999, p. 21). I saw Heather as a supportive *colleague*, a perspective that enabled us both to work in a secure relationship; I felt safe in open and honest disclosure to her. This, in turn, led to a rapport that allowed for formative and developmental mentoring (Knight & Trowler, 1999, p. 28).

Formal monthly review meetings offered an opportunity to discuss my progress, enabling me to raise issues of direct relevance. Heather made it clear that the agenda was largely mine to set, but this was only partly reassuring. My early concerns remained—I was still ignorant of many aspects of procedures and unaware of what issues to raise. I was relieved when Heather enlightened me about marking schedules, assessment regulations, and the formal appraisal system during my probationary year where my teaching would be observed. By negotiation, therefore, our discussions were appropriate and wide-ranging.

Illuminating the path: both seeing the light

After each meeting, Heather wrote a perceptive summary that left me feeling that she had guided a pathway for me through the process. I commented that she had ‘succeeded in erecting lights for me on what has been a dimly lit road’. I also had an increasing awareness that in uncovering the complexities of our working environment, Heather had also found the process helpful. Together we had talked ourselves into some shared understandings. During one meeting in December, three months into my first year, we discussed the inevitable tensions of the job, where our time is

limited but the needs of the students are not. Heather's metaphor was a 'bandage that is too small to cover the wound; it will only stretch so far'. At this point, I was recognizing more clearly some of the effects these tensions have on colleagues, as well as on me. We began to explore what our responses might be to these challenges, and at the end of the session, we agreed that we had both benefited equally from this dialogue. In another article written as a mentee, Fletcher (1997, p. 49) noted, as do I, that 'mentoring is a process of negotiation and development for mentor as well as mentee'. I also concur with Knight and Trowler (1999) that much of my mentoring was 'learner driven'.

Investment through a structure

While the mentoring process was very clearly responsive to my own needs, it took place within a structured framework. Knight and Trowler (1999, p. 29) insist that successful mentoring 'depends on the mentor taking the job seriously and scheduling regular meetings'. Heather had consented to be my mentor and was protected by having time allocated by her line manager for the process. Mentoring was part of her assigned duties, and she was also given the opportunity to attend meetings as part of her own professional development. She made this clear to me during one of our sessions when we were reflecting on the mentoring process. This gave me the reassurance that I was not making unreasonable demands and that the organization where we worked was structurally enabling my progress during my first year in post. This gave me a sense of security and self-worth—others were investing in *me*. In turn, my commitment to the organization and my new career strengthened.

It takes a village to raise a child

Knight and Trowler (1999) were right in stating that many colleagues contribute to the mentoring process. As a mentee, I benefited significantly from working with several experienced colleagues, most of whom behaved in a similarly supportive manner to my mentor. One suggested I join a tutorial for his students prior to their school experience; another persuaded me to write regular articles for a professional journal to 'get into the habit of writing'. In addition, there was a program leader who explained a number of features of the undergraduate degree structure. Then there was my line manager, a head of school with a wicked sense of humour and the skill to make colleagues feel at ease. He might be described as a charismatic leader, demonstrating elements of 'interactional leadership': 'sensitised to current practices, discourses and meaning construction [and establishing] a climate of negotiation based on trust oriented to ... departmental goals' (Knight & Trowler, 1999, p. 32). Thus, many people contributed to my sense of being nurtured, giving me a common message that I was welcome to approach them for guidance; they were generous with their time, and I was grateful to them.

A mentor's role takes place within a wider dialogue between members of the academic community, sometimes positive, but occasionally problematic. Some

colleagues shared their difficulties with me, as I was the ‘new’ colleague, willing to listen to their personal or professional concerns. Their acts of disclosure were at times uncomfortable and burdensome, particularly when I felt my experienced colleagues’ disillusionment was affecting my adjustment to my new career. However, they did enable me to enter into a dialogue of reciprocity, as I shared my confusions and concerns in turn. This became a valuable tool by which I was able to establish my identity within the institution. As Oakley (1981, p. 41) advised any would-be interviewer: ‘In most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship ... is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship.’ In the same way, I discovered that investment of my identity in dialogue became an essential aspect of orientation into my new working environment.

Professional and personal relationship: coffee or squash?

My relationship with Heather developed from professional to more personal. She taught me to play squash, and we continue to enjoy our games together. The importance of such a friendship has also been acknowledged extensively in research (see e.g. Clutterbuck, 1991; Mullen, 2005). Gardiner (1996) found ‘friendship’ to be a significant element in more than half of mentor–mentee relationships surveyed. Gardiner (1998) has further suggested a contract, implied or negotiated, to include reliability and openness, sharing of experiences, genuineness, and respect. I saw examples of Heather’s openness as she debated with me as to whether she was primarily mentoring me for the benefit of the organization, serving a process that Fabian and Simpson (2002) refer to as ‘acculturation’, with considerable pressure to conform to the values of the organization. This concerned Heather, who was reassured when I stated that I felt she was mentoring me for my personal development and that I was comfortable with aspects of our work that might indeed be termed ‘acculturation’.

Heather also displayed great warmth and concern for me, an example being the day I arrived, soaking wet, after cycling to work in traditionally inclement English weather. In Gardiner’s view, this responsiveness and warmth extends self-esteem in the mentee. In addition, the nonjudgmental support offered by Heather became a ‘two-way process and thus contributed to the longevity of the friendship’ (Gardiner, 1998, p. 80). The professional nature of the friendship, which Gardiner distinguishes from ‘personal friendship’ that is of one’s own choosing has led researchers to suggest that female mentoring may have features that are more casual and relaxed (see Kalbfleisch & Keyton, 1995). The importance of these serene elements—the invitations to share personal time in the staff restaurant, for example—should not be ignored. They add value to the sense of well-being and investment in both mentee and, hopefully, mentor.

Professional and personal identity: who am I?

During one of our meetings, Heather raised questions around a shift of identity as a result of career change. My immediate response was to challenge the notion. I did not

see myself as lecturer, teacher, or in any other job definition. I insisted to Heather that I identified myself within who I was, an 'inner essence', and not 'what I do'. I stated that: 'what I do I choose to do—it *reflects* who I am.' I was naïvely seeing the process as cyclical, with an autonomy born of a diminished financial responsibility for a family now grown into adulthood. I stated that I could change what I did if my work was not personally fulfilling. In Maslow's (1970) 'hierarchies of need', my 'deficiency needs' had been met, and other (and higher) needs had emerged. Davies (1989) would recognize my struggle, seeing individuals not as 'the unitary beings that humanist theory would have them be, but as the complex, changing, contradictory creatures that we each experience ourselves to be despite our best efforts at producing a unified, coherent and relatively static self' (p. xi).

My efforts may have at first succeeded, yet I have not remained static. Others have defined me as an 'academic' and a 'tutor'. Students took notes during my seminars and lectures as if my word were authoritative; they eagerly sought my advice in tutorials. At first, I found this a heavy responsibility, and then I began to reflect and problematize with them. Knowledge is provisional; past experiences may be relevant, and others might have differing perspectives to my own. In turn, I was a student again, learning alongside my own students as I developed theoretical understandings through research. This transition of professional identity takes time, but my reflection was beginning, enhanced by my emerging comprehension of post-structuralist theory. I was being 'constituted and reconstituted through a variety of discursive practices', as Davies (1989, p. xi) stated. As Elliott (2002, p. 4) has further explained: 'Things change, people change ... identity is fluid, not fixed for once and for all ... The self is a symbolic project that the individual actively and creatively forges.' By the end of my first year in academia, I was somewhat more reflective and self-aware than at the beginning, and less certain that I was right about most things.

A mentee's qualities: a recipe for success?

According to Roberts (2000), mentoring is not an event, but a 'process form' that includes elements of helping, teaching/learning, and reflective practice. Within this process, many research papers have outlined the characteristics of a good mentor (see e.g. Segerman-Peck, 1991, p. 65; Carruthers, 1993, p. 20), and many imply a very masculine view that the mentoring function is heavily reliant on the mentor (see Roberts, 1999). Few, however, consider what actions characterize a successful mentee. Here I offer some suggestions:

- *Be open and honest:* having been successful and appointed to the post, mentees should remember that the institution has a vested interest in their success. When questioning my own ability to deliver material on some courses I was required to teach, I recorded, 'They gave me the job, so they must have some faith in me'. By exposing and confronting their fears and confusions, mentees can seek support from their mentors and others within the organization.

- *Be prepared to listen and reflect*: in general, the advice that I received was good, such as that from the colleague who reminded me that it is the students who have to do the study; the tutor cannot do it for them. This colleague went on: ‘Get *them* to do the readings, and remember to *use* those readings—follow them up—else the students won’t bother to do them!’
- *Respect advice*: listen to all advice and opinions, even if seemingly unhelpful or plain bizarre! Recognizing the difference is a critical art: I still find it difficult to accept the advice given by some colleagues that failing to meet required deadlines is unimportant. Also, the observation that ‘no one gets to meetings on time, so expect them to start late’ seems discourteous, but I hold my tongue.
- *Continue to question*: ask questions of both mentors and of other colleagues. New staff can seem to settle relatively quickly into their role, and colleagues may forget their unfamiliarity with many aspects of the role. For example, an assumption was made that I knew my responsibilities when invigilating an examination, so I took it upon myself to check with the examinations officer and talk through the briefing paper to ensure that I fully understood the requirements of the role, including what I should do if a student’s cell phone were to ring! As the examination officer told me, ‘I’d forgotten this is only your first year—you seem to have been here forever’. I took this as a compliment.
- *Be prepared to ask for help*: remember to thank those who assist you. This was not only important with academic colleagues, who quickly empathized with my position, but also with support staff in administration and technical departments who told me that they felt their services were often taken for granted. When needing to use a facsimile machine, I approached a member of the administration team for help, only to find her surprised that I had not had the benefit of an induction into the various technologies available to me. Had this happened, she would not have to spend her time showing me. However, by expressing appreciation of her help, I left with the benefit of the tutorial and an invitation to return if further assistance was required.
- *Be sympathetic to others’ problems*: workload is a common concern among many colleagues, and the pressures of work vary throughout the academic year: ‘I have a mountain of marking to turn round for the next exam board; it’s unrealistic’. When I empathized and listened sympathetically, the encounter became therapeutic for colleagues and furthered good relationships with them, thus being mutually beneficial. It also served to warn me about such obstacles as the ‘marking mountain’.
- *Be prepared to offer fresh ideas*: there was no administrative system for writing to a group of schools with whom I was to work. My diary reflects that ‘I now realize how efficient my former employer is’. The office manager was keen to use my prior knowledge to create a useful system in her department.
- *Be prepared to work hard*: by demonstrating commitment to the job, I quickly gained the respect of my colleagues. However, I have always tried to balance the demands of a career with other aspects of my life. A New Year’s resolution in January read: ‘I’ve been married to one man for a very long time, and I want to stay married to him! New job or not, I mustn’t neglect my family.’ Working hard does not necessarily require working too long; working smarter is more effective.

- *Make friends—network*: new staff members have every reason to approach people to introduce themselves and exchange information. Taking the time to do this, before other responsibilities begin to impinge, is an excellent investment in time. As one technician said as we unpacked another crate of resources, 'It isn't often we see tutors on their knees among boxes of papers'. I recall thinking that this was not so unusual for me.
- *Enjoy the new life*: enthusiasm is infectious—new staff bring a fresh energy to the workplace, and those who are in contact with them are often reinvigorated by their presence. During one early team meeting, a senior colleague opened the door and asked, in mock disgust, whether laughter had been tabled as an agenda item and had we not considered the disruptive nature of our noise level on others? Later, I was asked, 'Where do you get your good humor from—you are always smiling?' My response was simple: 'I'm enjoying the change—and the challenge.'

Rewards to the mentor: satisfaction without recognition

I believed Heather when she stated that she benefited from the mentoring process. She commented once that working with me had enabled her to reflect on her own work, and the support she gained from working through challenges together had been rewarding. I had, perhaps unwittingly, helped her find insights into her own practice. Drawing from the field of business, Carruthers (1993) discussed advantages to both parties, including increased productivity, defined leadership qualities, and 'rusting managers challenged to grow'.

I certainly did not see Heather as 'rusting', but she stated that she 'grew' in her ability to reflect and that 'this aspect of the job was very satisfying'. Sir John Harvey-Jones (1999), former chief executive of ICI, rightfully celebrates the role of the mentor. In stating that his personal delight is in seeing people grow, he also points out the value for organizations and that greater recognition should be paid to the importance of mentors' contributions. Mentoring new colleagues is not always perceived as being such valuable work to an institution—it does not carry high status.

The price paid by the mentor: doing good yet feeling bad

Whether the mentor in academia earns the recognition that is deserved has to be questioned. As Acker and Feuerwerker (1996) argue, women, in particular, are expected to take responsibility for supporting others—colleagues as well as students. In 'doing good', they remain disappointed and 'feeling bad' as a result of the reward system in academic life, which privileges research output. In their study, women experienced a sense of working harder than their male counterparts, with an unequal allocation of teaching and supervision. In living out the commitments to others, the contradictory prescriptions for 'caring women' and 'productive academics' lead to a fractured sense of self.

Heather was subject to just such tensions and shared with me her intense frustration at having an overwhelming burden of teaching and supervision that prevented

her from following her research interests. On one occasion, she lamented, ‘I sometimes feel as if I have dropped all my principles on the ground’. In return, I questioned her: ‘Who mentors you? Who mentors the mentors?’ The question remains unanswered. What is more, although the quality of Heather’s work is acknowledged by her colleagues, line managers, and students, Heather is unlikely to be promoted or rewarded in salary from this recognition alone. She is required to demonstrate further research output.

Looking forward: from mentee to mentor

Moving into another identity as team leader and mentor to students and new staff members, I must reflect further upon the mentee–mentor relationship. I need to become the listener rather than the talker, encouraging the latter role in my mentees. If my experiences as a mentee allow me to reflect on my recent emotions, fears, excitement, and bewilderment, they must also be allowed to strengthen my ability to empathize with others. I should have some insight into the types of experiences that lead to bewilderment among others, such as the complex structures of our degrees or the challenges of conducting seminars with young adults. There is a danger in this, however. I need to remind myself that my mentees may not have the same responses that I had. I need to discover and respond to *their* needs, not what I *think* their needs are.

Reflection, negotiation, and questions of power

In this personal account, I have sought to illuminate some of the processes in one example of mentoring. Some literature about mentoring posits a very masculine nature in its discourse. Not atypical is the focus on the role and characteristics of the mentor, with much less on the claims of the mentee. As Fabian and Simpson (2002) discuss—and Heather had raised as a fear—there is a suggestion that new members of staff go through a process of ‘acculturation’. They reflect on the mentoring process as an opportunity for management to play a significant part, so that staff beliefs and values become aligned with management interests. Yet institutions will be changed—evolving as the most crucial of resources, their people change. The mentoring process empowers both experienced and new staff to reflect together upon their roles and identities within an institution and the values of the institution itself.

As a mentee, I took significant responsibility for the development of the relationship with my mentor, supported by an ethos of negotiation and reciprocity provided by Heather and the institutional practices. This allowed me to be sincere with my mentor. I would argue that power is then negotiated between the mentee and mentor. While the mentor has power derived from professional experience and institutional knowledge and may work within a framework required by the institutional practice, the mentee is by no means a passive receiver of the mentoring process. Caruso’s research suggests that informal, ‘natural’ mentoring, is usually driven by the mentee

(as cited in Roberts, 2000). It is my assertion that a degree of such 'natural' mentoring gives the mentee a sense of ownership of the process.

As a successful mentor, Heather suggested rather than imposed, supported rather than judged. She recognized my strengths as a mentee and built upon them, responding uncritically when asked for support. She was prepared to question and challenge, but, more importantly, she empowered me.

Further reflection: women benefiting from mentoring

The benefits of mentoring as a reciprocal process are argued in this article. Other questions arise, such as whether women mentor each other differently and more or less effectively than men. Is there a question of power relationships in cross-gender mentoring dyads? In his discussion about the androgynous nature of mentors, Roberts (1999) suggests that mentoring may require high levels of stereotypically feminine behaviour and calls for further attention to this possibility, arguing that the majority of mentoring literature has neglected this point. Segerman-Peck (1991) advises that women particularly benefit from networking and mentoring. She describes the 'new girl networks' that women in business have used and compares them with the 'old boy networks' that have permeated business, the legal system, and formal politics. She examines why women need mentors and questions why they are less likely to have them.

I raise the question why the academy appears to acknowledge the need for explicit mentoring on induction to the new environment, but, unlike some business environments (see Clutterbuck & Megginson, 1999), rarely develops this practice subsequently except, perhaps, in the field of developing research potential. Furthermore, I query, as others such as Morley (1997) have done, whether academia should be added to that list of fields where the 'old boy networks' are particularly strong, and whether women compete on the equal terms that are often espoused. I am fortunate to work in a system that encourages such reflection but argue that we must go further. For our staff and students, the investment needs to be much more long term. As Wright and Wright (1987) warn, 'By not mentoring, we are wasting talent. We educate and train, but don't nurture' (p. 207). Mentors need nurturing too:

From this point onwards,
The protection around me is gone.
I look forward and realize what others expect of me.
I must now reinvent myself
as leader, as mentor, as researcher.
And so,
we will move on
together.
J. B. (inspired by a poem in Cosslett, 2000)

Acknowledgements

My thanks to my colleagues, Lynn and Richard, who commented so constructively on earlier drafts. My sincere thanks to Heather, to whom this work is dedicated.

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