Guest Editorial: Why Are Mentors a Must in Academia?

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As a faculty member and researcher, I have worn multiple hats during my career and needed guidance every time I wore a new one. Fortunately, I had great mentors I could rely on when my new duties were daunting or overwhelming. Sometimes, these mentors were other graduate students in my master's or Ph.D. programs; other times they were senior faculty, fellow researchers, or chairs of my department.

Finding a mentor should be an essential task in our professional lives. When I was a first-year student in my doctoral program, my initial questions were: Do I need a mentor? Who could be my mentor? What kind of help can I expect from my mentor? My program assigned me a senior faculty member to help me navigate the program requirements, however, that initial mentoring relationship didn't work as intended. I suppose my mentor was not familiar with my personal and academic needs at the time. As a foreign graduate student, I needed to acquire the cultural capital that would allow me to engage and connect with faculty in my program as well as other graduate students. These initial mentoring needs were instead fulfilled by different senior graduate students who shared their approaches to the program requirements, in addition to successful and unsuccessful experiences with faculty, all while over coffee. These mentoring coffee breaks made me aware that my fears and struggles were not just mine, but were also the shared experience of other graduate students. This realization, along with the constant support of various peer mentors, helped me persist in my Ph.D. studies, and later on it helped me aid other graduate students in acquiring the cultural capital needed to succeed. Thus, I can attest from my own experience that we need mentors in academia.

Once you graduate, mentoring becomes central in your professional life. The need for mentors in early career professions such as language teaching has been emphasized as a tool to keep teachers in schools beyond their first five years (Asención-Delaney 2012), so initiatives to pair mentors and mentees within the profession have started to flourish (e.g., the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) mentoring program). A mentor is key in familiarizing you with the tasks and expectations related to your roles as a teacher, researcher, and program administrator in academia.

My next question was: Who could be my mentor? At first, it seemed to be a straightforward answer—a more experienced member of my community of practice—whether a fellow student, a senior faculty, or a researcher. But the answer is not that simple, because not everybody can be a mentor. When I was asked to write this editorial, I asked myself who can be a mentor. I also asked this question to my colleagues, friends, and former mentors and mentees on Facebook and, in the process, I learned a lot from their responses. A mentor needs to have a combination of knowledge and personality traits that help them understand their mentees' professional needs and encourage their growth. A mentor has to be knowledgeable, skilled, and competent at the task or profession their mentee is starting to navigate in order to understand the challenges and make them aware of the available resources for them to thrive. Mentors' personal traits include being an attentive listener, being flexible, collaborating well with others, and having rapport with their mentees. Mentors also need the time, patience, and commitment to guide or advise their mentees without disregarding their mentees' personal characteristics, motivations, and particular goals. Nevertheless, as in any relationship, there are two sides to the coin, so mentees also play an important role in mentoring. It is worth considering if your personality traits align with your mentor's, what your expectations and goals are, in addition to how well you communicate them to your mentor. Flexibility and negotiation seem to be vital elements in any mentoring relationship.

What kind of help can I expect from my mentor? In my recent role as a mentor of graduate students in the Conference Connections mentoring program sponsored by the American Association of Applied Linguistics, I discovered that my mentees in this context had a variety of questions which ranged from personal matters, such as how to balance your personal and academic lives during a graduate program, to concerns related to research/academic issues, including how to narrow down a topic for a dissertation, networking in conferences and other institutional venues, publishing, and academic life after graduation. Topics are varied and depend on the mentees' individual needs, so the mentoring agenda is open and flexible. For instance, mentoring during COVID times introduced new topics in my support sessions with graduate teaching assistants facing online and hybrid teaching: we discussed not only teaching goals, strategies, and delivery of lessons using technology, but also how to manage teacher identity and teacher-student relationships in online environments. Of course, I was not the only mentor facing challenges in these difficult times, as can be seen by the recent volume of the *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, titled *Mentoring in Times of Crises, Pandemics, and Social Distance.* Therefore, mentoring cannot only provide tools and strategies to navigate unfamiliar contexts, but also can provide support during unprecedented times within the profession.

The final question or aspect I would like you to consider is why you should care about mentoring in our profession. Do you see yourself in the role of a mentor? Should you learn more about effective mentoring? It may be the case that, at this point in your professional development, you need mentors to survive academia. In addition, mentors are also role models who teach you about the personal and professional traits that define effective mentoring. Fortunately, we don't have to rely on anecdotes or learning by trial and error to understand how to approach mentoring in the different situations (e.g., dissertation or thesis supervisor, new faculty or graduate students) we are likely to encounter sooner or later in academia. There is a bulk of research on this topic in the form of publications such as *Mentoring Foreign Language Teaching Assistants, Lecturers and Adjunct Faculty* (Rifkin 2001), book chapters such as "Supervising Doctoral Students and Managing the Supervisor-Supervisee Relationship" (Dewaele 2020), conferences like the Mentoring Conference organized by the University of New Mexico, or journals devoted to mentoring such as the aforementioned. You can even focus your research agenda on mentoring to greater expand this field of inquiry. In any case, your mentoring tasks can help many grow in academia and make the learning and working environment much more welcoming and conducive to success.

Works Cited

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