Mentoring as seen through the lens of doctoral students

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ABSTRACT

This paper will describe the reflections of doctoral students as they complete their first experience of formal mentoring and examine what they discovered about the process and rigors of mentoring adults. Goals and objectives were negotiated and a formal written agreement describing trust, communication, time expectations and constraints, confidentiality of information, plan developing, success criteria and measurement, delineation of mutual responsibilities and target dates for learning goals was executed. Although the students all indicated a successful experience, the process of how each achieved that experience varied.

Keywords: Mentoring, mentoring reflections, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Throughout an individual's educational experience, they undergo transformation as they acquire knowledge, skills, awareness, understanding and information through experiences and studies (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus, 2019). Mentoring is one approach utilized in education that creates shared experiences and knowledge in both mentees (those individuals being mentored) as well as mentors (those individuals doing the mentoring). Mentoring can be defined as the teaching or responsibility of guiding others using one's own knowledge and experience and transferring that knowledge and experience to another (Bova & Phillips, 1984). Another description of mentoring is where an experienced individual (the mentor) is paired with a newer or novice member (the mentee) and is viewed as a key developmental source to increase that individual's knowledge and skills (Horvath, Wasko & Bradley, 2008).

This paper will describe the reflections of doctoral students as they complete their first formal experience of mentoring and what they discovered about the process and rigors of mentoring adults. The Mentoring and Professional Development doctoral courses were offered Spring 2019 and Summer 2019 semesters at a Hispanic Serving Institution. The spring course ran for 16 weeks while the summer course was for ten weeks. In order to prepare the students for this project, students were assigned to read the first six chapters of their textbook, Zachary's *The Mentor's Guide* (Zachary, 2011). For this project, students were to identify an individual (of their own choice) that they felt might benefit from the knowledge or skills possessed by the doctoral student and that were interested in committing to a ten-week mentoring relationship with the pair meeting once or twice a week during that time. Goals and objectives were to be negotiated and a formal written agreement describing trust, communication, time expectations and constraints, confidentiality of information, plan development, success criteria and measurement, delineation of mutual responsibilities and target dates for achieving learning goals was executed.

ELEMENTS OF A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

In this study, the concept of mentoring will be described as the basic elements or factors that may be used in a mentoring relationship. Jacobi (1991) recognized five items of general agreements that appear in a mentoring relationship, it 1) focuses on achievement or acquisition of knowledge; 2) consists of three components: emotional and psychological support, direct assistance with career, and professional development and role modeling; 3) is reciprocal, where both the mentor and the mentee derive emotional or tangible benefits; 4) is personal in nature involving direct interaction; and 5) emphasizes the mentor's greater experience, influence and achievement within a particular organization or career (in Berk, et.al., 2005 & Jacobi, 1991).

Reitman and Benatti (2014) write that good mentors are prepared to develop beneficial and powerful mentoring connections with their colleagues or coworkers; reinforce corporate values, missions, and goals; generate their own distinctive organizational history and knowledge for their mentoring approach and are willing to act as role models (Reitman & Benatti, 2014). In a study by Yob & Crawford (2012), two areas of mentoring behaviors emerged from the academic and psychosocial literature, both associated with student development and learning and both equally important. Within the academic domain, four attributes were identified which

were competence, availability, induction, and challenge; within the psychosocial domain, three attributes were identified: personal qualities, communications and emotional support.

STUDENT REFLECTIONS

Using the five elements that are basic to most mentoring relationships along with the two paradigms of academic and psychosocial classifications, the following sections will describe the reflections provided by doctoral students about their mentoring relationships after a short-term, ten-week mentoring relationship.

Identification of a mentee for the achievement or acquisition of knowledge

One of the first decisions the students had to make in these courses was identifying an individual to mentor throughout the ten-week semester. Although generally, mentoring is a gradually evolving activity (over a period of months or years) with a veteran mentor (the doctoral student), in this project mentoring a new or first-year teacher, a potential administrator or a colleague wishing to learn specialized knowledge or skills from someone who has mastered a discipline or field was key. The mentoring relationship does not have to be between an academic teacher/student but can also be between an experienced professional to a new professional or between an experienced doctoral student at the end of their studies and a new doctoral student at the beginning of their studies. Part of the constraint to this mentoring assignment was that the assignment ran from ten weeks in either the spring or summer, so the mentee students selected had to be committed to meeting and meeting during that time period. To that end, the following are key sentences used by some doctoral students to describe how they identified or selected their mentees.

"(1) Although I had trepidation in inviting my husband to be my mentee, he had just been hired as an 11th grade IB History of the Americas (HOTA) teacher for the fall 2019-20 school year and that had been my position for the last 6 years. When I began teaching, I had a difficult time as I did not have a lot of support from any of my colleagues. I know I can help ease my mentee's transition into this grade level and make his life a little more pleasant and less stressful. (2) This is my second semester in my doctoral program having just finished my technology education master's degree. I invited someone that had just started on their technology education master's program to be my mentee. I believe that one reason why my mentee agreed and chose me as her mentor was our same love and interest in digital technology. (3) In deciding who to select to mentor and knowing my love of mathematics, an ex-student had been asking for my help in learning how to explain the mathematical process of arriving at budgeting figures when he presented a budget to his Board of Trustees. He enthusiastically agreed to help me with this mentoring project since he knew could help him with the abstract mathematical skills needed in his current employment. He needed to improve his response skill to direct questions from the board in such a way that they understood the process and results of those processes in the arriving at the budgetary figures. (4) My mentee was beginning his new position as chairperson over a department at the community college where I have been a chair for over ten years, so I had extensive experience and knowledge to share with him. (5) After doing a lot of reflective thinking, I realized that the perfect person to mentor was right in front of me. For the past several months a faculty colleague had been

asking my assistance and guidance on using some of the new digital tools available to prepare our lessons for the start of the new fall school term. Because she had the desire and need to improve her use of these new tools and I had the necessary knowledge and skills of those tools to help her, our mentoring relationship seemed predestined. I also totally believed that she, as a lead instructor, would have a significant impact in influencing others on campus to implement these same educational technology tools into their classroom strategies. (6) My mentor almost just fell into my lap! Upon arriving at a meeting within the local school district, I was unaware of the reason for the meeting, but had been wanting to engage in a professional relationship with this school. The individual I was meeting was new to the school and had been presented with the task of the administration of a grant awarded to this school and she had no idea how to go begin going about working on it. Because I was a grant writer/administrator at the district level and had been dealing with grants for over seven years, I knew exactly how to help her and I immediately asked if she would be interested in being mentored; so that's how we began our mentoring relationship" (Jones, 2019).

Discussion of emotional and psychological support, direct assistance with career and professional development and role modeling

Throughout the discussions held during class about each students' mentoring project, the mixture and type of support needed was so diverse and surprising. In one instance, a second-year teacher had been having regular monthly meetings with administrators to improve his classroom management skills since he had had many problems in his first year of teaching class. Even though the mentor had specifically asked him (the doctoral student) if she could mentor him, the goal he identified to be mentored on dealt with balancing his professional and home life as he wasn't able to deal effectively with both. When establishing goals and objectives, the mentee did not include classroom management as one item to improve. It was only when discussing balancing his professional and home life, it was that classroom management was brought up as an aside concern. It was in this way that classroom management was added and soon became a second goal. Another student wrote in his reflection that his mentee wanted to become more familiar with the duties of an administrator as he had been tagged to run the summer school program at his district. He knew that I (the doctoral student) had managed the summer school programs for several years and offered to mentor him on the tasks he would need to tackle; so our relationship began by hitting the ground running and organizing how summer school would work, teachers he needed to hire, students that would be attending, etc. Doing all these things together created an emotional bond that was stronger than I had originally realized. In a third reflection, yet another student reflected that flexibility was another challenge for him because he was accustomed to structuring and working from an idea most of the time and would not really have anything remotely resembling a plan or outline. Flexibility facilitated my mentee's learning, because documenting his understanding and ability to be creative in expressing what he was thinking by writing it down led us to be able to discuss different ways of accomplishing the goals set.

Mentoring as a reciprocal process where both the mentor and the mentee derive emotional or tangible benefits from the relationship

Even though both parties in a mentoring relationship learn and grow from each other, students (the mentors) seem to, at times, be surprised at that growth and learning that actually takes place. The following reflections are from some of these student mentors that discovered what was transpiring because of their mentoring: "Doing things together with my mentee created an emotional bond that was stronger than I had realized. I believe that bond was what led us to be able to accomplish as much as we did in such a short amount of time." Another student writes, "from this experience, I learned that having a mutually respectful and trusting relationship is significant for the mentee to be comfortable sharing needs and desires for learning from and with the mentor; equally so, I can feel comfortable giving constructive feedback on the material being created and used within the lessons." "I have been challenged to think-on-the-spot to come up with different ideas for curricular problems that had never occurred to me and I find that I truly enjoyed this kind of challenge." "Previewing a course was something we learned together. I had seen the ability of a student to look up a syllabus if it is posted online; however, I wasn't aware the previous syllabi for previous courses were also uploaded." "Thanks to my mentee, I was able to expand my search into previously unknown databases and search tools and the *Yewno* discovery tool was seen in a new light." "I realize that I needed to admit to myself that I was not an expert in this area and reach out together with my mentee for help from those individuals who are experts. Not doing so, cost us unneeded time and stress. It was something of which my mentee is very understanding but I learned that my overconfidence can harm the process of progress toward a goal" (Jones, 2019).

Mentoring is personal in nature involving direct interaction

Meeting consistently each week allows trust and confidence in each of the mentoring teams to develop. "Respect, trust, and support were developed, built and nurtured during our working relationship as it progressed." There were many different types of opportunities to meet with mentees and many of them were used by the doctoral students to connect with their mentees. These reflections indicate such meetings:

"(1) When we were not able to meet, emails sufficed as a way to communicate but this form of "meeting" was not as extensive or as productive as our face-to-face meetings. (2) In our face-to-face meetings, another challenge was the unpredictable direction of our discussion during the second half of our meetings. We established a routine where the first half of our agenda was planned; but, the second half was left available for additional discussion items. I always felt nervous that I would not be able to answer a question that might come up. (3) At least during one of our two weekly meetings, we discussed our reflections at the start of our meeting followed by progress toward my mentee's goals. Afterward, the focus was more of a question and answer session which led to a series of developing details for topics of current issues happening at his workplace. (4) The mentoring project was scheduled during the summer, so at times, it was easy to meet more than once a week. Other weeks were difficult to meet in person, so we communicated through video conferencing. On average, we met twice a week throughout our mentoring relationship. (5) During the first couple of weeks, we did a lot of back and forth communication via email. We, then, would be sure to meet a couple of times a week via email which later morphed into a combination of email and google doc collaborations. This was mutually decided due to

comfort, proximity and scheduling. (6) A practice that I found effective with my mentee was to have quick and frequent temperature checks with him to gauge his progress. I noticed he became more reflective in stating how he was feeling: whether it was excited, overwhelmed, or stressed. My follow-up question was always "why are you feeling that way?" This allowed him some time to reflect and really hone-in on the tasks he was struggling with, had questions or felt strongly about. I believe this simple action facilitated his growth and allowed him to be more in tune with his strengths and areas of improvement. (7) My mentee and I met weekly several times a week with at least one formal meeting, but we tried to schedule two sessions. (8) My mentee and I met via Zoom on Sunday afternoons as that was the only time we were able to meet without interruptions. (8) We (my mentee and I) had the opportunity to collaborate in a co-teaching session, to have formal and informal meetings at my mentee's classroom and my office as well as via online. (9) Thinking about the two ways in which we communicated, email conversations were generally reserved for updates; encouraging my mentee to ask me questions and provide me with feedback on how the mentoring relationship was going was a continuing method of keeping up with the pulse of the mentoring relationship. The google doc was mainly used to collaborate on and accomplish his overall goals. Providing this separation of communication methods gave me a clear way to navigate through our interactions. (10) The time involved with my mentee took on some initial mishaps like "sandwiching time" between other work until we developed a plan in which time and setting were both conducive to learning. Learning how to not be distracted by cell phones or bells ringing was difficult. (11) We communicated through email and text on our scheduled days, Wednesdays and Saturdays; but we agreed to meet face-to-face if my mentee requested it" (Jones, 2019).

Mentoring emphasizes the growth experience for both partners.

In a mentoring relationship, each individual contributes to the edification of the other. In reflections received from the doctoral students, the following thoughts are shown:

"(1) My growth is the insightful information I have gained throughout this experience and relationship. It is a valuable experience that helped me to understand another persons' perspective. It taught me to be receptive to what someone expresses and that adults tend to want to learn through direct guidance and not direct instruction. Even when I thought we were off task, we were not. (2) Through my mentee's lived experiences and contextual understanding, I discovered another means to help him in the learning process. This process had multiple pathways that led to my mentee's learning outcomes. Taking the time to listen alleviated the trial and error that occurs in direct instruction when adults can verbalize what they understand or need to clarify. (3) Brainstorming and having my mentee share his thinking reduced the discovery process mishaps that often occur in direct instruction. (4) My mentee demonstrated growth by feeling less threatened regarding the indecision and lack of confidence of applying mathematical concepts to budget plans and graphics when presenting to a panel of professionals. (5) My mentee realized we were both equal partners in this mentoring relationship and I was committed to learning with him. (6) We kept our assumptions in check throughout the mentoring process especially at the beginning of the mentoring relationship; consequently, this increased the feedback frequency and the explicitness in descriptive explanations to make a clear interpretation. (7) My positive reactions were heightened when I received an e-mail from her (my mentee) after our last and

closing meeting. First, she confirmed that she was excitedly anticipating creating new content for her classes as well as wanting to continue working with me in the upcoming semester. Second, she had already taught another colleague about incorporating the new tools into that instructor's classroom strategy, and more importantly, she was excited to share with me that she was passing on what I taught her to her own mentee, another lead teacher in different discipline. (8) New learning for me from this experience is that adults can have a stumbling block that can become a permanent issue if not tackled with support and patience. (9) My mentee was able to recognize his own growth in the areas we targeted. What helped was that he was truly invested in learning about the intricate details of being an administrator. The area in which I saw tremendous growth was his planning skills and that I often pushed his thinking by asking probing questions. (10) One of the areas in which I feel I improved is in being the devil's advocate or pushing others thinking. This was because when I was a mentee, I lacked the confidence needed throughout the school year to push the thinking of my more experienced peers. But as a mentor, I now feel much more confident that I could develop his skills and mindset. (11) My mentee appears much more confident as a result of the mentoring experience and I believe he has improved significantly in each area of growth. This gives me confidence knowing that I helped him improve his skill set to make his job easier. (12) My learning experiences as a mentor provided me with scaffolding about what I already knew but pushed me to be more resourceful to gather information and relationships to add to my mentees learning. (13) My favorite experience relates to what I have learned from this relationship and that is that I do not have to be all for my mentee. I can reach out and ask others for help in order to gain the needed knowledge to pass along and therefore, learned to be more resourceful. Networking my mentee with others who might help is one perfect way of connecting my mentee with other experts" (Jones, 2019).

Coming to Closure.

All good things must come to an end and just like children grow up and leave the nest, so do mentoring relationships serve their purpose and end. Coming to closure of these mentoring relationships was reflected in the doctoral students' reflective journals as follows:

"(1) Having written the summaries of what we each learned helped me to realize the amount of time and effort that was part of the mentoring relationship. This feedback from our collaboration facilitated the closure of our mentoring relationship. (2) To achieve closure, my mentee and I reviewed the goals and objectives we created at our first meeting. We evaluated the areas where he felt he learned/improved and the areas he still believed he could use more support. Because we both found this to be an effective mentoring relationship, we have agreed to continue an informal mentoring relationship throughout the next school year. (3) Closure was achieved through a set of final meetings to identify achievement of goals with both of us expressing a tremendous satisfaction of working toward our goals. (4) We could have brought a satisfactory closure to our collaboration; however, we decided not to end it, but continue to maintain a supportive and encouraging working relationship during the school term. (5) We achieved closure as we agreed we had completed our goals and objectives; however, my mentee would like to learn even more about the possibilities in this field so is not interested in ceasing a relationship. (6) My mentee was a great choice as she was starting her first year as a school librarian. We have both agreed to continue our partnership through emails and web-conferencing meetings. We both will be part of a

learning community and will be sharing resources and ideas throughout the year" (Jones, 2019.

The reflections by doctoral students about their mentoring experience proved to be insightful and ran true to what is published in the literature about mentoring as a whole (Eby, Allen, Evans, Nq & DuBois, 2008). At the beginning, most of the students were anxious about their ability to mentor someone and feared they did not have the knowledge and skills required. As the relationships developed and coalesced, many realized that the fact that they did not know everything did not mean they were not good mentors; it simply meant they had to do a little more research to learn the information to assist their mentee. It was interesting to discover that, although a mandatory closing meeting was required, the majority of the mentoring relationships, were set to continue long after the end of the class.

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