Mentoring Across Disciplines and Educational Levels

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Abstract

Many professions are trained in a college or university setting. This training is entry level and provides the basics of what must be known to be successful. For many professionals to include primary and secondary education teachers and college and university faculty members, a mentor is needed to assist with overcoming obstacles associated with the early years in the profession. Many times, there are not sufficient mentors available within a department or school for the new professionals. The new professional should not be afraid to look outside of the normal avenues for locating a mentor. Mentors do not necessarily need to be within the same educational system or professional specialty.

Keywords: faculty, teachers, mentors, educational setting, professions, professionals

1.0 Mentoring Across Disciplines and Educational Levels

In the professional world, educational degrees give entrance to many professions. These educational degrees prepare for basic entry into a variety of professions to include teaching and nursing. For teaching, the new teacher is assigned to a classroom in their specialty, given requirements, and told good luck. For nursing, a first nursing position is similar but orientation with an experienced preceptor is added. If a nurse dares to leave the clinical practice world for teaching nursing students, the experience is much the same as the new teacher. For both of these examples, there is a gap that needs bridged. Mentors can assist with bridging the gap for the new professionals (Clark et al., 2020; Goodyear & Goodyear, 2018; Stephenson, 2014; Webber et al., 2020). Often the new mentor is from the same profession and facility (Clark et al., 2020) but a mentor does not have to be from the same profession, facility or university, or educational level.

According to Merriam Webster (2021) mentoring is, "someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person" (para 1). Although mentoring has proven effective (Webber et al., 2020), not every college, university, or school district has sufficient numbers of willing and prepared mentors for all the new teachers or faculty. This can result in a sink or swim reality. Students need well prepared faculty and teachers. The following paragraphs will look at the possibility of mentoring across disciplines, across educational levels, and generations.

2.0 Finding a mentor

As this paper is being written, the United States is coming out of a Covid pandemic. Many teachers and university faculty have found themselves performing duties that are outside of their realm pre-pandemic. Primary and secondary education teachers and college and university faculty had to find a way to put learning in an online environment with little to no notice or support. This new reality creates an even greater need for purposeful mentoring relationships. Finding a mentor that can provide a safe space to reflect and discuss how to be successful in this environment is difficult. Mentees must also consider where the mentor is in their career and if a mentoring relationship is beneficial to both (Webber et al., 2020). Although many mentors are within the same professional group, a good mentoring relationship does not have to be established with professionals from the same profession or educational level. A new professional may need to think outside the box when looking for a mentor.

2.1 Initial discussions

The mentoring relationship between the two authors started many years ago. The first author (FA) was a nurse and nursing faculty at a university. The second author (SA) was a BA in English graduate who was teaching English in China. The two knew each other personally and therefor what their strengths were. SA reached out first with a question about teaching English to college students in a foreign language department in China. She knew English and how to speak, write, and compose but not how to teach, assess, and evaluate. As SA was beginning to put together lesson plans and assessments, she reached out via FaceTime to ask questions about how to teach, plan, assess, and evaluate. This first phone conversation began the mentoring relationship. The mentoring initial was out of necessity but over time become one of mutual reliance. Finding a mentor can be as easy as seeking advice form a professional that you know and respect. Goodyear and Goodyear (2018) state the best mentoring relationships are formed when the mentee initiates the mentoring relationship.

Although mentoring can be a formal process, it does not have to be formal. Mentoring can be informal and still be effective. For FA and SA, the process was informal. For the initial mentoring, FA was in the United States and SA was in China. Given the 12-hour time difference, FA would often start her day eating breakfast and mentoring SA via FaceTime as she was finishing her day. This outlet allowed SA the space to think out loud, get creative, and gain confidence. FA gained the satisfaction of seeing her mentee learn, grow, and be successful in the classroom. The mentoring covered many staples of classroom teaching.

2.2 Mentoring Discussion Topics

The topics for the early mentoring included things like creating a syllabus, creating classroom policies, managing a classroom, creating assessments, and evaluating students. These items were applicable to both FA as a nursing faculty member and SA as a foreign language faculty member. Mentoring is about sharing and guidance as well as brainstorming and creating new ideas.

2.2.1 Syllabus

One of the first hurdles for SA was how to create a syllabus. The discussion revolved around what components belong in a syllabus. One of these components was that of policy. Policies for acceptance of late work, for classroom attendance, for grading of assessments, and for use of rubrics were discussed. Samples of policies and rubrics were shared between the authors. Having a mentor who had created and used all of these components was helpful to the mentee. These items would also be brought to bear once the second author returned to the United States, completed her masters in education, and accepted a secondary education English position.

2.2.2 Classroom management

A second hurdle was classroom management. How could the second author get the students to listen and do what was assigned? This solution became gaining an understanding of what was most valuable to the students. In her China classrooms, it was about being chosen to present or speak first. So, a consequence to poor behavior was assigning a student to go last. The idea of understanding your students and what is most valuable to them is a life lesson. As both authors transition to new roles and schools, this is a piece that continues to assist with assigning consequences and classroom management.

2.2.3 Assessment and evaluation

Another key area was one of how to assign grades and effectively evaluate students. The initial discussions were how to do what the Chinese university required. These discussions evolved over the years to be one that became reciprocal. All levels of students must be evaluated. Evaluating effectively is difficult even for seasoned teachers and faculty. Although this started simply to achieve an outcome in China, it has continued to be a part of this mentoring relationship. New assignments, new rubrics, new online items, new students, and classrooms are part of this ongoing relationship.

3.0 Reciprocal mentoring

In the literature, there is much discussion about mentoring and how it is a one-way relationship (Goodyear & Goodyear, 2018). Stevenson (2014) found that mentoring could be a reciprocal. **"**Reciprocal mentoring transforms mentoring into a two-way relationship where information and experiences are exchanged on a regular basis between the participants" (Stevenson, 2014, p 11). Reciprocal mentoring allows for a mixing of generations and know how that follows bi-directionally (Friday, 2020). In this relationship, reciprocal mentoring has flourished in the last few years. FA and SA are from different generations. As technology increases and more virtual instruction is expected, the multigenerational mentoring is priceless (Stephenson, 2014). Covid caused many issues that were unexpected. Both FA and SA had a niche of information that could be shared with the other. They have found ways to overcome the online obstacles presented and were able to integrate successful online strategies. The mentoring that started as one directional has developed into reciprocal. SA is now a master's prepared secondary education English teacher and FA remains a PhD prepared university nursing faculty. The differences in educational venues and generations allows for the reciprocity of ideas and assistance between FA and SA. FA will call to discuss an issue with grading or a new project. SA who now has experience in secondary teaching, a millennial outlook, and experience with the next generation, Gen Z, can offer her support and suggestions. SA will call for similar help when she encounters issues. FA and SA have created a mutually beneficial support system that is outside of traditional mentoring. What started with a new professional being totally overwhelmed has developed into a continued support system that allows both authors to grow and learn from each other.

4.0 Conclusion

Being a professional is never easy when one is new. Growing as a professional is easier when one has appropriate support. Finding a mentor can be difficult but looking outside of one's discipline can lead to a very productive relationship. Students are students no matter what level of teaching. These two authors are an example of how mentoring can transcend educational levels, professional specialties, generational differences, and traditional mentoring flow.

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