Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 20
Issue 1 *Professional Development*

Article 6

2004

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Recommended Citation
Mix, Julie Ann (2004) "Toward a Philosophy of Effective Mentorship for New Professionals in Composition and Language Arts," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1244

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Toward a Philosophy of Effective Mentorship for New Professionals in Composition and Language Arts

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What is the difference between mentoring and directing? What are the qualities of an effective mentoring relationship? These are the questions posed to eleven new professionals being mentored through the Michigan Council of Teachers of English "Teachers for the Dream" program (sponsored by NCTE), two of whom are currently serving as mentors and all of whom are bright and talented. Their accomplishments are many: twenty state conference presentations and one proposal acceptance for spring 2004; eight national conference presentations and four proposal acceptances for spring 2004; eleven published articles; a co-editorship of an MCTE publication; an MCTE Executive Committee appointment, and a two-year Spencer Research Training Grant at Michigan State University. From the "Dream" participants' answers and from supplemental models of mentoring as suggested in the literature, a basic philosophy of effective mentorship is formulated here, one useful to English educators desiring to strengthen professionalism in the field. Of course, the philosophy is not fixed, but rather situates itself on a continuum relative to contexts and purposes.

Attributes of Effective Mentoring Revealed

What is the difference between directing and mentoring? What are the qualities of an effective mentoring relationship? In answering the first question, "Dream" participants ultimately reveal the answers to the second:

Hall-Sturgis begins, "Directing is a vertical relationship...with little sharing of power. The overarching concern is timely task completion." Other participants concur: Davis notes, "The term 'directing' conjures up images of definitive starting and ending points with little opportunity for divergence. Given that scenario, I would expect the relationship between the director and the directed individual to be one in which the director controlled the process." Jackson adds, "Directing—in its strictest sense—manifests as assertions of power and control, reflecting more of the director's goals, objectives, and desired outcomes and less the needs of those being directed."

How, then, does directing differ from mentoring? Long compares the mentor-protégé relationship to that of film director-actor, in order to study the hierarchical, differentiating dynamics of the relationship. As a basis, she asks us to put ourselves in the mind of film directors who most often are focused on an end result and who presume a particular level of expertise on the part of actors. She notes directors' aversion to serving as guides in a developmental type of relationship. Furthermore, she maintains, directors tend to command an authoritative respect as they enter the set, as a particular "distance" is assumed. Conversely, however, Long suggests mentors tend to receive a welcoming reception—one that includes respect, certainly, but is often linked with warmth and fellowship, as mentors are primarily focused on positively influencing their protégés' development and on building a comfortable rapport with them, one characterized by open communication rather than by "distance." Long believes this type of rapport is essential to improved performance—a worthy end. In summary, then, in the mentor-protégé relationship, unlike the director-actor relationship, the participants establish a comfortable, respectful rapport, beneficial to development, where lines of authority are purposely blurred.

One cannot deny a mentor's experience sets

the mentor apart, however, nor can one deny the necessity for a measure of supervision. The mentor and protégé are not truly "pals" or equals. How is the gap successfully bridged? In his article summarizing the benefits of "contextual supervision," Edwin Ralph suggests the notion of degrees of applied supervision based on a sliding scale. The greater the need as determined by the protégé's actual developmental level, the more support provided. The degree should vary with the situation on an ongoing basis. Participant Jackson concurs, "Different applicabilities...should be determined by the purpose and the particular teaching/learning situation participants find themselves in at a given moment." According to Ralph, however, at no point does the mentor become merely "director," as mentors and protégés jointly determine the instructional tasks/skills to be practiced and the methods of supervisory observation and feedback (197). Collaboration is at the heart of the contextual model.

The irony, however, according to Cheyne and Trulli (1999) is the person in the driver's seat or "first voice" (mentor) naturally draws upon a "third voice," an "authoritative and institutional third party" situated in the cultural and historical context of each era, when advising the "second voice" (protégé), as suggested by both Bakhtin and Vygotsky.[1] This authoritative "third voice" to which Cheyne and Trulli refer is derived from Bakhtin's theory of dialogue (*The Dialogic Imagination)* and Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development (*Mind and Society* 86)—the "zone" being the distance between actual and potential development, wherein reasoned guidance is necessitated even when collaboration is involved (18). The question of interest here is, "How can a mentor maintain a collaborative sense of partnership and contextual supervisory balance in the presence of the 'third voice'"? A compromise must be struck, it would seem, to achieve congruence. That is, an effective mentor reflects on the "third voice" in reference, but employs a communication style tempered and shaped by a keen sense of active, collaborative, guidance—a "working with"—adjusted to particular circumstances.

Relative to the enactment of "adjusted" collaborative guidance, none of the "Dream" participants report heavy-handed, inflexible supervision on the part of their mentors. Rather, they stress the value of their mentors' "guiding hands," revering their mentors as knowledgeable experts, wise in the ways of supervisory measures and wise in the ways of their fields, inclusive of the ways of the "third voice." In specific relation to valuable guidance on the part of his mentors, for example, Kirkland extends the notion of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development in terms of the mentor's involvement: "Not only does a mentor establish a path to follow, she is also *part of the journey* itself. She provides an example of how to travel [...] and offers ongoing support as we move along a path of development, [providing] an awareness of a world of possibilities." Tate underscores a distinct balanced, collaborative quality: "The difference between mentoring and directing is that a mentor is someone that works *with* you, 'scaffolding' you in the right direction." Hall concurs, referring to her relationship with her mentors, who "opened the doors of possibility and helped me to walk through them [...] Through it all, they never backed away from the task at hand and always kept me encouraged." In sum, therefore, mentors draw upon the "third voice," that of established authority, when considering "possible worlds" for their protégés, but manage to work *with*—to share—in a manner diametrically opposed to didactic or dictatorial styles much more common to directors. In the mentoring relationship, collaboration is key to establishing an invested partnership, and the degree of supervision is wisely adjusted according to need, at the planning stages and for the duration of the relationship.

The collaborative nature of an effective mentoring relationship, however, invites an element of emotional attachment. As Jackson notes, "Mentoring calls for faculty to become intimately involved in a student's life, becoming a sort of surrogate mother or father, big sister or brother." He refers to his mentor as his "surrogate mamma" to whom he turns for help, even beyond the limited

realm of the academy. Other participants agree. Mentors who join protégés "on the road" usually choose to do so in a heartfelt way. For example, in relation to personal attachment, Keaton states, "Perhaps the most important part of mentoring is personal and emotional. There is a sincere interest on the part of the mentor to guide and even serve as a role model. Mentoring takes all aspects of learning into account, the intellectual as well as the emotional." Dickens continues, "Mentoring is far more personal than directing. People who mentor create relationships and facilitate the development of others." Hankerson remarks on how deeply her mentor cares about her well-being and success and continuously provides encouragement during an ongoing growth process: "I inform her of my accomplishments and she praises me and encourages me to keep striving." Kirkland underscores the genuine, open communication style of his mentoring relationship, such that, "Not only do I 'hear' my mentors—their advice, encouragement, stories of experience—they also 'hear' me." Hall notes how comfortable she was with her mentors and their ability to appraise her ability and to encourage her involvement: "I think I probably wore out their ears [...] with my questions and or concerns." A level of authenticity is fostered through the personal touch.

Not surprisingly, authenticity is one of the elements of effective mentorship as described in "Teachers Mentoring Teachers" (Reding and Hurst). It may be attributed in part to empathy felt by mentors—as participant Davis notes, "Mentors remember 'I was once there.'" Even in the absence of empathy, however, a sincere regard is felt and demonstrated by many mentors, resulting in an emotional attachment often eschewed in business or acting worlds. Mentors differ from directors in that usually they are motivated by empathy or personal interest in the development of those in their charge. Mentoring differs from directing due to the nature of the authentic personal dynamics at play.

Furthermore, a measure of reciprocity not associated with directing is often realized in a mentoring relationship. "Dream" participants noticeably include it. Remarking on the collaborative nature of the mentor-protégé relationship, for example, Hall-Sturgis stresses the mutual self-fulfillment involved: "Mentoring is a collaborative relationship in which mentors are interested in helping others learn in order to better themselves and their circumstances. There is usually personal satisfaction in sharing oneself and one's knowledge in a mentoring capacity." Denham and Hankerson underscore the importance of a lifelong relationship between mentor and protégé built on trust, born out of support, direction, and encouragement. Keaton stresses the importance of the reciprocal learning process. As the mentor guides the "student" toward more individualized meaning making, the mentor also learns (as one learns best that which one teaches). Jackson notes, "The interplay within mentoring relationships is mutually beneficial for both the mentor and the mentored as they seek common ground. Mentoring involves high expectations on the part of the mentor and the mentored." A certain synergism is at play in a successful mentoring relationship. Mentoring is different from directing in that frequently mutual benefits are realized which do not derive from one person merely telling another person what to do or how to do it.

Finally, whereas directors usually do not necessarily desire to serve as powerful motivating figures for professional development on the part of their "charges," mentors often do. For example, Davis reports:

> My mentor has been very instrumental in fostering my professional development in the field of Composition and Rhetoric. The knowledge I have gained [...] has become the foundation for my doctoral research in qualitative studies and community-based learning. I know I would be less prepared to complete my dissertation and enter the job market without her ongoing mentorship.

As a "Dream Team" member, Davis presented at a state conference.

Additionally, Denham states, "My mentor has been very supportive in my teaching career. For this reason, I have decided to obtain my Master's

degree in Educational Leadership and Principalship at Central Michigan University. Also, he continues to support me as I prepare for presentations and keeps me informed about new opportunities in my career and in publishing." Denham presented at a state conference as a "Dream Team" member.

Furthermore, Dickens notes:

> I consider my mentor to be a representation of what I'm seeking to accomplish in my career, especially his contributions to the field of composition studies as an author. I benefit from his insight and knowledge of a subject that I am very enthusiastic about—Hip-Hop and its place in composition studies. My mentoring relationship [...] has a very strong impact on my professional life.

Due to her mentoring relationship in the "Dream," Dickens has presented on Hip-Hop at a state conference and has chosen the topic for her dissertation.

Also, Hall states, "I think that through my own experience with having a mentor, I can be an effective mentor to someone else. I have been amazed at how easily I've moved from being an observer to being an active participant." As a "Dream Team" member, Hall presented at a state conference, published two articles in MCTE's *Michigan English Teacher (MET)*, and went on to assume co-editorship of MCTE's *MET* and a role on MCTE's Executive Committee.

Additionally, Hall-Sturgis relates, "I'm fortunate enough to have my advisor and dissertation director as my mentor. From a publishing standpoint, this mentorship has been invaluable to me. I've acquired great experience writing for a professional audience." As a "Dream Team" member, Hall-Sturgis published an article in MCTE's *Language Arts Journal of Michigan (LAJM)*.

Also, Hankerson remarks, "I believe everyone should have the opportunity to work with someone who can provide insight into the appropriate direction to take. When I need assistance, my mentor is always there to readily help. She has helped expose certain creative sides in me I didn't know existed." As a "Dream" participant, Hankerson presented at a state conference.

Additionally, Jackson notes:

> The 'Dream' program provided my first opportunity to present as a graduate student at professional conferences. In fact, four presentations at state conferences were later turned into major papers, which I presented at national conferences such as NCTE and CCCC (The Conference on College Composition and Communication annual convention). Also, my presentations that began at MCTE via the 'Dream' program have turned into three publications.

As a "Dream" participant, Jackson, who is currently a faculty mentor in the program, has also recently received word of acceptance of three national conference proposals and another state conference proposal. On several occasions, he has presented with the African-American "Dream" students he is mentoring because, as he points out, many African-American faculty mentors, especially those identifying themselves with Black Studies, feel compelled to serve as powerful motivators of Black students who are negotiating the often unfamiliar and hostile territory of the academy, both in relation to course work and professional development. This obligation, Jackson notes, derives from the onus reflected in W. E. B. DuBois's "Talented Tenth" essay: the few Blacks able to gain entry into white institutions are obliged to help uplift the masses. Therefore, their motivation derives from cultural ties.

Whatever the cultural connections of the mentors, however, all "Dream" participants have been powerfully motivated by them and continue their success stories here: For example, Keaton reveals, "Being mentored has helped to give me the confidence I need as I begin my career as a teacher and scholar. My career as a published scholar began specifically because of my being mentored through this program. Were it not for my mentor [...], I would not have had any publications as early in my career as I did." Keaton presented at a state conference and published in the *MET* as a "Dream Team" participant.

Furthermore, Kirkland notes, "Certainly, with the expertise of my mentors, the travel toward career advancement and attaining the goals which lie at the ends of the roads are within reach. Without such support, it would be difficult to make this claim." Kirkland is currently a mentor for the "Dream" program. As an active participant, he presented at four state conferences and two national conferences. He also published in the *Journal of Teaching of Writing*.

Long also observes:

> "Dream" mentorship has impacted me tremendously, especially as a woman of color. Due to my mentor's encouragement, I have had the opportunity to interact with women who share a common vision for students—academic excellence—sharing the same methodology to reach that goal. [...] This constant interaction only inspires me to continue with the goals that I have set for myself.

As a "Dream Team" member, Long presented at three state conferences and published three articles in MCTE's *MET*.

Finally, Tate relates, "Through this program (being mentored), I was presenting at conferences my first year as a graduate student. I realized that my world should be bigger than my department, expanding across many activities, situations, and people." As a "Dream Team" member, Tate has presented at two state conferences and four national conferences. She received word of acceptance at another national conference being held spring 2004. Also, she was awarded the Spencer Research Training Grant at MSU for 2003-2004.

Clearly, all of the participants have benefited immeasurably from the intense encouragement provided by their mentors. Mentors, unlike directors, make a conscious effort to encourage and inspire their protégés to make dramatic developmental strides toward advancement in the field.

A Philosophy of Effective Mentorship for New Professionals in Composition and Language Arts

According to "Dream" participants, a philosophy of, or a theory underlying, effective mentorship appears to be grounded in two characteristics: vulnerability and trust—vulnerability on the part of the mentor and trust on the part of the protégé. Upon closer scrutiny, though, it becomes clear protégés are vulnerable, too, as they cannot foresee the results of the mentoring relationship and, thus, trust rather blindly. They invest much time and work, relying on mentors to "know their stuff" and to offer learned advice for purposes of professional development. Vulnerability, therefore, appears to be the key issue.

First, effective mentors are willingly vulnerable. In a successful mentoring relationship, mentors are not in authority in the traditional sense, as they serve as guides and are clearly on the road *with* their protégés, establishing solid, collaborative rapport. Intrinsically, an element of risk is involved, particularly for those in authority who feel most comfortable being fully "in charge." Effective mentors allow their protégés *in* even at the planning level. However, they do listen to the "third voice, the authoritative and institutional third party, applying it judiciously in a flexible, need-based supervisory environment throughout the relationship, adjusting as circumstances warrant. Essentially, though, they dedicate themselves as committed partners, sharing themselves authentically as they remember, "I was there." In doing so, they often find themselves on a slippery playing field. In some cases, they become much more personally involved with their protégés than they would have had they maintained the traditional teacher-student distance. However, due to an inherent resulting reciprocity, benefits are realized by mentors in terms of self-satisfaction gained through assisting worthy individuals and strengthening the foundation of professionalism. Through investing in closer relationships, mentors are more likely to share more fully in the accomplishments of their protégés, with a deeper understanding of their struggles.

Second, protégés are, also, willingly vulnerable. They must trust their mentors implicitly to motivate them in the ways of solid career and professional development—to know the proper "fit" for them in terms of presentations, publications, and networking opportunities. They must rely on their mentors not to be too heavy-handed, so as to discourage potential growth. Protégés cannot possibly know up front how beneficial their investment of time and effort will be. Even if they have noted other students' glowing accounts of experiences with particular mentors, they cannot predict their own individual outcomes. Therefore, protégés open themselves up to possible disappointment. In this light, when examining the accomplishments (as noted above) of the eleven "Dream Team" members involved here—twenty state conference presentations and one proposal acceptance for spring 2004; eight national conference presentations and four proposal acceptances for spring 2004; eleven published articles; a co-editorship of an MCTE publication; an MCTE Executive Committee appointment, and a two-year Spencer Research Training Grant at MSU—one is struck by the remarkable quality of the protégés' experiences and, by extension, the exceptional quality of the mentors who agreed to support them. Perhaps because mentors usually *choose* to mentor as opposed to finding themselves incidentally or otherwise assigned, by default a higher caliber of personnel is involved. That is, professionals who feel they have something to offer are those most likely tovolunteer. Faculty members who feel limited, it would seem, generally would not choose to step outside of the teacher-student classroom relationship to take on mentoring responsibilities. Yet, ironically, through mentoring, mutual professional growth often occurs.

The National Council of Teachers of English has funded the Michigan Council of Teachers of English "Teachers for the Dream" program for the third consecutive year, 2003-2004. Some of the participants referenced here and some incoming participants are busy with new projects, either being mentored or mentoring. What the "Dream" program has revealed about an effective philosophy of mentorship is a lesson in and of itself.

Notes

[1] Reference is made here to characteristics of the "magistral dialogue" of the Mediaeval scholastic tradition observed to be present in Vygotsky's work (1978) and in Bakhtin's work (1981 and 1986).

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