the changing profession

Against Representation: Countless Hours for a Professor

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WHAT WORK DOES MENTORING DO IN THE ACADEMY? TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION, WE FIRST HAVE TO ESTABLISH WHAT MENTORING IS. THE UNIversity of Michigan published a detailed handbook called *How to Mentor Graduate Students: A Guide for Faculty*, available online. One is expected to read a guide and to perform accordingly. But this guide confronts us with the difference between theory and practice and remains silent on the issue of how much time we spend mentoring.

Like so many other sectors of the world economy, the production of knowledge has changed, which means that the way we advise our students is taking new forms, particularly in the humanities. There are the specific tasks we all know well. For undergraduates, we clarify grades, explain an assignment, and develop an idea we presented in class. For graduate students, we supervise dissertations, advise on the job search, give tips on how to write an article well, and encourage them to attend conferences. Given the job situation in the humanities, we advise them to consider exploring other venues.

But perhaps more than any other activity we're expected to perform, mentoring is an open space, a loose idea. Any professor at any academic institution is expected to teach and do research. But what about all the work one has to produce outside teaching and research—the work of mentoring undergraduate or graduate students, for instance? We have no clear, quantifying ways to answer our trenchant questions about the kind of work we produce as mentors. How is it possible to describe it?

The work of a mentor in the academy is silenced by a process embedded in networks of signifiers that are already socially coded, an institutional discourse that prevents discussion of this work: one is supposed to do it and yet not document the countless hours it involves. Just do it! This is part of your workload as a professor! There is no need to talk about it. Because of this institutional discourse, mentoring is rarely mentioned in the academy. It is silent, and so I will approach it through silence. Understanding mentoring in terms of silence suggests the passage of time—an aspect of mentoring—along

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with the abstract qualities of mentoring, all that it does that lies beyond direct, quantifiable results and that makes it so difficult to discuss.

It is possible to understand silence in terms of time. Think of how we, as scholars, produce knowledge: by silently thinking through complex ideas for hours. But also silent is the time we spend with others, our teachers and our students, producing knowledge together. The silence of this time often seems less generative. The hours we spend on tasks such as the undefined duty of mentoring are lost to institutional silence. But in that silence the impossibility of representing the countless hours we spend with students is revealed. By attending to this silence, by writing about it, I wish to expose the traditions that make it impossible to represent mentoring, what it is and the time we spend doing it.

Part of the reason mentoring is silent is that we don't know how to speak about it, how to represent it. It exists in a liminal space between our work lives and our personal ones. Particularly in North American liberal arts colleges, unlike many other academic institutions around the world, students have easy access to their professors. Undergraduate and graduate students develop an informal working relationship with their mentors, and the issues we address often move from academic concerns to personal ones. To separate the academic from the personal would be to say that we are minds without bodies. It would suggest that intellectual work does not rely on emotions, does not come from our bodies. We are one: body and soul. But this means that defining mentoring as work becomes problematic.

What counts as work? Having coffee or lunch with a student to discuss an academic issue? Reading something a student writes that falls outside the defined parameters of academic work? Talking to students about their projects well after office hours are finished? There are no ready answers to these common questions because work in today's academy is not quantifiable.

Perhaps, then, mentoring calls for a kind of work similar to how a reader enjoys texts in Roland Barthes's playful spirit. Barthes asserts that literature is a liberating space of language, a playground of proliferating signifiers. Writing is happiness and seduction, a process permitting one to love words for their own sake, thereby producing *le plaisir du texte*. Barthes's ultimate aim is to debunk the myth of the representation of reality, of nature, human or not, taken as a referent, and to show that literature goes beyond representation. Literature is a privileged field owing to its ambiguity: it appears to have a unique meaning when in fact it has at least two levels of signification (denotative and connotative) and a multiplicity of interpretations. Literary signs refer to other signs and not to a referent in reality. From that standpoint, literature is a domain of freedom, where there is *jeu*, play with powerful and equivocal words. Barthes considers *jeu* to be found in the trembling meaning of words, which are always polyvalent (4).

Accepting this play, stepping inside the metaphoric space of the supreme game that is language, implies the acceptance of the cleavage between mentors and their students. The following story illustrates Barthes's pleasure of the text. There are unique moments in our careers, and this one is mine: I will never forget when one of my undergraduate students walked in during my office hours to ask me questions about Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. I spoke to her for about two hours and then sent her home with a clear set of questions, asking her to read the text many times before coming back to my office. From that moment on, we read this text closely by entering into contact with what is in the margins, with aspects embedded in the theoretical language. Together we read for what was not written. Like the text we found together in the margins, mentoring is a marginal activity, but attending to it, learning from it, can be an activity of great importance to us as thinkers.

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The work I did with this student on reading a single text recalls almost the same kind of work discussed by Hélène Cixous in her text *Reading with Clarice Lispector*:

> When we read a text, we are either read by the text or we are in the text. Either we tame a text, we ride on it, we roll over it, or we are swallowed up by it, as by a whale. There are thousands of possible relations to a text, and if we are in a nondefensive, nonresisting relationship, we are carried off by the text. This is mainly the way it goes. But then, in order to read, we need to get out of the text. We have to shuttle back and forth incessantly. (3)

This play of back and forth becomes increasingly dense, as does the work of mentoring. In reading a text, we are committed to an aestheticization of meaning in the same way we guide our students in order to shape their intellectual insights and career. Reading a text in detail brings us back to a unique experience we developed with students. There is a direct link between who we are and how we mentor our students.

Indeed, one thing we teach as mentors is how to move between different spaces, physical and intellectual. This is why part of the work I do with graduate students, particularly students of color and international students, is to spend time talking with them in the same way I spend time reading. I approach mentoring like reading a complicated theoretical text: it needs time and patience. And readers of texts can be interpellated à la Althusser; meaning will be produced. When I started contemplating Jean Genet as a negritude thinker, for example, I decided to have conversations with Aimé Césaire, a cofounder of the negritude movement. I went to Martinique with four students (two undergraduate and two graduate students) to meet this great poet and thinker. Not only did this encounter force a dialogue between these undergraduate and graduate students, Césaire also was fascinated with talking to them. He appreciated the fact that the students had traveled to meet with him. We spent countless hours on his island talking about his work. He encouraged me to continue this work with students: reading texts with them and giving them opportunities to discover other parts of the world, to meet and engage with writers and thinkers. If you have taken students abroad, you know exactly what I mean. All the hidden work that made that exchange possible gave those students a new means to see ideas and a more international understanding of the world.

But even without taking your students abroad you can teach them important strategies to help them think beyond the classroom. This is what my mentors did for me. As an undergraduate and graduate student, I had incredible mentors who invested their time in me. My undergraduate adviser, Professor Harvey Rabbin at Colorado College, taught me how to think outside the classroom. I used to have dinner with him and his wife and go for walks with his dog. We would sit in a café for hours. My love for reading philosophy comes from the countless hours spent with him. My graduate adviser was equally amazing. We would have dinner, go for walks, and spend long phone conversations working out ideas. Every time I went to her during her office hours, I came out with many articles and books to read. Only now, as a professor myself, have I come to understand how precious these relationships were and appreciate the time my advisers invested in me.

Now I do the same with my students. Every Friday I organize and cook a dinner. I invite a few colleagues to join our intellectual conversation. Students bring wine. We talk for hours. It is intense, but I do it because I want my students to learn and because I want them to see that mentoring is a part of everyday life.

Mentoring should be organic, blending into what we do. Learning should be part of all that we do, as students and teachers. Buying groceries together, we can share an article that might be useful. Or perhaps I can suggest, at a

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moment of dissertational despair, going for a walk and talking about the project. We become a regular presence in one another's lives. This is part of mentoring for me. For some of what we do must happen outside the classroom, in our addressing and responding to one another as empathic listeners—engaging in the affective, embodied communication from heart to heart that is at the heart of subjectivity.

In mentoring this way, you show students that they, too, are thinkers. You tell your students, "When you are a professor . . ."; you show them that you believe in what they're doing. Telling a student, "I want to work with you," or "I shared your project with a colleague of mine who is working on a similar topic," or "Reading your work made me want to read this novel that you mentioned"—that is mentoring at its best. It teaches students to share their work and ideas in a natural exchange. Showing students that their thinking matters, even if it is packaged in a hesitant style and immature work, is one of a mentor's most beneficial functions. A mentor's priority is to teach her or his students intellectual confidence and the pleasure of sharing ideas, without fear.

All students need this emotional support, as well as intellectual mentorship. But it is especially important for students of color and international students, who may not feel at home, or even welcome, in the academy. The work that faculty members do for these students should be recognized, yet often it isn't. Estelle Kamler and Shaireen Rasheed underline this point in their article "Mentoring Academic Women: Struggles for Advancement and Strategies for Change": "Faculty should be rewarded for efforts to recruit and retain minority faculty to help lessen the burden on existing minority faculty as well as to help meet goals for a diverse campus community" (11). If you, as a faculty member of color, are in an institution where students of color or international students feel that they do not belong and you constantly need to reassure them, you often do work for the institution that is paradoxically both unrecognized and expected: faculty members of color often spend a lot of time with students of color even as it is assumed that they will also mentor other students who look to them for help. So you mentor students of color in silence, important as that work is. It is hidden work.

The voices I nurture flee through cracks in the hegemonic wall formed by this work I do for the institution. I call it a wall because I have experienced it as such, because it is a front for an apparatus that I work for and that hides the work I produce in the academy. I call it a wall because it is plain (like plain speech) and dense (with the weight of public opinion) and because I run into it without hope of ever finding the door to a space that allows me to simply document the work I do with my students.

The academy is often structured in ways that perpetuate psychosocial oppression and hierarchies. Yet communication and communion take place there, as we break silences and respond to others, as we make in the communication that spans generations what Audre Lorde called poetry, the "revelatory distillation of experience," on which we predicate our dreams of survival and change (37). This polysemic, dialogic speech rises to action out of ourselves. But in mentoring the voices of everyday life are walled off, as if concealed in the crowd, murmured in an exchange that one forgets having heard.

I return to the problem of representation. In the chain of knowledge, the transmission of ideas and support from mentor to mentee is opaque and hard to conceptualize. It is a silent, invisible line that moves between what counts as work and what often does not. Perhaps joy, and the intellectual excitement it suggests, creates that line connecting generations. It would be unthinkable for mentoring not to give us joy. We feel intense enjoyment and pride when the students we have spent countless hours mentoring do well. Perhaps it is because seeing your students succeed is

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such a joy that the question of workload remains silent or is not posed.

Although mentoring is so often silent, so often unarticulated, it is part of the language we all speak, part of what we write, part of what we were taught and what we teach. I would like my reading of silence to be understood as a gesture of beauty, as a gesture of gratitude, as a recognition of the mentor's gift of knowledge to students so that they can grow as great spirits, great thinkers. To borrow a thought from Derrida, "the difference between *différence* and *différance* is silent" (Kamuf 59). It is this silence that we have to account for when discussing the countless hours we spend mentoring our students.

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