the changing profession

Peer Mentoring in the Academy

ROBERTA JOHNSON

In memory of my mentors, who were without peer:
Howard T. Young, Andrew P. Debicki, and E. Inman Fox

WHEN ATHENA WISHED TO ADVISE TELEMACHUS ON HIS QUEST FOR HIS LONG-ABSENT FATHER, ODYSSEUS, SHE SLIPPED INTO THE GUISE OF Mentor, the tutor in whose care Odysseus had left his son and household. Respected, wise, war-savvy Athena preferred to counsel her mentee or protégé in the form of a human male rather than as a female goddess.[1] The Greek story suggests the matters of hierarchy, selection, approach, relationships, and gender addressed in the proliferating literature on workplace mentoring. Athena's maneuvers behind the scenes also remind us that, compared with teaching, doing research, writing, advising, serving on local and national committees, editing, applying for grants, and evaluating colleagues and manuscripts, mentoring is perhaps the least recognized and least rewarded aspect of our academic work. The related but substantially different work of advising has achieved a more formal place in academic reviews.[2] Although journals, books, and articles devoted to mentoring attempt to codify the practice and assign it a formal place in the constellation of our working lives, mentoring continues to be elusive, difficult to define, and unevenly carried out.[3] I argue here that this ragged, catch-as-catch-can situation is not necessarily a bad thing. Overinstitutionalization could stifle the vitality of mentoring relationships, which flourish optimally when they are spontaneous, mutual, and open-ended.

Since 1978 mentoring has been a social science research area with formal experimentation, models, case studies, and theoretical formulations. Less-scientific writings on the subject also abound; an online search for items relating to mentoring in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* yields 2,522 entries.[4] This literature reveals a wealth of ideas and information that can contribute to thinking about our work as mentors to colleagues and students. I am addressing peer mentoring, between faculty members, although the border

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that separates a peer, "a colleague of similar level and rank" (Gottesman 4), from others we might mentor is fuzzy. Faculty members are easily distinguished from undergraduates and precandidacy doctoral students, but many of the same variables—hierarchy, power, age, gender—apply to mentoring any of them. Senior faculty members hold power over junior faculty members who aspire to move up the ladder, just as professors hold power over graduate students who hope to complete their degrees and begin careers. The border between advanced graduate student and junior colleague blurs, because graduate students become colleagues, usually at an indefinable moment before the dissertation is completed and the doctoral hood bestowed.

A good working definition of *mentoring* has been slippery for those who conduct research in the field. Early definitions focused on rigidly dyadic (one-on-one), hierarchical relationships, "whereby advice, counseling, and developmental opportunities are provided to a protégé by a mentor, which, in turn, shapes the protégé's career experiences" (qtd. in Bozeman and Feeney 722). Barry Bozeman and Mary K. Feeney prefer to emphasize informality in mentoring:

> Mentoring: a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psychosocial support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development; mentoring entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé). (731)

W. Brad Johnson adds "personal and reciprocal" to the relationship between mentor and mentee and "challenge" to the mentor's activities (20). Folk wisdom–like sayings found on the Internet capture these notions more picturesquely. For example, John Crosby defined mentoring as "a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction," and an unknown source observed that "[a] lot of people have gone further than they thought they could because someone else thought they could" (*Daily Mentoring Quotes*).

Holly Angelique, Ken Kyle, and Ed Taylor distinguish between "traditional" (asymmetrical, unidirectional) and "peer" mentoring, although these two types "may be said to fall along continua of their own." Traditional mentors provide "acceptance and support," dispense "advice and guidance," coach "in the ways of the institution," impart "important and sometimes privileged information," offer "visibility and exposure," and extend protection (197). Those who favor traditional mentorship argue that the relationship is unequal but complementary: benefits accrue to both mentor and mentee. The mentee may provide skilled labor while learning the ropes from the mentor: "The two are involved in reciprocal and simultaneous support, where both benefit and contribute to the learning process" (Creighton, Creighton, and Parks 42). Angelique, Kyle, and Taylor quote research asserting that "as mentees are trained in the practical and technical skills of the profession, 'they may undertake the more "mundane task" of the mentor's jobs and free them for more creative pursuits . . .'" (197). The quoted author's choice of "mundane" and "creative" belies the salutariness of this work relationship. Reciprocity between mentor and mentee need not be equal, but there should be an exchange, and reciprocity is one indicator of mentee satisfaction (Ensher, Thomas, and Murphy 422).

Angelique, Kyle, and Taylor believe, however, that traditional mentorships can be androcentric and exploitative and may lead to homogeneity in an institution. They find that mentoring between equals in rank can obviate the negative potential of traditional senior-to-junior mentoring. Since peer mentors are "roughly equal in terms of age, experience, rank, and/or position along hierarchical lev-

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els within their institution," the relationship would be characterized by "mutuality, rather than complementarity." They also note that an institution may organize peer mentoring with particular goals in mind—"improvement of classroom instruction, greater success in acquiring grants, and/or improving the chances of achieving tenure and promotion." The authors worry, however, that peer mentoring may not eliminate hierarchy and may provoke rivalry between peers for grants, publishing opportunities, and favors from the department chair. "Thus, peer mentoring can be intimidating as well, especially when mandated by one's employer" (198–200).

Felicitous mentoring between faculty members, be it traditional or peer, usually includes compatibility, mutuality, a long and spacious view of the relationship and of the profession, openness to change, a sense of justice and fairness, and not a small degree of altruism or generosity.[5] Ellen Ensher, Craig Thomas, and Susan Murphy employ social-exchange theory to study the satisfaction of mentees in traditional ("classic 'godfather'" [421]), step-ahead, and peer dyadic mentoring relationships. Traditional mentors "provided significantly more vocational and role-modeling support than did peer mentors," although "there were no significant differences found on the amount of social support or reciprocity provided to protégés among different types of mentors," which "suggests that different types of mentors can be useful in various ways for protégés" (433–34). The study by Ensher, Thomas, and Murphy monitored three types of support: social, role modeling, and vocational. Mentees reported more job satisfaction and greater career success with traditional mentors than with peer or step-ahead mentors. Not surprisingly, sociological research has found that the mentor's gender can influence the perceived success of the mentoring relationship. John J. Sosik and Veronica M. Godshalk conclude that female mentors "provided more role modeling and less career development" for both female and male mentees. Women mentors also offered more psychosocial support to mentees of either gender, but male mentors of women "were associated with more career development than any other gender combination of mentoring relationship" (102).[6] Had Athena been aware of this syndrome, she might have stayed home with Penelope in Mentor's guise instead of following Telemachus.

Some studies propose alternatives to dyadic mentor-mentee relationships. For example, Angelique, Kyle, and Taylor describe a nonandrocentric "musing group," which is "somewhat fluid and can be altered to fit the needs of the moment" (204). Lisa Driscoll, Kelly Parkes, Fresilda Tilley-Lubbs, Jennifer Brill, and Vanessa Bannister also propose group peer mentoring and collaboration in an "autoethnographically based approach"—"[a] group of pre-tenured female faculty members [who] advance from professionally isolated individuals to a collaborative group of writers through the peer mentoring process" (5). Contrary to those who fear that peer mentoring between professionals may foster unwelcome competition, the women involved in this study overcame a sense of isolation, the pressures created by "a productive rhythm" established by colleagues, and "lack of confidence in themselves as researchers" (16).

Complexivist theorists such as Nadine Kalin, Daniel Barney, and Rita Irwin posit what they call "a/r/tographic" inquiry or mentoring relations that occur in a "*space of emergence*": "'we do not know, for sure, who we are or who we are dealing with because it is only *through* our responses in this space that we *become* who we are'" (357). For these researchers, mentoring is a relational art form based on the mentor's respect, empathy, and compassion, in which "[t]here needs to be a level of professional intimacy . . . built on trust and commitment and promoting self-disclosure and risk-taking" (362). Their theory includes exchange and mutuality, but instead of being

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strictly work-related, the mutual exchange has emotional and intellectual dimensions. Both the autoethnographic and the a/r/tographic approaches can be considered self-conscious metamentoring, because those involved discuss and analyze the process as it unfolds.

Many of the sociological studies on mentoring include personal experiences and case studies. In this spirit, I offer my own, not as a model to follow but as an example of what can happen when academic mentoring is allowed to take its own course and when people of like mind and interests seek each other out and allow their relationship to grow in mutually beneficial ways. Most of the available literature on mentoring new colleagues focuses on senior-junior or junior-junior dyads in the same institution. My story involves a different kind of mentoring situation, one that began as a senior-junior pairing of people at different institutions but grew rhizome-like in new directions. At a key point the colleagues came together at the same institution, and eventually the mentor and mentee roles reversed. The relationship finally blossomed into an enduring friendship. In January 2001 Maite Zubiaurre, then a lecturer at the University of Southern California, learned that I was a visiting professor at Claremont McKenna College, nearby. She had heard me speak at a UCLA conference in 1998 and realized that we had feminist interests in common. She contacted me for a face-to-face meeting, which took place in February 2001. Over lunch we explored our determination to make a place for women's studies in the male-dominated literary landscape of early-twentieth-century Spain. Shortly thereafter, Maite sent me some article drafts to critique. As we continued to communicate, we realized that Southern California was home to many top scholars in our field who did not appear to be benefiting from the kinds of intellectual exchanges we were enjoying. So in 2003 we founded the Modern Peninsularists of Southern California to create a venue for sharing research and for keeping colleagues in our field abreast of lectures and other pertinent events at the many colleges and universities in the region. The group gathers for fall and spring meetings on different college and university campuses in Southern California to discuss two or three professors' current research projects. The electronic mailing list reaches from Stanford in the north to San Diego in the south and as far east as Las Vegas and Boulder.

As new faculty members in our field arrive in Southern California, we extend a welcome and offer to help them get settled into the academic environment. The group has become a place where young professors find mentors to read manuscripts and offer advice, where they have open forums to discuss their research programs, and where they can experiment and grow professionally away from the sometimes intimidating, judgmental eyes of senior colleagues at their home institution. At smaller colleges, there may be no one in a related field with whom to converse about research projects. We welcome graduate students to the mailing list and the meetings, but to date we have not made the semiannual research meetings a forum for graduate student presentations. The meetings offer PhD students the opportunity to make contacts with working professionals and to develop a sense of collegiality. It has been eye-opening for graduate students to observe the polish with which first-year assistant professors present their research, a skill so essential to landing a good job. Our organization of Peninsularists fits some of the sociological studies cited above, which recommend a loose-knit group approach to mentoring. As Ensher, Thomas, and Murphy observe, "[O]ne way in which protégés can receive a career boost from their mentors is through invitations into useful informal social/professional networks and provision of access to critical information" (423). Groups allow flexibility and a variety of mentors and thus can meet needs that vary from person to person and from one stage to another in a person's career.

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Maite and I were so energized by our collegial relationship that two years ago we decided to collaborate on a publication. I was then semiretired, with occasional visiting appointments at UCLA, where Maite had taken a tenure-track position. I was writing a book on Spanish feminist theory in typical humanities-style solitude when it occurred to me that there was no anthology of Spanish feminist thought of the kind available for French and Anglo-American feminist theory. I proposed to Maite that we put one together. She readily agreed, and we worked up a prospectus and shopped it around to publishers in Spain. When Cátedra, one of Spain's most prestigious publishing houses, offered a contract, we set to work. A year or so before we undertook research for the anthology, Luis Cuesta, a new UCLA PhD student enrolled in a graduate seminar I was teaching, asked me if I needed a research assistant. I gave him the monumental task of perusing Miguel de Unamuno's vast oeuvre for references to Santa Teresa. He accomplished this assignment so efficiently and effectively that I hired him for other research projects; he took more courses with me, and I became an informal mentor to him. Luis's work as my research assistant led to his collaboration on the feminist-theory anthology, with his name on the title page and on a contract. Maite and I are now cochairing his doctoral thesis committee, and the three-way collaboration continues in several formats. For example, Luis and Maite supplied me with much of the material I have quoted in this article. Maite found bibliography and quotations on the Internet, and Luis located and read many of the sociological studies. He and I have discussed some of the ideas they contain, and I feel certain he will carry the fruits of this research into his professional life. He especially noted the emotional support afforded by mentors, mentors' moral and ethical modeling, and the importance of the mentee's active role in the relationship.

As Maite has moved into mentoring her own graduate students, our relationship has changed. She included me in her work coordinating the purchase for the UCLA library of a large collection of novelettes of the kind sold in kiosks in Spain. We took a memorable trip to Spain together to assess the collection. Maite has also been instrumental in my continuing to receive visiting professorships at UCLA. For several years she has collaborated on projects with her doctoral students, an arrangement rare in the humanities although commonplace in the social and "hard" sciences (note all the multiauthor studies cited here). She coedits novels and story collections with her doctoral mentees; these editions provide students with insights into professional publishing and items for their CVs.

My personal examples hardly constitute the kind of data required to validate a serious sociological study, but I believe that lessons can be drawn from them. Anecdotage is illustrative. While it was serendipitous that Maite and Luis found me, they did take the initiative. Graduate students and young professionals should be on the lookout for people who might help them achieve their career goals. They cannot expect Athena magically to assume Mentor's role. Their Athena may be nearby, but they should also look beyond the immediate faculty of their institutions and consider alumni, retirees, and faculty members at other institutions. Wherever they meet a potential mentor, they should put their best foot forward, unaggressively and strategically revealing their merits. Ensher, Thomas, and Murphy found that professionals were more willing to mentor someone who seemed high-performance (423).

I have emphasized mentoring as a positive relationship between people that promotes their growth, creativity, and discovery of their appropriate place in the academic profession. W. B. Johnson calls this condition "generativity," the "art of bringing into existence, creating, and producing" (qtd. in Kalin, Barney, and Irwin 357). However, a few titles that come up in the online search for items

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on mentoring in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* point to hazards: "Graduate Students' Relations with Mentors Are Often Tense" (6 Sept. 1996), "Mentors and Tormentors in Doctoral Education" (17 Nov. 2000), "When a Mentor Becomes a Thief" (1 Apr. 2002), "The Pitfalls of Academic Mentorship" (13 Aug. 2004), "Do You Have a Bad Mentor?" (19 May 2008). Johnson's book includes a chapter on dysfunctional mentorships. The Athena model is not always benevolent. Mentors are not gods above the fray, and even the gods are subject to human emotions. We should remember Athena's treatment of Arachne when that masterly weaver challenged her superior's skill. If our mentoring is successful and a younger scholar surpasses us in accomplishment and recognition, we may not be immune to jealousy, nor can a mentee always avoid a sense of competition with a mentor. We cannot expect that a mentee will display the largesse enacted in the recent Israeli film *Footnote*. When a secretarial error mistakenly informs a scholar and father of an academic son that he has won the Israeli Prize, his son, the real honoree, prevails on the selection committee to award the prize to his father.

Sociological research suggests that mentoring can be learned through models and instructional programs, but one cannot overlook the importance of personality in the successful mentoring of peers and others. While the literature offers useful tips for improving mentoring, we have to ask ourselves if everyone in our profession is suited to be a mentor. Dick Gregory is supposed to have said, "One of the things I keep learning is that the secret of being happy is doing things for other people," and a popular saying confirms that thought: "We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give" (*Daily Mentoring Quotes*). Not everyone may have the generosity gene required to engage in mentoring or to be judged on it. Perhaps it is best that academic mentoring remain invisible, like Athena's relationship to Telemachus, that it not be counted in the yearly tally of merit points for salary or step increases, that it be free of evaluations and numeric scales. The personal satisfaction and pleasure one derives from helping others succeed seem reward enough; codifying and counting the mentoring experience encroaches on its altruistic dimension and converts it into one more assignment.[7] Mentoring is a great opportunity for alumni to remain connected to the institutions where they did their undergraduate or graduate work and for retired professors to continue to be useful. It is an aspect of our academic work that, like research and unlike teaching, advising, and grantsmanship, can be practiced long after retirement and be performed on a volunteer basis. It is a way to continue working and to give something back to a profession that has given so much to so many of us. Mother Teresa advised, "Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person"; Benjamin Disraeli is said to have counseled, "The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches but to reveal to him his own"; and, in an existential vein, Whoopi Goldberg believes that "we're here for a reason. . . . [A] bit of the reason is to throw little torches out to lead people through the dark" (*Daily Mentoring Quotes*).

Notes

1. While most of the social science literature on mentoring employs the term *protégé*, in the humanities we normally use *mentee*. Johnson prefers *protégé*, partly because it carries the French connotation of protection. Tellingly, a Spanish article genders the term as *telémacos* (Alonso García, Sánchez-Ávila, and Calles Doñate).

2. For a helpful distinction between advising and mentoring, see Creighton, Creighton, and Parks (42).

3. I randomly quote a few studies, but Johnson's book is most pertinent for a comprehensive overview of mentoring in academia. Johnson synthesizes a wide variety of scientific literature on the subject and offers a reasoned analysis of topics such as what mentors do; mentors' qualities; designing a mentorship; the phases, term limits, ethics, boundaries, and assessment of mentoring; cross-sex and cross-race mentoring; and mentorship dysfunction.

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4. A large number of these entries are answers to questions received by the advice columnist Ms. Mentor, and not all the questions and answers have strictly to do with the practice of mentoring.

5. I thank David Gies, a master mentor, and my husband, Ricardo Quinones, for pointing out problems with the term *altruism* in relation to mentoring, but I use it because it occurs regularly in social and animal science literature on seemingly selfless acts.

6. The authors admit that these results may not hold for professions, such as nursing and teaching, with a greater number of female mentors and role models.

7. Johnson confirms my opinion: "Among the most consistent research-supported findings from the study of mentor-protégé relationships is this: Protégés in informal relationships report more and better outcomes than those in formally assigned mentorships . . ." (27).

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