

Mentoring from the Middle

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Readers of this journal are not likely to offer much resistance when I write that teaching is extremely challenging, both in terms of practical skills for designing and managing classes, and in terms of the sheer amount of energy and sustained emotional effort it requires. As a result, mentoring is especially important for new teachers who are often overwhelmed by a multitude of factors, but particularly by the experience of being in charge of a classroom for the first time, an environment that probably seemed comfortable and familiar until it became their responsibility. Much of what follows will be applicable to the teaching profession generally, not just Latin, although I will address in some detail a particular experience that happened in a Latin classroom towards the end of this paper. The main goal of this discussion is to show how mentoring, like teaching, can happen in both formal and informal contexts. A ‘mentoring moment’ can arise as unexpectedly as a ‘teaching moment,’ and it is a crucial part of a teacher’s job to watch out for such moments so as to turn them into productive interactions. In particular, I will emphasize that the role of ‘mentor’ can be taken on quite early in one’s career, since the contributions of potential mentors are so varied.

All of us pass between a number of different social roles and it can be easy to think of yourself as more or less permanently entrenched in one role, even if you are attempting to move into another (as in the case of moving from student to teacher). Mentoring programs are usually specifically designed to manage such transitions, and they are often highly structured as well, involving a formalized pairing of mentor and mentee that lasts for a defined period of time and may even cover defined issues such as time management or work-life balance. I have been the beneficiary of many such relationships, and I will address them in due course, but I am particularly interested in a less formal kind of mentoring that happens regularly but often without the participants even realizing what they are doing. Things as simple as a conversation over lunch with a friend, or a passing remark from a senior colleague in another department, if they occur at the right time and in the right way can be immensely helpful, especially if the person in need of advice is ready to receive it. An area where many of us could improve is in recognizing such interactions for what

they are: mentoring. Without the intentionality of a mentoring relationship, miscommunications can easily arise on both sides, as I will discuss below, ultimately diminishing the value of those interactions.

The following story about teaching illustrates what I mean. I can remember with great clarity the very first class I ever taught. It was in January of 2004, and it was a discussion section for a Greek mythology class. I was a 23-year-old first-year graduate student and I had received precisely one day of training before walking into that classroom, but, all things considered, I was pretty confident. Then class actually started. I went through a few procedural matters, did a little ice breaker activity, and began to cover the day's material. I remember a lot about that first class: names, faces, the horrible green tile walls, but the thing I remember most is my own reaction when I saw students writing down what I was saying. All my preparation to that point had been focused on simply getting through the experience. How would I fill up the time? What would I do if a student asked me a question I could not answer? How would I make the students like me? But when I saw those students taking notes, it suddenly came home to me that I had a real responsibility to them—that, as improbable as it seemed to me, they saw me as an authority figure and a person from whom they could expect to learn sophisticated skills and concepts. My preparation changed after that, and I began to focus more on what my responsibilities were, what my students needed from me, and how I could make sure that as many of them as possible got what they needed. In short, I became much more aware of what I was doing at the head of the classroom and, as a result, much more intentional in how I approached it.

These were good changes and in the long run have made me a much better teacher, but my immediate strategy for dealing with the sudden realization of my new role as teacher was distinctly unhealthy. I was terrified that I would fail in my task, and I compensated by drastically over-preparing for every class meeting. This level of preparation seemed like virtuous self-sacrifice at the time, but it was undeniably destructive. I was working late into the evening almost every day, my own course work suffered, and the whole idea of work-life balance was close to non-existent. Although my supervising professor was very nice and approachable and obviously willing to help—and for all the help he gave me in our meetings I am extremely grateful—at the time I was still fresh out of college myself and totally intimidated by all professors. I had a hard time getting up my courage to talk to them about anything, and most often I just avoided it if at all possible, even when I

knew I needed help. I was not ready to receive the help I am sure they would gladly have given. So I turned to fellow graduate students instead for advice on all kinds of things and in their generosity they responded warmly. In this case, I did not have a formal mentoring network set up, but I was fortunate to be surrounded by people who were not only knowledgeable, but willing to give extensively of their time. They became a network of ad hoc peer mentors for me.

Those are people that I reached out to for help, but there were others, too, who saw me struggling and offered unsolicited advice that made a real difference for me. In particular, I remember two senior graduate students who, on separate occasions, saw me working late in the library and encouraged me to go home and get some rest, assuring me that everything would be fine even if I made a mistake in class and reminding me that all of us do better work when we are well rested and happy. Because those graduate students seemed to me like more successful versions of myself, I followed their advice and began to limit my working hours. I still have a tendency to be a bit of a workaholic, but I have gotten much better about it and my improvement started with those people I respected and admired going out of their way to give a little guidance when they saw it was needed. In this instance, informal, unstructured mentoring—taken in small impromptu doses—had a big impact on my ability to do my job properly, and also to do it in a sustainable way. In short, my ad hoc mentors, whether they knew it or not, prevented me from burning myself out just as my career was getting started, a well-known danger for early career teachers (Chang).

More recently, from 2012 to 2014, I held a post-doctoral fellowship in Classics at Colorado College, where my duties entailed teaching, research, and broad participation in the life of the department and the college. In this fellowship, and at Colorado College in general, mentoring is an extremely prominent element. I had a formal mentor assigned to me at the college, no less authoritative a person than the Associate Dean of the Faculty; and I was sent to a professional development conference each year where faculty and administrators from other colleges critiqued my job application materials and talked with me about ways to establish myself in academia. Back at Colorado College I had other de facto mentors as well: the chair of my department regularly visited my office to see how things were going, observed my teaching, and offered advice where needed; my other colleagues in the department also periodically checked in with me; the dean's office invited me to events specially designed for junior faculty; and so on in that fashion. This is a normal

feature of life at Colorado College. All the formal mentoring has created a sort of mentoring culture in which people go out of their way to try to help new young faculty, or at least that was my experience. Senior faculty from other departments reached out to me so that I got a diversity of perspectives both on the college and on the academy in general, junior faculty in other departments showed me the ropes in other ways and gave me a social outlet, and before long I had a large network of people I could approach for advice on a wide range subjects. Most importantly, I felt entirely comfortable doing so.

In such an environment it can be difficult to make a distinction between talking about work with a colleague and ‘mentoring.’ Nevertheless, I think it is important to point out that a sense of intentionality, an awareness of one’s possible role as mentor, is a key factor in making sure you are giving good advice, and, when you are on the receiving end, in making sure you are interpreting advice in the right way. If you are just talking about work with a colleague, you might end up blowing off steam and saying things you do not really mean, or only partially mean, but if the person you are talking to looks to you for advice on a regular basis, how are they to know which of your complaints are genuine and which are merely the verbalizations of a frustrating day? Misunderstandings can easily occur, and in an unguarded moment you could end up hindering the professional development of a person you would prefer to help.

This distinction (informal mentoring vs. unmarked conversation) is something that did not occur to me at all until I was asked to participate in a panel at the annual meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South *as a mentor*. It had never crossed my mind to think of myself as such. I consider myself an early-career scholar, someone who is still in need of good mentors and ready to take the advice of more seasoned teachers and scholars. But I have been teaching for 11 years and there are plenty of people in the profession who are newer than me, so it should not seem strange to me that they look to me for advice just as I looked to more experienced people (and still do). It was like that first day of class all over again—a sudden realization that I have to watch what I say and what behaviors I model. I try to maintain a professional demeanor in general, but who knows how often I have let my guard down and missed an opportunity to help someone who needed it just because I was not thinking of myself as a potential mentor at that particular moment? Who knows how often I have blown hot air while someone was seeking serious advice? Intentionality and awareness as they relate to mentor-

ing need to be bigger features of my professional conduct going forward, and I am already working on that.

The invitation I just mentioned arose from an experience I had in the summer of 2014 when I was teaching introductory Latin at Colorado College, the last class I taught there. This class was a great example of the back-and-forth of mentoring. I co-taught it with Kendra Henry, who is a master teacher of many years' experience from whom I knew I would be able to learn a lot. When we first started planning the class I fell comfortably into the role of mentee and listened when she talked about what had worked for her in introductory Latin in the past. She was very generous in providing such advice, and teaching materials as well. I taught the first half of the class and she taught the second, and during my half Kendra came by once just to meet the students. Ultimately she decided to sit in for a session. I was happy to be observed by someone so knowledgeable, and after that session I asked for her opinion of how I had conducted the class that day and we had a productive correspondence. Working closely with Kendra benefited me in many ways, but one of our students, Ben Burtzos, added an uncommon element to the class.

Ben is a Colorado College alumnus who had asked to sit in on the class entirely because he wanted the challenge of learning a new language, but he teaches at a school that offers Latin and after he made this arrangement with us the school found itself in need of another Latin teacher. Since Ben was planning to learn Latin anyway, his principal saw an easy solution to that problem. As a result, what started out as a fun summer project turned into an intense program of professional development for Ben: learning Latin in June and July in preparation for teaching it in August. Because of this professional motivation (and his natural disposition as well) Ben was an eager student. He regularly did large amounts of extra work so he could get the practice and he also regularly met with me outside of class. During these meetings, we certainly talked about Latin, but our conversations often turned to teaching as well. I had a lot to say about what Latin students struggle with and how I like to teach the language, but Ben is an experienced teacher himself. He had taught history and literature for two years at that point, and we traded a lot of stories and tips and theories pertaining to running a successful class, often focusing on our shared experience of being relatively young teachers.

As I describe it now, it sounds a lot like a mentoring relationship, wherein I was the slightly senior partner. I did not recognize that at the time, but Kendra did and it was her suggestion that we present our experiences in a mentoring panel that

opened my eyes to what I had been doing. The conversations Ben and I had were, I hope, beneficial to us both, and the advice I was able to give from my experience in the Latin classroom hopefully contributed to what has been a successful transition for him, as he moved from his roles as a Latin student and teacher of non-Latin subjects to Latin teacher. My mentoring network temporarily extended quite a bit through the accidents of that summer Latin course. For a time I gained a new mentor in Kendra and a mentee in Ben who also functioned for me as a peer mentor. The flexibility and temporary nature of the relationships (since I was about to move to a new job in Illinois) underscore the complexity of a good mentoring network. The roles one takes on in such a network can overlap and complement each other in productive ways, but the more aware you are of the roles you are playing, the better you are able to play them.

This experience worked out well in spite of my imperfect recognition of the roles I was playing, in large part because the personalities of all the people involved meshed nicely. But the idea of a mentoring network—one that involves people who are more senior than you, less senior than you, more or less on the same level as you, and all contribute to the network in different ways—brings with it a powerful need for awareness of the multiple roles that can be played by the same person. Everybody knows that mentoring is important. New teachers are often encouraged to seek out mentors; senior colleagues are generally aware that it is part of their job to help out the younger members of the profession; but for those of us who stand in the messy, grey middle between those two poles, it is all too easy to be oblivious to our ability to help our less experienced colleagues. If we extend the concept of mentoring beyond formal pairings to include a whole range of social and professional interactions, it will quickly become clear how often ‘mentoring moments’ arise. These informal, temporary forms of mentoring are every bit as important as more structured ongoing relationships—often in ways that are quite distinct from the training provided by a formal pairing—and the more aware we all are of how such interactions work, the easier it is to put them to good use in the service of building a strong new generation of teachers. And that, of course, is a goal we all share.

WORK CITED

- Chang, Mei-Lin, “[An Appraisal Perspective of Teacher Burnout: Examining the Emotional Work of Teachers.](#)” *Educational Psychology Review*. 21.3 (2009):193-218. Web. 20 May 2015.