Mentoring: From Athena to the 21st Century

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All these words reflect notions that seem to fit various definitions and ideas of our mentors. Perhaps the most acknowledged root of the ideas and definitions surrounding the concept of mentor is the well-known story from Greek mythology: Odysseus, leaving for battle, asked his female friend, the goddess of wisdom Athena, to take on the male form of Mentor to watch and guide his son Telemachus while he was away (Homer 1967). Thus, a name was given for beneficial people in our lives, and the themes encompassing mentors as helpful teachers were brought into consciousness. These conceptions of mentors have continued through the centuries and are reflected in the many definitions of mentors and in expectations of mentoring relationships.

Just uttering the word “mentor” may bring to mind images of supportive people in the past or present who have assisted us and continue to sustain us in our professional and personal lives. But “mentoring is a slippery concept” declares Patricia Cross (1999) in her foreword to Daloz’s second edition of Mentor: Guiding the Journey of Adult Learners. Indeed, a search through the mountains of literature and research concerning mentoring reveals differing definitions for the term. Levinson et al. (1978) defined a mentor as “teacher, advisor, or sponsor” (p. 97), leaving the term open to personal or professional connotation. Daloz (1999) gives mentors mystical powers, declaring that “mentors give us the magic that allows us to enter the darkness; a talisman to protect us from evil spells, a gem of wise advice, a map, and sometimes simply courage” (p. 18). Others choose to define mentors as helping more with professional life, such as Ragins (1997b), who describes mentors as people with advanced experiences and knowledge who are willing and, in most cases, committed to providing upward mobility and support to their protégés’ career development. Sands, Parson, and Duane (1992) add the idea of nurturing to their definition of a mentor: “professional guide who nurtures and promotes the learning and success of his or her protégé” (p. 124). Cohen (1995) describes mentoring as a one-to-one relationship; in order for the relationship to evolve, he prescribes a series of recommended hierarchical steps for the mentoring dyad.

The differing definitions of mentors reflect the various characteristics that seem to define informal and formal mentoring relationships. Informal mentoring relationships are psychosocial mentoring relationships, enhancing protégés’ self-esteem and building confidence through interpersonal dynamics, emotional bonds, mutual discovery of common interests, and relationship building (Kram and Isabella 1985). Formal mentoring relationships, in contrast, are generally organized and sponsored by workplaces or professional organizations; a formal process matches mentors and protégés for the purpose of building careers.
Mentoring relationships have been recognized as contributing to the psychosocial development of individuals (Caffarella and Olson 1993; Daloz 1986, 1999; Kram 1983). For protégés, involvement in a mentoring relationship has been associated with career enhancement, promotions, higher job satisfaction, and larger incomes (Ragins, Cotton, and Miller 2000). Mentors also seem to gain from these relationships: Erickson (1982) discusses the selflessness of mentors and the generativity achieved by them through their involvement with their protégés.

However mentors, protégés, and mentoring relationships are defined or explained, in the latter half of the 20th century, research and prescriptive practice ideas concerning mentoring and formal mentoring programs were frequently published. In the 1990s, more than 500 articles concerning mentoring were published in popular and academic journals (Allan and Johnston 1997). The ERIC database contains references to thousands of articles concerning mentoring. An examination of the titles, subject lines, and abstracts of these articles and books reveals the various interests and perspectives concerning mentoring taken by researchers and authors; for example, adult learning and development, workplace learning, service learning, peer mentoring, formal and informal mentoring programs, technology in mentoring relationships, changing workplace and societal roles and expectations, and diversity and power issues in mentoring.

Until the past 15 years or so, however, few empirical studies existed concerning mentoring; most studies and articles were anecdotal in nature and uncritical, making the assumption that mentoring was a universally positive phenomena for mentors and protégés, no matter the gender, race, socioeconomic class, or ethnicity of either mentor or protégé. (See, for example, Roche 1979.) By way of illustration, Daloz’s first book (1986) concerning mentoring unreservedly touts successful mentoring relationships that enrich the lives of all involved. However, in his second book, published in 1999, he gives examples of failed mentoring relationships and examines the reasons for these failures. Clearly, mentoring relationships may enriching for some but can be problematic for others, such as women and people of color.

Obviously, there are many different topics that one could pursue in a monograph on mentoring. Keeping in mind that our target audience is researchers, adult educators, human resource professionals, graduate students, adult and continuing education directors and teachers, apprenticeship training personnel, and inservice education specialists, the purpose of this monograph is to explore, from a critical perspective, emerging viewpoints, issues, and trends surrounding mentoring in adult learning. The next five chapters—

- explore the role of mentoring in adult learning and development (Mott, chapter one)
- examine research concerning mentoring in workplaces and educational institutions (Ellinger, chapter two)
- investigate the role technology plays in mentoring relationships (Guy, chapter three)
- probe the influences of power and diversity on mentoring relationships (Hansman, chapter four)
- conclude with suggestions and implications for practice (Hansman, chapter five)
What we hope to gain from this exploration is a critical view of mentoring in all its forms along with a clearer understanding of how mentoring has the potential to enhance (and perhaps at times hinder) many aspects of learning throughout adulthood.

With one foot barely in the 21st century, it is clear that mentoring programs and relationships are integrally built into many venues of learning in adulthood. What must be considered, however, is that as workplaces, educational institutions, society, and culture change, so too must mentoring relationships. As Kerka (1998) contends, “Like most institutions in a world of change, the age-old practice of mentoring is being influenced by new forms of work, technology, and learning” (p. 1). In this monograph, we take a critical stance as we hope to capture, report, discuss, and analyze current trends and issues regarding mentoring. However, we cannot possibly be inclusive of all issues surrounding mentoring. Therefore, what this monograph intends to provide is a critical lens through which we examine mentoring in its present forms, analyzing, discussing, and making suggestions concerning issues and trends related to the future of mentoring in adult, career, and vocational education.
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