Emerging Perspectives on Mentoring: Fostering Adult Learning and Development

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From the time that Athena, goddess of wisdom, assumed the form of Mentor to look after and guide Telemachus, mentoring has been used by individuals, organizations, and societies to promote the development and learning of promising persons. As Daloz (1986) noted, “mentors, it seems have something to do with growing up, with the development of identity” (p. 19) and thus are crucial in our development and learning. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the role of mentoring in fostering adult learning and development, consider the transformative nature of mentoring relationships, critically examine the embedded assumptions and limitations of mentoring relationships, and suggest how mentoring might serve the future of adult and continuing education. As this and other chapters within this monograph show, although mentoring relationships can foster adult learning and development, the processes and outcomes of mentoring are not necessarily benign. Both mentors and protégés, as well as the organizations and institutions in which they work, must be aware of the embedded power issues and the primarily unempirical and anecdotal, if not mythical, evidence on which most mentoring programs have been grounded.

Mentoring Explored

There are many definitions and nuances of mentoring. Caffarella (1992) defined it clearly as an “intense caring relationship in which persons with more experience work with less experienced persons to promote both professional and personal development” (p. 38). In his landmark text on effective mentoring, however, Daloz (1986) was more expressive in his assessment of mentors as guides who “lead us along the journey of our lives…. They embody our hopes, cast light on the way ahead, interpret arcane signs, warn us of lurking dangers, and point out unexpected delights along the way” (p. 17). As these definitions suggest, the relationships formed and the processes involved in mentoring can facilitate not only one’s career but psychosocial development in adulthood as well.

Although many terms are synonymously used for mentor—guide, role model, and sponsor commonly among them—Kram (1985) and others have differentiated among these terms in important ways. Although a mentor may indeed serve as a role model and sponsor, persons in these roles often have no emotional bond with the protégé and their assistance may be purely functional, without an affective component or concern for the protégé’s psychosocial development. Whatever the term, a mentor usually represents the superior characteristics, accomplishments, skills, and virtues to which the protégé aspires as a result of the mentoring relationship. As Levinson et al. (1978) noted, however, it is not the definition or terms used for mentors or mentoring that are important, but rather the “character of the relationship and the functions it serves” (p. 98).
There are a few guiding principles for effective mentoring. In order for mentoring relationships to function well, a healthy psychological climate must be maintained to provide a mutually beneficial and growth producing experience. Such a climate includes mutual trust, respect, autonomy, care, and appreciation. According to Daloz (1986, 1999), mutual trust and nonjudgmental listening are crucial to “move the [protégé’s] reflections onto a level where meanings are made” (1986, p. 125). Daloz emphasized the importance of giving the protégé voice so that both mentor and protégé can see movement in perspectives and thinking, eventually introducing conflict to promote self-examination and further development of alternative perspectives. Motivation is critical throughout the mentoring relationship, as are praising positive growth, modeling appropriate professional conduct, “providing a mirror … to extend the student’s self-awareness” (p. 234), and watching for signs that the relationship may be transformative and growth producing for both partners.

Many formal mentoring programs follow the often-cited model by Kram (1983, 1985). In her classic work on mentoring relationships, Kram outlined two basic mentoring functions: career and psychosocial. Career mentoring involves promotion and visibility, sponsorship, socialization, and coaching; psychosocial mentoring is more general in its role of friendship, affirmation, modeling, counseling, and support (Kram 1985). Both forms of mentoring provide valuable access to power structures and an understanding of culture in the settings or circumstances of importance to the protégés in the relationships (Ragins 1997b; Ragins and Scandura 1994). According to Kram (1983), mentoring relationships progress through a series of “four predictable, yet not entirely distinct” (p. 614) developmental phases—initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition. In his earlier biographical study of four well-known mentor pairs, Hobbs (1982) depicted a similar redefinition stage to include the protégé’s internalization of the mentor, reflective assessment of their relationship, and the protégé’s preparation to serve as mentor to someone else. In each of these phases, interaction patterns and interpersonal experiences are shaped by the individuals in the relationship and their needs, circumstances, and responses to one another.

Cohen (1995) likewise identified six behavioral functions of the mentor role, including relationship building and information sharing, a facilitative and then confrontive focus that encourage reflection and alternative thinking, modeling, and the prompting of a vision so that the protégé begins to take initiative for independent growth and learning. Cohen suggested important activities that accompany various phases of mentoring, ranging from understanding and empathetic listening in the beginning, to having high expectations and being able to motivate, and ultimately to assuming an oppositional stance in order to prompt new perspectives in later stages of the mentoring relationship. In Cohen’s functions, as in Kram’s (1983, 1985) and Hobbs’ (1982) stages, the focus is on development of the protégé, either cognitively, psychosocially, or emotionally—growth that is promoted through enthusiasm, communication, modeling, challenging assumptions, and promotion of broadened perspectives.
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The Role of Mentoring in Adult Learning and Development

Research suggests that mentoring contributes significantly to the psychosocial development of individuals (Caffarella and Olson 1993; Crosby 1999; Daloz 1986, 1999; Levinson et al. 1978; Sheehy 1995). The interconnectedness and support provided through mentoring can play a crucial role in negotiating the challenges of discontinuities, transitions, and new roles undertaken in the developmental process. A person new in a career field or life stage, for instance, can benefit from the encouragement, counsel, and shared experiences of a more experienced person who can share perspectives, ask critical questions, and provide opportunities for reflection and growth.

Like others before her, Kram (1983) noted that mentoring relationships have “great potential to facilitate … psychosocial development in both early and middle adulthood by providing a vehicle for accomplishing these primary developmental tasks” (p. 608). Levinson et al. (1978), for instance, maintained that during early adulthood the most crucial developmental function of a mentor was to facilitate the formulation and realization of a protégé’s dream. Although Levinson’s work in this regard focused primarily on career aspirations, mentors can also be instrumental in prompting visions for personal life goals. Levinson et al. noted that, particularly during the transition to early adulthood, a mentor might promote broadened and integrative thinking and encourage the protégé’s consideration of the societal impact of one’s dream. Then, in later adulthood, reappraisal becomes an important developmental dimension when mentors can help individuals come to terms with reconsidered life dreams, accomplishments, and adjusted life and career roles (Daloz 1986, 1999; Gordon and Whelan 1998; Levinson et al. 1978; Sheehy 1995).

Hansman (1998) cited some benefits of psychosocial mentoring relationships: friendship and emotional support, enhanced self-esteem and confidence, role modeling, and possible career advancement. Other research suggests that mentored individuals enjoy higher self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-assurance (Cohen 1995; Daloz 1986, 1999; Sheehy 1995) and that mentoring can facilitate communication and interpersonal skills and identity development as well (Fleming 1996). Because of the support and encouragement, protégés develop enhanced ability to reflect, learn to examine their cognitive processes, and are more prone to assess their strengths and weaknesses. As confidence and self-assurance develop, protégés may adopt more daring and enterprising attitudes and behaviors (Daloz 1986, 1999).

Mentoring may be especially important to first-generation college students, first-generation professionals, those entering career fields dominated by persons of a different gender or race, and working-class individuals pursuing higher education or career advancement. Stalker (1996) found, for instance, that women academics in same-gender mentoring relationships enjoyed a “special connectedness” (p. 298) that may be instrumental in helping negotiate the difficult young adult stages of identity/role confusion and intimacy/isolation as theorized by Erikson (1982), as well as the later adult stages of generativity/
stagnation and ego integrity/despair. Of Erikson’s eight stages of opposing dilemmas, it is in the early adult stage of identity development versus role confusion that a mentor may first play a significant role. Through modeling, listening, and encouragement, the mentor can help the protégé develop self-assurance and confidence in newly developing roles. Mentoring experiences can also be important in later adulthood as individuals negotiate one or both of Erikson’s later stages, as mentors demonstrate generativity and pursue ego integrity through volunteer work, writing, or continued learning. It is in these later stages that the mentoring relationship may also be particularly valuable to the mentor as well, as the experience provides an important source of generativity and stimulates the mentor to even greater reflection and life review.

The psychosocial benefits of mentoring relationships may vary significantly, however, depending on the gender of the individuals involved. The shared experiences, empathy, and potential for deeper emotional bonds enjoyed between women mentors and protégés, for example, may not be enjoyed by male mentoring pairs, who tend to focus more on instrumental aspects and benefits of mentoring and who may be concerned with maintaining social propriety and avoiding any sexual innuendo. Ervin (1995) also noted that mentoring in an educational context could be significantly power laden, especially depending on the gender of the mentor. In Ervin’s study, women graduate students’ mentoring experiences were frequently marked by “fierce negotiation,” infantilization, prejudicial grading, and silencing when their mentors wielded “authority over their subjects” (p. 447). In his sequel, The Seasons of a Woman’s Life, Levinson (1996) also countered the notion of women students being effectively mentored by teachers. Although teachers “served a few mentorial functions, enabling the student to realize specific goals, to feel appreciated, to cope with stressful situations … very few served the most crucial function of a mentorial relationship, namely, the development and articulation of the [protégé’s] Dream” (p. 238). Surprisingly, however, even though few of Levinson’s female subjects noted the presence of significant mentors in their early lives and careers, in later years, many were interested or actively engaged in mentoring younger colleagues. This is perhaps due to the recognition of the great value of mentors in the lives of women and their desire to provide mentoring relationships to benefit younger individuals in ways not made available to them.

Thus, as this discussion suggests, our needs for mentors change as we develop throughout adulthood; our mentors and the nature of the relationships may change as well (Gordon and Whelan 1998). Mentors assume a plethora of roles and functions, standing sometimes behind students in a supportive stance, walking ahead as a guide, engaging students face to face while listening and questioning, then finally standing “shoulder to shoulder … as companion, ally, and [fellow] learner” (Bloom 1995, p. 64).

The developmental benefits of mentoring are significant and promising. Among the most common is the use of mentoring to promote cognitive development and intentional learning. According to English (2000), mentoring is a “complex yet informal system of learning, initiation, and ongoing support that encompasses career and psychosocial support” (p. 31), which involves mutual respect and reciprocity. Bierema’s (1999) study of executive women similarly pointed to the importance of mentoring as a learning
strategy. All of the women in her study identified mentoring as critical to learning to negotiate the corporate culture. Women in the early stages of their career relied on “informal learning through relationships, mentors, peer feedback” (p. 112) as learning tactics; women more advanced in their careers agreed with the importance of mentoring in development and learning, often identifying themselves as mentors to those following in their footsteps.

Other research supports the assertion that mentors are crucial—but often missing or ineffective—for women in the workplace, especially for women whose identity was “anchored” by work. For women in many professional fields, for instance, there are few other women to serve as effective mentors and role models (Gordon and Whelan 1998; Hale 1995; Josselson 1990; Kram 1983; Ragins 1997b; Sheehy 1995). As Josselson noted, “for a woman to anchor herself importantly in work, her work has to matter to someone who matters to her…. The presence of even one person who validates the meaningfulness of her work can change an identity-distant job into an enriching and anchoring aspect of a woman’s existence” (p. 177). Guy and Hansman continue this discussion of gender issues and mentoring later in this monograph.

Transformative Nature of Mentoring Relationships

Mentoring is also considered to carry a social responsibility and to have a spiritual dimension, as has long been recognized in religious traditions and various helping professions (Daloz 1999; English 1998, 2000). In academia as well, Lyons, Scroggins, and Rule (1990) found that mentors play “an almost spiritual role in the life of graduate students” (p. 278). They found that mentors not only transmitted formal academic knowledge and provided socialization experiences into their chosen discipline, but also supplied encouragement and support that bolstered the students’ confidence, professional identity, and efficacy, giving them a vision of the identity they might one day achieve. Bloom (1995) also stressed the importance of mentors in an educational setting who provide support structures for reentry women whose personal or family support may be threatened by their return to formal education. Thus, mentors may provide a special advantage to individuals entering cultures other than their own. Lyon (2001) found, for instance, that friends, colleagues, family members, and neighbors, as well as hosts in the overseas cultures being entered by her American research participants, provided comfort, heightened sensitivity, and encouraged the adoption of alternative perspectives.

In her discussion of mentoring in terms of a radical humanist approach, Darwin (2000) stated that mentoring should be a reciprocal, supportive, and creative partnership of equals. Especially in peer mentoring, there is less emphasis on role-defined relationships and both parties “take risks with one another beyond their professional roles” (p. 206). Darwin suggested that mentoring relationships in the radical humanist perspective are “adult-like and interdependent … [in which] individuals transcend roles (or create different roles) and interact as colleagues” (p. 206); thus, the relationship becomes transformative in nature.

According to Mezirow (1990) and others, mentoring can promote transformative learning and development by fostering an examination of underlying assumptions, encourag-
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ing reflective engagement between mentor and protégé, providing deeper understanding of the dynamics of power in relationships, and developing more integrative thinking (Brookfield 1987; Cohen 1995; Gould 1990; Heaney and Horton 1990; Rodriguez 1995). Cohen and Galbraith (1995), for example, have noted the development and transformative power of mentoring programs by community-based groups such as Outward Bound, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts and numerous professional development centers. Gould further noted that mentoring relationships can assist individuals in negotiating changes that require new and improved attitudes and behaviors that result in “consolidating new views of reality” (p. 144).

Limitations of Mentoring Relationships

Mentoring is generally viewed as an altruistic, productive, even generative activity—good for both the mentor and protégé. However, there are limitations associated with mentoring activities and relationships. As noted earlier, mentoring processes and outcomes are power laden, frequently unexamined, and uncritically applied. Paradoxically, although women are often left out of formal mentoring programs and might benefit more from informally arranged relationships, there are fewer opportunities for women to be mentored. This is partially due to the unavailability of individuals willing and capable of serving as mentors and because women are seldom included in the informal settings where mentoring relationships are initiated, such as golf courses, private clubs, or sporting events. Unfortunately, there remain social taboos and suspicion of close relationships between mentoring partners in cross-gender mentoring relationships. Further, Daloz (1999), Kram (1985), and others have suggested additional difficulties with cross-gender mentoring, such as stereotypical assumptions regarding the importance of career and potential resentment by peers of both members in the mentoring relationship, thus limiting the psychosocial developmental potential in cross-cultural mentoring relationships (Shumate 1995). According to Crosby (1999), in all forms and instances of mentoring, “at the heart of the matter are issues of trust, comfort, and rapport [but]…. senior people might more readily act as instrumental sponsors than as psychosocial confidants for someone who differs from them on important dimensions of identity” (p. 10) such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, social class, or ability (ibid.; Hoyt 1999).

Many organizationally sponsored mentoring programs pair protégés with administrators or supervisors under the assumption that the senior person is in a natural position to recognize both the abilities and future promise of the person being mentored. Daresh (2001) and others, however, suggest that this may not only be disadvantageous, but also inappropriate. Although supervisors may be in a position to motivate, they may also function in an evaluative capacity with potentially punitive functions regarding the protégé’s performance. Additionally, the administrative relationship may preempt the open communicative and trusting climate necessary for effective mentoring. Finally, administrators are frequently isolated from their peers, thus compromising their ability to be empathetic, supportive, and even trusted.

Although research has shown that self-chosen mentoring relationships are the most valuable and productive, there is a tendency for mentors and protégés to choose
mentoring partners most like themselves (Daloz 1999; Hale 1995). This tendency, however, may prevent the sharing of differing perspectives, compromising the full development of the protégé and limiting the learning benefit to the mentor as well.

Mentoring relationships can be difficult, even destructive, for either or both parties in the later mentoring stages of redefinition as a “battle occurs at termination” and both mentor and protégé suffer from “ambivalence and anger … gratitude and resentment” (Kram 1983, p. 609). Levinson et al. (1978) concur that, regardless of whether the relationship ends abruptly or slowly, by choice or force, both the mentor and protégé may experience emotions and reactions ranging from rejuvenation to rancor, from abandonment to liberation.

In a more serious critique of the entire issue of mentoring, Stalker (1994) challenges the androcentric and didactic nature of mentoring activities and suggests that mentoring merely perpetuates oppressive and exploitative working environments, recreating the “patriarchal academe.” Hale (1995) and others note as well that formalized mentoring relationships most often function to reinforce the status quo by reproducing the disparate existing dominate power structures that mentoring seeks to make more equitable in the first place. As such, these practices may actually serve to limit individuals’ potential for full psychosocial development. Stalker (1994) found that women mentors, in particular, “engage in a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, we accommodate the patriarchal institution of academe, which threatens to consume and subsume us. On the other hand, we resist those structures and risk the consequences of anonymity and marginality” (p. 356). Stalker suggested a possible reconceptualization of mentoring that “allows [individuals] to mentor within the walls of academe at the same time that they reformulate the structure of those walls” (p. 370).

Voices of Experience: Narratives of Mentored Professionals

Perhaps the narratives of persons recently involved in mentoring relationships may add a valuable degree of context to the foregoing information. The three narratives are those of a young male teacher in his first year of teaching, a middle-aged woman entering academia as a new assistant professor, and a young couple in a franchised service industry.

Dan is a 24-year-old, first-year science and social studies teacher in a rural middle school. Dan’s preservice education included three semesters of student teaching experience, and his teaching assignment came with the formal appointment of a mentor. Dan’s mentor, a middle-aged woman who also taught social studies in a nearby high school, had been trained as a mentor and was paid a moderate stipend for her work with Dan. According to Dan, however, “it doesn’t do me any good to have a mentor across the county; we’ve missed some meetings because of school conflicts and it’s hard to find the time to get together. I don’t even think she can understand what it’s like for me as a male teacher; she treats me like one of her high school students, even calling me ‘sonny’ or ‘sweetheart.’” When Dan and another teacher and coach in his school began to talk, however, Dan seized the opportunity to establish his own mentoring relationship with the older
man, noting that “he’s accessible; I trust him and he understands me; we have a good rapport and I can learn from him even if we don’t teach the same subjects. I’d like to be the kind of teacher he is.”

After a long career in business and industry, Patricia recently completed her doctorate and joined a small college in the Midwest as an assistant professor in the school of business and management. During her doctoral studies, Patricia worked closely with two professors who “counseled, advised, coached me into the professoriate. They mentored me and when I graduated, I knew how to be an academic.” When Patricia settled in and began teaching, however, she noted with sadness that similar relationships were now missing in her new role. Patricia noted that, although she could “call on my old professors any time, what I really need is someone here to talk to informally, help me understand this culture, guide me toward—and away from—committees, even join me in some research and writing projects. I’m not sure the men in this department will even be willing or able to mentor me.” As a result, Patricia has sought out an old family friend and former dean to serve as her mentor and is in the process of forming a peer-mentoring group of women and men with similar needs.

Constance and Dave are new co-owners of a franchised service business in a midsized city. They serve a professional community with Internet-based services, educational brokering, and information processing. Constance, the company’s president handles the administrative details of the business, and Dave deals with marketing, promotion, and technical support. The franchise agreement included a formal mentoring contract that stipulates they are both to be mentored by a former franchisee. According to the couple, however, the assigned and paid mentor “focuses his total attention on Dave, largely ignoring—or worse, even contradicting—Constance’s administrative decisions, needs, and questions.” Dave added that the mentor “doesn’t seem to know how to relate to Constance, can’t take her seriously. He wants me to take charge of the administrative functions that Constance is better prepared for and needs his advice on. He is totally dismissive of her talents and, as such, is really of little help to us. We’re sure mentoring isn’t supposed to be like this.”

These scenarios point to the complexities of mentoring relationships and demonstrate the need to attend to the dynamics and contexts inherent in such relationships. These individuals’ experiences evidence the potential limitations and challenges of arranged mentoring, unequal relationships, gender issues, and stereotypical expectations—many of which are found easily in educational settings. These same scenarios, however, also evidence the great need for individuals to acquire mentors for both career and psychosocial development and the significant value mentoring can have for both parties. In two of the cases, the mentored individuals recognized the limitations of their mentoring relationships and took measures to establish their own more productive and meaningful mentoring experiences. Gender was not so much the issue as was a lack of respect; time and space for the mentoring to flourish was crucial; and informal, peer mentoring became valuable adaptations to the formal, paid arrangements. Thus, for psychosocial development in particular, the dynamics of the mentoring relationships, the context in which they are instituted and maintained, and the relationships that develop are critical.
components for mentoring success, whether for adult educators, administrators, and other professionals engaged in the continuing professional development of those who look to them for the advantages that mentoring can provide.

**The Promise of Mentoring**

Mentoring relationships hold great mutual promise for adults—whether as mentors or protégés—in terms of understanding and negotiating life’s challenging developmental processes, while promoting friendship, assurance, career advancement, rejuvenation, and transformation. Mentoring contributes to the development of professional expertise, facilitates team building and cross training, and enhances job satisfaction (Peterson and Provo 1998). Further, as Stalker (1994) and others have suggested, mentoring holds promise for promoting structural change and more equitable opportunities in our institutions, agencies, and organizations (Brookfield 1987; Cohen and Galbraith 1995; Daloz 1999; Daresh 2001). Thus, mentoring may provide significant developmental assistance to both the mentor and protégé, while benefiting a learning society as well. Aimed at promoting intentional learning and development, mentoring enables individuals to cope with change, challenges assumptions and perspectives, and promotes critical and integrative thinking. English (2000) views mentoring as a means of self-actualization for both mentor and protégé. She suggests that adult educators could “initiate mentorship structures in their places of practice, and … encourage individuals to mentor, to pass on their knowledge, skills, and attitudes to protégés and instill in them the social value of the field … fostering in them a shared commitment for the common good” (p. 36)—all valuable goals for practitioners in adult and continuing education.