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Stories of Informal Mentorship: Recognizing the Voices of Mentees in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Based on the 2014 OLA Super Conference session “Mentorship in Academic Libraries: A Universe of Possibilities,” this article explores the benefits of informal mentorship in its various forms and how librarians are embracing a new way of thinking about mentorship both individually and organizationally. The lived experiences of two professional academic librarians are shared as they argue that informal mentorship offers the opportunity to co-create a meaningful mentorship experience by recognizing the importance of the mentee’s voice. This paper will discuss the value of informal mentorship and how, when certain elements are present within it, this model can allow us to reimagine mentorship in academic libraries. Concepts such as “accidental” mentorship, “purposeful” mentorship, mentorship “network,” and “peer” mentorship are discussed.

Keywords

informal mentorship; purposeful mentorship; accidental mentorship; peer mentorship; academic librarianship

A Mentorship Story

Every librarian has a mentoring story, and many have a few. This is one of ours. In 2008/2009 a friendship was struck in the halls of a research university. One member of this duo was a librarian not yet two years out of an MLIS program, recently hired at the university and new to its dynamics and her role. The other member was an MLIS co-op student who was familiarizing herself with the ins and outs of her first professional experience. The two worked in the same

department with brilliant colleagues doing interesting work. Both had formal mentorship relationships set up through the institution that provided them support and helpful guidance.

As time went on, the two often found themselves talking about librarianship and the day-to-day realities of working in an academic environment, among many other topics. The co-op student graduated and entered the job-market as a new librarian, navigating interviews, job offers, and a move cross-country and back. The no-longer new librarian, who was gaining experience and knowledge, offered encouragement through the process and answered the new librarian's thoughtful questions. As their careers progressed, over time it became evident that what began as a friendship had become an informal mentoring relationship. It held great value for both of them and was very different from the formal experiences and perceptions either of them had about mentoring.

Introduction

What comes to mind when you think of mentorship? For some of us, it is the formal mentorship program we have joined as part of a professional association or been assigned to in the workplace. For others, it may seem like awkward conversations at regularly scheduled meetings with a manager or assigned mentor and a healthy dose of "going through the motions." On the other hand, for a lot of us mentorship appears in the wise words of a senior colleague with whom we can feel comfortable discussing professional issues and concerns.

Outside of these formalized relationships in academic libraries, mentorship is happening around us in informal ways all the time and with different people in our professional networks. In this type of environment, Marina Khidekal is on point when she writes that "for a new generation, the idea of seeking out a single career confidant is as old-fashioned as a three-martini lunch" (68). Helping others and teaching others how to help themselves is a fundamental part of being a librarian, and so it is only natural that, as professionals, mentorship – *good* mentorship – is a priority. But what makes mentorship *good*?

A "one size fits all" approach to mentorship is not viable in a time when the career paths of many academic librarians no longer follow a direct route. For mentorship to work effectively, it needs to challenge us to grow while also complementing the particulars of our career and life situations. For that reason, the type of mentorship we need can be much different from what is formally presented to us. The reality, as Professor Monica Higgins of Harvard's Graduate School of Education states, is that "one senior person can no longer be the only place you turn for career support" (Khidekal 68). Informal mentorship dynamics often occur among peers, within groups, and in multiple relationships across one's professional network. "Good" mentorship has purpose, even within these various informal incarnations, and can help us to develop a sense of professional identity.

Based on research in the field of mentorship and our own stories, we argue that informal mentorship offers an excellent opportunity to co-create a meaningful mentorship experience because of its natural tendency to recognize the importance of the mentee's voice. This can be different from a traditional mentorship experience and is no less valuable. This paper will discuss the value of informal mentorship in its various forms and how, when certain elements are present within it, this model can allow us to reimagine mentorship in academic libraries.

'Accidental' Mentorship

Colleen

Before pursuing my career as a professional librarian, my perception of mentorship wasn't exactly negative, but was limited to my stereotypes of what I thought mentorship was: an arbitrary and artificial pairing of a senior/junior duo. I doubted the benefits of what seemed like an awkward game of match-maker, and the chances of a 'mentoring match-maker' getting it right seemed slim. It was because of this that I was skeptical of traditional mentorship. To me, in order for mentorship to thrive between two people, those two people need to be invested in each other, and that is personal. When I met my mentor, our relationship had been such a natural intermingling of friendship and mentorship that neither one of us knew it was even happening! It was *accidental*.

Accidental mentorship plays by its own rules. It's often spontaneous when mentoring comes into play, and it ebbs and flows based on the unique professional experience you are living out. Perhaps you're seeking advice on how to better communicate with a particular co-worker, or maybe you're looking for feedback on a presentation you will be making soon. Whatever the situation or circumstance, the need for mentorship can't always be anticipated. Instead, it takes place spontaneously: in daily interactions and conversations in the hallways and offices of the workplace, during lunch or coffee breaks, walks around campus, committee huddles, drinks after work, or at special events. However and wherever your relationship already exists is where accidental mentorship can most naturally show up.

That spontaneity also comes from the fact that the dynamic of informal mentorship is self-directed. The relationship isn't bound exclusively to "mentoring moments," and so it is up to the mentee to proactively seek out and ask for advice and the mentor to offer it when she feels compelled and competent to do so. For me, that meant seeking out someone I trusted and whom I knew had gone through similar experiences not too long ago. Having found that person to already be a friend and colleague, I felt comfortable asking for help deciphering job postings, practicing mock interviews, and asking for guidance when it was difficult to see how my frustrations might actually be opportunities for learning.

This self-directed quality of informal mentorship contrasts with the often very structured nature of a formal mentoring dynamic and instead increases the mentee's level of agency within the relationship. Lois Zachary put it nicely when she described informal mentorship as not having "structured agreements or commitments, just two people committed to learning and a mentee who is motivated and open to change" (12). From this point of view, one would be correct in detecting an element of vulnerability and risk which can be intimidating but simultaneously empowers the mentee to take ownership of her career path.

Peer Mentorship

Informal mentorship is also happening in different shapes and sizes. No longer must we be tied to the idea of the one-to-one dynamic in order for effective mentorship to thrive. Informal peer mentorship groups are popping up in all sorts of workplaces – even libraries! Rather than limiting support to being shared top-down from one single senior level librarian to a junior, librarians are instead coming together and offering support to each other regardless of age and position. In so doing, we become "co-mentors...[who] vary our role and power depending on the project or issue" (Norrell and Ingoldsby 345). It's what Richard Blackwell from the University of Nottingham describes as the "feel equal factor" (37). This feeling of equality can mean barriers to active participation are lessened, confidence levels rise, and windows for growth and opportunity open.

The benefits of the peer group dynamic are abundant. For many of us who work in isolation, or simply just spend a lot of time alone in our offices (I'm sure more than a few us can relate), the group atmosphere is an opportunity to come together and offers a sense of professional community among colleagues (Norrell and Ingoldsby 346). Together, coworkers can share experiences, ask questions, listen to each other, and debate important issues affecting their work, organization, and profession. The informal peer mentoring group also provides the opportunity for deeper level thinking to take place, which is not always available to us in our regular day-to-day meetings with their often tight agendas and limited time for critical discussion (Karam et al. 58).

A group of scientists from the Harvard Medical School have been reaping the benefits of peer mentorship since 2011 and assert that the driving rationale for participation in their "Critical Discussion Group" is that "informal, unstructured interactions often yield highly creative feedback" (Klein and Lande-Diner 167). At the University of Iowa, librarians have expanded upon the success of a shared virtual space and have begun to meet regularly in-person at what they have coined the "Liaison Connection" for discussion, community, and peer support (Koffel et al. 535). Both examples show how workplace peer-mentoring can contribute to creating "learning environments where collegiality, trust, continuity, and critical feedback go hand in hand [...] as hallmarks of a healthy organization" (Karam et al. 57).

Librarians at Brock University have also begun to explore the advantages of peer-mentorship. Having moved from working in a small college library to a medium size university library, my network of professional academic librarians more than doubled. I found in my new role that sharing similar responsibilities with co-workers led to an increased sense of connection with fellow liaison librarians, and I was intrigued by the unique and varied types of work each of us was pursuing. However, the often hectic day-to-day responsibilities of work left little time for us to gather as a larger group. In response to impromptu conversations among liaison librarians and a shared desire to meet as a group more often, I and a fellow librarian initiated a grassroots, bi-monthly “coffee klatch” for informal discussion on various topics of interest. Attendance has been steady since our inaugural get-together last April, and there is consensus among participants to continue with regular meetings. There is no set agenda, but participants are encouraged to bring their “burning questions” to the group.

Purposeful Mentorship

Susan

Informal mentoring relationships may develop in unexpected ways, whether individually or in a group setting, but in order to be successful they must have a purpose. This can be achieved by asking meaningful questions, building a strong and diverse professional network from which to draw expertise and knowledge, and knowing one’s own values and goals. At the same time I was acting as an “accidental mentor” to a newer professional, I felt a great deal of pressure early in my own career to find the “right” mentor: someone to whom I could go with all of my questions and who would help me navigate the rocky terrain of my fairly new career. The problem was that, early-on, I did not know enough about my own professional identity to have a clear understanding of what guidance I needed or who might be the right person to approach.

The idea that one person can mentor us in all aspects of career and life is somewhat romantic and has a long history in academia. For those who have spent many years in post-secondary education, particularly in graduate studies, it can be appealing to “...sense that some key aspect of yourself, some part of who you want to be, is tied up into this other person’s view of you...” (Palaima). In a classic study in which tenured faculty members were asked to rank junior faculty on the basis of overall career success, almost all used their own personal careers and approaches to research, teaching, and service as the template for what it meant to excel in academic life (Cameron et al. 315). This perception of “academic cloning” has in some ways become aligned with the notion of mentorship in an academic environment. What is troubling about this dynamic is that it does not allow the mentee any, or very little, agency in the relationship. It cements the power imbalance in a way that can be negative and may result in mentees feeling as if they are at the mercy of their mentor to recognize when and how mentorship is required.

While this tension is not exclusive to formal mentorship, the pressure lessens in an informal situation where the expectations and roles are generally different for everyone involved. An already established comfort level between participants allows the mentee to take ownership and feel like a partner in the experience. In my own career, a mentorship program in a former workplace proved very helpful in navigating my day-to-day tasks and the particulars of the academic library environment, but it was the informal professional network that I created in my first couple of professional positions which made a marked difference.

By working with very talented colleagues, I was able to learn how to be the kind of librarian I wanted to be and also developed a much better sense of the areas in which I need mentorship. Documentary filmmaker Louis Massiah has described this kind of relationship as being one of “comrades” where “the learning comes from seeing how [your colleagues] address the problem at hand, how they live their lives, do their work, rather than merely listening to what they preach” (Palaima). No longer was I waiting on the sidelines hoping that someone would know what I needed and then impart their wisdom. Building trust and respect with my colleagues meant that I was more likely to approach them for mentorship around particular topics and to become a partner in the learning. It was at this point that mentorship became *purposeful*.

Questions for Purposeful Mentoring

As a new librarian, it was not always clear to me when I needed mentorship until particular situations arose that created questions, and sometimes doubts, in my mind. Now that I am at a more mid-level point in my career, having more professional experience and knowledge to draw on helps to self-identify when mentorship would be beneficial. Reflective practice has been discussed at length in the literature in the context of the value it holds for teachers (see for example the work of Donald Schon and Stephan Brookfield) and instruction librarians. Along with this, however, reflection is a critical component in the creation of purposeful professional development. As part of reflective practice, these are the questions I ask myself regularly to identify opportunities for purposeful mentorship.

- What are my immediate needs?
- What am I challenged by?
- Where can I grow?
- Where do I want to go?

Immediate needs may be as diverse as navigating a tricky personnel situation to writing a research paper. The mentoring that can happen here does not necessarily require a lengthy commitment. I received mentoring based on my immediate needs when I moved into my current role working with business faculty. I wanted to learn how to better communicate with this audience and connected with an experienced colleague in the field. We met for 1.5 hours, and our conversation focused only on this topic. I walked away with a notebook and

head crammed with ideas that I could apply right away. This immediacy of application is one of the advantages of purposeful mentorship. Respect and trust are required, but one's entire career does not need to be connected with the relationship.

Challenges are a part of all our professional lives, and they are nearly always areas for potential growth. Peer mentorship, and arguably informal mentorship, "offer a range of developmental supports for personal and professional growth at each career stage" (Level and Mach 304). Recognizing the places where we can develop as professionals, whether in technical skills, interpersonal relationships, managerial competencies, etc. can provide the opportunity for one to feel empowered when establishing a mentoring relationship. As careers develop and change, so too do long term career goals. Checking in with these goals regularly and asking "where do I want to go?" can help to identify areas of exploration and people who might provide some mentoring.

Rather than viewing academic careers as "linear progressions up a specified path," it can be argued that, like professors, an academic librarian's career is a series of "learning experiences" where connections and knowledge are developed constantly and then re-integrated into personal and professional development (deJanasz and Sullivan 267). Of course we all have areas that could be improved upon that may not be obvious in our own minds, no matter the depth of our reflective practice. This is when having a network of trusted mentors that one can speak candidly with can prove invaluable.

Building Your Mentoring Network

An individual's professional network can be a huge advantage when embracing informal mentorship. This can be especially true for those working in remote locations or in niche areas of librarianship where long-distance connections can be a life-saver. Informal connections can be built in the workplace through professional activities, in online networks like twitter and LinkedIn, or through colleagues of colleagues. The wider one's reach in a network the more likelihood there is someone who can provide mentorship.

Some scholars have referred to this as developing a "portfolio of mentors" rather than a network. These are the people who "can help [one to] develop across a variety of learning experiences and over the phases of their careers" (deJanasz and Sullivan 273). This portfolio of mentors is innately flexible, which allows the mentee to connect with a wide-range of skills and experiences. Accepting invitations to events, including casual coffees with an informal mentor (no contract, no specified length of time working together) can open up new areas for discussion and mentoring. I found this practice especially helpful early in my career when still developing my professional identity. My professional connections were genuinely interested in my story, asked open ended questions, and were generous with their knowledge and sharing of conversation. Because of

this, it became clear to me that being prepared for mentorship is important but so too is allowing for spontaneity.

Identifying Your Values

Identifying the need for mentorship and having a strong network play a large part in successful informal mentoring, as does having a very clear understanding of personal values. Values can be described in a number of ways but can be generally understood as “a unified trans-situational personal identity...that serve[s] as guiding principles in the life of a person” (Hitlin 119). Our values can change over time, but, for any professional making difficult choices, recognizing those values can help us remain true to our own goals and professional identity.

That we are human means that the wisdom and conversations shared in mentoring situations are not foolproof. Ultimately, it is up to an individual being mentored to recognize what resonates with one’s own values personally and professionally. Mentorship is not about blindly accepting the opinions of others, and sometimes that means respecting a mentor’s viewpoint but not necessarily incorporating it into one’s practice. That said, one of the biggest benefits of mentorship is that it allows us a chance to challenge ourselves to grow in ways that may not be possible without some extra encouragement.

Conclusion: Voices Carry

Nearly all of us have a story of informal mentorship, and though different, each can leave a unique impression. At the time, for a brand new librarian like Colleen, informal mentorship from a trusted colleague and friend helped build the confidence she needed to successfully land her first professional position. It offered a life-line to turn to when facing new challenges and a confidant with whom to share new experiences and successes along the way. For a more experienced librarian like Susan, informal mentoring brought about the realization that she could play an active and empowered role in shaping her own career. When the mentors she respected were so generous in sharing their own voices, she was able to claim her own.

Informal mentorship provides the freedom to think about mentorship in new ways. It creates conditions that positively influence the mentee to take ownership of the experience and share her voice. Informal mentorship also has the capacity to bridge the gap or remove the power-imbalance between senior and junior colleagues that is often present in traditional mentorship models. Because of the self-directed nature of informal mentorship, it necessarily requires the mentee to enact purposeful decision making, questioning, and reflection. This means it has the potential to impact one’s career path in ways that are quite different from traditional forms of mentorship. At the same time, the flexible nature of informal mentorship means it inherently empowers each of us to see ourselves as both the mentee and mentor, sometimes simultaneously. Informal mentorship enables

us to see ourselves as learners able to benefit from the help, advice, and guidance of others, no matter the stage in our careers.

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