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Mentoring Toward Interdependency: "Keeping It Real"

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Krista Ratcliffe and Donna Decker Schuster

While traditional mentoring assumes a “master-apprentice” model, this model is far too simplistic and fraught with cultural biases—such as, gender, race, class, and age—to engage without question (Enos 137; Rickly and Harrington 110-13; Carpenter 156-65; Ragins and Scandura 957-73; Brown et al 105-19; and Redmond 188-200). One question that emerged for the First-Year English Program (FYE) at Marquette University for us when beginning our tenures as director (Kris) and assistant director (Donna) was this: how may *mentoring* be redefined to resist the master-apprentice biases and to provide benefits for mentors and mentees? Our response to that question was to conceptualize and implement an *interdependent model* of mentoring that promoted productive administrative *habits of mind*.

Mentoring may be conceptualized as interdependent when its effects are envisioned as flowing in all directions and benefiting everyone involved, albeit in different ways and to different degrees (Wilde and Schau 174; Ragins and Scandura 958; and Brown et al 108). Despite this positive definition, mentoring toward interdependency with its multi-directional flow of effects should not be mistaken for a utopian vision, for such mentoring can be productive only when it foregrounds *real* differentials in experience and power. Indeed, at the site where these differentials intersect, commonalities and differences among people become visible and serve as sites of agency. Admittedly, the type and degree of agency is delineated by institutional structure and by power dynamics.

In such sites of agency, everyone may become not independent, but interdependent; in other words, everyone may learn how one’s own

agency arises in conjunction with the agencies of other people and institutional structures. Recognizing and engaging such interdependency provides mentors and mentees a means for learning how to define their own places within established institutional structures, how to negotiate these places, and how to navigate to new places. Negotiating one's agency within a program structure potentially provides new levels of professionalism for everyone involved.

Given these ideas, this essay offers stories that illustrate how mentoring toward interdependency fosters five administrative habits of mind. We ground our claims in the 2002-03 academic year when we worked together administrating the FYE program. Kris assumed directorship that summer and two institutional changes took place: she designed a new curriculum, and she negotiated for a new assistant director position, assumed by Donna. At that time, Kris was an associate professor; Donna, an advanced PhD student. Our duties, in part, included mentoring new TAs, experienced TAs, lecturers, and each other. Although our claims about interdependent mentoring emerged from our particular experiences, we believe that interdependent mentoring can be adapted by readers for their respective institutions.

To define and critique the concept of mentoring toward interdependency, we address five factors that informed our mentoring practices: (1) local institutional factors, (2) writing staff needs, (3) curriculum design, (4) staff personalities, and (5) training opportunities. Each factor is contextualized by the administrative habit of mind we cultivated. Together, these habits of mind construct a pragmatic vision of mentoring toward interdependency.

LOCAL INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS: *LISTENING AS* AN ADMINISTRATIVE HABIT OF MIND

The most important local institutional factor we faced in the fall of 2002 was the newness of our positions. Kris succeeded former directors who had defined the position and its duties clearly, although no written job description existed. To prepare for her new position, Kris merged her research interests with her administrative duties. By putting the theories of Aristotle, James Berlin, Adrienne Rich, and Paulo Freire into play and by engaging her own theoretical interests in rhetorical listening, Kris anticipated that listening could be used as an invention strategy by students for writing, by teachers for pedagogy,

and by administrators for directing a program. By listening to others, she constructed a CCCC award-winning program.

First, Kris listened to experienced colleagues. The previous director, Virginia Chappell, kindly gave Kris a list of monthly duties, walked her through scheduling, and gave her copies of all program documents. The director of the writing center, Paula Gillespie, often met with Kris to brainstorm ideas for a new curriculum design. The English department chair, Tim Machan, shared his impressions of the political issues facing the first-year program, given upcoming changes in the university's core curriculum. These interactions defined the administrative tasks for Kris in terms of daily activities, program policy, and institutional politics. As these experiences demonstrate, listening as an administrative habit of mind is important for mentoring toward interdependency because, when successful, it demonstrates a respect for others, creates a space for dialogue, fosters collegiality, and encourages reflection.

Second, Kris listened to students, both graduate and undergraduate. She attended a meeting of the Association of English Graduate Students to hear TAs discuss the strengths of the existing program, define their desires/needs, and offer advice for a new curriculum. She also informally asked first-year and upper-division students for feedback about the strengths of the existing program as well as about their suggestions for a new curriculum. In all these instances, Kris listened for patterns of ideas about curriculum, training, and structural power dynamics. Once Donna was appointed, Kris listened to her ideas about curricular and training issues.

Within this context, one story that remains vivid for Kris is when Donna came to Kris's office in the second week of fall semester, confused about the program's agenda for the year and about her duties in relation to that agenda. Her peers had questioned her about these very issues, and when she couldn't provide a clear response beyond "helping with TA orientation," they assumed she was to be a glorified research assistant, which upset Donna who was committed to making genuine intellectual and practical contributions to the program. Until then, Kris had been so preoccupied by curriculum design, training, and day-to-day decisions that she had not developed an agenda for the year. Donna's desire for clarity spurred Kris to draft such an agenda and to consult with Donna about its particulars and their respective roles.

This story is important to the concept of mentoring for interdependency because it demonstrates how rhetorical listening encourages a multi-directional flow of benefits. Donna's asking for clarification became a way for Donna to mentor Kris about working collaboratively with an assistant director, a way for Kris to mentor Donna about duties of an administrator, and a way for both to mentor graduate students about learning from peers (Brown 120-6; Gunner 8-15). It also fostered a new sense of professionalism in Donna about how to shape discussions and clarify one's administrative role. Donna discovered the agency to ask, "What should I be doing?" and "How can I make a contribution and support Kris, the TAs, and the FYE program?"

Moreover, this story is important because it engendered and confirmed a dynamic of openness that had been established earlier between us. From this openness, a collaborative style for enacting new curriculum emerged. We defined an agenda of program outcomes and deadlines, we revised the job description for the assistant director position, and we ran a methodology workshop concurrently with the practicum. On a professional level, Kris began to see how her research life and her administrative life could intersect in terms of rhetorical listening as a stance of openness that one may assume in relation to self and others in order to sidestep defensiveness and facilitate genuine communication (Ratcliffe 204). On a programmatic level, listening to ourselves, each other, students, teachers, and other administrators became a habit of mind that fostered what we came to call mentoring toward interdependency.

WRITING STAFF NEEDS: *PERFORMING TRUST AS* AN ADMINISTRATIVE HABIT OF MIND

When Kris became director, she redesigned the two-course sequence in the FYE Program. As core curriculum courses, RhetComp 1 (academic literacy) and RhetComp 2 (public literacy) had specific student learning objectives that had to be integrated into the new design. Given the need to make these objectives and the new curriculum accessible to the FYE staff, Kris set up a Blackboard instructor site. There staff could download sample syllabi, lesson plans, assignment sheets, peer review sheets, grade sheets, sample student papers, and external links for each unit in both courses as well as training materials used at TA orientation and staff meetings. Instructors were encouraged to submit their own documents to the site. Kris's goal was to develop a dynamic

site where instructors could access documents, revise them to reflect their own voices, and then resubmit revised versions to share with colleagues. By making the Blackboard site open to all contributors, Kris hoped to make visible her trust in the writing staff.

To generate this trust, Kris asserted that, even though each course had specific units, detailed student learning objectives, and common textbooks, each teacher was responsible for negotiating his/her own place within the program structure. For Kris, this negotiation was made visible via sample lesson plans, which allowed the writing staff to see what other people were doing in the classroom. For example, at TA orientation, the favorite session was microteaching where TAs shared lesson plans and performed them for each other. During these sessions, TAs asked so frequently if they could "steal" each other's lesson plans that a running joke emerged: "In pedagogy, it's not called plagiarism, it's called 'sharing.'" During TA orientation and later at the pre-semester staff meeting, Kris stressed that what works for one teacher may not work for another. For pedagogy is more than a lesson plan; it is dependent upon an individual teacher's beliefs, interests, talents, rhythms, and *ethos* as well as upon a teacher's embodiment of the program structure, along with an eye and an ear toward students' needs.

Within this context, one story challenged us not only to listen rhetorically but also to perform trust. Although the Blackboard site was very popular that first semester, one use of the lesson plans triggered different responses from each of us. A few TAs and lecturers were simply downloading lesson plans and using them in class, without adapting them to their own beliefs about writing and pedagogy—in sum, without thinking them through. As a result, Donna suggested removing lesson plans from Blackboard. Although Kris considered this idea, she ultimately resisted it. She wanted to give teachers time to discover for themselves what worked for them in the posted lesson plans, what did not work, and why. She wanted them to understand what she had been saying at TA orientation and the pre-semester staff meeting: pedagogy is a negotiation of the programmatic and the personal, and such negotiation takes time.

This story is important to the concept of mentoring for interdependency because it demonstrates how performing trust may foster a multi-directional flow of benefits. Donna's bringing up the lesson plan problem became a way for her to mentor Kris about how program mate-

rials were being employed, a way for Kris to mentor Donna about how staff members need time to find their own ways, and a way for both to mentor the staff about personalizing lesson plans as a means of defining their own pedagogies. Likewise, this story is important because we were able to disseminate a definition of *pedagogy* as a negotiation of the programmatic and the personal in our discussions with teachers. Concurrently, the staff began to reflect on what worked for them, and they developed faith in themselves, which provided a foundation for negotiating the programmatic and the personal. In addition, the staff recognized that their lesson plans scripted rhetorical acts whose success is dependent not only on teachers' negotiation of the programmatic and the personal but also upon their negotiation with audiences (i.e., students). On a programmatic level, performing trust became another habit of mind for mentoring toward interdependency.

But even with commitment to trusting, we still wondered how much help to provide or withhold so as to foster interdependency, not dependency, among the staff. Finding the balance was difficult because the answer to the question of how much help to provide teachers is "it depends." The amount of help new TAs need depends upon their teaching experiences and their levels of confidence; the amount of help experienced TAs need depends upon their familiarity with a curriculum; the amount of help lecturers need depends upon their previous experiences and their current career situations. Performing trust was important because we established an expected performance level in terms of intellectual engagement and appropriate behavior. If coupled with ample preparation and institutional support, performing trust engenders a reflective habit of mind for everyone involved; thus, it builds confidence in administrators and staff and promotes opportunities for confidences (pun intended) among administrators and staff.

CURRICULUM DESIGN: *PERFORMING CONFIDENCE* AS AN ADMINISTRATIVE HABIT OF MIND

As a new director, Kris walked into a curriculum focused on student's writing processes. While this curriculum was strong, it reflected the theoretical view of the former director, and Kris wanted to bring her own theoretical and research interests to bear on the program—thus, the shift to academic and public literacies. By sharing her theoretical and research interests with the writing staff, Kris emphasized the interdependency of theory and praxis (i.e., how theory can inform praxis

and how praxis can test theory) within a particular institutional structure. By reflecting on theory and praxis in the program, the staff developed as reflective practitioners and gained an intimate knowledge of the program that, in turn, increased their confidence in their teaching. Such reflection also helped us develop personal and professional administrative voices as well as confidence in these voices. Thus, performing confidence became for us another beneficial habit of mind.

Three factors in particular helped us perform confidence in the FYE program and in our own roles: first, we attended a regional WPA (writing program administrator) conference; second, Kris solicited input from Donna on the curriculum, the custom reader, the course guides, and the program policies guide; and third, Donna used her location as graduate student to ask for clarifications from the perspectives of new and experienced staff and students. One story that best exemplifies performing confidence concerns a regional WPA conference that we attended in March of 2002 prior to implementing the new curriculum in the fall. Held at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, this conference was Donna's first exposure to WPAs, both faculty and graduate students. These other graduate assistant directors served as role models for Donna, establishing a professional context and providing concrete examples of their duties; her conversations with them provided important intellectual leaps for Donna to gain professional independence and to prepare her to make a significant contribution to the Marquette program.

This story is important to the concept of mentoring for interdependency because it demonstrates how performing confidence may foster a multi-directional flow of benefits. As other directors and assistant directors from different-sized schools talked excitedly about their own programs, they mentored Donna, who gained confidence in herself and MU's new FYE curriculum. Their information provided her a professional overview of curriculum theory, organizational structures, and troubleshooting strategies. These overviews were invaluable to Donna as a theoretical immersion upon which to draw when she, in turn, interacted with Kris and the writing staff (Brown et al 113). In the best sense, this conference helped professionalize Donna. Now able to see multiple levels at which the program operated, she was better able to assist Kris professionally and intellectually and was also more confident in her ability. Thus, Donna had the ability to mentor writing staff by fielding questions, acting as a kind of initial filter for

them by reporting their questions and concerns (anonymously) to Kris. In turn, Kris became more confident not only in Donna's ability but also in the new curriculum's viability and in our collaborative efforts to "sell" it to the writing staff. She knew Donna was intimate with the curriculum and was confident that Donna could discuss course materials and curriculum without supervision; thus, Kris encouraged the writing staff to discuss problems and brainstorm with Donna, which also provided her with a certain level of administrative authority (Ragins and Scandura 958). By investing time upfront with Donna on the curriculum design and at the WPA conference, Kris saved time during the semester because the staff could work through many curriculum issues and questions with Donna.

This story is also important because it empowered Donna to incorporate current WPA research into the FYE program and curriculum and because it enabled her to perform confidently during her initial days on the job. Interacting with other program directors and assistant directors taught Donna to employ a variety of administrative strategies (such as, ways to mentor TAs and conduct workshops). It also taught her to situate herself not only within the FYE program but also within her discipline. As a literature PhD student (MU has no rhetcomp PhD program), Donna began researching within rhetoric and composition studies in order to access resources and effective training materials to support the staff. This research supplied valuable context for understanding the education cycle of student, TA, contingent faculty, WPA, English department, and institution. As a result, Donna was much better equipped to give Kris feedback on the curriculum, course guide, course policies, and introduction to the critical reader because she could intellectually situate the new curriculum in relation to the old curriculum and Marquette's curriculum in relation to other universities' curricula.

Moreover, Donna's confidence was contagious; it helped the writing staff gain confidence not only in her but in themselves because working through a problem with the assistant director often meant a shared solution rather than one dictated by a higher authority (i.e., the director). Kris's openness, her confidence in Donna, and her ability to listen helped Donna understand the interdependency of the mentoring relationship. When the staff could come to solutions without "bothering" their boss, they gained confidence. As one advanced TA and doctoral student, Tom Durkin puts it, he realized that "since the Asst.

Director in our program is typically someone closer in experience to us (i.e., no PhD by their name), there is more of a comfort level" discussing "problems" or issues with her. The "trick" as he puts it is to convince TAs to "air" their concerns to the Assistant Director. Donna used this new knowledge to act as a resource rather than to air superiority, often a problem in many doctoral programs. Only by creating an environment of trust, compassion, and performing confidence could we create this environment together. By performing confidence we established a sense of openness and shared knowledge that began in a traditional top-down model (i.e. from Kris to Donna) but then shifted in ways that supplemented, and subverted, that model.

PERSONALITY: *PERFORMING AUTHORITY* AS AN ADMINISTRATIVE HABIT OF MIND

Any administrative position garners authority from two sources: its place within the institutional structure and the person occupying the position. Institutionally, the assistant director position had been invested with authority when the department approved its creation. But the success of this new position was going to depend on the person first occupying the job. Kris was aware that her attitude toward the position would set a tone for the writing staff, so she invested Donna with as much authority as possible via inviting Donna to attend the WPA conference, asking Donna for feedback on curriculum planning, and having Donna run sessions at TA orientation. As a result, the writing staff often came to Donna for advice about their teaching. In such instances, Donna used her new knowledge as a springboard for discussions; simultaneously, she resolved to treat people with a sacred degree of respect, making a conscious effort to use her new knowledge as a means of helping other instructors find their own solutions, not as a means of pointing out what seemed like "obvious" solutions to her. In that way, she not only performed authority herself, but she engendered such performances in other teachers.

One story of authority stands out because it represents a common pattern of "gender" sensitivity that we encountered and that Kris has encountered every year since (Wilde and Schau 167)—young male students' challenging young female TAs' authority. One TA, Kristen Mekemson, describes her experience with inappropriate student behavior:

Basically, there were 3-4 male students in my afternoon class (fall '02) who would sit in the corner of the U-shaped room set up and make negative comments to [. . .] one another during class, particularly during mini-lectures and large class discussions. Unfortunately, this made me feel as if my authority was being discredited and [it] affected the comfort level of other students in responding to questions, comments, etc. This group of students rarely said anything loud enough for anyone else to hear exactly what they were saying, but they certainly made it obvious that they were NOT interested in what we were discussing and/or how we were broaching these subjects. (Mekemson)

Initially, Kristen ignored the behavior, but it did not stop. It became so disruptive that Kristen dreaded going to class and eventually sought advice from Donna.

When Kristen came to Donna's office, Donna discussed first how she would handle the situation either directly by asking the students to participate in class discussions or indirectly by using humor to help deflect the authority issue and shift the focus back to the material. Because of her personality, Donna would immediately address the challenges; however, Donna knew that Kristen's personality was different, i.e., less assertive and more uncomfortable about directly addressing the students and their behavior. So Donna and Kristen openly discussed these style differences; together they brainstormed solutions that Kristen would feel comfortable enacting. Because Kristen felt more comfortable addressing the students about the intellectual task rather than about the behavior, the solution was to facilitate group work that would not only split up the students but also invite each one to respond on task. Additionally, Donna and Kristen acknowledged that Kristen's age and gender played a factor in the students' behavior (according to specific comments the students made); these acknowledgements depersonalized the students' behavior and allowed Kristen to focus on becoming a professional.

This story is important because it demonstrates how performing authority may foster a multi-directional flow of benefits. First, Kristen mentored Donna about how to handle such situations; that is, Donna had to reflect upon what Kristen would be able to do, not to simply give advice. Thus, this situation gave Donna more data for reflecting

on how she should use the authority of her position. Second, Donna was able to mentor Kristen, drawing upon her own experiences and upon research about microteaching and teacher assessment in ways that helped Kristen devise pedagogical tactics that would encourage desired classroom behavior. Third, Kristen was then able to mentor her students about proper behavior that is respectful not just to the teacher but to other students. Fourth, Donna was able to mentor the writing staff by making this situation the topic of a weekly methodology workshop (with Kristen's permission, of course) where they discussed different strategies for handling challenges to authority.

Performing authority is important for mentoring toward interdependency because the staff can sense when false authority or symbolic authority is placed upon someone. Kris—at her own risk—gave Donna actual responsibility, and Donna had to perform that authority, but with great respect for her peers.

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES: *PERFORMING ONE'S BEST SELF* AS AN ADMINISTRATIVE HABIT OF MIND

When Kris assumed the FYE director's position, multiple opportunities were already structurally embedded for training the staff. Every August, a two-week TA orientation was conducted by the director and twelve experienced TAs (all of whom were paid to work) to train new TAs (all of whom were paid to attend) to teach RhetComp 1. Before each semester, a staff meeting was held as a professional development seminar—each meeting serving as a feedback loop for assessment results and as a forum for learning about a pertinent pedagogical topic. Once the semester began, a weekly practicum afforded TAs an opportunity to discuss pedagogical strategies with the director, and a composition theory seminar was required of all new TAs. When Kris became director, she asked that the seminar be taught not by the director so that TAs could intellectually engage pedagogy and openly critique program design, and she lobbied for the assistant director's position. When Donna became assistant director, she implemented a weekly methodology workshop to help the writing staff gain ownership of the new curriculum by having them share ideas for teaching the new curriculum. The overriding goal at all these training sessions was to encourage all teachers to perform their best selves in the classroom.

The training story that best exemplifies performing one's best self is the methodology workshop. Because the curriculum was new that fall,

both new and experienced writing staff had pedagogical questions and anxieties. So Donna decided to organize a weekly methodology workshop, where the writing staff (sans director) could conduct sessions for each other that responded to their own questions and needs. It provided them an outlet for performing confidence and authority—for professionalizing themselves and for engaging pedagogy as an intellectual enterprise—while Donna acted as a facilitator of topics rather than a teacher of teachers. Once a TA or lecturer presented an idea or lesson plan, other staff members discussed how it could be adapted for other materials or units and how they might have taught the material a bit differently (again reflecting differences in teaching style and persona). The minutes of each workshop were posted on Blackboard for all the staff to read. Through their participation in these workshops (either directly or online), the staff began to articulate their own pedagogies as they applied to the new curriculum; in other words, the staff began thinking about how they could perform their best selves in the classroom, and they were taking responsibility for doing so.

The story of methodology workshop is important to the concept of mentoring for interdependency because it demonstrates a multi-directional flow of benefits. First, thanks to the writing staff's presentations, our learning about pedagogy, teaching styles, and adapting materials exploded. In order to be effective at methodology workshops, Donna's performance of her best self in these sessions became her greatest learning experience because one drawback was that a competitive desire for "floor time" occasionally brought out dominant personalities, fostering competition among the writing staff. It became important for Donna to enforce her role as facilitator yet maintain respect for differences among staff to ensure that less assertive TAs received fair amounts of time to present their ideas. As such, the circumstances of these workshops required Donna to focus on her own teaching persona in which she had to prepare her best self—as a judicious, careful, deliberate and caring coordinator.

Second, the writing staff benefited from mentoring each other because, as TA Tom Durkin claims, it was useful "being able to go hear or read concerns of others" regarding the curriculum. In addition, the writing staff saved a great deal of time in the methodology sessions by using them as a forum for community lesson planning. In this way, the methodology workshop and the sample lesson plans posted on Blackboard worked off each other. If Kris had posted lesson plans for every

day of the semester or if she had responded directly to staff questions, new TAs especially would have felt obligated to follow the advice of "the director." But by having a choice and by being in a "conversation" with one another and with Donna (whether online or in person), the writing staff began to see that pedagogy is a series of choices with consequence, a rhetorical performance of their best selves. This habit of mind informed Donna's work in the tasks that meant the most to her—e.g., commenting on developing curriculum, organizing and planning microteaching, conducting methodology workshops, and writing observation letters. Because these tasks had actual, realistic consequences for the writing staff, any abuse of her privilege would have created a negative backlash.

BENEFITS OF MENTORING TOWARD INTERDEPENDENCY

While master-apprentice mentoring is a well-established practice, new approaches—interdependent ones—can benefit mentors, mentees, and the staff with whom they interact, especially when the mentees are moving into a job market very different from that of their mentors. By exposing and discussing outdated modes and unspoken assumptions that feed traditional models of power and agency (i.e., master-apprentice models in a dated hegemonic structure), mentors can help mentees access agency. In turn, this agency affords everyone practical professional experience that equips them with skills for effectively navigating political environments within the academy.

By combining listening with performing trust, performing confidence, performing authority, and performing one's best self, administrators can develop and model mentoring toward interdependency. While these habits of mind may occur in any order, we organized them here to create a certain logic: *listening* creates an atmosphere of *trust*, which promotes *confidence* in self and in others and in program structures, which fosters respectful *authority* and, thus, encourages one to perform *one's best self* in administrative offices and in classrooms.

Although our stories are particular to our experiences at Marquette University, these habits of mind are not. They may be adapted to other locations. And adapting these habits of mind in order to mentor toward interdependency holds the potential to generate myriad rewards. These rewards include: developing reflective administrative and/or pedagogical stances, building morale, learning to negotiate the personal and the programmatic, establishing more equitable and productive divisions

of labor, encouraging professional development, and, if you are lucky, collaborating on scholarly projects, such as this one, wherein we have focused on the positive features of mentoring toward interdependency while never losing sight of our goal of "keeping it real."

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