

# MOVEMENTS IN MENTORSHIP: EXPLORING SHIFTING BOUNDARIES AND ROLES IN A FACULTY-GRADUATE STUDENT-UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT MENTORSHIP MICRO-COMMUNITY

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*The relationship between mentors and mentees in academic communities is often complex. In the interactive workshop described here, we worked with participants to make visible the generative function of the shifting boundaries within academia as a resource for establishing rich and enduring learning relationships between established and emerging members of a teaching community.*

At the 2018 University of Calgary Conference on Postsecondary Teaching and Learning, we facilitated a workshop with 21 participants from Canadian and international University contexts (including participants from Ireland, the United States and Mexico) during which we discussed the ways that membership boundaries between established and emerging members of an academic community can be made porous in order to encourage the development of new and unique kinds of learning relationships. Participants in this workshop were taking part in the University of Calgary's Conference on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching, and (based on discussions with participants before and after the session) the overall sample included educational development consultants, faculty members, librarians and four graduate students. The workshop itself focused on the use of a mapping technique that enabled participants to identify their mentor and mentee roles in a micro-community, to map those roles using multiple perspectives from within that micro-community, and to identify areas of strength that can be reflected upon when seeking to fortify existing and emerging mentorship relationships. The mapping technique we used in this workshop was structured in three stages. First, participants were asked to identify a set of key academic mentorship relationships that have guided their practice as markers on a page, second; participants were tasked with connecting the identities that they have marked using lines to indicate how each of their identities is related to those of the members of their micro community, and third; participants identified which of the identity categories is connected most often within their network. Each of these steps were done using 8.5 by 11-inch sheets of paper and pens, and participants were provided handouts with instructions to guide their process. After completing this process, participants reflected upon their maps and their areas of strength.

While mentorship relationships can be generative and supportive of excellence, they often reflect the hierarchical boundaries of a traditional academic culture. How do we develop mentorship relationships that acknowledge all members as creators, drivers, innovators and collaborators? We propose that by engaging all members of a mentoring partnership as agents, participants and learners a new approach can be developed; one which supports growth and

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Dorland, A., Johnston, D., & Henderson, M.J. (2019). Movements in mentorship: Exploring shifting boundaries and roles in a faculty-graduate student – undergraduate student mentorship micro-community. *Papers on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching: Proceedings of the University of Calgary Conference on Learning and Teaching*, 3, 111-119.

innovation. We have learned from our own complex and multi-dimensional relationships that building academic micro-communities characterized by mentorship is integral to learners' success. In this paper, we will discuss how we used the example of our own mentorship micro-community in this workshop, how the mapping exercise developed as part of this workshop was used as a learning tool to identify the strong and weak connections on the spectrum of mentorship within a micro-community, and how mapping work such as that described here can serve to guide "significant conversations" (Roxå & Martensson, 2009) in student, faculty and community collaborations.

## **BACKGROUND**

Our own mentorship relationship reflects the entanglements of the Faculty, Teaching Assistant, Graduate Student and Undergraduate Student roles that we have occupied collectively over a five-year period of working together. We are a senior faculty member, a senior doctoral student who has recently joined a new department as a faculty member and a junior graduate student/recent alumnus, representing a unique continuum of mentorship – each of us has mentored or been mentored by the others in our group through shifts in both formal and informal relationships within an existing academic community. Shifting roles in the academic context mean that boundaries between mentors and mentees are often in continuous flux. For example, our relationship is characterized by shifting subject positions and boundaries over a five-year period of working together, and we have now added a new layer to this history as SoTL co-researchers. That said, the strength of our relationship is an indication of how fluidity in mentorship may provide the foundation for supportive and inclusive micro-communities which allow space for the "significant conversations" (Roxå & Martensson, 2009) key to moving learning cultures forward.

Our intent in this workshop was to critically explore the typically hierarchical nature of academic mentorship relationships, and to ask how we can acknowledge all members as meaningful agents. We proposed that by identifying all subject positions in a multivalent mentoring relationship as launching points for innovation and growth, we could establish mutually fulfilling relationships that positively impacted the success of mentors and mentees within an academic micro-community. We contended that such relationships could, in turn, influence the teaching and learning practices of a wider learning culture by creating lasting moments of engagement, recognition, and insight.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this workshop, we adopted Roxå and Martensson's proposal of the "significant conversation" or moments of academic communication within a small community that enable a transition from understandings of "teacher-focused learning" to "student focused or learning – focused teaching" in the practice of a teacher (2009, p. 547). Roxå and Martensson identified the ways that "university teachers rely on a limited number of individuals to test ideas or solve problems related to teaching and learning" (2009, p. 556), and that the use of significant conversations within this network is essential to evolve understandings of teaching and learning. Significant conversations, as we understand them here, are conceptualized differently by all participants, but are fundamental to initiating and strengthening a mentorship (or academic micro-community) network.

In addition to “significant conversations” (Roxå & Martensson, 2009), we draw on Roxå, Martensson and Alveteg’s (2011) network approach to teaching and learning cultures and Lave and Wenger’s (1998) understanding of communities of practice to analyze our relationship. Clarke and Poole (2009) offered an expanded definition of mentorship which uses the framework of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to frame a continuum of mentor/mentee experiences, and to highlight a multiplicity of identity positions both enacted and residual within that network. In this workshop, we extended this understanding of mentoring as a form of legitimate peripheral participation to include the use of significant conversations as acts of mentorship within both the community of practice (as suggested by Clarke and Poole) but also within the academic micro-community, or teaching and learning culture network (Roxå, Martensson & Alveteg, 2010). In this way, our conception of the academic micro-community is supported by Hinsdale’s (2015) definition of mentorship in an academic context as a continuum or spectrum of engagements, with movement between the subject identities of mentor and mentee occurring over the course of membership in the community itself.

### **APPLICATION OF THE MOVEMENTS IN MENTORSHIP MAPPING TOOL IN A WORKSHOP SETTING**

During this interactive conference session, we drew from our own experience with the “significant conversations” (Roxå & Martensson, 2009) that helped us to strengthen our academic micro-community over the course of many chances to our roles and identities. In the workshop description that follows, we will outline how we made visible the connections within our own three-person micro-community – itself constructed of significant conversations – using a constellation-mapping technique. By modeling how we mapped our own complex mentorship and multi-level relationships with each other in the course of this workshop, we encouraged participants to consider the boundaries that exist between established and emerging members of their own academic communities. We then provided the tools for each participant to map their own micro-community networks (including handouts, paper and pens), to use their maps to reflect upon their own mentoring relationships (including reflective question templates), and to share their reflections as a group in order to contribute to the wider discussion. The workshop ended with an open discussion where participants generated strategies for developing or strengthening their academic micro-communities, and the mentorship relationships that they were a part of.

In this workshop, we aimed to meet the following learning outcomes. By the end of the workshop time, participants had:

1. Developed enhanced strategies for developing or strengthening their academic micro-communities.
2. Improved relationship-mapping techniques in order to conceptualize the way that mentoring relationships are formed in their own academic micro-community.
3. Built capacity to create change in their own mentoring relationships leading to mutually increased academic engagement among teachers and learners.

We began our workshop by facilitating a conversation about the roles we each play in mentorship micro-communities, and by clarifying what some of the key terms in this exercise meant to us. Notably, we outlined how Roxå et al.’s (2011) network approach to teaching and learning cultures and Lave and Wenger’s (1998) understanding of communities of practice, expanded upon our understanding of what a “map” of mentorship might mean. The first phase of this workshop was defined by storytelling: the three of us opened our time together by taking

turns to tell the story of the first significant conversation we had with each other. What emerged from this first part of the workshop was that each of us, as facilitators, had different recollections of our first significant conversation with each other – that each of us had fundamentally different understandings of *when* we began to engage in a mentorship relationship, and *how* that relationship was structured from the very first moment of our engagement.

For example, Dawn Johnston (as a senior faculty member) recalled the same teaching assistant orientation as did AnneMarie Dorland (recollecting her first time as a graduate student, meeting her mentor), but we each recalled this event quite differently, and we each reported that we learned different lessons from each other during that first interaction. Monica Henderson (recollecting her first time as an undergraduate student, meeting AnneMarie Dorland) recalled learning a new way of teaching, whereas Dawn Johnston (recollecting the same event from her perspective of the instructor in the class) described an “accidental coaching moment” where Monica Henderson inspired her to raise her expectations of student participation in the course. Telling these stories demonstrated the fluid and layered nature of mentorship relationships in the changing dynamic of an academic culture: as each of us have moved through a variety of roles in the University our relationships as mentors/mentees (and mentees/mentors) has also continued to evolve.

We then moved on to the most participatory component of our workshop: mapping all of the individual “identities” that we had occupied in our micro-community over the last six years on a blank field. For example, AnneMarie Dorland identified her roles as graduate student, teaching assistant, instructor of record, colleague, volunteer and researcher. Monica Henderson identified her roles as undergraduate student, graduate student, teaching assistant, peer mentor, researcher and barista. Dawn Johnston identified her roles as Associate Dean Teaching and Learning for the Faculty of Arts, Instructor, former graduate student, colleague, researcher, leader of the teaching assistant orientation, and teaching team member. Mapping, in this case, was a process reduced to drawing dots on a page and connecting them using lines. The results as compiled on one page are shown in Figure 1.

Working collaboratively, we then demonstrated to participants how these diverse identity points could be mapped into a constellation. Using the white board and different colours of markers, we connected the identity dots using any association we could make and drawing multiple lines when multiple points of connection were identified. The results, when completed, are showcased in Figure 2.



Figure 1. Movements in mentorship identity mapping stage one.

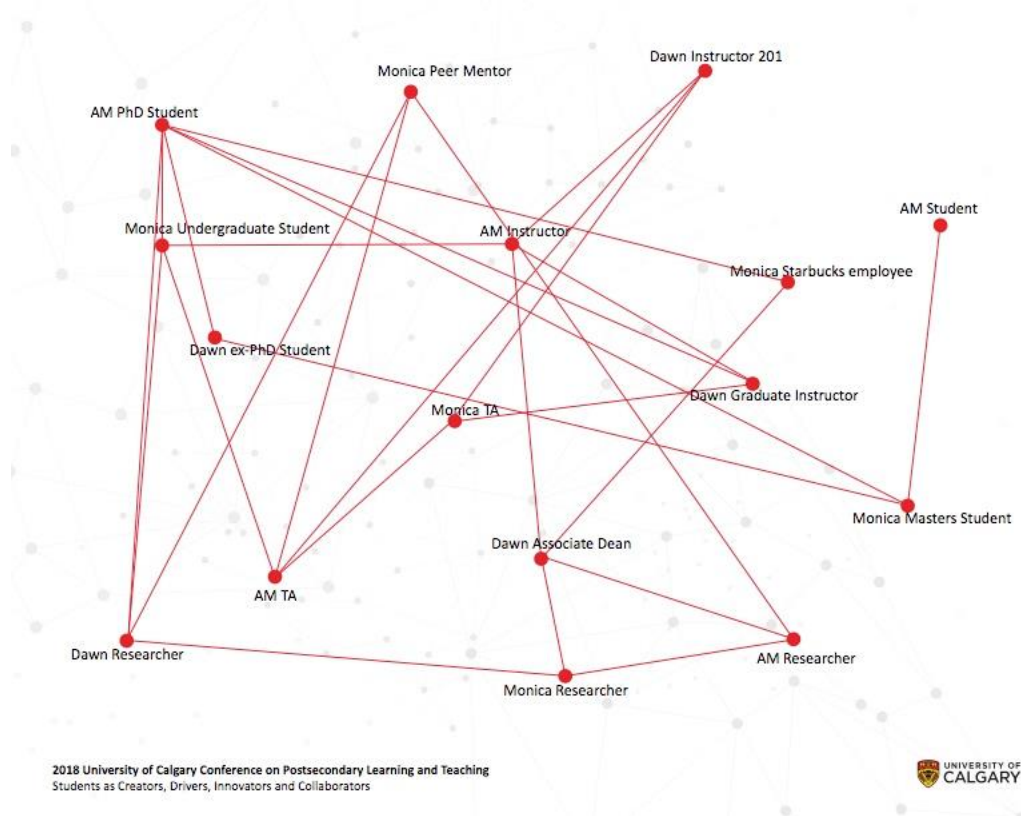


Figure 2. Movements in mentorship identity mapping stage two.

Using our brief demonstration as a model, participants then worked on listing the identities that they occupied (both past and present) as well as those occupied by a maximum of two other individuals in their own academic micro-community. In keeping with the conference theme, participants were encouraged to consider at least one student as part of their academic micro-community of practice. Each of the 21 participants in the room were given a template page to work off of with the following instructions:

1. Select collaborators in your network, and map how your mentorship relationship has changed.
2. Identify your subject positions on your map using a dot and a note (you will have many!)
3. Identify 2-3 key mentors/mentees in your micro-community of practice: students, collaborators, peers and/or mentors.
4. Identify their subject positions using a dot and a note (they will have many!)
5. Draw any connections that you can imagine between all of these multiple points.

After five minutes of individual work, participants self-organized into “shoulder partner” teams of two or three to analyse on what they saw in their maps and to reflect on their own subject positions in multi-level mentoring relationships. They were asked to share their maps with their fellow participants and to collect their observations about their strongest types of collaborative connections on a white board for discussion with the larger group. We asked them to consider the following questions in their small group discussion:

1. What connections were strongest on your map – what identity positions did you keep connecting together?
2. Which identities were left disconnected from the rest?
3. What are some practices that helped define the strong areas, but that are not present in the weaker relationships?

The findings from this analysis then supported a discussion about generative strategies for fortifying existing mentorship relationships within academic micro-communities, and for facilitating the development of new mentorships which have the potential to be lasting sites of meaningful academic discourse. Our belief is that this process could be used with larger groups as well, assuming that they could be broken out into teams of four or five for discussion purposes. It is noteworthy that several groups identified an area of focus that we as facilitators had not considered: seven participants expressed that they had not considered the mentorship relationship in their academic community to be reciprocal, but that in identifying the multiple roles that they had played in the community (and the residual traces of those roles in their current identities), they became aware of how their mentorship relationships continued to evolve on a spectrum of mentor to mentee with each member of their micro-community of practice. Other key insights included those identified in Table 1.

Table 1

*Insights from mapping exercise – participant feedback*

<b>Thematic area</b>	<b>Insight</b>
Students as collaborators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are positioned as mentees, and rarely as mentors in academic micro-communities.</li> <li>• Academic micro-communities of practice are strengthened when a student’s transition between types of roles or identities is supported by fellow community members.</li> <li>• Understanding students as collaborators reframes the mentor/mentee relationship (and exposes areas of weakness, primarily around inclusion of students in research).</li> </ul>
Nature of academic micro communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic micro-communities appear to be more fluid than other professional relationships. This may be due to the changing nature of status (collegial committee membership, evaluative instructor/student relationships, competing funding relationships) or to the temporary nature of roles (student, teaching assistant, research assistant, instructor or committee member roles may last only a few months before changing).</li> <li>• Academic micro-communities of practice may be defined by location in a way that other networks are not – would these relationships change if one member of the micro-community changed institutions?</li> </ul>
Research connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The connections between researcher identities in the micro-communities emerged as the weakest of all.</li> <li>• This may be due to the individual nature of some research programs, or to an underlying discomfort with including students as co-researchers or collaborators in the academic environment.</li> <li>• Research connections were identified by participants as being the area that could benefit most from some of the positive mentorship practices that were evidenced in other connected areas.</li> </ul>
Personal development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The benefits of being both a mentor and a mentee in an academic micro-community were identified as being surprisingly personal (and not just professional).</li> <li>• Participants reported many times when the roles of mentor and mentee in their academic micro-community were either reversed or inverted. Participants suggested that these reversals of mentor/mentee role often resulted in deep learning related to personal development.</li> </ul>

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this paper, we presented the Mapping Movements in Mentorship workshop as an opportunity for participants to question how they engaged in the development of mentorship relationships that acknowledge all members as creators, drivers, innovators and collaborators. Engaging in storytelling about significant conversations and demonstrating a mapping technique that encompasses the roles of all members of an academic micro-community both past and present allowed participants to explore how they could expand their understanding of top down mentorship to include layered, multiple and changing points of connection between established and emerging learners and teachers within a micro-community. Findings from the mapping exercise indicated that an acknowledgement of the fluid nature of mentorship relationships within an academic micro-community, and of the multiplicity of subject identities occupied by all members, may assist us in defining what some of the high impact practices might be in the development of a strong mentorship relationship between students and faculty. Most importantly, this exercise identified that the inclusion of students as collaborators, researchers and mentors within an academic micro community was a key way to enhance the durability and impact of the micro-community itself.

In the process of drawing these maps as a group, we uncovered new methods of supporting the shifting roles of established and emerging learners and teachers in our micro-communities and we challenged participants to carry these findings forward into their practices of learning and teaching. These findings have clear implications for teaching and learning in academic communities and can be used to guide best practices for those interested in nurturing and developing mentorship relationships across the temporal or role-focused boundaries of student – faculty – administrative engagement. The method does, however, also have limitations: mapping personal experience using subjective recollections assigns a mentorship role to community members who may not share the same perspective on the relationship, and not all participants were comfortable with the “creative” aspects of drawing the map itself. That said, based on this exercise, we suggest that finding a way to include all of the different subject identities experienced by participants within a mentorship relationship to the table when discussing collaborative work will be of benefit for mentors and mentees alike. In addition, we propose that reframing mentoring as the engagement of a series of significant conversations, which can happen inside or outside the formal one-on-one structure of most mentorship work, would be of benefit for those seeking to enhance the role of students as collaborators or partners in research work. For our own work, we now move towards a new area of inquiry – exploring the implications of academic mentor and mentee relationships in higher education institutions within graduate student supervision, for it is here that this mapping tool appears to be most useful in the effort to create change in academic practice.

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