

Faculty Mentoring in an Upside-Down World

Abstract

Covid-19 turned college teaching upside down. Subsequent pedagogical and technological changes moved from a 3D world to an almost exclusively a 2D world, dealing with students on a screen only. Newer faculty, having grown up in the digital and internet world, generally are more comfortable than many experienced faculty in this upside-down world, and often more comfortable address emerging student needs than more experienced faculty may be. As a result, newer faculty members mentor experienced faculty navigating, a reversal of the traditional faculty mentoring roles. We explore taking advantage of this new mentoring dynamic from both newer and experienced perspectives.

Keywords

Upside-down

Mentoring

Internet

Introduction

This symposium addresses faculty mentoring in the “upside-down world” created by Covid-19. One of the biggest benefits of belonging to MOBTS is the opportunity for newer faculty members to develop a traditional mentoring relationship with (mid-to-late career) faculty at other schools. However, in the last year, Covid-19 has required changes in teaching that have altered the nature of our interactions with students from in-person, high contact face-to-face class sessions to Zoom sessions, a “cool” TV-like medium (McLuhan, 1964). Thus, teaching has been turned “upside down.” Concurrently, students may face difficulties because of limited Wi-Fi connectivity, their inability to attend class from a quiet place, the stress of being quarantined and isolated, and their own technical deficiencies with respect to Zoom. Thus, faculty members must develop competency in both the use of Zoom and other distance learning platforms and how to help students function in their current circumstances.

Clearly, the old world order has been upended. While more experienced faculty members deal with these issues from varying levels of prior experience, newer faculty from the internet generation are closer in age to today’s college students, and have tacit knowledge about students’ interests, concerns, skills, and preferences, as well comfort with forms of technology that more experienced faculty may not have. If there is one group of faculty with the knowledge to mentor others in this era, it is newer faculty. As a result, the nature of the mentor-to-mentee relationship has been turned upside down. Our discussions will address mentoring relationships where newer faculty mentor experienced faculty during this time, since the need for understanding the knowledge and skills that are needed, as well as how to build them, has been reversed. It is ironic that more experienced faculty often don’t know what they don’t know as well as what they know

they need to know, while less experienced faculty, who have knowledge and skills to share, may not know how to approach faculty who need mentoring on these issues.

This proposed symposium will include a faculty panel whose members cover the range of a complete academic career. The moderator is an early mid-career faculty member. Other members include a current doctoral student, two faculty members who have graduated in the last seven years, two later-career faculty, one very late-career faculty member, and a retired faculty member. After a brief introduction, the symposium will focus on the reversed nature of mentoring during this period of change. The presenters will discuss the mentoring needs of more experienced faculty and the concerns of the newer faculty about how to approach, establish, and conduct reversed mentoring relationships.

Theoretical Foundation

Mentoring of faculty is considered a form of teaching (Karm, 1985; Nicholls, 2002). One faculty member teaches another faculty member to develop new skills and knowledge, both explicit and tacit. Traditionally, more experienced faculty have mentored newer faculty by sharing the insights and lessons they have learned during their careers.

Covid-19 made this obsolete overnight. Teaching moved completely online, often asynchronously, and from 3D face-to-face interaction in the classroom to 2D interaction with students on a screen. Marshall McLuhan (1964) would describe this as moving from a “hot” to a “cool” medium and, as he famously described, “the medium is the message.” In a “hot” medium, such as a lecture, students generally only need to engage their sense of listening because listening provides the details of the instruction. On the other hand, online instruction uses a “cool” medium, which requires viewers to use more effort to define meaning in the content of a class (McLuhan, 1964).

While a faculty's age does not directly correlate with their comfort teaching online, the amount of time one has spent online does (Martin et al., 2019; Seaman, 2009). Newer faculty, having grown up in the social media age, have more experience as producers of "cool" media. As a result of their experience with "cool" media, newer faculty understand the tacit nature, features, and needs of connecting with their students more broadly and deeply than many more senior faculty. This gives them an excellent opportunity to be mentors to veteran faculty. Because the roles have shifted, however, the ground rules of how this relationship will be conducted in academia are sparse and there are few examples of reverse mentoring that can be used as guidelines (Morris, 2017).

Generally, a faculty member who mentors another serves as a source of information, influence, network connections, and protection for the mentored faculty member (Karm, 1985; Zellers et al., 2008). The voluntary nature of the relationship and the extent of tacit knowledge being conveyed often makes mentoring the most sophisticated type of teaching. In our Covid-related world, mentoring is now often done by someone with less experience as a faculty member, and certainly mentoring more experienced faculty. While little research has been done on the challenges of reverse mentoring in academia (Morris, 2017), the experienced faculty member may have stricter standards for what is effective mentoring than an early career faculty member may be capable of satisfying. Also, the mentored faculty member is likely to have an important voice in the career evaluation of the mentoring faculty member. These dynamics may complicate the mentor-mentee relationship.

Woolworth (2019) noted that successful mentoring addresses more than the characteristics of the job or situation. It is a personal and unscripted attempt to help the mentee to achieve success. Acting in this way, a mentor endorses the ethics of caring (Gilligan, 1982; Hawk & Lyons, 2008)

by accepting responsibility for the development and growth of someone else. The mentor must focus on the responsibilities, concerns, and relationships of the more experienced faculty member (Murphy, 2019). Thus, the ethic of care is an on-going relational process, going beyond a single event or situation (Gilligan, 1982; Hawk & Lyons, 2008). Mentees learn to analyze situations more completely, as well as increasing their understanding of the talents and capabilities needed to perform their tasks and fill their roles more effectively. A key benefit of successful mentoring is helping others to exceed their perception of their capabilities. The mentor becomes a role model (Clutterbuck, 2002) in how to approach and solve unique situations one encounters. Dungy (2007) summarized a mentoring relationship by stating that each of us is a role model for others and that we should make sure we serve as a positive role model. This is the paradox many newer faculty currently face. They may struggle with how to become a positive role model while unsure of the role itself, dealing with the same upended context in their teaching task and with limited experience navigating turbulent professional situations.

Mentors' capabilities, often unknown to them, to engage in actions enhancing both the mentee, as well as themselves, is the basis of the mentoring relationship. Effective mentors comprehend the mentee's reality, feeling what the mentee feels as nearly as possible. Moberg and Velasquez (2004) argue this requires commitment to seven ethical principles: beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, confidentiality, fairness, loyalty, and concern. Such commitment is crucial because the subjective experience of both the mentor and mentee are involved in ethical encounters and conditions that are rarely sufficiently similar to warrant ignoring context and using abstract universals.

An ethically caring mentoring relationship requires mentor engrossment, displacement of motivation, commitment, and confirmation (Noddings, 1984). Engrossment exists when mentors

accept mentees as they are: caring, as much as possible throughout the duration of the mentoring relationship, which can range from a semester to several years. When mentors step out of their personal frame of reference and into mentees' frame of reference, displacement of motivation has occurred. Commitment is steadfastness to the mentoring relationship, even in an uncertain context, by both mentors and mentees. Finally, confirmation is seeing mentees in the most positive light, including their potential. Caring is the basis of serving the growth and development of both someone else and ourselves at the same time.

Mentoring, including engaging the ethics of caring, is a discretionary act that supports the social and psychological context within which work is conducted. It is generally outside the normal measurement and reward system of an organization. Thus, mentoring can be considered organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), (Organ, 2018, Zhang, 2011). Many of the qualities of OCB meet the criteria of the ethics of caring. Mentees recall the courtesy, altruism, conscientiousness, civic virtue, and sportsmanship (Organ, 2018) their mentors showed to them. These characteristics drive the best practices of OCB, setting an example mentors can use to create a partnership with their mentees. When mentors articulate cultural (academic) norms and share their experiences and wisdom, they are modeling how mentees should approach the tasks, roles, and unique characteristics of the Covid pandemic, creating a partnership orientation for addressing them. Thus, mentors exhibit characteristics of both the ethics of care and OCB. By helping mentees expand both their range of behaviors and values in a new context, their academic unit will have expanded the capabilities of both mentors and mentees.

The symposium nature of the session, directed by early and mid-career faculty, along with encouraged involvement of those in attendance, will result in an increased awareness of how new and early career faculty can provide mentoring to more experienced faculty in this turbulent era.

In addition, new and early career faculty can learn how to approach a mentoring opportunity and how to engage in it, as well as develop a broad understanding of how to conduct and evaluate their mentoring relationship. An additional outcome will be that more experienced faculty will discover and recognize how to approach newer faculty for advice on the best uses of new technology.

Symposium Overview

The symposium incorporates the reversed mentoring roles and opportunities created by the Covid pandemic. The panelists comprise a cross-section of faculty career stages. One is currently a doctoral student, two have graduated in the last 7 years, two are later-career, one is late career, and one is retired. The chair is a late early-career faculty member. The perspective to be taken will be of early to mid-career faculty members and how they can navigate through this new terrain. Topics will include what a faculty member can offer as a mentor, how to recognize the opportunity to be a mentor, how to approach a potential mentee, and how to act in this role. Some of the issues raised by newer faculty can be found in Appendix A. Expected outcomes include:

- Help potential mentoring participants understand the advantages of being a mentor or mentee in this upside-down world
- Develop a sense of confidence in newer faculty members that they have the potential to make a significant contribution to the development of their peers, individually, and to their departments and schools
- Develop a pool of early career mentors available to those attending this MOBTC
- Develop a resource base of faculty and mentoring interests that is available to other MOBTC members.

Session Description

After introducing the panelists, the first part of the session will begin with one to two-minute statements from the four more experienced faculty members about the mentoring needs they have and/or have observed in their departments. Next, the newer faculty will state what members of

their career stage cohort have to offer as mentors. A short follow-up discussion and synthesis will follow. **Time: 20 minutes**

An open discussion among all attending the symposium will address the issues in Appendix A that newer faculty have suggested about how to recognize that they have positional, expert or referent power to be a leader in a mentoring relationship. The discussion will center on the how to develop and use informal power and persuasion effectively. **Time: 30 minutes**

Next, the group will be broken into smaller groups for discussion based on specific topics of interest. **Time: 30 minutes**

Finally, a short summary session will be held. **Time: 10 minutes**

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APPENDIX A: Concerns Expressed by Potential Mentors

- How to identify what one can share with others.
- How to initiate a mentoring relationship.
- How to cultivate a mentoring relationship.
- How to determine what is the ideal proportion of emphasis on the process of mentoring and relational aspects of mentoring.

- How to handle the processes of the mentoring relationship with an individual faculty member and the faculty (what if the mentee is not a highly regarded member of the faculty)?
- The reversal of inter-faculty roles, when the parties are operating in new circumstances that neither has much, if any, experience with.
- How to develop comfort level and tacit knowledge of how to build mentoring relationships beyond the traditional seniority difference between mentor and mentee.
- How to develop an understanding and communicate that learning has changed (and in more ways than the technology used). How are student expectations of the education experience changing? What about what may be the most effective process for students to learn? How to deal with students that are more disconnected from the peers than in the past? How does this separation impact their level of commitment, anxiety, stress, and depression?