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[Faculty Mentoring Faculty: Relationships that Work](#)

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

At this point in my career, I am expected to mentor others. It's something I enjoy and it has never felt like an obligation. However, I haven't given much thought to exactly what mentoring is, how best to do it, and why it's a worthwhile endeavor. Mentoring is one of those higher education topics that was trendy for a while, but I no longer see it addressed much in current literature. That omission doesn't diminish its potential to greatly enhance both teaching and learning, and a revisit of the topic might remind us of its many values.

Mentoring can take many forms. Teachers can mentor students, which is not the same as advising them. Advising is information-oriented. It's clarification about required courses in a program and recommendations about sequencing them. It's identification of resources and reminders that help is available. It's feedback about what could be improved and what shows great promise. But despite being related and often linked, mentoring is something much more than advising. "Mentoring isn't about answering questions," longtime teacher and wise colleague Linda Shadiow tells me. "It's about asking questions—me asking students those questions they are on the cusp of asking themselves."

Teachers also can mentor each other. Typically we think of this scenario as the experienced senior faculty member being there for the less-experienced junior faculty member. Collegial mentoring is about more than sharing good instructional strategies, as important and necessary as that is to teaching and learning. "Mentoring between colleagues grows out of a relationship," Linda explains. It happens when we start getting personal—moving past the tips, tricks, and techniques and into those harder but more essential queries. Who are you as a teacher, and is that who you are as a human being? Why do you teach? Are you the teacher you want to be? What's your relationship with your content, and how does that influence your teaching? What do you believe about students and learning?

Our habit of always thinking of mentoring as a senior-to-junior exchange troubles me a bit. It creates expectations about who's learning from whom. In mentoring relationships, it seems to me that the insights and learning ought to flow in both directions. Sometimes we teach and sometimes we learn. "Why do you work so hard on learning the names of people in your workshops?" a much younger faculty developer I've been working with asked me. "Most of them you won't ever see again." I heard myself replying, "Because names are important," while I was thinking, "That's a darn trite response." So, why do I bother? What makes it worth the effort? Is it worth the effort? I've decided it is, but it was that question that motivated me to think more clearly about my rationale. I do it because I'm trying to create a sense of community in workshop settings, and being able to call someone by name helps do that. This is just one example of why I see mentoring as a two-way exchange. It's something that came as a bit of a surprise to those of us who were involved with formal

mentoring programs years ago when they were more in vogue—mentors regularly reported they gained as much, learned as much, and changed as much as those they were assigned to mentor.

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If mentoring between colleagues happens in the context of relationships, then that explains why structured mentoring programs are only intermittently successful. Some partnerships flourish; others flounder. Relationships may emerge when partners are randomly paired, but they certainly aren't an automatic outcome. Just as teachers mentor some but not all students, some collegial relationships move beyond the pleasant exchange of strategies and discussion of instructional details, and some do not.

I have one other concern about mentoring between seniors and juniors, between those who know and those who don't: Mentoring falters when the senior, the experienced, the one-in-the-know, the published, the outstanding teacher is too much revered. It is lovely to be held in great esteem, to be asked questions, and to be listened to for answers. It is easy for mentors to become captivated with the role of the wise elder, but that's not how we continue growing. And those who revere a senior mentor should be respectful, but that should not stop their questioning, critical analysis, and thoughtful reflection. There may be much to learn from a wise mentor, but when the mentor's magnificence shines in every direction, there's little room for learning in any direction.