

What I Wish I'd Known: Mentoring

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It's an icky word, mentee. It means you are on the receiving end of mentoring, the mentored one. Mentoring is something that is done to the mentee. The Mentor is active. The mentee is passive. The mentor is senior. The mentee is junior. So there is lots of advice out there about being a mentor. You can do mentoring training. Universities love to see evidence of mentoring in promotion applications. Mentoring is a skill, a practice, a type of post-religious pastoral care, tied up in the metrics of the neo-liberal academy. There is no verb, or gerund for that matter, for being mentored. One does not mentee.

But actually, one does mentee. Being mentored asks a lot of the young scholar. And in what follows, I offer advice on how to navigate a mentoring relationship as an early career researcher.

Finding a mentor

How do you find, or recognise, your mentor? Think about relationships that you have experienced in the academy where you have felt properly seen and supported. Think about the people who have made you feel valued and energised and safe. Hopefully there are a few at least. A good mentoring relationship will instil those feelings in you.

There may be leading experts in your field with whom you work, scholars who are superstars, whose recommendation would mean the world. But if they make you feel anxious and crap, then they aren't your mentor. They might be your boss or your supervisor, and that's that. But they are not your mentor (or at least not a good one).

Be alert to the difference. A mentor should not see you, instrumentally, as a way to get what they want. A mentor will help you work out what you want—or work out that what you think you want might not be what you actually want, or what you need.

A good mentor will not gaslight you. That is, their version of reality will dovetail somewhat with yours, and they will respect your version of events. This is not to say that they won't tell you to pull your head in if you are displaying grandiosity, paranoia or unnecessary self-abnegation. I've been nurturingly managed through the performance of all three by caring mentors. But it is to say that they will always take your account of things with the respect and the gravity that it deserves. This matters a lot, particularly when if you encounter the academy from a position of marginality, whether for reasons of class, gender, disability, mental-health, and, cultural/racial background. It is of utmost importance that you find a mentor who sees, with you, the forces that preclude your full participation, and helps you navigate them as dextrously and self-preservingly as possible.

How to be mentored

If you have identified someone that you trust and admire, and from whom you would like to be mentored, offer to buy them a coffee and tell them what you admire. Tell them how their work has influenced yours. Or, tell them that you respect the way that they conduct themselves in meetings.

Express precisely what it is that made you seek them out. If you say to someone 'mentor me', that is a demand. But if you convey to someone that you have registered them, and thought about their capacities and generousities, then that is a much warmer and relational start.

Always ask them something specific at the first meeting, but nothing that asks them to do extra work. Just ask for advice. Should I publish here or here? How would you handle this thorny intellectual problem?

Now that I am an experienced lady of middle age, I am delighted if some of my hard won experience can save someone some time and stress. And I think many academics are the same.

Good mentors love to mentor because it helps them make sense of their own experiences. It also enables them to protect younger scholars from some of the mistakes they made, as well as some of the more pernicious aspects of the academy. So, your job as a mentee is to have your radar on, to ascertain whether this person has your interests at heart, and whether they want you to flourish on your own terms.

If you find that person, the other part of your job as a mentee is to be appreciative. Let them know that you recognise their labour, and let them know that you are paying it forward to other scholars, who are coming up in your wake.

I have been lucky enough to be mentored by some wonderful people. I nominated one of them in the Australian honours system, within which she was subsequently awarded. I am currently editing a festschrift volume for another mentor, to whom I owe great intellectual debts.

As mentees, it is our job to recognise the support of those who preceded us, as well as to model inter-generational academic collegiality. There are a lot of superstars in the academy who really couldn't give the proverbial rats about the flourishing of others. If you are committed to a different model, one of support and inclusion, then make sure to recognise those who do not always put themselves first, and have built the world in which we came to be, or at least worked to repudiate its worst aspects.