

Finding Time for Mentoring: A Conversation

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Alan Mandell: Lois, how did your understanding of mentoring develop? Where did you begin?

Lois Zachary: Many years ago, I was invited to start a mentoring program, and as I did my research, I found that what people were using when they were thinking about the mentoring of adults was a very pediatric, a very paternalistic – a very *non*-adult focused kind of mentoring. I thought: “We’re mentoring adults, and we’re talking about learning. Learning is really what people want to get out of it. So, what would happen if we took adult learning theory and held it up as a lens to better understand and better facilitate the learning of people who are engaged in mentoring relationships?”

Lee Herman: How were people defining the term? Was there some common understanding?

L. Z.: One of my first major clients was a multinational corporation. I sat with the development team and I asked: what does mentoring mean for you? We unearthed multiple assumptions about what mentoring was, and I said to the group: If we hadn’t had this conversation and you went out and were planning a “mentoring effort,” you’d

all be operating under different assumptions about what mentoring is and nobody would be satisfied with the result. Let’s see if we can all come to agreement about what mentoring is and what it’s not. And that’s probably one of the most important conversations that any group can have.

A. M.: Did you come to agreement?

L. Z.: We did come to agreement, but there were a lot of people who had to take a look at their assumptions. There were a lot of people who still had the “old boy” – what I call the “spray and pray model” – where you sit at the feet of the master; or if you think about Freire’s work, a more “banking education model” – where the mentor is the holder of the pearls of wisdom. It’s the difference between “the sage on the stage” or “the guide on the side.”

L. H.: I love your use of the word “pediatric.” Something’s wrong with the child and that child has to be fixed by a physician.

L. Z.: When I was thinking about “pediatric,” I was thinking about a caretaker model and its limits when we work with adults. But, yes, I agree: mentoring can’t be about doctors fixing people.

A. M.: It’s really hard to get away from the notion that the mentor is the expert.

L. Z.: I think the mentor can and does have expertise. But it’s not for all reasons and for all seasons. Do you know Stephen Brookfield’s notion of “impostership”? This is important to remember. The mentor has expertise but the mentor is not an expert in everything and does not have the entire world of experience. That’s just impossible.

A. M.: These days, instead of “mentor,” people seem quite willing to use the word “advisor.” Are there substantive as well as symbolic differences between the mentor and advisor?



Lois Zachary

L. Z.: This is interesting. I don’t know if you’ve been following a lot of the GenY mentoring and the virtual kinds of platforms that are out there. Instead of the word “mentee,” people are using the word “learner” who looks for multiple “advisors.” Many people don’t even want to use the word “mentor” when they’re doing it virtually.

L. H.: This is the case here, as well. For example, there are a number of Empire State College programs where the use of the word “advisor” is preferred. One is in the graduate program; the other is in our online program, the Center for Distance Learning. Nowadays, when a student graduates, instead of the student’s name and other graduation information, where it used to say “mentor” or “primary mentor,” it now says “mentor/advisor.” And in the academic record system, it reads the same way.

L. Z.: So, at your institution, how do you differentiate the two?

L. H.: Just speaking for me, with probably a narrower breadth of experience and view of Empire State College than Alan's, an advisor is someone who gives expert advice; that is, "Don't do this, do that."

A. M.: One argument is that you change the language because people are more used to the word "advisor," so there's a claim that there's a kind of demystification that occurs when you use a word with which people are just more familiar. But the other side of this is that by using the word "advisor," there's a tacit assumption that, if it's not exactly "don't do this, do that," it's at least the assumption that there are only a finite number of moves to be made and the advisor can talk with you about what those moves are. I think that advising ends up being more administrative, which reflects a certain kind of closure of options. Certainly in my own college experience as a student, a question like "What do you want to learn?" didn't exist as an option. In this way, "advisor" becomes more legitimate when the questions narrow.

L. Z.: Though comfort with the term "advisor" may not be universal, it's interesting to ask why the word "advisor" would appeal to a GenY, someone born around 1980, someone in her early 30s?

A. M.: In the late 1990s, when Lee and I were working on our book, *From Teaching to Mentoring*, the term "mentor" was just about everywhere! It was difficult to find an institution of any kind that *didn't* have a mentoring program, whether a corporation or a college. And I think this meant that the institution wanted everyone to know that it would never throw an individual to the wolves, that there is a support system and we call it mentoring. So, one of the difficulties was that the word had attained a kind of ideological status, almost to the point of meaning nothing. The "mentoring" word took off, got legitimized as defined as something like "caring advising," and thus no institution could say that it *didn't* do it. So, in the process, "mentoring" lost some kind of critical edge.

L. Z.: I always say that the term is used "promiscuously." It is the idea that we care, and all the literature also tells us that if you are going to be successful as a leader, you need a mentor in your life and those who

are successful have had such a person. The research also tells us that mentoring is a great recruitment tool because it does make the claim that an institution cares.

A. M.: I feel that mentoring has become some kind of blanket term. But even "kind advising," for example, is not collaborating – which Lee and I wrote about as one important dimension of mentoring – it's what it is: "kind advising."

L. H.: I was having a discussion this morning with a number of people who are faculty and administrators at the community college here in Auburn, New York, where my office is. They are starting a program of assessing experiential learning. I'm thrilled that they're doing it. However, very quickly during the discussion, there was a tension in the room – not between different people, so much as it was *within* people who were speaking. This was a tension between what I would call a "conservationist" approach to education – meaning an assumption that we already know what the best things are to be known and the best things for our students to learn, and that should be the primary if not the sole reference point for evaluating experiential learning – *and* an assumption that says, we want to find out what you think you know about through your experience, and we'd love to find ways to get at that and document it and incorporate it in your formal education. The latter is a more open-ended and, as you put it, Alan, a more collaborative version.

L. Z.: To me, this speaks loudly and clearly to mentoring because mentoring is a reflective practice.

L. H.: And I would say exactly that tension is what so many people, not only in the academic world but in other situations, too, struggle with. It's between preserving a certain historically and rationally grounded notion of authority and this other way of approaching learning, which is not conservative in that sense. It is open to discovering learning and legitimate learning purposes in the student that may not already be housed in a ready-made fashion in the institution. I think that tension is really fundamental, and it's really hard to handle.

A. M.: That's what I meant to say: as the choices narrow, advising actually seems a more appropriate term.

L. H.: To put it in terms of the tension that I was observing really clearly in the room this morning, what you are calling the "narrowing of options" means that the discussion and the weight of the reference goes more to the conservative side of authority – curriculum and so-called legitimate learning already housed in the institution and its representatives.

L. Z.: This is so interesting to me. I was just working with people from about 30 different countries around the term "mentoring" and it reminded me of the old Bill Clinton line that it depends on what the definition of "is," is. How you juxtaposed it, Lee, was very clear. It also speaks to something else that has been very much on my mind, which is the role of context. That is, we bring who we are to what we do. Who owns these assumptions? So, for example, there's this big power dimension in the eyes of the mentor *and* the mentee. And there's a lot of dynamics that are going on there, which accounts for why mentees are often very reticent and you often hear the comment: "What's my mentor getting out of this?" And the mentor thinking: "Well, I've got 45 minutes; what's this guy doing wasting my time? I'm going to tell him what he needs to know. Why is he asking me all of these questions? This is *the way* to do it." All of this feeds right into the tensions that we've been discussing. So, as I was revising *The Mentor's Guide*, I thought a lot about the circumstances, conditions and contributing forces that people brought to the mentoring relationship that influences how they connected, how they learned and how they interacted with each other.

A. M.: I've been tangentially involved in a program at Columbia University, an "executive master's program in technology management" for people who are interested in becoming chief information officers of corporations. Arthur Langer, who runs the program, has been very proud, as he should be, that he has been able to get the support of a huge number of corporate information executives who volunteer as "mentors" to the students in the program. Every student is assigned a mentor. But, as I see it, there is a

completely taken-for-granted hierarchy in all of this. The “context,” as you might put it, Lois, is that there are experts who are there to “show the ropes” to those who are their juniors. Of course, there is interacting and advising and, I think, sincere helping here, but certainly not collaboration.

L. H.: We’re back to the “tensions” between the two different points of view that were so poignant to me in this morning’s discussion at the community college. There is an important legitimacy in making the claim “Stop asking me all these questions, I need to know from you, senior person, what it takes to succeed in this environment,” which, indeed, might be a hierarchical corporation. Or it might be a community college from which one is hoping to graduate and have one’s degree be accepted by transfer to a four-year college that might not be interested in experiential learning. That desire to be advised about the risks ahead and how to avoid them for the sake of one’s own purposes, which is what mentoring is all about, is a totally legitimate desire.

L. Z.: I think you are making the case for how important it is to have mentoring training. One of the exercises we do when we do a workshop is that we take the mentees in one room and the mentors in the other room and we ask them each about the assumptions they have about the others’ role. And it’s always amazing to me – and also reflective of the culture and the context in which we’re working – the kinds of answers we get. In colleges and universities and in some corporations, we hear that mentees assume that their mentors have all the answers. In some, we hear that their mentors will be available to them 24/7, that the mentors have been there, that they know the right thing to do, and that they’ve experienced the same challenges that the mentees have. And when we get the mentors together, we hear assumptions that are often diametrically *opposite!* However – and this is really significant – through the discussion and the training, what many mentors discover is that they *don’t* have to have all the answers.

A. M.: This isn’t simple for either the mentor *or* the mentee to accept.

L. Z.: I remember a study we did with one organization and one of the mentors said: “My deepest learning is that I didn’t have to have all the answers. The hardest thing for me was to hold back. I knew the right answer, I knew how to fix it, and it was really frustrating for me, but when I went through this training I realized that my purpose was to *ask the questions*. When I went back to my organization, I started to ask more questions that made me listen more and which developed more ownership in my team.”

A. M.: Is there room organizationally – in terms of assumptions about authority and in terms of time – for that kind of un-knowing or admission of lack of knowing? Is there room and is there respect for that point of view? That is, it seems to me that one of the “contexts” that so many institutions are facing is that calls for various kinds of efficiencies reign. Doesn’t mentoring demand a kind of pausing – that “holding back” – and reflection for which there is just less time and space?

L. Z.: I think that what happens is that in the desire to hit the numbers or the preset outcomes, we tend to focus on getting *there* and we forget about the core of mentoring, which is about building and strengthening the relationship and about acknowledging how central relationship is to learning. When I go into institutions, I’m consistently told that the one thing that gets in the way is *time*, perceived or real. However, the real issue is how you deal with and manage that time.

L. H.: A really huge difficulty our students at Empire State College have always faced, because that’s why they’ve come to this college is that they don’t have a lot of time. They’re busy doing their jobs; they are busy taking care of their kids, sometimes kids and parents; with community activities. In other words, they’re adults. So, they have a range of commitments, each one of which is every bit as serious – or more serious – than the commitment they can make to school. It takes a while for them to discover – to learn – that it’s possible to create time for the kind of reflection, invention and collaboration that Alan was talking about and still be timely. One of the things we have to fight with is that it’s so much easier not to see

it that way. It’s so much easier not to see that if you give it the time and patience to learn how to do this, to make this unusual “relationship,” to use your word, Lois, that it’s really going to pay off, *even* in terms of productivity. It’s so much easier to say: “Our students just want to know what they need to do in order to graduate as soon as possible. Why not just tell them?” And that point of view has a lot of clout.

A. M.: But is there evidence that, in fact, the thinness of some advising relations often doesn’t provide the kinds of supports that students and others really need, and there is an important link between the depth of these mentoring relationships and student – or employee – learning? And I don’t mean some crazy romance with the term here, but something that is more than the purely instrumental. In the college context, even take a crucial issue like “retention.” If the student feels a connection that is deeper than merely being shown how to fill out a form or make a choice between X and Y, isn’t it more likely that the person will complete his or her studies?

L. Z.: It definitely makes a difference as to whether someone stays in an institution or stays in an organization. In both cases, with mentoring programs, people are much more likely to stay. It definitely impacts retention. I think the point, the secret, is to learn to sit at the feet of your own experience and learn from it. And I think that’s one of the things that a mentor does: a mentor helps you do that. And here’s how I think this connects with this “time” theme. When organizations want to develop mentoring programs to enrich what they already have, one of the mirrors I hold up for them is to reconceptualize time as part of the infrastructure. We typically think about human resources and technological resources and knowledge and financial resources. But I have added two pieces – one is time and one is leadership. If you think about time as a piece of the infrastructure, it helps shape what is valued and how to create that space and the time for it.

L. H.: So, this legitimates time as a part of the basic work of the institution. Can you give us an example of this?

L. Z.: It means that as a mentee, my manager understands that when I say that I'm going to meet with mentor, my manager is *not* going to say: "Why are you going to take time for that; we have something that's got to get out the door right now."

So, time is seen as valued for mentoring and everyone is pulling in the same direction and it's assumed that someone will *not* abuse that time. Or here's another example: in companies that are global or have multiple locations. "I'm going to meet with my mentor in Canada." "You're going to what!?" "I need a day for that." And then:

"I hope it's a good session. Tell me what I can do to support you when you come back."

L. H.: And that message that goes through the organization originates where?

L. Z.: Leaders have to create value and visibility for mentoring. And they have to be champions for it. They need to recognize that there's learning going on when mentoring is present. They need to acknowledge that mentoring is intrinsically important and that it contributes to the quality of work." When not only an

individual but an entire *institution* pays attention, it creates active communities of practice. In a mentoring culture, which is really what we're talking about here, it's about how we individually and collectively get better at keeping the conversation about mentoring going. That's why I always ask people: "What are you going to tell me a year from now that you're better at doing as a mentor? How have *you* developed as a mentor? Who is going to mentor the mentor? How do we make room and find time for *that*?"

"What if we were to allow the concept of reflection to 'reflect' on itself, not within the confines of a small upstairs room well away from the distortions of subjective experience but rather by running downstairs, exploring the darkness of the basement, flinging open the front door, and venturing out of the house? If reflection could stretch its limbs, get in touch with its bodily held feelings, its discomforts, emotions, intuitions, and imagination, might then awareness emerge of a more expansive calling in the service of human learning and development? Might reflection see that it can embrace a wider range of elements in our learning processes?"

– Richard Jordi, "Reframing the Concept of Reflection: Consciousness, Experiential Learning, and Reflective Learning Practices"
Adult Education Quarterly, 61(2), May 2011, p. 184