

**“A kick in the pants” or Mentoring as “a brain to pick,
an ear to listen and a push in the right direction” (John
C. Crosby 1859 – 1943)**

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ABSTRACT

The elegant phrases of John Crosby to describe mentoring have been amended and added to over the years to include, “a shoulder to cry on and a kick in the pants” (Josefowitz, 1980). This paper is a follow-up to the podcast the authors engaged in with Edie Demas as their moderator at the NYU Forum on Educational Theatre, April 2016. Here on the editor’s invitation, we expand on our conversation, moving from our personal experiences of mentoring/being mentored to examining the confusions that arise over the application of the term itself, what is effective mentoring and how it may be derailed. We begin with what we said (slightly modified) about our own experiences of mentorship to set the context.

Edie Demas (Moderator):

... the next thing on the list is who are your mentors. So it would be remiss of me, to be in these rooms and not think about Lowell and Nancy Swortzell who were very powerful mentors to me throughout my life. We made that shift from student to teacher and, you know, without Lowell doing that thing...what was the phrase in your lovely quote about giving you a kick in the pants...? Without Lowell doing that, I would not have my PhD. I think it's...there's something about that shared commitment...somehow you know that even when it's bumpy or the power dynamics are murky, you hang in there and figure them out. And...and there's a give and take in that that has to make that possible. That's the important thing.

Carole Miller:

Yes. I started with Barbara McIntyre; she was my teacher in 1961—she was my first teacher—the first class I went to at the University of Pittsburg. And she was my teacher all through those four years and then, when I graduated, she became more of a mentor and gave me those pushes out the door and into a bigger context. She encouraged me to do other kinds of work. Years later, she came to Victoria and the relationship shifted again. It became a much more collegial relationship at that point. . . . She once asked me for advice about something—an academic issue—and I realized it was that “click-click” which totally shifted things again. I knew her for over thirty years and our relationship went through an incredible arc to become colleagues and dear, dear friends throughout my adult life, certainly.

That recognition of our altered relationship was extremely powerful and really changed my own view of how we are in the world with each other. Yeah.

Monica Prendergast:

I think a mentor sees something in you that you might not see in yourself. . . . I was very fortunate to work with Brian Way some years after he came to Canada and worked at the Globe Theatre in

Regina. I came out of my BFA in theatre in the early eighties, and worked for a season at the Globe with Brian. I didn't know who he was. I had no idea. Why would I? I mean I was an actor. I didn't know anything about drama education. I went to the Regina Public Library and got out his book and read it 'cause I knew I was gonna be working with this man. I thought, "This is really interesting." I worked with him and we created performances and toured them to schools and of course, he did all of his creative drama workshops that he'd been doing for umpteen years at that point 'cause it was late in his career. But he was a marvelous teacher and a wonderful role model, as Juliana said. But there was one moment of mentoring from Brian that I will never ever forget because, in hindsight, he saw something in me that, at the age of twenty-two, I was not able to see in myself. It was close to the end of my contract and we were in the green room at the Globe theatre and we were having a drink and chatting, and he said, "Monica," in that very gruff sort of way—"Monica, there's a teacher in you." And I just went, "Phh." I completely rejected that notion. What?...I don't want to be a teacher. I'm gonna be an actor. I'm going to Toronto and I'm gonna be an actor.

But he was absolutely right. He could see my energy, how I loved working in schools and how much energy I got from the kids. He saw that in me. He saw that identity that I didn't even know was there. I wish I had been able to track Brian down before he died a few years ago, just to thank him for that. And then, twenty years later. . . I went through the same process with Carole and Juliana because I only planned to do my master's and then I was gonna go back to be a high school teacher.

I would go to meetings with Carole and Juliana and they'd be going through my thesis and saying, "Well this bit can go in the PhD. Oh, this bit...you can take this bit out and we'll keep that for the PhD." They kept saying this to me and finally I got my gumption up one day and said, "Are you telling me that you think I should do a PhD?" And they both went, "But absolutely, Monica, there's no reason why you shouldn't."

I think that notion of identity is really important. That a mentor sees

something emerging from someone they're mentoring and... gives it a shape and names it. Carole and Juliana saw an academic in me that I didn't know was there...because my identity at that point in my life was fully formed as a teacher. So these mentors, twenty years apart, were able to name something in me that I had no idea was there. And the work continues. . .

Juliana Saxton:

Gavin Bolton was my mentor and I knew that the relationship had shifted [from teacher/guru/whatever] because he was staying at my house and he came in one morning in his dressing gown and bedroom slippers, bringing me a cup of tea—and I was still in bed. He sat on the end of my bed and we talked drama, and I thought, “we’re friends—we’re friends now”—because we were seeing each other really at our un-best. So it is all about identity.

Mentoring is a lovely word. It has a softness and musicality that signals to both user and receiver that its meaning embraces kindness, interest and good will. It is not surprising that it is a word that has been adopted to describe a multiplicity of other but different relationships: supervision; coaching; teaching; and training, to name a few—all of which should include those qualities but, often, do not. In preparing for the podcast, we found ourselves deeply interested in these differences and the blurring of these definitional boundaries. Mentoring is used as an umbrella term for what we would consider to be job descriptions that imply some sort of professional relationship such as manager, consultant and role model. But, in fact, they are more accurately descriptors for performance-based relationships that have to do with the betterment of an organization or business; all involve some kind of evaluative component and monetary compensation.

Although a mentor may have a number of mentoring relationships, each is a one-to-one pairing. They may, particularly in the initial stages, involve helping organize, offering advice and serving as a role model but these activities are offered generally without any thought of a longer-term association. These initial connections can, however, serve as important opportunities to “suss” each other out and may be foundational in building a mentoring relationship. We found it useful to remind ourselves of the kinds of functions that relationships other than

mentoring involve in order to be clearer about what we see as mentoring.

Supervision: “to direct and inspect work or workers or the operation of an organization” (Oxford Dictionary, 1983, p. 678). Supervision often includes motivating and inspiring but always involves power-over with an evaluative component. The goal is one that is broader than the individual: it aims at the improvement of the organization.

Coaching: “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” ([Coach Federation](#)). Coaching is a paid position that requires skill and experience, but there are exceptions as with community volunteers for school teams (the professionalism of unpaid youth coaches is exemplary). Today many businesses use coaching to help develop their employees’ skills and future leadership capabilities. A “high-level” activity, the relationship is not a friendship; it is exclusively focused on the clients’ goals (Pagliarini, 2011, np).

Teaching: to show, point out, declare, demonstrate, to give instruction, train, assign, direct, warn and persuade are just a few of the synonyms drawn from the on-line etymological dictionary ([EtymOnline](#)). More succinctly, Merriam-Webster ([Merriam Webster](#)) tells us that it is the imparting of information or skill so that others may learn. Teaching generally is with groups, and ideally all should be taught equally. When one is singled out for special attention, it can cause issues with relationships within the classroom. In addition to being paid for their work, teachers are in both power-under (administration) and power-over (students) positions, and working within a context where assessment is a requirement.

Training: like teaching, involves the imparting of knowledge and skills but is particular to a specific, useful competency, and to a set of skill levels pertinent to a job or activity. Training is a much narrower definition of teaching with an emphasis on individual performance ([Business Dictionary](#)); it will, as well, involve a monetary exchange.

Unlike many of the relationships mentioned above, mentoring is, for us, fundamentally different. As educational psychologist Ray Carr (2001) pointed out, mentoring emphasizes learning in *general* and the *reciprocal* relationship of that learning. That is to say, mentoring is not directed at skill- or performance-building but, rather, at a more mutual and global understanding of “how the world wags”. With mentoring, the mentor *holds no stake* in the outcome, there is no payment and there is no evaluation. In mentoring there is always an openness to learning from one another because each partner brings his or her own strengths to the relationship.

For all of the above descriptions, the focus is always on best practice, but a good mentor has a broader view of the field and should not think of him or herself as a gatekeeper, standing somewhere ahead of the mentee. Rather, in mentoring both partners are walking alongside each other, sharing the view, listening deeply, giving a hand to one another when needed. Changing places in order to see another perspective is a gift of the mentoring relationship. For the mentee, it is a way for him or her to access the *phronesis* or experience of the mentor; in turn, the mentee, because of his or her unique qualities, can add to and expand the mentor’s view and often does so, even inadvertently. In other words, the heart of a mentoring relationship is that each learns from the other through a mutuality of interests, shared commonalities and diversity of experiences within a context of professional and personal respect.

According to the APA Presidential Task Force on Mentoring (2006), in order for the relationship to thrive, the mentor needs to be “clear and up front about what the mentee can expect from the mentoring . . . [he or she] guides the process, sets appropriate boundaries . . .” and creates an environment of sensitivity and equanimity that serves both partners (p.12-13). But, for us, many of the qualities of an effective relationship such as promptness, reliability, independence and self-motivation are established in the earlier stages of supervision or teaching and are what, for us, create the environment in which mentoring can evolve and flourish into collegiality and friendship. Generally, boundaries are unspoken and negotiated over time in ways that are particular to each relationship.

We see mentoring as something informal that grows and evolves when power-over and assessment are no longer components for consideration. We do not see examples of “bad” mentoring (APA, 2006)

as being mentor relationships at all; but role confusion can occur when duties such as supervision and management are *seen* as mentoring. Even while it is difficult for us to think of a “bad” mentor or mentee, that is not to say that the relationship cannot be tested; even the best partnerships have times of tension and misunderstandings. However, if the relationship is strong, reflective and open, it can be repaired and often emerges more resilient than before.

It may be useful to consider some of the reasons why relationships break down in these rather close one-on-one associations. Of course, we cannot be inclusive because there are as many examples as there are mentor partnerships, but drawing from the research, our own experiences and those of colleagues, we offer the following examples as possible sites for derailment:

Confidentiality is breached: All good relationships are built on trust and when that is compromised, it is difficult to rebuild.

Inappropriate sexual intentions: When the professional relationship moves to a personal one, it can lead to a sexual one that may disruptive (APA, 2006, p.15).

Personal or professional boundaries of respect are breached: This may occur because the boundaries of the “job” description have become blurred or a familiarity is assumed by one for which the other is not yet ready—the balance between professional and personal shifts uncomfortably.

Feedback on either side is seen as criticism: For a student, a supervisor’s criticism is an expectation and can be offered quite directly. But a mentoring relationship can become strained when offers of help are misinterpreted as power-over criticism rather than suggestions for consideration. In mentoring, criticism comes from a more reflective stance in which the “critical friend” (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban, 2009) lays out his or her experience for the other to consider (Schön, 1990). Swami Radha’s (n.d.) personal advice “to keep the ring under your tongue” is something we try to hang onto in moments of vigorous discussion.

Free labour: There are occasions in which the mentee perceives

him or herself as being “taken advantage of” by the mentor. These can happen in academia or in business where there is a tendency for the “senior” to take first author or to simply ignore the mentee’s contributions by taking ownership of the ideas.

Confused expectations: Expectations are more appropriate to the customer-service model of higher education, but as part of the preliminary stages of a mentorship (Endersby, 2010, np), they can arise during its development. A mentoring relationship requires partners to be aware of the possibility of inequality of responsibility and the potential for feeling that one or the other is being taken for granted.

Expert/Expertise: A misunderstanding of the difference between these two words (the first referring to “knowing it all” and the second to “having a breadth of experience on which to draw”) can place undue responsibility on the mentor.

Dependence: On either side, dependence or neediness can be a deterrent to a productive mentoring relationship. New relationships, positions or family demands may take one or the other individual in a new direction. In the long-term, both partners need to be aware of these possibilities and to respect and maintain a healthy life-work balance.

Passivity: Mentoring is an active relationship for which both need to take responsibility. This does not mean that the connection can’t go “quiet” for months or even years, but it can, at any time, resume with that mutual sense of engagement and affinity.

When we [are] harnessed together as a team, we respect each other’s space; adapt our rhythms; recognize that when the ground is uneven, it makes different demands upon each of us; and know that there is nothing more satisfying and enjoyable than when we are pulling together and that it is the journey that matters to us. (Saxton, 2006, p. 159)

Mentoring has, for the three of us, been an organic process, one that we never actually discussed or considered consciously. It is something that

has evolved over the years of knowing each other and sharing our passionate interest in drama and theatre, as audience, participants and teachers. So, when Phillip Taylor invited us to contribute to the podcast series of the NYU Forum on Educational Theatre, we agreed happily—really knowing nothing about it! When we realized that it might be long half-hour for our listeners, we decided we had better do a bit of research. And what we discovered was that our relationships were never official appointments and that, indeed, when mentoring becomes “official,” it changes the dynamic. In a funny kind of way, the appointment itself can compromise the emotional landscape that nurtures the reciprocity fundamental to healthy mentoring relationships. Our thinking appears to be supported by Ragins and Kran (2008), whose work offers a substantial analysis of the multifaceted aspects of mentoring:

[E]ven as mentoring is accessible when framed within our own experience, scholars continue to struggle with understanding the complexity of this pivotal, life-altering relationship. In a nutshell, we know it works; we are still grappling with why, when, and how. (p. 4)

With that in mind, we had a look at Goleman’ s (1997) *Emotional Intelligence* as a guide not only for ourselves but also for others who may or may hope to, find themselves in a mentoring relationship. Here is what we discovered (though we claim no sainthood in any of the following): Firstly,

- We trust one another to think about what is best for each other.
- We try to think before we speak, but we know that sometimes what blurts out can be what we need to hear. While there must always be some kind of balance, as Bill Doll (1993) reminded us, don’t let it turn into stasis!
- Considering the variety of our ages, we are pretty adaptable, but we also believe in and practice *conspectus* when we face tensions. That is to say, we hope we listen deeply, keeping in mind that objections and differences may be the grit that makes the pearl.

- We are pretty comfortable with new ideas and approaches and see change in a positive light; we understand that it is inevitable and that we have a responsibility to make better.

Lastly, we take ownership of our mistakes (oh, this is a hard one!) and recognize that what we are engaged in together is bigger than all of us.

While the spirit of mentorship may infuse any number of more structured learning relationships, we believe it is something that is not up for dissection—though this paper has certainly been a kind of reflective dissection. Now, we can forget about all that and go back to accepting mentorship is a holistic happenstance for which we are, have been—and continue to be—so very grateful.

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