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Mentoring in Higher Education: A Reflection

Miloš N. Mladenović

Introduction

The origin of the word mentor comes from Ancient Greek mythology, when legendary Odysseus went to war, and entrusted his friend Mentor to take care of his son, Telemachus [1]. Mentor was a wise teacher and guide to Telemachus, and since then this word has been connected to some of the extraordinary characters in human history. Virgil to Dante, Yoda to Luke Skywalker, Merlin the magician to king Arthur – these are just some of the examples of mentoring relationship between two people [2]. More realistic examples of mentoring originate from the apprenticeship model, originally developed in the Middle Ages craft guilds [3, 4]. Guilds were the place where mentor, usually an older and more experienced artisan, passed down knowledge and tradition to younger people.

Nowadays, mentoring is very often related to institutions of higher education. The importance of mentoring has been even more emphasized, especially in the modern research university, starting from the 1960s [5]. Mentoring relationships today are, unlike the relation professor-student, often made by choice [6]. Some universities have successfully developed a multigenerational chain of master-apprentice relationships among their scientists [7]. In addition, the mentoring relationships in modern university are becoming even more complex due to the increasing number of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups [8]. Besides the more evident diversity, mentoring relationships are generally considered as complex human relationships simply because of the diversity of individual personalities and perceptions.

Why mentoring?

Previous research is pointing out to significant benefits resulting from effective mentoring. Mentoring is considered to be of critical importance for mentee's professional success. For example, mentoring is beneficial to knowledge acquisition, improvement in technical competence, improvement in behavioral competence, planning and achievement of specific career goals, increased self-awareness, increased visibility, better understanding of organizational politics, clarity of personal goals, increased confidence, intellectual challenge, etc. [9]. Additional research showed that mentored students reported having increase in career

mobility and opportunities, higher reputation, and higher promotion rate [10], faster career transition, rapid assimilation into the culture, shorter learning curve, increased job satisfaction, etc. [3].

The work satisfaction has been directly related to psychosocial help from mentor [11], and role modeling functions related to distributive and procedural justice [12]. Furthermore, mentoring enables protégé to understand their scientific community, internal relations, and their own responsibility to that community and to society in general [13]. In addition, previous research showed that protégés that were more engaged in their career planning, reported higher psychological benefits [14]. Finally, mentoring is considered to democratize higher education through enhanced support for learning and development [8].

In addition to enhancing career accomplishment and psychosocial benefits, mentoring has high importance in fostering ethical values in prospective researches, especially within the context of their scientific programs [15]. Through mentoring relation, protégé can become aware of numerous ethical concerns (e.g. issues of accuracy and reliability, information access, abuse of power, the need for open public discussion, etc.) [13, 16]. Education on ethics, as a good example of tacit knowledge transfer, can be most effectively taught primarily through mentor-mentee relationship [16-18].

Besides the benefits for the protégé, mentors themselves can experience several benefits from the relationship: enhanced self-esteem, revitalized interest in work, feeling of leaving a legacy [3], learning, motivation, professional network, social network, status enhancement, etc. [19]. In addition, there is the opportunity to engage in self-reflection as an important part of professional development [20, 21].

Mentor's functions, features, and activities

Mentoring is often considered both a complex process and function [22]. Some of the mentor's roles that are frequently mentioned in the literature are:

- friend
- career guide
- information source
- intellectual guide
- teacher
- encourager
- role model
- counselor
- sponsor
- socializer [23]
- supporter
- patron
- guide
- protector
- confidant
- befriender [24]
- coach
- senior advisor
- experienced leader
- master
- exemplar
- luminary
- trainer
- instructor
- leader
- boss [3]

This long list depicts the complexity and broad range of functions required and expected from a mentor. However, each of these functions separately is not equivalent to mentor. For example, a coach is an expert in facilitating the protégé's skills or knowledge acquisition, while mentor has more personal domain and specific expertise [20]. In general, mentoring is considered to be more formative activity than for example instructional supervision [24].

General mentor's features

The mentor's features are a mixture of functional approaches and characteristics [25]. In general, mentors need to provide two functions – a career and psychosocial function [14]. The primary thing expected from mentors is to challenge but provide supporting guidance, since it is considered that high support and high challenge leads to protégé's growth [2]. Furthermore, mentor's belief in their protégé's capacity is very important for protégé to achieve full capacity [26]. Good mentor knows to recognize and build upon protégé's strengths, establishing an atmosphere where protégé can take risks, and be open to learning from protégé [27]. Furthermore, good mentor is able to meet protégé at their level of psychological need, recognizing emotional needs and stressful situations [28]. This emotional support is often crucial, since learning professional skills without concentrating on psychological factors can be a drawback in situations when emotions overwhelm rationality. Finally, assuming a role of trusted colleague, mentor need to be courageous in acting principles such as human dignity,

equity, and justice [22]. As a part of psychosocial function, mentors need the ability to help their protégé's regulate feelings, behavior, and situations [20]. Mentors can have different functions as a part of their personality, and that can reflect in their mentoring approach. One of the examples of that diversity has been shown by previous research, identifying three types of mentors [29]:

1. Authoritarian – mentor sets the goal and tasks
2. Coach – set the goals jointly with the protégé
3. Laissez-faire – does not set the goals, just encourages protégé

Personal characteristics

There are different psychological characteristics that are desired in a mentor. A compiled list of desired mentor's characteristics from previous research includes the following [6, 8, 21-23, 25, 30]:

- selfless, approachable, and nonjudgmental
- persistent and patient
- appreciating diversity
- respectful
- good listener
- willing to share knowledge
- willing to allow growth
- honest and direct in dealing with protégé
- role model for continuous learning
- hopeful and optimistic
- empathetic and sensitive
- committed to the role
- able to establish rapport
- high energy level
- outgoing personality
- have unquestionable personal and professional integrity
- personal power and charisma

In-depth description of positive mentor's characteristics gives more insight into the wide range and complexity of beneficial personality traits of mentors [26]. The traits are grouped in the following categories:

1. Authentic – genuine, fair, honest, supportive, understanding, loyal, helpful, principled, thoughtful, believing, respectful, and tolerant of others

2. Nurturing – kind, sensitive, compassionate, easy-going, spiritual, patient, generous, not stubborn, nonaggressive, and empathetic to others
3. Approachable – humorous, friendly, encouraging, communicative, positive, open, caring, cooperative, and considerate of others
4. Competent – knowledgeable, bright, interested, intelligent, enthusiastic, professional, confident, experienced, insightful, and informative to others
5. Inspirational – visioning, risk-taking, creative, curious, dynamic, strong, passionate, direct, brilliant, challenging, and assertive
6. Conscientiousness – efficient, organized, disciplined, consistent, strict, and available to others
7. Hard-working - dedicated, motivated, committed, ambitious, energetic, driven, then to be demanding of self and others

However, mentors can also have negative features such as neurotic, overbearing, egocentric, outrageous, vindictive, contradictory, self-centered, wild, centric, opinionated, stressed, cunning, etc. [26].

Knowledge and skills

In addition to personality traits, that are innately internal, inborn, and harder to adjust, every mentor can have a set of skills that are learnable and can improve his mentoring competence. The preferred skills of a mentor are grouped in the following four categories [6, 22, 27, 30-32]:

1. Interpersonal and human resources skills

This skillset includes the ability to giving positive and critical feedback, effectiveness in communicating and interpersonal contexts, negotiating, active listening, intervention and conflict management, questionings, motivation, self-awareness, etc. The important part of this skillset is dialogue, that can take for of a social, technical, strategic, integrative, dialogue for self-insight or for behavioral change [25]. In addition to dialogue, previous research identified skill of storytelling as a good non-invasive interpersonal tool for learning and change [33].

2. Organizational and project management skills

This skillset includes resource planning, selecting and structuring work activities, contracting, recording, structuring of sessions, time management, validating, assessing, delegating, logging activities and development of protégé, etc.

3. Technical competence

Besides required scientific knowledge, this skillset includes the ability to perform training and assistance in developing protégé's skills, peer-reviewing practice, online skills, technical and proposal writing, acting as a source of information, etc.

4. Status and prestige

This specific skillset that bases upon mentors respect among the peers in the scientific community, requires from mentor to have experience in chairing committees and attending conferences so the mentor can introduce protégé into research community, offer insight into organization's philosophy, and point to other people for specialized help.

Mentoring stages

Although there might be a list of required features for a mentor, and maximum level of mentor's functions is extremely important [34], some situations might require different competencies that the others (e.g., career development, personal development, etc.) [25]. The relationships itself, as any other relationship, changes over time, with both potential for positive and negative resolutions [6]. Previous research has determined several stages in the mentoring relationship. Stages relate to progress from protégé's dependence until his autonomy, confidence and self-reliance, with variety in the amount of structure, mentor's direction and support [22]. In different phases, mentor needs to focus more or less on career development and role modeling [35]. Most of the researches recognize the existence of four to six distinct stages [9, 32, 34, 36-39].

Initial stage

Most of the researches recognize initial/initiation/introductory stage at the very beginning of the mentoring relationship. This first stage is when mentor teaches mentee how to do things [37], leading and directing the protégé [39]. This is also a stage where role of a mentor is established, and protégé determines his goals and expectations [3]. In this initial stage, mentor and protégé build rapport, and decide whether or not to work together, based on meeting each other's needs [9]. In this stage, mentor's need skills such as active listening, offering openness and trust to elicit reciprocal behavior, and identifying common ground and differences.

Second stage

The second stage where mentor is supposed to be more proactive, supporting and encouraging [38]. In this stage, mentor and protégé set the directions and focus more on the protégé's education [9]. Contrary to the initial stage, the second and the third stage are stages where mentor needs to emphasize his core mentoring functions, especially for psychosocial support [34]. This stage requires skills of goal identification, clarification and management, personal project planning, etc.

Third stage

This stage, as the core of the mentoring relationship, consists of all the conventional and generally perceived mentoring activities. At this stage, protégé develops independence and confidence, and the mentor becomes more critical, challenging, and encouraging reflection [38]. The relationship becomes more collaborative and mentor participates jointly with protégé or delegates to protégé [39]. At this stage, the most time and energy is invested, requiring sustained commitment, sufficient challenge, helping the protégé take increasing responsibility [9], and identifying appropriate conditions of desired performance and/or behavior [37].

Final stage

This last stage is when protégé achieves functional independence [39]. This stage starts when the desired outcomes have been accomplished, and when protégé begins to outgrow the mentor [9]. The relationships transforms into a more casual friendship, since it has fulfilled its purpose [40].

Mentor-protégé dyad

Besides an atmosphere of mutual trust and belief [24], as one of the key factors for success of mentor-protégé relationship, the success of this dyad depends on the compatibility of personalities [19]. The protégé perceives more success if the mentor has a similar amount of the personality extraversion, and if the discrepancy in conscientiousness is high. In addition, the protégé perceives a high degree of success if they themselves score high on openness to experience, and if mentor scores high on emotional stability. Furthermore, the mentor

perceives more success if the protégé has a similar amount of the personality variable agreeableness. Finally, the level of mentor's information seeking relates to mentors ability to provide career support and be influenced by the protégé [41].

Some mentor and protégé features that are good for them individually, might be resulting in the negative outcomes in the relationship [6], especially considering that traditional faculty student mentoring relationship bases on intuitive inequality [42]. Mentoring, as a highly complex human interaction, has much scope to develop in a wrong direction [43]. Lack of commitment, lack of clear recognition, sexual intimacy, and other problems can appear in this relationship.

Some previous research confirmed the importance of commitment on both sides of this relationship. For example, opposite gender mentoring relationships were often reported as improved, potentially because of the awareness of the possible negative outcomes [14]. In this mentor-protégé dyad, the emphasis is on the mentor maintaining a dual perspective, perceiving protégé as an separate individual, and as a part of a larger social context [8]. Other potential pitfalls that protégés need to be aware of during the mentoring process can be overreliance upon mentor's actions, and failure to allow development of the relationship over time.

Observing the relationship from the mentor's perspective, protégé is often described as mentee, candidate, participant, apprentice, a devisee, counselee, trainee, student, follower, subordinate, applicant, hopeful, or seeker [3]. In addition, some of the positive characteristics of a protégé, perceived by the mentor, and that are developed or reinforced during the relationship, [3, 6, 26, 44] are:

- eagerness to be mentored
- willingness to assume responsibility for his or her own growth and development
- assessed and perceived growth potential
- ability to perform in more than one skill area
- a record of seeking challenging assignments in your responsibilities
- receptivity to feedback and coaching
- dedication and enthusiasm

- intelligence
- ambition
- focus
- proactivity
- respect and self-respect

Discussion

It is in the essence of human behavior is to emulate the behavior they observe in others [23]. With that in mind, mentoring in higher education is considered to be of crucial importance for student’s development and knowledge transfer, and has a place of central importance in the modern university. This literature review has shown that word mentor invokes different images of a similar stereotype. Furthermore, this literature review has showed us the variety of personal characteristics and skills needed for the mentor in the higher education of the 21st century. Mentors need to be capable to develop both their personalities and their skillset in order to achieve ideal mentoring relationship. As presented on the Figure 1, the lack of one or the other can result only in partial benefits for protégé, since he/she will receive only relationship management or knowledge transfer.

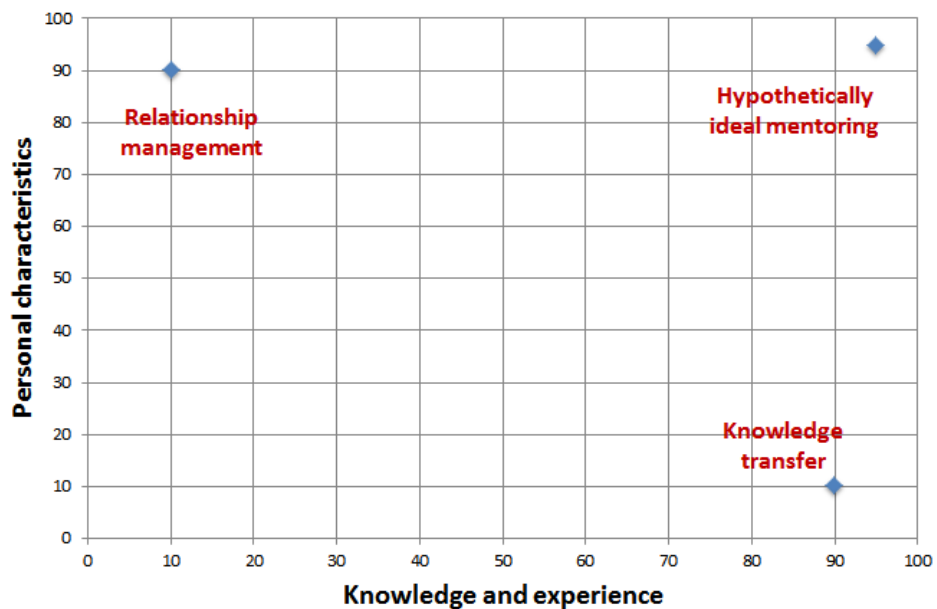


Figure 1: The relation of mentor competencies to relationship achievement

However, in the mentoring relationship, the responsibility for success is not just on mentor. For a complete success of the mentoring relationship, both participants must truly encounter each other [22], creating a bond of friendship, based upon feeling of trust, respect, and emotional commitment [26]. From one side, mentoring requires a commitment to actively exert consistent influence on the professional development of protégé, and commitment to continue improving mentoring skills [24]. In order to help protégés develop and internalize their own set of values, standards and skills, mentor needs to separate the personal value of the individual from his efforts and do not let his value as a person be affected by the outcomes of his efforts. On the other hand, the personal characteristics and capabilities of protégé are also important for success of the mentoring relationship, due to the necessary interaction in the dyad.

Potentials for the future

Considering the ever-increasing diversity in higher education, mentoring has the capability to make a positive impact on a grander scale, in addition to just benefiting the mentored individuals. Mentoring can be very important in developing and accomplishing the transformation of scientific communities of the future. As a part of higher education, mentoring is positioned in its very core, and thus it is very important to nurture and develop this model. Although the research on developing a more holistic mentoring model in higher education is still ongoing [45], below are some of the recommendations for future implementation.

- Mentor training

Departments should consider formalized approach to mentoring programs [46], since the familiarity with the concept of mentoring does not guarantee its full applicability in implementation [47]. Considering this, there is a potential to establish mentor-centered training as a prerequisite for all faculty members who will serve as mentors [18]. For example, faculty could receive training in interpersonal, project management, or cultural competency skills.

- Mentor-protégé matching

Considering the complex relations developing over time in the mentor-protégé dyad, there is a need for improved decision-making about mentor-protégé matching. Mentors should be matched with protégé after consideration of the experience, skills, and knowledge needed by the protégé [3]. Factors in selection can be compatibility of styles and personality, gender issues, cross-cultural issues, etc.

- The additional mentor/advisor

The availability of extended human network is beneficial to mentoring relationship, just as much as it is beneficial to parenting [48]. Developing a network of secondary mentors can provide additional experience and guidance [49]. There is a practical potential to have secondary mentors change every semester.

- Involvement of the academic administration

In addition to mentor and protégé, a third party that can support or restrain the development of benefits from mentoring relationship is the academic organization itself [45]. Over the course of years, administrative rules have imposed a number of barriers that do not support frequent, close, and often long-term interactions of mentors with students [50]. This needs to change, since administrative is crucial through effective organizational structure, financial resources, coordination, etc. [51].

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