Teaching as Relationship: Opportunities to Mentor our Students

by Rebecca Fawns-Justeson

In times of declining resources, faculty members are being asked to do more with less. Under these circumstances we might be tempted to make ourselves less available to our students — to pull back and guard our time as we seem to have fewer free moments in the day to meet our myriad responsibilities. I have been noticing this temptation as I’ve struggled to manage my own time, and I’ve asked myself what really is to be gained by making myself available to my students outside of class hours.

The answer to this question, for me, lies in what I perceive to be the real purpose of education. I believe it’s not merely to pass on knowledge within a particular field of study, although knowledge is a critical goal, certainly. To me the real purpose of our work is to mentor our students, to help them along their path to becoming thoughtful, engaged, self-aware citizens who are fully able to make choices that reflect their most cherished values; choices that lead them to a meaningful and satisfying life, however they define it. In order for this important mentoring to take place, we must have an open door policy with our students.

There are many views about what types of actions can or cannot be defined as mentoring. In my opinion, we often make it much more complicated than it needs to be. At its core, mentoring is the act of listening, of asking good questions, and of probing others to more clearly articulate their ideas. Mentoring also involves challenging thoughts or beliefs that seem erroneous, undefined, or overly rigid, appropriately sharing one’s own successes and failures, and helping the mentored to develop perspective on his or her values, goals, and life. Mentoring is about

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problem solving, connecting people to resources, and helping them to develop needed skills. Mentoring is about encouragement and inspiration. It is about investing time and energy in other people, because other people matter to us.

I would like to share five powerful opportunities I’ve recently had to mentor my students, experiences I would have missed without an open door policy. I believe these examples will highlight what is to be gained by allowing space for a teacher-student relationship to develop outside of the classroom. I work in teacher education and serve as the coordinator of a blended credential and master’s degree program. These stories derive from my interactions with students in this context.

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EXPANDING NOTIONS OF DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

Juliana came to see me one day because she was very unhappy in her elementary school special education field placement. She couldn’t work effectively with her mentor teacher, she said, and hoped to be transferred to another placement. As we spoke, she cited a perceived lack of flexibility on the part of her mentor, along with an already overly full daily schedule that would make it difficult to complete her required M.A. work. But as I simply allowed time and space to listen to this student, and as I asked her probing questions, I discovered the issue was not merely the daily schedule or an inflexible personality.

When I asked Juliana what I perceived to be a benign question, she opened up. She became emotional and wanted me to understand that it was very difficult for her, as a Latina from an urban background, to work in a predominantly white school in a rural environment where she and the teachers did not share life experiences. Those teachers made remarks about students who came from backgrounds similar to hers, she told me, and those remarks offended her. Ironically, Juliana had designed her action research project around the idea of promoting a greater appreciation of diversity, starting with the students in her class. However, she felt unable to execute her plan in this monocultural environment amidst people she believed would not value her research.

Juliana was in an uncomfortable position, to be sure, but through our conversations she discovered additional dimensions to this issue. As a person who considered herself both an educator and an advocate, she came to see value in persevering in this environment. In the course of our conversations, she determined that, while it was critically important for her white peers to understand the experiences of people of color, promoting diversity did not mean that only her perspective should be understood. She opened herself up to seeing how other teach-
ers might be blinded by their inexperience. She decided that, while perhaps unfair, this situation might make her a more effective advocate in the future. She also determined that if she could understand how people from monocultural environments think, she could seize opportunities to jolt their assumptions.

Through our conversations, Juliana came to see that there would be much to gain for her in making an effort to communicate her beliefs to people who were not like her. She came to see this as an opportunity to refine her communication skills so that she could be a better advocate for children in the future. She also grew to see value in facing the problem head-on (with faculty support), rather than simply switching to another environment. Importantly, she discovered the value of attacking ignorance, not people.

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PROFESSIONALISM FURTHER DEFINED

Tom contacted me about a situation he saw as problematic. He and a group of three other student teachers were responsible for developing a service-learning project at their school site, but their mentor teachers had recommended a project that the student teachers felt did not meet the full intent of the assignment, or their collective interests. Rather than communicating directly with the mentors, the student teachers began to talk amongst themselves, criticizing the mentors for their lack of understanding, their perceived controlling and domineering style, and for putting the student teachers in a position to receive a lower grade in my course.

Tom, being the agreeable sort, was “volunteered” by his peers to bring their concern to my office. But, rather than delivering their concern, he aired his intense frustration with his fellow student teachers’ unprofessional behavior. He was angry that they would not speak directly with the mentor teachers and that they instead gossiped about their concerns. In addition, he utterly disagreed that the proposed project would not meet assignment expectations.

But when I asked him how his peers reacted when he expressed these opinions to them, he turned cold. He confessed he had not shared, nor did he intend to share, his opinions with them. Wait! What? “Let me understand,” I said to Tom, “you are angry at them for not communicating directly, but you are also not communicating directly?” Yes, exactly. Not only had he not shared his feelings frankly with them, he somehow found himself in my office as the group spokesman for a group opinion he did not happen to share. Interesting. This was certainly an opportunity to mentor Tom into a deeper understanding of what it means to be
professional. While he correctly understood that withholding his concern from the mentor teachers was problematic, he didn't see his own reticence with his peers as the same phenomenon. When I shared my thoughts with him, he was blind-sided. He had expected me to curtail the unprofessional behavior at the school site. He had not considered that he had a role to play in changing the circumstances.

Through several discussions, Tom came to understand that, as a future member of a school faculty, he had a responsibility to speak up, and that his silence exacerbated the problem. If he did not develop the personal courage to speak his mind on everyday issues, he realized it would be much harder to express himself when the stakes are higher—for example, to advocate for a student or to defend a deeply held belief.

CHOOSING AN APPROPRIATE LIFE PATH

Myra appeared to be the perfect teacher candidate: she had passed all required assessments, meticulously assembled her application materials, and wrote stellar essays that demonstrated deep insights into the purpose and politics of public education. She also had demonstrated she understood the needs of students, and had attended teacher training on beginning reading and on supporting English language learners before she even applied to our credential program. We were impressed. However, when Myra began her student teaching experience, she withered. While her course assignments were acceptable, her classroom performance was half-hearted, and her lesson plans uninspired and poorly executed.

Several months into her field experience I invited Myra to my office to discuss her performance. She shared that she had not felt like herself for months, and seemed to have no energy. She reported that she had never struggled with depression before, but was certainly feeling depressed now. She wondered aloud about potential physical ailments that might be ravaging her body, and told me she was planning to see her physician. When I asked her if she was enjoying the teaching, she assured me she was.

About two weeks later, in the early evening hours, Myra showed up unannounced at my office door. She confessed that she was pretty certain that she actually hated teaching.
this profession, but she also couldn’t imagine ever telling her family of educators and her educator fiancé that she didn’t want to teach. Moreover, she really couldn’t imagine telling them that she wanted to be an actor. Myra had performed all of her life, but was told that attempting a professional acting career was impractical and foolhardy.

As we talked, Myra spontaneously explored what her life as a performer might look like. She imagined performing in various productions, either local or “on the road.” She decided she didn’t actually hate teaching, but she did hate a life devoid of performing. She thought she might like to teach acting skills to children and teens in a private studio setting, and she enthused about the possibility of starting her own consulting firm to teach the use of acting techniques in business presentations. As she spoke, she displayed a whole new energy and vitality. It was clear what she needed to do.

Myra eventually chose to remain in the credential program, but re-committed to earning her teaching credential in a much more honest and self-aware manner. She brought drama into her teaching, led a group of 6th graders in a school-wide holiday performance, and made plans to participate in an actor’s workshop the following summer in New York City. Myra found her passion and was able to move forward in her life.

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Cynthia was a tall, athletic student teacher, full of life and energy, who was well-loved by her classmates. Because of her commitment and good nature, for her first practicum experience I placed her with one of our most exacting mentor teachers—a man with a reputation for high skills and high standards. This was not a perfect match perhaps, but I had an instinct it would work. Cynthia was nervous, to say the least, about her ability to measure up in this context.

Just two weeks into the practicum, Cynthia visited and shared some sad news. Her father, a well-loved and highly respected local teacher and football coach, was dying of a brain tumor. Anticipating he would not survive much longer, she was struggling to decide whether to remain in the program, as her father wished. I immediately felt invested in helping Cynthia through this difficult time. I spoke to her mentor teacher, who not only agreed to support her, but also almost immediately shifted the focus of their work. He had recently lost his father and was able to share that experience with her. He encouraged her to be strong and to believe
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in herself, and to have more confidence in her considerable abilities.

Cynthia did elect to remain in the teaching program, and her mentor helped her to see how teaching can be therapy during the roughest patches of life. Throughout this experience, her mentor and I gave her permission to not be perfect, to take care of her own needs, and to be with her family. We encouraged her to receive support from others, to take life as it comes, and to not feel pressured to make decisions for her entire future. Not long after, her father did pass away, and she sailed though the rest of the year with poise and confidence, knowing she already had faced the worst.

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After certification, she earned a job locally, and has become a teaching professional with a very solid reputation and a heart for the most underserved students. She is a colleague and friend to me and her mentor teacher. Cynthia would have made it through the death of her father without us, but I am so glad we were there. It was a privilege to support her through that period of time, a privilege I would have missed without an open door policy.

BUILDING AWARENESS OF SUCCESS

I met Jasmin in an undergraduate writing methods course, where I taught future elementary teachers how to use a writer’s workshop approach, and took them through all stages of the writing process with their own piece of writing. For the major course assignment, Jasmin chose to write about how dyslexia impacts children’s writing ability and development. At the end of her comprehensive and impressively written paper, she added a personal note for me to read. She shared that she had struggled with reading and writing for many years and was diagnosed with severe dyslexia as a young child. She also shared that English was her second language, and included a lengthy apology for the quality of her paper. I was amazed at this note—her paper was the highest quality submission in the class.

As I reflected on Jasmin’s performance on the assignment, her personal note to me, and the fact that she did not bring her own experiences into the paper, even though she was strongly encouraged to do so, I knew we needed to talk. I immediately made an appointment to meet. I recognized Jasmin as a student who had worked very, very hard to overcome obstacles in her life, but also as a person who had yet to step back and appreciate how her efforts had paid off. She wasn’t aware of how she had grown academically, particularly in her reading and writing skills. She was also not aware that the strategies she was using were working really well.
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for her. How could it be possible for Jasmin to perceive herself to be performing at the bottom of her class when she was performing at the top?

When we met, I simply reviewed her performance in my course, highlighting what she had done well, noting the strategies I had observed her using, and punctuating how much effort she was devoting to her assignments. After reviewing this information, I asked her what she thought about her performance. She remarked, with the intonation of a question, that it seemed she had done pretty well. I asked what prompted her, then, to write the explanation/apology and attach it to her final paper. Tears began to flow as she confessed she had been so focused on per-

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forming at an acceptable level she had failed to notice (and celebrate!) that she had reached that level.

I let Jasmin know that I was certainly not encouraging her to put in less effort, or to relax her standards. I only wished to help her develop a more accurate and realistic perception of herself as a student, and as an individual. We talked more about the specific strategies she used successfully, so that she could continue to use them effectively and with awareness about how and why those strategies worked for her. We also discussed unproductive habits (mental habits mostly, but also the habit of writing disclaimers to accompany her "A" quality work), that could be jetisoned, freeing up energy for enjoying school and other areas of her life. Jasmin continued to visit me in my office over the next year, and is currently flourishing in a credential program.

The Real Purpose of Education

At the beginning of this article I asked the question, “What is to be gained by making myself available to students outside of class hours?” This question has several answers, but the common theme among them is one of growth and learning. In each of these five cases, the students grew in important ways. We know learning does not take place in classrooms only—learning also occurs quite powerfully as students struggle to live in the real world. If we take time to develop relationships with our students, and if we are available to guide them through these real-world learning experiences, we will contribute more substantially to their overall growth and development. As an educator, I view this as a very valuable outcome.

Students, however, are not the only ones who benefit from a strong teacher-student relationship. I also grow and learn as I help my students solve real issues. Juliana’s situation made me consider what I really believe about diversity. Tom
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Butterfly Lovers is a painting by Carrie Ann Baade, an assistant professor of painting and drawing at Florida State University. For more, visit carrieannbaade.com.
made me reflect on how often I am courageous, and Myra made me reflect on my own life choices and whether or not I honor the stirrings of my soul. Cynthia caused me to think about my confidence, and Jasmin caused me to ponder how often I appreciate my own progress. Sometimes I like what I learn about myself and sometimes I don’t, but as I wrestle with the issues that my students face, I am proud that we are both involved in the process of education. When I invest in my students, I feel satisfied and more authentically engaged in my profession.

The teaching profession, at all levels, stands to gain when educators make themselves available for the type of teaching and learning I’ve described in this article (i.e., mentoring).

We are teachers—whether we teach six-year-olds, 26-year-olds, or 86-year-olds. Inherent in this role is a tremendous capacity to influence lives, to make a difference in the world through our interactions with people. When we take this role seriously, we bring pride to our field. This pride begets respect and reminds teachers, and society at large, that the work of education is important for all of us. Indeed, if we want an informed, thoughtful, and self-aware citizenry, we must invest in our students.

I’ll close by saying that I hope to cultivate within my teacher candidates a belief in the power of mentoring. I want my students to leave our program with an intention to develop strong relationships with their students, relationships that will enable them to mentor. I want them to carry this intention into their professional lives, and to “pay it forward” to their students. In my teacher education classes I frequently tell my students that “teaching is about relationships.” If I really believe this, nothing will stop me from putting this belief into action—not the formality of the University, not my desire to focus solely on course content, and certainly not my busy schedule. If I believe that teaching is about relationships, then it must start with me and my relationships with my students.