

22 To mentor or not to mentor

A mentor speaks

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As the mentor in this study, I report on my first experience on mentoring a new graduate (Maggie, whom I had taught as a senior in college). Being a mentor of a college student was like being a mother taking care of a newborn baby who demanded a great deal of attention and guidance as he/she grew up. Mentoring is a unique interpersonal relationship between two individuals (Janasz, Behson, Jonsen & Lankau, 2013). In fact, it is a life-long relationship that does not end or go away even after the baby turns into an adult or, as in Maggie's case, graduates from college. Thus, being asked to serve as a mentor was a great honour for me. It was also a great motivation for me to help Maggie, a student from the Department of Foreign Language Instruction, become a more effective student/researcher.

Mentoring undergraduates or mentoring undergraduate research has never been the focus or practice in Taiwan. This may be one reason why Maggie had been turned down by six teachers prior to meeting me. This research focuses on one mentor and mentee relationship and the challenging and rewarding experience of being a mentor.

The current study was based on my own experience as a mentor, so reflexivity was adopted throughout the research process. Reflexivity helps with understanding how researchers construct meaning (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009). Additionally, reflexivity is a significant part of the data because researchers reflected on their participation in the study (Atkins & Williams, 1995). It facilitates the understanding of the research process (Watt, 2007). Furthermore, Dowling (2006) indicated that applying reflexivity in research, researchers should be aware of their relationship to the research topic and people involved in the research.

I knew that researchers do have influence on data generation and interpretation and insights of the phenomenon researched (Buckner, 2005). Thus, applying reflexivity in this study can be viewed as a means of adding credibility to the research (Dowling, 2006) and can provide the evidence for sound qualitative research (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004). Furthermore, to assure that I presented the results accurately, I contacted Maggie and presented the study to her personally and invited her to make any comments.

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1 I also invited Maggie's feedback and comments on the study as a further way
2 of ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of the present study.
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4 **Beginning a mentoring relationship**

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6 Prior to reading the mentoring articles I provided, Maggie knew nothing
7 about mentoring or the role of a mentor. Yet, prior to meeting and working
8 with me, Maggie clearly explained what assistance she would like from a
9 mentor. She expressed a wish that she wanted to do research with a faculty
10 member and she was looking for someone who could read what she read and
11 grow with her. Planning to study for a Masters in the United States was prob-
12 ably the most important reason Maggie sought a mentor to help her gain
13 research experience in preparation for thesis writing. After all, mentors are
14 good resources for gaining research experience (Hughes & Fahy, 2009). The
15 added benefit of having a positive and meaningful research experience at the
16 undergraduate level would inspire confidence and motivation in an under-
17 graduate such as Maggie to pursue advanced degrees and a career in research
18 (Abdel-Qader, 2004; Abudayyeh, 2003). Most importantly, mentoring pro-
19 vides "rich one-on-one mentoring experiences, guidance/preparation for
20 graduate school, and career and hands-on-research experience" as stated by
21 Horowitz and Christopher (2013).

22 I told Maggie that I was honoured and glad that I was able to help her. I
23 learned from Maggie that I was not the first faculty member she had asked to
24 mentor her in doing research. Maggie said that she had wanted to get
25 involved in research as a sophomore, but had been turned down by six teach-
26 ers for various reasons. One teacher, for example, told Maggie her focus
27 should be on learning English, not doing research. In contrast, I had always
28 been approachable and generous with time. Thus, when Maggie responded
29 to my invitation to come to her for anything, this mentoring relationship
30 evolved.
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32 **Challenges and dilemmas**

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34 The foremost challenge I encountered was to think back to my own experi-
35 ence as a mentee at graduate school and as a faculty member. Casto, Caldwell
36 and Salazar (2005) wrote a research paper about their own experiences of a
37 mentoring relationship to provide guidelines for mentoring relationships.
38 They reported that a mentor who did not have his or her own mentor as a
39 new faculty member or as a graduate student might feel ill-prepared or
40 reluctant to become a mentor herself/himself. On the other hand, mentors'
41 own experiences as students and faculty influence how they mentor their
42 mentees. I, from time to time, would tell Maggie that I admired her and
43 wished I could have had a mentor at school. After all, I had no mentor like
44 those in the Rippe (2001) study who had regular meetings with their mentees
45 when I was a graduate or undergraduate student.

Nor had I had the same experiences as those in the Katz and Coleman (2001) study in which the mentee presented several papers at conferences with her mentor. In addition, I wondered why she herself didn't contact her supervisor for advice, resources, support, or didn't simply just email her supervisor regarding what she has been up to after graduation. I think her situation was like participants said in the Rippe (2001) study: a change in location, the feeling that the supervisor and supervisee relationship was meant to be short term, and not feeling a connection with the mentor all resulted in not anticipating further contact.

Mentors themselves find publishing hard to do even though publication of research is one of the standards of academic excellence. I did want to put pressure on Maggie to publish, to collect data or to write for publication. After all, mentors play an important role in helping mentees preparing manuscripts (Straus, Chatur & Taylor, 2009). Furthermore, supervisors' involvement in undergraduate researchers' research is the key to success (Mah, 2013). Yet, in reality, both I and Maggie at times were overwhelmed by our respective responsibilities at school as faculty members and as a senior college graduate. Consequently, publishing became impossible since it needed time and patience.

Additionally, Maggie had many extra-curricular activities such as tutoring a young boy with Asperger Syndrome, being a teaching assistant, auditing a graduate class and working as a part-time assistant to a retired professor. Those activities took away from her time to publish or get a research paper done. Therefore, at times when Maggie seemed not to be doing her work, I was encouraging rather than being judgemental.

At the same time, the mentor acknowledges the importance of regular meetings with Maggie and also believes time is a valuable commodity a mentor can offer to his or her mentee (Pita, Ramirez, Joacin, Prentice & Clarke, 2013). Simply, regular meetings allow mentors to check progress, answer questions and minimize potential miscommunication concerning with mentees' research (Mah, 2013). Yet, the next challenge I and other mentors might encounter is to find the suitable or best time for regular weekly meeting with mentees. After all, many mentors might be married and their duties at school and in the family can be overwhelming sometimes. In addition, many mentees might have a full time or part time job. As a result of busy and different class or working schedules, both parties have personal and professional responsibilities which make demands on their time.

(Not) setting boundaries

I met with Maggie on a weekly basis during the school year. However, that year, I had a heavy teaching load and meeting weekly with Maggie meant that I had no time for a short break or something to eat. In addition, depending on the length and number of the articles I and Maggie were reading, the discussion could be as short as one hour or as long as three hours. This

1 reduced the time I could spend before my evening class. She was especially
2 stressed at the times she had a fully booked schedule and was afraid that she
3 did not spend enough time for class preparation.

4 Furthermore, I was surprised to learn that Maggie did not want a break
5 when school was not in session. When a mentee expresses her/his desire to
6 continue working with the mentor during the break, a mentor who wants to
7 be a good mentor has no reason to turn her down. In addition, I did not
8 want to or give Maggie the feeling that she occupied my time even when she
9 did. For many mentors, that could be an issue. After all, school break is an
10 important time for faculty to recharge themselves after the pressure of teach-
11 ing, doing research and outreach work.

12 Additionally, at first, there were times when Maggie was late for the
13 meeting. Excuses such as she overslept were truly unacceptable or irresponsi-
14 ble. I was disappointed. Instead of blaming her, I gave Maggie a few mentor-
15 ing articles in which mentors in the study indicated their disappointment at
16 having unpunctual and undedicated mentees. I discussed those mentors' con-
17 cerns with Maggie at the next meeting. Subsequently, Maggie would call if
18 she could not make it or would be late for the meeting. I can only say that
19 Maggie would have been a more disciplined mentee, if I had initially cor-
20 rected Maggie's behaviour as it happened. I should have discussed with
21 Maggie how often and in what manner she established contact.

22 **The mentor's role**

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24 Many mentors would agree with Abdel-Qader (2004) that mentoring stu-
25 dents to do research is not an easy task. It is especially challenging with
26 undergraduates who are not used to searching for information. Instead, they
27 demand quick answers from mentors.
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29 According to Scott (n.d.), a mentor is a person who makes a mentee feel
30 more confident about the steps he/she takes. Furthermore, mentors are
31 experienced people or role models who are sources of guidance and wisdom.
32 Mentees in the Milner and Bossers (2004) study of mentor group relation-
33 ships in an occupational therapy university curriculum reported their desired
34 qualities of a mentor as someone who is wise, insightful, honest, approach-
35 able, inspiring, enlightening, professional, friendly, personable, encouraging, a
36 good communicator, trustworthy, respectful, a role model/leader, dedicated,
37 enthusiastic, willing to share ideas and perspectives and learn from mentees.

38 Similarly, Hudson (2005) examined 331 pre-service science teachers' percep-
39 tions of their mentors' personal attributes and found that having a mentor who
40 is supportive, attentive and comfortable in talking about teaching does help
41 mentees' teaching practice. Indeed, supportiveness is a vital component of a suc-
42 cessful mentor's character (Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007). Furthermore, a
43 mentee in the Kamvounias, McGrath-Champ and Yip (2008) study described a
44 mentor as someone a mentee can look up to and someone who is interested in
45 mentees' interest. Mentors are also people who sometimes might put mentees

ahead of their own interests. Katz and Coleman (2001) indicated that mentors are those who are willing and enjoying committing time and energy to help mentees. Additionally, mentors should be people who believe their mentee is worth helping. Therefore, mentors should never penalize or criticize mentees (Brown, 2004). According to Hughes and Fahy (2009), the nature of the mentor-student relationship is voluntary and primarily very informal. However, it needs to be noted that not everyone is a competent mentor and arranged mentor-mentee matching are not always ideal (Darwin & Palmer, 2009).

Mentoring undergraduate research is a very time-consuming process. While some mentors find editing writing style and correcting formatting time-intensive (Jensen, Martin, Mann & Fogarty, 2004), many mentors find scheduling time to meet with mentees is the major challenge for them. However, I was surprised to find that mentees and mentors met so frequently in the Rippe (2001) study of the benefits of a mentoring programme at the University of Nebraska Omaha. Mentees in the Rippe (2001) study met with their mentors anywhere from daily to every two weeks. All mentees in the study said they met with their mentors on a regular basis even when they were still in their coursework in the university. I was surprised to learn that Mentee F, a high school teacher in Rippe's (2001) study stated that his mentor with whom he worked to develop a website for the building, updated him at least twice daily and that they spent a minimum of 15 minutes daily together. Generally, it is rare to have a mentor who could devote time to mentees every day.

Having experts as mentors to inexperienced mentees can be a challenging task for both mentors and mentees. For example, Shim and Roth (2007) studied how expert teaching professors transfer their knowledge to mentees. They reported that very often experts may not be able to explain how they do their jobs or exactly what they know. A mentee in their study also commented on shadowing her mentor and observing how she interacted with students. The mentee said she could learn, view, feel and see how her mentor did that, but her mentor really could not put it into words.

Unlike a teacher, whose responsibility mainly focuses on class teaching, a mentor does more than teach. A mentor usually has a mission to help mentees succeed in their professions and fulfil their needs. Furthermore, having a mentee is like raising a child. Parents are excited to have children, but they feel their hands are tied when it comes to educating their children and have limited time to spend with them. Similarly, mentors want to share the success of mentees, but they do not have time or do not want to devote too much time to mentees. No doubt, not all mentees can succeed without help from mentors. In the following, I discuss my challenging and rewarding experiences being a mentor to my mentee, Maggie.

Challenges and rewards

Reading and discussing articles with a mentee does not sound like a lot of work for a mentor. Maggie, at first, would send articles to me which she had

1 read or was planning to read. I was indeed glad to read all of them and to
2 discuss them with Maggie. However, there were times when I was over-
3 loaded with my own work and reading those could disturb my schedule or
4 delay the original proposed working schedule. Furthermore, at first, it took
5 me some time to digest the Asperger Syndrome articles that Maggie was
6 interested in.

7 Additionally, the way I read Maggie's articles were different to the way I
8 would read my research articles. Instead, I read as if preparing a lesson plan.
9 After all, I was not sure if Maggie could comprehend all the articles despite
10 the fact that those articles were chosen and sent by her. However, later in the
11 meetings, articles tended to be chosen by me, so I was fully prepared for dis-
12 cussion. Thus, this was not a problem. Yet, it did raise another question:
13 when the readings originate mainly from me, does that mean Maggie is
14 relying on the mentor and she is not making any progress in searching the
15 literature? Perhaps, I should have used literature as a reference to teach
16 Maggie how to research, like Rivera did with his mentees (2014).

17 The Atkins and Williams (1995) study registered nurses' experiences of
18 mentoring undergraduate nursing students. I experienced a similar satisfaction
19 from working with Maggie as those mentors in their study. Mentors in their
20 study said that it was quite a nice feeling to see that mentees had taken their
21 advice and had done something positive and creative. Throughout the men-
22 toring, I taught Maggie how to organize the literature review and the import-
23 ance of organizing knowledge especially when doing research. I showed
24 Maggie her own filing system and how to retrieve articles easily. I was pleased
25 to learn when I visited her that Maggie had adopted the practical advice and
26 examples of organizational strategies she had been offered. Mentors can point
27 mentees in the correct direction or even open doors for them, but mentors
28 cannot do the work for them (Advice to mentees, 1997).

29 A mentee in the Lee (2008) study expressed that he/she wanted to call
30 his/her supervisor the moment she/he solved the tough math problem. Sim-
31 ilarly, the mentee, Maggie, in this study shared all the good things that hap-
32 pened in her life including passing the first screening of the school's
33 outstanding student competition, earning it afterward and being reported in
34 the newspaper with the mentor who had spent all day with her to get her
35 recommendation letter out. Interestingly, Maggie told me that, if students
36 were selected as outstanding students, teachers who wrote recommendation
37 letters would join the celebration luncheon with school officials. I felt greatly
38 honoured by that. In the event, I was not invited to the luncheon with those
39 selected outstanding students, but Maggie's homeroom teacher was. Despite
40 that, I was surprised and touched to learn later Maggie came to my office and
41 asked to have a photo taken with me the day she received the recognition
42 plate from school. Maggie has been very grateful to me. Having a mentee
43 who remembers and appreciates what a mentor has done for her/him and to
44 her/him means a great deal to a mentor.
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Reciprocal learning

I have learnt greatly from mentoring Maggie, especially from her personal development. I agree with Lee et al. (2006) that mentees should not underestimate their professional knowledge. On the other hand, mentees might offer a lot of information, knowledge and enthusiasm to their mentors in return for their support. Mentoring Maggie helped me learn what the new generation is thinking, doing, surfing, eating, expecting and hoping.

While I attempted to teach Maggie, Maggie taught me in return. For example, by passing articles to me for discussion, Maggie introduced me to sources that I would not normally have come across. Additionally, Maggie had been the tutor of a boy with Asperger Syndrome for two years. I got to know and compare the Asperger Syndrome learners to what I read and heard. This helped me to reflect on my own teaching style and method in class in which there might have been Asperger Syndrome learners.

Furthermore, during the mentoring process, the mentor also learns how to be a good role model – role modelling is another good method for mentees to learn from mentors. On the other hand, mentees learn through observing their mentors (Jones, 2013). However, I also believe that not all mentors are comfortable with having mentees job shadowing what they are doing. Nonetheless, Atkins and Williams (1995), looking at registered nurses' experiences of mentoring undergraduate nursing students, found that a mentor believed her mentees' presence as an observer had facilitated learning even though she knew observing how nurses interact closely with patients was not easy. As another mentor said in the Atkins and Williams (1995) study, role modelling will push mentors' desire to do things properly. Similarly, I wanted Maggie to learn research skills from me and, more importantly, that I could be a role model for her. Thus, I hope my own desire for learning and reading could make me a good role model for Maggie.

The feeling of being a mentor is quite interesting because the researcher becomes very protective and takes her mentee under her wing. The mentor wants her mentee to do well and she feels like she needs to help her succeed. Maggie was well nurtured; she should have no regrets about her college life as I had contributed to her success.

I believe being a mentor will help teachers develop a bond with students. It is only when the mentor and mentee both have the same or a similar research interest that the mentor is able to provide sound advice. I and a mentor in the Lee (2008) study both believe that a mentor's job is to get mentees to the stage of knowing more than the mentor. It is my hope that colleges and universities will develop a mentoring programme for undergraduates.

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