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Mentoring Dialogue and Practice: A Transformative Experience

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Abstract

Mentoring novice faculty in higher education warrants further exploration. Novice scholars may underestimate the time and energy of gaining access to a new community of practice, learning the norms, and developing successful long-term academic practice. The purpose of this essay is to describe how transformative learning theory, a cognitive apprenticeship model, and critical reflection practice work together in a mentorship—one that benefits both the novice and seasoned academic. We note how all three frameworks rely on dialogue or discourse for creating new and effective assumptions. We emphasize dialogue between the mentor and novice as well as their individual and collaborative practice. Their practice entails the complex work of questioning higher education success, challenging assumptions, collaborating on writing, and growing individually by investing in each other. We contend that when novice and mentor engage with their colleagues, they deepen their work and expand their perspectives.

Keywords: mentoring, cognitive apprenticeship, transformative learning, dialogue, practice

While mentoring novice faculty in higher education is not a new idea, research about the structural success of faculty mentoring programs warrants further investigation (Zellers et al., 2008). These programs can be highly structured or left to the devices of the mentor and mentee. In our experience as being both the mentee and the mentor in academia, we are proposing the role of theory to inform and influence how two participants might develop a process for their work to be mutually beneficial. Many novice scholars underestimate the time and energy of gaining access to a new community of practice, learning the norms and developing successful long-term academic practice. According to Feeney and Bozeman (2008), mentoring is a vital professional activity to learn the ins-and-outs of an organization. All these transitions can potentially mold a young scholar's development of their own academic identity. We suggest that holding a complex view of academic life is a more genuine way to manage the multifaceted expectations of teaching, research, and service (Caskey & Weller Swanson, 2020).

The purpose of this article is to describe how we intertwine transformative learning theory, a cognitive apprenticeship model, and critical reflection practice to demonstrate how mentoring with intention can benefit both the novice and seasoned academic. According to Welsh et al. (2012), mentoring relationships can be either formal or informal. They can be mutually successful, nominally successful, or unproductive. Therefore, we believe that articulating a mentoring process with a theoretical construct provides a solid foundation for both the novice and mentor to engage with an understanding of the ebb and flow of growing into the role of a scholar. We begin by identifying an emerging scholar or protégé as an individual who has completed a degree program that required a thesis or dissertation and is now pursuing a long-term academic career. A mentor, in our view, is an advanced practitioner and scholar who is genuinely interested in the success of their protégé.

Previously, we described mentoring using a cognitive apprentice model that supports transformative learning with the novice looking though a kaleidoscope (Caskey & Weller Swanson,

2020). In this previous essay, we viewed an academic mentorship to be as dynamic and beautiful as the turning of a kaleidoscope. All the bits of colored glass kept their integrity; however, the reflective qualities could provide endless mandala.

The Role of Theory

In this article, we suggest how the intentional application of theory can help both participants name the challenges they experience along the way. Our approach is three-pronged conceptual framework, the first is to explain the stages of transformative learning theory for the young scholar through Jack Mezirow's (2000) scholarship. We hope to provide the mentor or expert scholar a roadmap to use Allen Collins and colleagues' cognitive apprenticeship model (Collins et al., 1991; Collins, 2006) which identifies when to be a teacher and when to remove support to allow for independent exploration by the novice. Lastly, we encourage both the novice and expert to engage in challenging their assumption through Stephen Brookfield's (2017) critical reflective practice. Our conceptual framework is situated within Max van Manen's (2014) phenomenological stance which values and explores the beauty in the ordinary. We appreciate bell hooks (1994) thoughts about the intersection of theory and living:

> When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to the processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two—that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other. (p. 61)

Our mentoring model emphasizes dialogue between the mentor and novice but also their individual and collaborative practice. By practice we mean that the mentoring is more than just talking, it embodies the challenging work of questioning the system of what higher education deems as success, being a mirror for one another to challenge assumptions, co-writing to collaborate in an intimate way, and lastly, to grow individually because of investing in each other.

We bring phenomenology into practice because of the intimate nature and individualization it offers mentoring pairs to think about the work together. We agree with van Manen (2014) who posited that a phenomenological approach allows us to be:

> swept up in a spell of wonder about phenomena as they appear, show, present, or give themselves to us. In the encounter with things and events of the word, phenomenology directs its gaze toward the regions where meanings and understandings originate, well up and percolate through the porous membranes of past sedimentations—then infuse, permeate, infect, touch, stir us, and exercise a formative and affective effect on our being. (pp. 26–27)

We use a kaleidoscopic metaphor to illustrate the fluidity of transformative learning and explain the interplay of ideas. These ideas stand alone as represented by the pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope, but also remain essential in the creating of ever-changing mandala. A kaleidoscope requires the practice of turning the mandala and intentional dialogue to understand and grapple with its intricacies.

Transformative Learning: Dialectic Method of Inquiry

The basis for transformative learning theory is the ability to identify one's frame of reference or how one makes meaning. Transformative learning (Mezirow, 2009a) is the way we experience problems or issues and find ways to change our thinking about them to be more broad, open and flexible. In an intentional mentoring relationship, this transformation occurs when asking questions and questioning our assumptions through dialogue. The premise is that to transform requires individuals to re-evaluate the assumptions and expectations they utilize when making decisions and even when conclusions are tentative as new information integrates through lived experiences. Thus, transformation centers on

cognitive self-reflection (Desapio, 2017). We assert that a dialectic method has a place in an intentional mentoring approach.

We employ transformative learning theory because emerging scholars are simultaneously honing their craft of research, teaching, and service while gaining access to a new community with established rules and expectations. We build on the tenet that transformation is an integrative experience and is not directly taught (Misawa & McClain, 2019, p. 53), rather transformation occurs when a disorienting dilemma occurs where an expectation no longer serves the current demands. For example, an emerging scholar may hold expectations of crafting a publication or participating in an academic environment that are different than they imagine.

According to Mezirow (2000) the transformative learning model has four stages: centrality of experience, critical reflection, rational discourse, and responsive action. We are primarily focusing on his use of *habits of mind* that refers to habitual thoughts, reactions, and emotional processing built on a set of assumptions. Individuals may or may not be aware of these assumptions until the assumptions come into conflict with new information or a situation in which they no longer serve the desired outcome. For example, an emerging scholar may believe that publishers will readily accept their writing for a peer-reviewed journal. To the contrary, once they receive feedback, they may feel disheartened and need to reorient their assumptions about academic writing and what is necessary to publish in current journals.

The peer review example is about the *centrality of experience* referring to an individual or in our work an emerging scholar experiencing a *disorienting dilemma*. This occurs when a person's frame of reference conflicts with a new situation or information. It takes courage and *critical reflection* on the part of the emerging scholar to move forward in this example. However, it is difficult to examine our own assumptions; thus, engaging with a qualified mentor is a powerful way to unpack assumptions and transform a no longer effective habit of mind.

Dialogue to Build a Mentoring Relationship

Mentoring provides the dialogue necessary for the protégé to recognize the source of the frustration and begin to look at the possibilities for change and growth. Our emphasis on the dialogue of mentoring intertwines critical reflection, cognitive apprenticeship, and transformative learning. All three frameworks hinge on the role of dialogue or discourse for creating new and effective assumptions. According to Mezirow (1997), dialogue is a critical for transformative learning; it prompts discussion of related experiences, critical analysis of alternative viewpoints, and building common understanding. The cognitive apprenticeship model is a relationship in which the mentor provides specific and intentional information and practice for the novice to engage in authentic work. To continue our example, the mentor and novice scholar may have conversations about the academic publishing arena. They might review the fore mentioned manuscript and the reviewers' comments. This dialogue can help the novice gauge their reactions to the feedback with the mentors to determine a new baseline for the novice's view of their contribution to a large academic conversation happening in publications—resulting in a new plan of action. The mentor may offer to help the novice edit the existing article by suggesting that they read articles accepted by that journal looking for format, style, and content. An example would be the mentor completing a Text Structure Analysis (Stevens, 2019) alongside the novice to identify a good journal fit. The mentor may also suggest co-authoring an article which would provide a rich conversation about the skills, content, and practice useful for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. According to Mezirow (2000), this part of transformative learning is *rational discourse*.

The individual growth of the protégé is the development of new skills and confidence in their writing and intellectual contributions to the field. As they develop academic writing skills, they become integrated into their academic identity. The role of the mentor fades as the novice begins to explore and articulate new research or writing projects and follows through with them. The *responsive action* taken by the mentor to usher novice into a community of practice of academic writing.

Transformation begins when we can imagine an alternative view of reality. Imagining outside our own frames of reference occurs within our kaleidoscopic metaphor (Caskey & Weller Swanson, 2020). Imagination is the courage to continue to turn the device to experience beautiful, complex, and ever-changing colors combinations and designs. The beauty of the kaleidoscopic metaphor is that the mentor holds his/her own kaleidoscope. Inside are the glass pieces which represent the intertwining of theory and practice (see Figure 1), the academic role filled with assumptions and challenges. As the mentor and novice are in dialogue the kaleidoscope spins and is shared with the novice. They learn what each glass piece represents and how the nuances of each are gracefully influences by the turning and shifting of mechanism. The cognitive apprenticeship model of supporting the development of a scholarly identity is mutually beneficially as the mentor and novice grow in new ways as they move forward, which according to van Manen (2014) is "the ultimate aim of a phenomenology of practice is modest: to nurture a measure of thoughtfulness and tact in the practice of our professional and in everyday life" (p. 31).

Figure 1. Kaleidoscopic Bits of Glass Supporting Dialogue and Practice

A Cognitive Apprenticeship: Practice through Dialogue

Collins (2006) defined cognitive apprentice as a teaching practice with a focus on cognitive skills and processes. Earlier, Collins et al. (1991) referred to those engaged in apprenticeship as the expert and the apprentice. In our application of the cognitive apprenticeship within higher education, we have used the terms mentor and protégé.

In a cognitive apprenticeship, the mentor prompts the protégé to address real world problems demanding the investigation of multiple perspectives and interrogating one's own assumptions. Cognitive apprenticeship in a mentoring relationship is unique because the goal is not to dispense knowledge or to simply reproduce the status quo, but rather to utilize dialogue that grows both the mentor and the emerging scholar (Fuller & Unwin, 2011). The mentor, then, gradually releases scaffolding, and the mentee begins to explore and articulate their own ideas. Phenomenology supports the organic nature of cognitive apprenticeship. Phenomenology takes the ordinary day to day experience and through reflective

practice reveals a "loving project of bringing all the living of life to meaningful expression through the imageriers…" (van Manen, 2014, p. 18).

Also integral to cognitive apprenticeship is Habermas' (1984) critical distinction between instrumental learning and communicative learning. *Instrumental learning* is learning that entails managing the environment or people to improve performance, while *communicative learning* is understanding someone's meaning when they are communicating with you through dialogue, text, or an artistic form (Mezirow, 2009b).

In a cognitive apprenticeship, the mentor needs to make thinking visible by bringing tacit cognitive processes to light (Collins et al., 1991)—making the implicit explicit. Using the cognitive apprenticeship model (Collins, 2006), the mentor employs a method of modeling, coaching, and/or scaffolding to guide the learning experience of the protégé. When modeling, the expert completes a task as the young scholar observes. In contrast, when coaching the expert observes as the young scholar completes a task. When scaffolding, the mentor works alongside and provides support to the protégé while completing a task. Modeling, coaching, and scaffolding are aspects of *instrumental learning*, in which the mentor structures the environment for improving performance (Mezirow, 2009a). Another aspect of instrumental learning transpires as the method transitions to the protégé who guides their own learning through articulation, reflection, and exploration. In this case, articulation involves the emerging scholar expressing their own thinking, whereas reflection requires the protégé to contemplate their own work and ponder their work relative to mentors' work. Exploration entails the young scholar engaging in ways to pursue their own ideas, recognize problems, and identify viable solutions.

These vital conversations or dialogues between mentor and protégé embody the grappling with ideas and assumptions held by both the mentor and the protégé. According to van Manen (2014), this is good talk. Good talk "happens between two people who share an affinity or attachment to one another—not only to each other, but also to their shared world" (van Manen, 2014, p. 36). The conversation is only part of the purpose but it also the collaboration that builds the ability to learn and grow from one another (van Manen, 2014). Our vision of dialogue in a mentoring relationship goes far beyond the function of academic life but also includes the understanding and nuances that go into becoming a scholar. In cognitive apprenticeship, *communicative learning* experiences are the interpersonal interactions, conversations, discourse, or dialogue that occur within a learning environment, specifically a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Within the community of practice, situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) can be transformational for the expert and the protégé alike. According to Collins (2006), the sociology of learning in the cognitive apprenticeship model encompasses situated learning, community of practice, intrinsic motivation, and collaboration. Within this sociology, the mentor and protégé play with ideas and grow.

Critical Reflection: Individual and Collaborative Practice

Novice scholars are initially tender at navigating their new roles that often come a steep learning curve, but also the risk and rewards of asking for feedback. Some feedback may challenge their deeply embedded assumptions yet may propel them to explore unfamiliar spaces or revisit experiences with alternative lenses. Development often occurs when theory challenges or interrupts the flow of ideas or hegemonic perspectives which the protégé and mentor may unconsciously hold. We agree with Wenger's (1998) notion that identity is "a constant becoming…it is something we constantly renegotiate during the course of our lives" (pp. 153–154). Being caught off guard or skewing a worldview "can be creatively dissonant" (Brookfield, 2017, p. 75) and can lead to transformational learning.

Transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000) and cognitive apprenticeship (Collins, 2006) provide solid frames that can anchor the development of novice scholars who are building a professional identity. We assert that each of these frames depends on dialogue or discourse. "Through discourse, learners make sense of new information and reach consensus by critically examining and comparing their assumptions with their peers" (Cordie & Adelino, 2020, p. 25). In addition to the frames of transformative learning and cognitive apprenticeship, we tap transformative learning theory as it relates to how individuals grow

intellectually and cognitive apprenticeship because it provides a model to organize intentional learning experiences to advance professional identity development. To this end, we look through three of Brookfield's (2017) four lenses of critical reflection: colleagues' perspectives, personal experience, and theory. Through these three lenses to light, we discuss the potential transformative learning has for novice scholars and their mentors.

Learning from Colleagues' Perspectives

Novice scholars and mentors alike can learn from their dialogue and interactions with their colleagues and the diverse perspectives they hold. For both novice scholars and their mentors, learning often occurs when listening to multiple audiences—students, faculty colleagues, mentors, peer reviewers, or members of a professional organization. By asking for feedback on their writing, presenting, teaching, or participation experiences, novice scholars can reap enormous benefits. Learning from others entails critical reflection—a collaboration in which "colleagues, clients, peers and experts pose questions to us, introduce new ways of looking at practice, and support us through the periods of struggle when challenging dominant assumptions threatens our sense of identity and raises the risk of our being marginalized" (Brookfield, 2016, p. 21). Specific examples of novice scholars learning from colleagues' perspectives include (a) viewing a new colleague or mentor as a critical friend—a person who speaks the truth and offers constructive feedback; (b) seeking a colleague's knowledge of institutional expectations such as promotion and tenure; and (c) talking about traditional challenges in the academy (e.g., writing, teaching, peer review) with a colleague. Mentors learn from colleagues' perspectives in similar and nuanced ways such as seeking council about a concern or issue, asking for feedback on a manuscript prior to submission, cooperating on the development of institutional policy or guidelines, and interacting with novice scholars and their fresh ideas.

In our kaleidoscopic metaphor, learning from other's perspectives happens iteratively when colleagues identify or clarify practices in the academic world. Learning occurs in dialogue with others—in this case, colleagues. Serving as mentors, these colleagues can reveal to the protégé what the pieces of glass in the kaleidoscope represent.

Learning from Personal Experience

The transition from novice scholar to expert scholar is learning to trust the legitimacy of one's own personal narrative. Naturally, novice scholars begin to take ownership of their own experiences and learning when pursuing their dissertation. During their developmental progression, the novice continues to imagine and design their own scholarly journey. With mentor guidance, they can consider ways to acquire deep disciplinary knowledge, but they can also learn how to draw connections between the discipline and their own experience. As novice scholars, they are already adept at communicating their learnings in at least two ways: (a) writing an expansive text (i.e., the dissertation), and (b) presenting their scholarly work (i.e., dissertation oral defense). During a novice's journey to develop the skills and habits of mind of an academic, the novice experiments with new ways of learning, while the mentor learns with and from the novice.

When transitioning to a faculty position, novice scholars build upon their own personal experience to advance their academic skills such as participating in thoughtful discourse, writing a cogent argument, or presenting their original ideas. For the personal experience to be transformative, these emergent scholars need to reflect critically upon their experience to examine their assumptions including their own thoughts, feelings, and actions related to that experience. In other words, transformative learning requires critical reflection, but critical reflection can occur without transformation (Brookfield, 2000). We contend that transformative learning cannot happen without dialogue—in this case, the dialogue inherent to critical reflection and development of an academic identity. Transformative learning cannot happen without practice—questioning one's own assumptions and grappling with what it means to be a scholar.

Learning from personal experience may appear in one's scholarly writing. For example, the ways that protégés incorporate their own experience in their writing such as writing in the first person, citing

transformative events, and recounting personal anecdotes. Likewise, mentors may feel empowered to include personal experience in their writing. Mentors as veteran scholars may feel more open to break free from the shackles of traditional academic writing and allow their own voice to flourish. For instance, they can experiment with non-fiction writing genres (e.g., autobiographical accounts) or creative and expressive writing (e.g., prose, poetry) to communicate their ideas.

Learning from personal experience can happen when the emerging scholar understands their own kaleidoscopic mandala because they know what the pieces of glass represent and how to influence their movement. They can engage in the practice of an internal dialogue—critical reflection—to move beyond surface level beauty to understand the deeper meaning of developing an academic identity.

Learning from Theory

Part of the transition from novice to experienced scholar is finding, learning, and using theory to advance your ideas. Identifying a theory along with the leading theorist(s) serves to encourage and propel scholarship According to Brookfield (2017), coming across a theory that describes clearly what you believe can be affirming. Using theory that aligns with one's own way of seeing the world feels comfortable. However, learning from theory also needs to come with a cautionary note because drawing from an affirming theory can become so comfortable that it clouds our thinking (van Manen, 2014). We assert that in a mentoring relationship a discussion about theory can advance the protégés' exploration and articulation of ideas.

Scholars have sought out theory from a deep need to ground their own thinking. For instance, hooks (1994) revealed, "I came to theory because I was hurting…I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around me and within me…I saw in theory then a location for healing" (hooks, 1994, p. 59). While seeking theory has been restorative for scholars, it has also been an academic tradition that shaped many scholars. Scholars have framed their ideas and advanced written conversations—written dialogues—to make larger connections with the scholarly community.

Emerging scholars warrant opportunities to learn from theory to bring new perspectives and other ways of considering the world to light. As experienced scholars, we celebrate the power of learning from theory. For the emerging and experienced scholars alike, instances of learning from theory include (a) recognizing how theory provides a robust foundation for their ideas; (b) situating their own ideas within the broader context of theory; (c) using the explicit language associated with theory; and (d) considering new ways of thinking based on exposure to theory.

A kaleidoscopic metaphor helps us articulate how we see a mentoring model work and inform the relationship differently than previous models—ones solely designed on theory. The kaleidoscope metaphor requires action of moving the optical lens, requires action for identifying sources of light, and requires attention to details as the mandala change in minuscule and intimate ways. All this action is what we refer to as a practice. Because at any time either party can let go or set down the kaleidoscope, and at any time they can pick it back up again to feel grounded, inspired, and impelled toward transformation.

A Kaleidoscopic Perspective of Transformative Learning

Ironically in our kaleidoscopic metaphor, Brookfield's (2017) perspective of critical reflection represents the light necessary to illuminate mandala. Reflection of light holds potential for emerging scholars and mentors to grow. Independently and collaboratively, emergent scholars and experienced scholars—mentors—can learn when they engage with their colleagues to deepen their work and expand their perspectives. They can both learn to draw upon their personal experience to enrich their academic endeavors whether teaching, writing, or presenting ideas. Similarly, they can learn to seek and embrace theories to support and/or challenge their worldview.

We agree with Brookfield (2016) who envisioned critical reflection as "the experimental pursuit of beautiful consequences: pragmatism." Pragmatism is a philosophical stance to examine "the truth of meaning of theories or beliefs in terms of the success of their practical application" (Oxford Reference). According to Brookfield, pragmatists seek to make something better by engaging in continual

experimentation, learning from their missteps, and looking intentionally for innovative ideas and untapped options. Mezirow (2009b) might view this perspective as transformative learning.

Discussion

As we build on the work of other scholars, we make three points about mentoring novice faculty in an academic setting. First, mentoring needs to be mutually beneficial and critically reflective. According to Misawa and McClain (2019), the mentoring process "is reciprocal…a mentor and a mentee understand how their mentorship relation influences their academic and personal lives. A reciprocal aspect of mentorship focuses on the importance of respect between the mentor and mentee" (pp. 56–57). For example, the mentor and protégé can co-author an article together in which they both build their content knowledge and choose to be a critical friend while building a writing practice.

Second, mentoring requires understanding how to structure and implement modeling, scaffolding, and coaching methods as a mentor and when to support independent ideas of the protégé to articulate and explore their scholarly passions. Using a cognitive apprenticeship approach, the mentor recognizes when the protégé is ready to transition to the complexity of articulation, reflection, and exploration (Caskey & Weller Swanson, 2020). Building on the previous example, the mentor can encourage the protégé to write a single-authored article while still providing critical feedback.

Third, mentoring relies on the continuous and intentional use of dialogue (what do we talk about and how does it benefit one or both academics). In other words, dialogue helps learners to make sense of new information, examine their own assumptions, and build consensus with others (Cordie & Adelino, 2020). Staying with the writing for publication example, the mentor can talk with the protégé who may be grappling with the reviewers' feedback on an article by discussing the big ideas, possible changes needed, and where they agree with the reviewers' comments.

We employ the kaleidoscopic metaphor for mentoring because it offers both a model that responds to movement, growth, new sources of light but also honors the unchanging elements of theory, dialogue, and practice. The kaleidoscope turns and produces or reveals an ever-changing mandala both in the mentor's hands and in the protégé's hand.

As with any new skill or relationship praxis starts slow, clumsily and requiring practice of multiple steps but over time repetition becomes muscle memory and habits of mind allowing for new challenges for the seasoned mentor and the maturing novice. Dialogue starts shallow and develops into deeper trusted conversation, ones that are risky, challenging assumptions. The protégé and mentor build unconditional respect for one another.

The practice of a phenomenological wonder could encompass musings such as: what is the truth of this academic setting, what are the rules, asking new questions of the setting, posing new possibilities once old assumptions are unearthed. Phenomenological thinking compels us towards a disposition of wonder. We agree that "phenomenology is more a method of questioning than answering, realizing that insights come to us in that mode of musing, reflective questioning, and being obsessed with sources and meaning of lived meaning" (van Manen, 2014, p. 27). As we continue to practice, we still have wonderings and questions including:

- What other teaching and learning theories, models, and practices might enhance our kaleidoscopic mandala?
- As bell hooks (1994) stated that theory can heal, how can theory ward off possible injury from the process of developing an academic identity?

Through dialogue and practice, the protégé and mentor grow and learn in a practical, realistic way; they adopt a pragmatic stance while holding the kaleidoscope. Over time, they use rational discourse to explore and debate ideas, talk openly about their challenges, and make sense of their practice. The protégé and mentor learn by studying their current routines, playing with novel approaches, and attempting alternative strategies—all with the aim of transforming practice. They also take pleasure in

their individual transformations (Nin, 1985); they find beauty and possibility in the kaleidoscope's mandala (Caskey & Weller Swanson, 2020).

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