To Challenge and Support: Mentoring and the Liberal Arts

Steven Schultz

As interest has grown in the ways that the college experience can form student character and enhance moral and spiritual development, there has been a corresponding increase in attention to the value of mentoring in higher education. For religiously based liberal arts colleges, with their emphasis on educating the whole person, that attention has been magnified. In this essay, we will explore the place of mentoring at religious liberal arts colleges through an examination of the language we use to describe the mentoring process, a discussion of the paradoxes encountered in mentoring young adults, and some reflection on the contributions and limitations of a developmental approach to our practice as teachers and learners.

The Meanings of Mentoring

We begin our discussion with an exploration of the terms that we associate with the experience of mentoring. At the most basic level, mentoring has to do with the process of accompanying another person on a journey. As in the myth from which the term is derived (Daloz 1999 23), the mentor is one with more experience and wisdom who joins the protégé in a process of learning and growth.

The synonyms associated with the term “mentor” help us to further understand its meaning. In the ancient Greek, the closest sense of the term is conveyed by the word “advisor” (Quick 53). Advisor, in turn, means “one who sees what is good” (ibid). The moral dimension of the mentor’s role is clearly brought to light here. Other words that convey aspects of the term “mentor” include coach, guide, teacher, tutor, and master.

While our therapy-oriented culture sees a mentor as more of a psychological counselor, it is instructive to recall that the Indo-European root of the word, “men”, means “to remember” or “to remember” (OED Online). Thus the mentor is one whose task is to encourage thoughtfulness in the one being mentored, to help the young adult become reflective about her own life so that eventually the mentor is no longer necessary.

A number of commentators have used the image of the mirror to describe the relationship of mentor to the protégé. As mentors, we are called to reflect the image of the protégé back to herself, thereby allowing for a clarifying vision of self and world. Studies of human development from infancy through adulthood confirm the life enhancing power of the experience of being seen and understood by the other.

The term protégé, (used in this essay in place of the more awkward term, mentee) means “one who is protected” (Quick 72). We discover here an intimation of the parental role that the mentor plays – the person of greater knowledge and experience who shields the other from missteps and dead ends. While young people will sometimes identify one or both of their parents as mentors, the mentor can also be one who presents a corrective for the human limitations of one’s parents through the difficult transition of young adulthood. The mentoring relationship that is not a parent-child relationship may free both parties from the need for control or rebellion.
Within the Christian tradition the word “disciple” has the perhaps the richest associations for our discussion. In the master-disciple relationship, the one who is wiser and older provides guidance in the Way, rooted in scripture, the traditions of the church, the life and teachings of Jesus, and the individual’s own encounter with God. The unique dimension of this Christian framework is the place of Jesus as the paradigmatic mentor, whose life and teachings are mediated by those who mentor others in the faith.

_A Mentor’s Paradoxes_
Mentoring may be best understood in terms of paradox, in that the task of the mentor is often one of balancing seemingly contradictory roles in our relationships with students. At one moment, we may be called to challenge a student with a perspective different from his own, and in the next, we may need to focus on listening and support, all in the interest of helping the student think more deeply about his life.

_Dependency and Independence_
Effective mentoring involves continual judgments about when a particular student needs to be given shelter and encouragement, and when they need to be pushed out of the nest. It is natural in a mentoring relationship for the protégé to idealize the mentor, to be in awe of the mentor’s knowledge and experience. It is also natural for the mentor to be gratified by this idealization, and to wish to maintain it. If we believe we have important values that we wish to impart to students, then this idealization is an important element of the mentoring process. At the same time, the challenge for the mentor is to help one’s protégés move from this kind of idealization to a sense of their own moral and intellectual competence.

During a period of my life when I worked as a wilderness guide, my fellow trip leaders and I often spoke about “working ourselves out of a job.” In the face of the temptation to retain an air of indispensability, we saw our task as imparting skills to the young people we were leading so that our presence would no longer be necessary. What could be most difficult in this process was settling for an inadequate tent site, a zigzagging canoe, or a barely edible meal because we wanted our charges to experience a sense of agency and growing competence.

Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig speaks of the tension that is built into the relationship between teacher and student, pastor and parishioner, therapist and client. In these kinds of relationships of unequal power between the helper and the one being helped, there is always a tendency for power to be constellated in the helper. While this projection of strength and goodness can initially serve a positive purpose, it eventually impedes the development of a sense of competence and strength within the learner. At its extreme such projections can result in a cult-like devotion to the leader or teacher. These kinds of idealizations can be highly gratifying, and the mentor must be diligent about not encouraging them beyond the point where they are no longer constructive.

A developmental perspective can be useful in discerning when to allow for dependency and when to encourage independence. For example, our role with first year students will be quite different from the role we play with seniors. Students who are just
beginning the college experience are much more likely to have a need for dependency than those who are about to graduate.

Sharon Parks, in her book *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, adds a helpful third term to this paradox. Drawing on feminist scholarship in moral and intellectual development, she suggests that the goal of having students move from dependence to independence leaves something important behind. Parks suggests that beyond the duality of dependence-independence, what we should be encouraging in our students is interdependence – a way of being that includes both critical thinking as well as a sense of mutuality and connection to a larger community of thought and action. This notion of interdependence resonates strongly with the importance of community in Christian ethical and intellectual formation.

**Challenge and Support**

A slightly different light on the contradictory tasks of the mentor is captured in the activities of challenge and support. The stance of the mentor in relation to these two roles can vary significantly depending upon her assessment of the student’s needs.

Several years ago, we had a student in the college’s urban studies program whom I will call Marta. Marta struggled throughout her semester with issues of ethical and intellectual ambiguity posed by what she was reading and experiencing in the city in contrast to the very clear dictates of her faith, and what she saw as a dangerous engagement with uncertainty on the part of her fellow students.

The tension of this conflict built throughout the semester, until a point several weeks from the end of the term when she felt that she had to make a decision to resolve this tension. She understood her decision as one she had to make between the faith and the understanding that she brought with her to this new experience, and the new ideas that threatened to undermine her previous certainty. Her conclusion at this point was that her semester was a “waste”, that her fellow students who had given themselves over to this experience and the questions it raised had abandoned their faith, and that the most important thing she had learned from her experience was how much she “valued her home as a place where she was loved and accepted and affirmed” in contrast to her desert experience of the previous three months. Her decision was accompanied by significant anger voiced towards her fellow students and towards the faculty.

To understand Marta intellectually, I also need to understand what might be happening for her psychologically and spiritually. In light of this larger understanding, her longing for “home” becomes a metaphor for the fear that can be occasioned by the encounter with different perspectives that is invariably a part of a liberal arts education. If important persons such as her teachers encourage her to question what have been foundational truths, she may reach a crucial stage in which she feels she must either embark on the frightening and uncertain journey with these new guides, or turn back to the safe shore of assurance.

The development of critical thinking, which is at the heart of most understandings of liberal education, cannot be separated from the development of the psychological and moral capacity to sustain it. We cannot isolate these processes from one another. For
students who have been raised in the Christian tradition, the understandings of God, self and others that they bring with themselves to college have a profound impact on their courage to explore new ideas and experiences. What is required of us is a sense of patience and encouragement, and the awareness that a student may need to develop a sense of safety in their current location before they have the strength to move to an enlarged understanding.

**Development and Mentoring**

The framework provided by William Perry in his landmark study, *Forms of Ethical and Intellectual Development in the College Years*, is a helpful structure for understanding the practice of mentoring, and has formed the basis for many of the recent commentaries on young adult development. Perry’s scheme comes from his interviews with Harvard undergraduates in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, in which he discovered a common theme: students often arrived at college with a dualistic perspective on ethical and intellectual matters, in which they held that truth was something unitary, which could be known through the proper authority. Through the period of the college years, and often as a result of experiences during this time, students moved through several degrees of relativism, in which they began to understand truth as something shaped by its context. Authority became multiple. The hoped-for culmination of this process was what Perry called “convictional commitment” or “commitment-within-relativism”, in which the young adult was aware of the multiplicity of perspectives in the world, yet had discovered an orientation and sense of commitment in the midst of this awareness.

Perry notes that students found the experience of the interview itself, in which an interested adult simply asked them questions about their lives, so meaningful that they felt that others should be able have the same experience each year. Perry understands this not so much as a comment on the content of the interview as a statement of the power of being attended to. He writes:

> students should experience themselves more vividly as recognized in the eyes of their educators in their efforts to integrate their learning in the responsible interpretation of their lives (Perry 289).

The activity of mirroring by the mentor is implicit in this comment from the author.

Perry also talks about the courage required of students as they take on the threatening task of moving forward in their development. The parallel task of the educator is to encourage: to enable the student to take up his or her new responsibilities rather than retreating from the challenges they pose. As Perry points out in his discussion, it is tempting to retreat or escape from experiences or ideas that challenge a student’s present way of understanding the world, whether that be a defensive dualism or a passive relativism. We can help our students to avoid these hideouts by giving them “not only models to emulate, but the experience of community with them.” Perry asks the question:
What environmental sustenance most supports students in the choice to use their competence to orient themselves through Commitments--as opposed to using it to establish a non-responsible alienation (Perry 287)?

His answer is that one of the greatest needs of young adults may be a sense of community, both with peers and with faculty – the knowledge that in their struggle to define their identity and what is important to them, they are not alone. Perry draws on the work of Eric Erickson to describe what he calls “reciprocal acts of recognition and confirmation” (p. 288). The student experiences a sense of membership in both seeing and being seen by others. It is this sense of mutual recognition that allows students to persist in the often-difficult struggle of finding one’s way in a plural world. Put in another way, Perry talks about what we could call our new post-modern context – one that is so different from the experience of students fifty or a hundred years ago. Within the new heterogeneity in which young people find themselves, old forms of belonging and solidarity are no longer as sturdy or as available. In Perry’s words: “the new aloneness requires a new realization of community” (Perry 290).

The shift from viewing mentoring solely as an individual activity to one that takes place within a larger community is reflected in a number of important books on the subject (Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks) (Dykstra) (Parks 2000). As mentors we must remember both that we have support in our efforts to guide our students into responsible adulthood, and also that need to be thoughtful about all of the different ways that our institutional environments help or hinder our students’ development.

In his book Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America, Mark Schwehn offers some insightful questions about Perry’s developmental model that bear further exploration. In the first place, he asks if the scheme that Perry has provided should be taken as normative, or whether it is more a description of the era in which we find ourselves. If this is the case, are there other models that might be more hospitable to an education that takes religious faith seriously? Secondly, Schwehn wonders about the actual outcome of much of higher education in this country. If we seek to guide students into lives of commitment, but our practice more often leads to graduates who exhibit a type of passive relativism, (Porpora) should we re-examine our approach?

**Conclusion**

At the close of his study on the development of young adults in college, William Perry makes the following statement:

It appears, then that it is no longer tenable for an educator to take the position that what a person does with his intellectual skills is a moral rather than intellectual problem and therefore none of the scholar’s business. Epistemologically the knower and the known are now inseparable” (Perry 287).
This seems to be a fitting point at which to conclude our discussion of mentoring and the Christian liberal arts. If we understand our calling as educators to be towards students as whole persons, then an integral part of that calling is to help students discern what they will do with what they have learned. What Jesus asked of his disciples again and again was that they follow his Way of love and justice – that they take on a particular relationship to truth, in which knowing and doing the truth became one and the same. As Wendell Berry reminds us:

Education in the true sense, of course, is an enablement to serve – both the living human community in its natural household or neighborhood and the precious cultural possessions that the living community inherits or should inherit. To educate is, literally to “bring up,” to bring young people to a responsible maturity, to help them to be good caretakers of what they have been given, to help them to be charitable toward fellow creatures (Berry 52).
Works Cited


Oxford English Dictionary Online  www.oed.com


Perry, William J. *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard University, 1968.


