



Adult Development & Aging News Volume 38, Number 1 Spring 2010

Teaching Tips:

Finding One's Way: Mentoring Notes Between a Mentor and a Mentee

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For this issue's "teaching tips" column, we address an important facet of teaching for academic psychologists: mentoring. In many ways, mentoring represents one of the most challenging – and potentially rewarding – aspects of teaching. Successful classroom teaching is challenging indeed. However, the ambiguities and nuances of successful mentoring are more vast – thus rendering the topic one for which insight is sparse, elusive and welcome!

To commemorate the APA 2009 Division 20 Mentor Award to Patricia Reuter-Lorenz, we decided to engage in a dialogue with Patti about mentoring. As Joe Mikels, a previous mentee of Patti Reuter-Lorenz, reflects on his experiences, she provides commentary on his observations and questions.

JAM: Three years into my career as an assistant professor, I find mentoring to be one of the most challenging aspects of my profession. Being on the "other side," I have a new perspective; a seemingly insignificant dismissive comment on my part can be perceived as earth shattering, while a comparable gentle nudge to complete a project can spur notable productivity. As a graduate student under the mentorship of Patti, although I received both positive and negative feedback, I always judged the feedback as accurate and was subsequently motivated appropriately.

Patti, as a mentor, how does one provide the most objective and motivating feedback?
PARL: Joe, I think it is especially helpful for one's students to know the standards by which their work is evaluated. Moreover, these standards can be put in place in collaboration with the student. So, in the case of a graduate student's first year project, for example, the mentor and student can decide together that the goal is to generate a publishable piece of science, and to do so within a set amount of time. With this shared and explicit goal in place, the student is now aware of and has agreed to the standards by which progress and the product can be judged. Most likely this goal will need to be modified along the way, but having set it in place collaboratively, the groundwork is there for the student to be a partner in determining the necessary adjustments. As faculty, we are the proximal representatives of the profession's criteria for success. Of course our ability to judge what will succeed or not is far from perfect, but if we acknowledge "the profession" as the source of our standards for evaluation, then we and our students can recognize that our feedback is informed by greater authority. Is this objective? Well, not

entirely of course, and some may argue that “conformity” to the profession’s standards could stifle new breakthroughs, on the one hand and force square pegs into round holes on the other. But this is where the initial conversation about the nature of the standards is critical. By knowing them in advance, the student has a basis to reflect in an on-going way about their fit with the profession and its expectations. This is essential, because after all we are guiding our students through the very fundamental process of figuring out what they want to do and be in their lives.

JAM: From my experiences with Patti as a mentor, I always felt empowered to pursue the ideas of most interest to me. While I seriously consider my students’ interests, I sometimes find myself doubting the promise of the projects that fit their interests. At various times, I have given students considerable latitude, which has resulted in terrible disasters but occasionally also remarkable contributions. How does a mentor judge the constraints versus freedom that they provide their mentees?

PARL: As you will recall in your own career as a graduate student in my lab, you had interests that you wanted to pursue that required my moderation. I required you to work on some “sure-bet” projects to hone your skills and offer you an opportunity to see something through from inception to publication. Once this line of work was well underway, you had the latitude to explore more high-risk research directions. I think this strategy worked incredibly well for you, and I think that versions of it can apply more broadly also. So, it is a two-fold progression...work on a conservative line of research either prior to, or concurrent with a direction that is higher risk. Diversification—it is wise in finance, and in research investments as well.

JAM: As a mentor, I have supervised students who have differing levels of dedication. Sometimes, I find it frustrating to encourage students who seem to lack motivation – but I also find it rewarding when they do succeed. How does a mentor come to know and motivate mentees with notably different academic styles?

PARL: This is a hard one. I believe the key is accountability. I think that students who lack motivation know it at some level, and probably struggle with it as much if not more than their mentors. Requiring weekly updates, frequent meetings, benchmarks and timelines is especially important for this type of issue, while also being useful for all students to see where they are and where they want to be. These require communication, another factor that I think is critical to counteract the adverse effects of motivational issues. Joe, you have always had knack for asking good and challenging questions, and for giving your mentors the opportunity for their own new learning. Thank you for engaging me in this thought-provoking dialogue!