A Conversation About Mentoring

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Following is a conversation reconstructed on mentoring among six of us who have mentoring relationships with one another. We reveal and explore advising and mentoring in the hope of improving future relationships among students and faculty. Our conversation has biases. Barrett invited participants with whom he has good working relationships to engage in an honest and open e-mail conversation on mentoring. This conversation has limitations because the Ohio State University (OSU) has a large art education department, and students can choose an advisor from about 15 full-time art education professors. At smaller schools, students are assigned advisors or may have only two to select among.

We are using narrative writing as a method of inquiry and agree with Josselson (2006) that "all research is fundamentally conversation" (p. 10). In telling our stories, we acknowledge differences and commonalities. We are aware that our narratives impose structure and shape events and are linked to the politics of representation because they are positioned and partial stories. As Britzman (1991) notes, telling a story is bound by perspective and also by what can and cannot be said. It is important to question narratives that construct mentorship to challenge the familiar models and find alternatives.

The following conversation took place over 9 months, through e-mail, and it is team-edited and reconstructed. We found dominant themes in our exchanges: mentoring and advising, mentoring, access, gender issues, honesty and openness, reciprocity, power, and autonomy. Before exploring these, the conversationalists introduce their research.

Research of the Conversationalists

IVY: In my dissertation (Chevers, 2008), *A Study of Rastafarian Culture in Columbus, Ohio: Notes From an African American Woman's Journey*, I used qualitative autoethnographic methodologies to research *Rastafari*, a social movement that began in Jamaica in the early 1930s among poor and oppressed people who resisted British colonial rule. Rastafari encompasses its own vernacular, musical, visual, and material culture that is infused with demands for social improvement. I analyzed data gathered from members of the Rastafarian community in Columbus through a narrative analytic process and screening of themes, patterns, consistencies, and inconsistencies through the theoretical lenses of critical theory and social movement theory.

LAURA: I am finishing my second year as a doctoral student at OSU, investigating how women with eating disorders interpret *Thin* (2006) by Lauren Greenfield, a traveling photography exhibition, book (Greenfield, Herzog, & Strober, 2006), and film about women with eating disorders. As a former anorectic and a current museum educator, I am interested in how women who have struggled or continue to struggle with eating disorders view Greenfield's work. I will include autoethnography to reveal my own story and relationship to *Thin*.

KENDRA: In my dissertation, I document the development and implementation of a pedagogically critical conceptual framework for teaching visual culture in a television criticism course I teach for the art education department at OSU. I will use a triangulation of action-research, autoethnography, and ethnomethodologies. The approaches to teaching and learning that I discuss draw on artistic practices of contemporary artists, including my own work, which promote ways of knowing that have post-structuralist, feminist, and performative characteristics.

RINA: My dissertation (Kundu, 2008) is a study of an art history survey class and how the discourses in which it was imbedded privileged ways in which the classroom constructed knowledge about art, culture, and difference. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, I understand discourse as a structure through which knowledge produces activity. In the midst of education reform, I examined the environment of the classroom, the discursive practices of art history, and how its educators staged signification, deployed relations of power through their choices and actions, and constructed and embodied values through their framings. My research agenda concerns how meanings are constructed in relationship to cultural practices and differences and as sites of resistance. My work influences my understanding of mentorship—how we mentor is a form of cultural production by which we transmit some values and displace others.

SHARI: My dissertation is a self-reflective autoethnography that investigates and critiques "Lolita-like" or eroticized girl representations in popular visual culture. I construct a novelistic research narrative that is critically grounded in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), and I format the dissertation to mirror the structure of his book. My study investigates beliefs about gender, authority, and erotic narratives inscribed onto girls. I write reflexively from multiple positions: girl, artist, woman,

wife, mother, teacher, and scholar. I insert into my narrative identity-based reflective commentary and artifacts that I made to show that research is fluid, collaborative, and influenced by much that is outside of collected data.

TERRY: Most of my research is philosophical in methodology and explores recent art criticism, photography criticism and theory, and philosophy of art and their implications for education (Barrett, 2008). I am also pursuing narrative inquiry (Barrett, Smith-Shank, & Stuhr, 2008).

Mentoring and Advising

TERRY: Classical conceptions of mentoring (Merriam, 1983) reach back to ancient Greece when Odysseus entrusted his son to a man named Mentor. It was a father-like relationship between a young man and a wise old man. Such a relationship entails a strong emotional bond between an older person and a younger person, and a relationship in which the older member is trusted, loving, and experienced in the guidance of the younger.

My notions of mentoring, however, are shaped by feminist notions (Bona, Rinehart, & Volbrecht, 1995) that explicitly resist conceptions of mentoring that indicate a presumption of superiority of one over the other. They also resist classical notions that the mentor has superior knowledge, that mentoring is initiated only by the mentor, that only the mentor may set the agenda for the relationship, that the mentor should always be older and male, and that the benefits run only in a single direction from mentor to mentee. I agree with Diamond and Mullen (1997), who foster mentoring that results in partnerships among intellectual friends who share a professional identity. In their view of mentorship, people tell and respond, question to seek understanding of experience, and support rather than restrain one another. For them, the relationship between mentor and *comentor* is a form of collaborative learning that is reciprocal, mutual, and supportive in what otherwise might be isolating circumstances.

There is a difference between advising and mentoring. Students must have an accredited academic advisor if they are to graduate with a doctoral degree; students need not have a mentor, and students have earned degrees with advisors who did not mentor. Advisors are often imposed upon students, but mentoring relationships should be mutually chosen and should not be imposed. The roles of advisor and mentor need not coalesce. An advisor can advise but may not be a mentor, and a mentor need not be an academic advisor. A student might well have a mentor in a department other than her own and have an advisor in her home department.

RINA: For me, mentoring enables how one comes to understand oneself in relationship to others in a field of practice—generating a way of representing oneself and taking action in the world. Although the pervasive model of mentoring is a one-to-one relationship between an experienced mentor and a mentee, such practice can be both empowering and disempowering. Mentoring is socialization and can thus protect the status quo by facilitating development towards standards established by others

or it can enable community building that embraces differences in how people can imagine practice in light of social structures that limit. As a student, I was looking for ways of empowering myself—constructing a vision of myself as a practitioner, researcher, and as part of a community. It was not enough for me to have a one-to-one relationship. I was looking for a way of being in community and still am.

Mentoring

KENDRA: By joining in this conversation, I am examining parts of myself that I have neglected. Reflexivity, as a positional practice, has been instrumental to my development; it has provided a space for me to revisit the successes and failures of the past. While reflecting, I better understand a revered, complex, and precarious relationship with an advisor and mentor.

IVY: Terry was my advisor for my master's thesis (Chevers, 2004) on being an Afrocentric mother and educator. I struggled for over a year to define that topic. Two years later, when I began the dissertation process, I struggled again to define my topic. Terry consistently encouraged me to research that which I am passionate about. He also encouraged me to explore alternative writing methods and to write creatively and honestly. Throughout the dissertation process, I often doubted Terry's guidance. I anxiously wondered what on earth I was going to do with an autoethnographic dissertation on Rastafarian culture in Columbus, Ohio. Nevertheless, 2 weeks prior to defending my dissertation, I was offered a position at the Martin Luther King Arts Complex in Columbus.

SHARI: Like Ivy, I went through variations before settling on my dissertation topic. I was trying to do too much, and Dr. Barrett suggested one area to consider. Once I did "settle," he challenged me to write less dogmatically and to acknowledge my biases. My words, filtered through his readings, became focused on issues I was too close to see clearly.

RINA: I had just changed majors from art history to art education, and things were done very differently in my new major. In art history, mentoring was authoritarian, where I felt separated from my mentor, and he was there to complete me, to bring me along. It was about assimilation. It was freeing to realize that, in art education, learning was understood to be social and thus had the potential to be participatory and egalitarian. We could extend each other. In art education, mentoring happened across spaces and in relationship to faculty, my peers, and various communities in which I participated.

Access

RINA : I chose my committee members based on accessibility—not only with their time, but also with their ideas. I was interested in substantive conversation and opportunities to reflect, take on new roles, and access different types of professional

development. I needed this so I could see where I was positioned in relation to them and others and to develop my own public voice. Although I try to be accessible to the students studying with me at University of North Texas (UNT), it has not been easy and I am not sure I am successful. We have formal conversations in my office and informal conversations as groups in different settings, through fieldtrips and exchanges with working professionals, and by participating in the community. I try to support them in their changing roles as teachers, conference presenters, researchers, and writers. With all this, I sense students' fear. Some have described me as "a kick-ass," and I worry that I am after all that authoritative mentor, a role I had hoped to critique. Do I push too hard? And for what? Do students have room to tie knowledge and action to interests of their own that are not made to disappear through co-optation? How can we learn from each other? How do I acknowledge that my knowing is always partial?

KENDRA: Dr. Barrett skillfully hones his time, or he would not be as accessible as he is. I never want to waste our time by being unprepared for a meeting. I won't go to him unless I'm ready for business, with the exception of having a quick and friendly chat. Chats are as important to me as his help with my research because they nurture the person that I am.

TERRY: I am readily available, but I do not chase down advisees. Perhaps I let some go too long without interfering. I encourage advisees to talk with me, and then I wait. Perhaps I should be more assertive with some.

Gender Issues

SHARI: We are all women, at least three of us writing from female and feminist lenses, on topics that are personal. Dr. Barrett, do you, as a male, have some insights into how we "girls" approach writing, researching, and thinking about issues close to our hearts (emotions, wounds, biases)?

KENDRA: Shari's question touches upon an important aspect of my relationship with Dr. Barrett. If he were not "in touch with his own feelings," *I would not* feel the support and freedom I do as a writer to reveal the personal experiences of my artistic and pedagogical work. I wonder if an emotional and spiritual connection did not exist in this mentoring relationship, what in my research would fall by the wayside; what would remain hidden under the surface.

I also wonder if my comfort with Dr. Barrett has something to do with not feeling bound by my femaleness (as he seems to me not bound by his maleness). I don't believe you can ever get away from gendered discourse; however, in some relationships it's less of an issue. Fixed gender roles limit expression. How Dr. Barrett relates to me as a "girl" is not delimiting and reinforces my work as I examine ways of undoing barriers that hinder my expression.

TERRY: I generally find women to be more open than men, to be honest about issues in their lives and scholarship, and I am drawn to openness. I have benefited from group-therapy sessions, and, invariably, some women in the group were noticeably

more willing to be open and honest than most men in the group. Women tended to further conversations, and many men tended to shut down conversations. I have found all-male counseling groups tedious because men tend to be closed to themselves and to others. It's hard to make progress with students unless they articulate problems and fears they are facing in their research or their lives that are affecting their work.

Honesty and Openness

SHARI: Dr. Barrett, you confronted me about my unknowing use of passive voice. How did you encourage and support me to uncover myself in my writing? I was taken aback by your ability to ask the questions unasked or masked.

TERRY: What you were not saying in your autoethnographic thesis (Savage, 2006) was obvious to me, but you were resisting the telling of certain things that I hoped you would tell, so I tried to gently push you to tell just by pointing out where you were not taking responsibility in your use of passive voice. This was, however, risky for me to do because I wanted neither to be too invasive nor to scare you away. I have unintentionally hurt and scared away other advisees by being too direct with them.

LAURA: Dr. Barrett uses courage, honesty, and openness in an academic and personal sense. I see these qualities in his writing (Barrett et al., 2008) but also in his relationships with us. During my first session with Dr. Barrett, he set the tone for recognition of the *self* in one's work. As we spoke, the person that I had read about on book jackets came to life, candidly and authentically. He related how he was recovering from chemotherapy and shared details of his frustrations, worries, and how cancer was influencing his research. His transparency and work with his "self" seemed dangerous and was foreign to me, but in my research I want to explore my experiences with my eating disorder. I learned I could "insert" myself into my research. I was exhilarated but also bewildered and slightly terrified. The personal was excised as irrelevant in my previous studies. I had been taught that it was silly and selfish to write from my own experience. I had learned, through modeling rather than mentoring, that real research was not messy, but clean and cleaved and cut and dry.

IVY: I agree with Laura that working with Dr. Barrett requires "openness and honesty" in our writing. He encouraged me to write about that which I am passionate about over the 6 years of work with him.

TERRY: I do hope for and encourage openness and honesty with those whom I advise, and if they reciprocate, we enter into a mentoring relationship. If a student chooses to be closed, I respect that wish and remain an advisor. Both roles of advising and mentoring are satisfying, but mentoring is more enriching.

SHARI: Dr. Barrett is invested in the work we are doing. He sees connections between our research interests and encourages us to share with one another. It is unlikely Laura and I would have crossed paths had Dr. Barrett not recognized kindred spirits and facilitated us meeting, which has grown into a cherished friendship.

Reciprocity

LAURA: I want and *need* reciprocity. I appreciate having *real*, two-sided conversations beyond academic experiences that are translucent (Tedlock, 2008). Dr. Barrett's openness encourages me to want to do the same in my writing about my personal experiences in relation to girls and women with eating issues.

TERRY: Because Laura and Shari and I have experienced life-threatening conditions, I share with them my fears and seek information. These conversations deepen our relationships. Facing death has made me more transparent in my daily living, teaching, and advising, and has strengthened my resolve for relevant research.

RINA: Besides the discussions that took place with advisors, committee members, and in my classes, my fondest memory of mentorship was the organization of a dissertation support group. We were a group of seven OSU women who decided on our own to meet once every 2 weeks at different members' homes. We formed a diverse group made up of visual artists, dancers, and art educators, from different cultures and with different understandings of the field of art education. We ate, drank, and shared, creating a space to discuss our progress, our setbacks, our conflicts, and our negotiation of writing and academia. It was about community building. This experience has lead me to organize groups here at UNT, first as an informal reading group and now, with my colleague Nadine Kalin, as a group of members conducting action research on our changing identities from practitioners to researchers. We are trying to facilitate group action, reciprocity, interdependence, and lifelong learning. It is not the same as my former support group at OSU. Institutional power constrains what can be said.

Power

SHARI: How do we navigate the murky line between friendship, boss man, and mentor? When is he Terry to me, and Dr. Barrett at other times? As a cancer survivor, I have a personal connection to him. When we are discussing the impact cancer has had in both our lives, he is Terry. The rest of the time he is Dr. Barrett. These are different roles, and we have had moments when these roles have crossed, even clashed. I've cried, he's cried. I've snipped, he's snapped.

KENDRA: Control is an issue for me. I have equated "being advised" to a loss of control. I'm not very good at being an advisee. It's something I resist. Outside of academia, I have not asked or received guidance of any lasting kind from another adult. Growing up without guidance from authority figures has been empowering; it has also, however, created tension for me as a doctoral student. As I grapple with my desire to be fully autonomous, I am only beginning to understand the ramifications of this disposition. Working with Dr. Barrett is a first go at *letting* someone give me guidance; it has been tenuous at best. I'm beginning to understand that scholarship makes one open to scrutiny; the fear of being vulnerable is a hurdle I need to get over.

RINA: Strategies for empowerment and dialogue give the illusion of equality. According to Elizabeth Ellsworth (1993), such strategies as teachers positioning themselves as learners to empower students, or teachers offering up dialogue to enable equal opportunity to speak, are not what they seem. Learning from students often just helps teachers build more effective ways to bring them along according to teachers' own agendas. Dialogue does not ensure communication. As Ellsworth explains, "What they/we say, to whom, in what context, depending on the energy they/we have for the struggle on a particular day, is the result of conscious and unconscious assessments of the power relations and safety of the situation" (p. 56). These sentiments can also be applied to mentoring. I am working on confronting the power dynamics in my relationship with students, asking how I silence them, marginalize them, and make them vulnerable. How have I invested in them and what are the consequences of such investment for them?

Autonomy

SHARI: I trust my advisor will attend to my writing with his professional and critical readings, decorating my margins with questions, thoughts, points of discussion, leaving behind a treasure map of possibilities for me to discover. I trust he understands and acknowledges where my language patterns fail to clarify, that he will challenge my assumptions, even disagree with my argument. I expect all of this, but I need more. At the end of a writing installment, after all the commentary and question marks, I need affirmation. What I usually get is simple, direct, and not enough: "This is good. Keep writing—Terry."

All that is unspoken (unwritten) shimmers at the borders of my self-worth. How do I value such a succinct summary? How do I negotiate for more? Can I move forward on "This is good"? Do I trust his simple declaration? I have to. I wish I didn't want more, that I wasn't so fragile about revealing the spaces between what I said and what I am trying to say. He is not my father or husband, and yet I have uncovered more of myself to him than perhaps any other person. He's not being paid to grapple with my personal struggle with self-worth. My desire to please is a product of my past, and my future will prosper only after I let go of needing affirmation. Because of that alone, I will trust he is being honest when he writes "This is good," and I keep writing.

LAURA: Dr. Barrett gives me a long leash. I cherish that freedom to explore. I've felt nurtured in this "distance" because I am trusted and treated as someone whose work is taken seriously. When I am ready to talk, so is he. Some autonomy is essential for me as a new academic because I have to learn how to fumble, fall, fail, and to stand up on my own, straight, tall, and proud.

I am learning how to be myself through my research and use my voice in my work. My first year has been a voice lesson. I am learning to trust that the sounds I speak come from a place of wisdom and authenticity: a sound of the self.

TERRY: I tell those who have passed their candidacy exams that their research is now

theirs. I ask to see finished chapters, unless someone gets stuck. I encourage advisees to write what they want to write (not what a committee member might want). I advise students to be independent. I send them to others for knowledge I lack. I do not chase down students who are not making progress. I occasionally ask how they are doing, or if they need my help, but then leave them to their research. If they cannot be self-propelled as scholars, I fear they will not do well when and if they graduate.

Conclusions

SHARI: Trying to please all the members of my committee is daunting, especially when each has an area of investment. Dr. Barrett supports my desire to write in a manner that suits my voice, guides my inquiry, and allows for intertextuality.

IVY: I am thankful I followed my passion. Terry reaffirmed my belief in Bob Marley's lyrics, "when one door is closed, many more are open."

KENDRA: I realize that up until now I have only had one foot in the mentoring process. Fear of letting my mentor know when I struggle and am confused has to go if I want to get the most out of this experience. I owe that to myself and to those who invest their time in me.

LAURA: It is essential to me that both mentor and mentee have each other's well-being at heart. In mentoring, there is a tacit decision that both will help each other to achieve their highest potential as teacher and learner.

TERRY: Many individuals have influenced my work. I rely for help from my wife, chosen colleagues, friends, peer reviewers, freelance editors, and psychological counselors, all of whom I have chosen cautiously. I wish I had a mentor. I am growing with and through those with whom I mentor.

RINA: It seemed easier being a mentee, perhaps because I am familiar with the role. I could choose to ask for advice or not, answer or resist what was asked of me, and find what I needed through the department or alternative venues. Being a mentor is harder. The participants in this conversation have challenged me to rethink my concepts of mentorship, not to lose sight of the risks involved, and formulate complex questions about my practices with students. It is not enough to be reflexive. Seeing how one is positioned in the act of mentoring requires relational strategies and persistent critique.

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