The Art of Mentoring Across Disciplines

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THE ART OF MENTORING ACROSS DISCIPLINES

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As a tenured, professional librarian, I have been asked by colleagues over the years to mentor junior librarians in either navigating the tenure process at an academic library or in establishing a career as a subject specialist librarian, as I am an art librarian. The requests come from within my local library system or from colleagues whom I have come to know through networking at national conferences. More often than not, I am approached to mentor someone who is specifically pursuing librarianship in an arts- or design-related discipline or at the very least involved in a more distantly related humanities field of learning.

What happens, though, when you are approached to coach or mentor someone in a totally unrelated subject specialty? What if you are asked to mentor someone who is a chemistry librarian when you are a fine arts librarian? What if you are asked to mentor a cataloging librarian when you are primarily a reference librarian? How about if you are an academic librarian trying to help a colleague make a mid-career change from public libraries? Briefly discussed, here are some survival tips and strategies to establishing and maintaining a healthy and productive mentoring relationship no matter what the discipline or type of librarians involved. Differences in generations, experience, and disciplines can offer each individual insight and benefits from a fresh perspective.

ESTABLISHING A FRAMEWORK

As far as terminology, I prefer to acknowledge when establishing a new mentoring relationship that I am indeed entering into a true dialogue between two professionals. Aside from joking about the names usually used for mentoring participants – “mentor/mentee,” “protégé,”
“apprentice,” etc. – I generally avoid the use of such terms outside of whatever verbal contract or formalized agreement we have entered or signed. Use of such terms can sound somewhat artificial or even get in the way of what should truly be happening, and that is the establishment of a two-way discourse. Even though mentors are often viewed as “handing down” information or providing guidance to another person, new ideas can be gained from either viewpoint. The advice I give in a mentoring relationship may go unheeded – maybe the wisdom was not conveyed properly or maybe the information is viewed as outdated – either way, I learn something about myself in the giving of such advice. For a mentoring relationship to be successful there should be no role-playing of “teacher” or “junior librarian” while trying to keep an open mind and acknowledging that the mentoring relationship can be beneficial to both parties. When making introductions to associates, bosses or coworkers I simply refer to my mentoring partner as a “new colleague.”

Priority in establishing the mentoring relationship is to determine what exactly is to be mentored. Either verbally or in a simple written agreement, both parties should express expectations as to the ultimate outcome of the mentoring process. In fact, it might be helpful for each person to finish the sentence: “Through this mentoring, I hope to ….” and list three or four goals for this specific mentoring relationship. This is especially important if you are mentoring someone outside your area of expertise. There may be considerable differences in expectations from someone used to scientific forms of inquiry versus someone devoted to the study of literature or the fine arts. It also would be extremely helpful at this time to ascertain a schedule of communication between the participants; what forms of communication are to be used; and what intervals of time (e.g. weekly? monthly? quarterly?). There should be specific beginning and ending dates for the mentoring agreement, noting significant dates like tenure deadlines,
graduations, vacations and publication deadlines. Preferred methods of communication should be agreed upon and prioritized (e.g. 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.) and may include the following:

- Face-to-face meetings
- Telephone calls
- Email/Facebook messages
- Instant messaging chat
- Video chat

Some methods of communication may be preferred over others depending on the information or advice being sought. Confidentiality should be assured between the individuals. If someone is more of a visual learner than an aural learner, some people may find it more comfortable to communicate in writing in order to compose thoughts or questions. If it is a particularly sensitive topic, some issues might be best discussed in person rather than committing them to email which may be subject to institutional policies on confidentiality and record retention. Going to each other’s work environment can be beneficial as well, so that each can witness firsthand what the other’s department or library is like in terms of day-to-day activity, location of office, and interaction with coworkers. This too might need to be handled carefully if the mentoring discussion has the potential to verge on sensitive personnel issues.

**AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CASE STUDY**

Recently, the chair of our university’s science library called me seeking a mentor for one of her newest employees – a chemistry librarian. My initial reluctance must have been audibly
noticeable. Sure, I had mentored other art librarians and even librarians from the social sciences but what could I possibly bring to a mentoring relationship with a hard science librarian? Knowing my chair friend was desperate to pair her new hire with a mentor in our newly formalized mentoring program, I decided to take on this newest mentoring challenge. The way I saw it – we all need mentors, and this was a chance for me to not only examine myself and the current point in my career, but was also a chance for me to examine a new librarian’s challenges within our academic library system from a perspective entirely different from that of my own.

My new colleague and I met soon thereafter for coffee and to discuss in general terms the mentoring agreement form our human resources office wanted us to complete. The main purpose of our library’s mentoring program is to provide guidance and counsel for newly hired librarians as they pursue academic tenure and/or promotion. We agreed to meet once a month either virtually or face-to-face, choosing the 15th of every month (or thereabouts) to touch base. Every second week of the month, one of us initiates contact over the phone or through email setting up a place to meet that is convenient to both of us. Sometimes I come with a topic for discussion, but most often I try to just be a sounding board or resource of needed information. Or also, we might see each other at library- or campus-wide social events where each of us introduces the other to coworkers and faculty neither one of us has had the opportunity to meet within our large university community.

Having the very real goal of helping and guiding my colleague through the six-year long tenure process gave us an easy framework within which to set up and work on our mentoring relationship. In discussing expectations for tenure and promotion at our university, I have found that many of the strategies I employed as an academic art librarian could easily be transferred to my new chemistry librarian friend in her endeavor to achieve permanent faculty status. Being
that we are both subject specialists actually makes some of the discussions rather easy to draw parallels. Sometimes I merely substitute the words “chemistry” or “scientific” where I might have approached topics from an “art” or “artistic” perspective. Some universal and cross-disciplinary issues might consist of:

- Networking – How do you start to create a strong personal network both on-campus and off-campus? As a subject specialist, I would begin with getting to know the primary clientele of your particular library or subject area. Subscribe to faculty listserv discussion lists and introduce yourself as their personal (fill-in-the-blank) librarian, available for research consultations or taking their book-buying suggestions. See if you can get an invite to the next faculty meeting to introduce yourself or talk about a new database in your research area. Try to go to lunch with some of the faculty to find out more about their latest research interests and talk about how you might support their efforts. Show up at college-sponsored talks to show interest and see and be seen. Take advantage of your “newness” to make yourself and your role known to the library community you serve. Similarly, make yourself known on national and international library- or subject-related listservs to ask and answer reference queries. By doing so, you are announcing to the world not only your title and position but over time you may also be viewed by others as a potential subject specialist resource.

- Instruction – In making yourself known to users in a particular subject area or library, you might start offering classes or workshops in doing discipline-based research. I have found that by becoming known as the resident “expert” of certain arts-related databases or in helping users discover hidden resources in our collection, I am now regularly scheduling subject-based bibliographic or database instruction for fellow librarians,
faculty members, graduate assistants, and undergraduate students. In order to keep an eye on the bigger picture of instruction, I have made myself available for general reference instruction or library orientations at the main library. Not only do I get another perspective from performing more generalized instruction but also in addition I am informed of new or upcoming trends in research strategies, which I can then bring back to my subject-based instruction sessions.

• Research – One of the hallmarks of an academic librarian is supporting the research of faculty members on campus. For some librarians, they too must perform research and publish the findings of their own academic pursuits in order to attain tenure. Finding appropriate and realistic avenues for library research can sometimes be daunting and intimidating for the newly hired academic librarian, especially when there are many other competing job obligations and pressures. I often recommend that my colleagues start small, maybe writing reviews of books in their subject area or contributing as a co-author on publications. Invitations to present papers, poster sessions, and exhibits at professional meetings or symposia sometimes qualify as scholarly endeavors, as do acting as a session moderator, panelist, conference organizer, or program planner. Also, familiarize yourself with publications that are not necessarily library-based. Look up non-library faculty’s names in databases to see where they are publishing. Many of the publications or journals may not seem appropriate for you, but you may indeed see opportunities for publishing more as a subject specialist than librarian, or you might see a chance to co-author with a fellow faculty member when your insight would bring added value to a future article. Collaboration across colleges and departments is generally looked upon very favorably by academic administration.
• Membership – As professional librarians, most of us are well aware of the benefits of membership to library organizations like the American Library Association (ALA). We are able to network with colleagues far and wide either virtually or at conference. There are any number of divisions and sections and roundtables that any subject specialist librarian should be able to find and connect with like-minded librarians and even potential mentors. In addition, there is a myriad of other library organizations devoted to special areas of librarianship – the Medical Library Association, the Music Library Association, and Special Libraries Association just to name a few. Some of these library organizations can augment the subject specialist librarian’s professional development through regional workshops and memberships. In my own experience, I came to know many current art librarian colleagues not only through ALA but also through the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA). I started off small because at the time I could not afford two full-fledged memberships to both organizations, so I got to know ARLIS/NA first through one of their fall southeastern chapter meetings. I was able to register rather affordably as a non-member and thoroughly enjoyed the meetings and speakers and workshops they had organized for their regional conference. The contacts I made through this chapter became very valuable resources and network contacts for me over the years. I met a great number of art, museum, and special library staff and librarians I would have never met and here they were practically neighbors within my own state and region. I encourage the librarians I mentor to not only pursue the vast opportunities ALA has to offer but also to pursue finding specialized library organizations as well as subject-based societies that might open up networking, publishing, and continuing education possibilities. For my chemistry librarian colleague,
I know that she is actively involved in the American Chemical Society and has met and become a closer associate with several chemistry librarians at conference and through regional chapter meetings of that learned society.

**Service –** Another topic for discussion in a mentoring relationship is potential for service or leadership within the library, the university, the community, and the profession. Working and serving on library committees is pretty much unavoidable. While having a dialogue about it with another subject specialist librarian I like to stress the importance of contributing to library committees and task forces for the betterment of the libraries as a whole. Oftentimes, when concentrating on a certain disciplinary focus or working closely with associated faculty, I can get caught up in the day-to-day practitioner side of things and lose sight of the most basic requirement of my job responsibilities and that is to the working relationships with fellow library employees. Not only is it a required element of most tenure-accruing criteria but working closely with your library colleagues will put you in good stead for local leadership and allow you to effectively advocate for your subject focus or branch library in a cross-departmental organization. Much the same can also be said for serving on campus-wide committees – you can represent the library’s interests while at the same time interacting with faculty in a larger, interdisciplinary atmosphere. Volunteering in the community can be a fun way to add quality service to your resume and use your subject expertise. I have judged for local art shows, and I have encouraged my chemistry colleague to judge at local middle school science fairs. Building on the connections I made through the regional ARLIS/NA meeting mentioned earlier, I was eventually encouraged to seek and get elected to office within the southeast chapter that then lead in later years to election and appointments to
major offices within the parent organization and ultimately ALA as well. My trajectory within these organizations sometimes makes me think of the marketing adage: “Think local, go global.” By my example, I hope to inspire others to think locally first and then, as you gain confidence, search for ways to contribute back to the profession.

- Résumés and Tenure Packet Reviews – A very real application of a mentoring relationship is the ability of the colleague with more experience to help a co-worker or another colleague to write, to edit, and to review his/her résumé or curriculum vita; or, in the case of those in an academic/faculty setting, aid in the construction of a tenure or promotion packet. Helping a colleague go over application materials (cover letter, résumé, application essay, and reference listings) either early in his/her career or during a mid-career transition or promotional opportunity can prove extremely valuable in assisting that person make a high-quality impression at a very crucial point in his/her life. In academia, tenure and promotion decisions represent an evaluation on the part of the university of the librarian’s value to the campus and of the potential for future contribution based on past performances. Decisions on tenure and promotion require, in addition to performing assigned responsibilities, that candidates effectively fulfill all responsibilities attendant to membership in the university community. Having personally reviewed hundreds of résumés and curriculum vitas either as part of an academic search committee or tenure/promotion committee, I know how to look at such materials with a highly critical eye to offer effective feedback. Sometimes we all need an objective viewpoint when it comes to looking at ourselves professionally. What better way to do so than within the respect and trust of a mentoring relationship.
OTHER MODELS FOR MENTORING

Even though the example used above concentrates on similarities that can be drawn when establishing a mentoring relationship between two vastly different, discipline-based librarians, I think much of the framework and many of the topics for discussion can be applied to any mentoring relationship. If the chemistry and art librarians can be mentoring colleagues then surely other librarians from different backgrounds can serve as sounding boards and bring a unique perspective to each other. This is especially true when our situation and inherent problems can seem exclusive to our day-to-day work or primary job responsibilities. For example, possibly a colleague you met at conference last year had a bad day with her boss and is calling you and seeking your advice on how you would have handled the situation. Simply having a cataloging librarian visit and sit with you once a week while you are at the reference desk can bring him/her a different point of view as to the impact of effective subject headings, especially when you are helping patrons understand bibliographic records. Maybe a friend comes to you who has worked in public libraries for twenty years and wants to pursue academic librarianship; you sit down and show him or her what a tenure packet looks like. Even if an undergraduate student is thinking about changing her major and earnestly asks you, “How does one become a librarian?” – it allows you to think about what it is you actually do and maybe wax philosophically for a moment while you expound on how you got where you are.

All of these scenarios have the potential to grow into mutually beneficial mentoring relationships. We all have some perspective to contribute, and by opening up our career track to others we just might learn something about ourselves we never realized. Mentoring is all about helping colleagues explore and ultimately define their own choices within the context of an open and honest dialogue. Effective mentoring requires great skill in giving and receiving feedback.
We are not there to tell someone the right and the wrong way to do things. We can only say what has and has not worked for us up to this point in our career.