

Special Extended Teaching Note

Proactive Mentoring: Tips from the Trenches

*Laura Holland, American English Institute and
Department of Linguistics, University of Oregon*

Abstract:

Effective faculty mentors both support and challenge the instructors and TAs with whom they work. A mentor's job is to orient protégés to their new work culture, to support their teaching and to advocate for them. A mentor looks at the organizational systems of the workplace and projects how those will affect the people under the mentor's umbrella of support. A mentor's aim is to collaborate with other members of the unit to create a culture of mutual support that enables new faculty to find their unique place in the organization, taking advantage of new opportunities for growth and developing their professional niche. A mentor recognizes that each mentee comes with different levels of experience, and a mentor strives to tap into the special contributions mentees have to make. From their initial "survival" and "getting grounded" stages, mentors do everything possible to support their efforts, to help them identify and develop their particular passions in order to create a meaningful career path.

Key terms: *Mentor, Protégé, Proactive mentoring, Orientating new faculty, Integrating new faculty, Developing a professional niche, Mentoring TAs, Role of a teaching mentor*

Introduction

In her 2005 book *Creating a Mentoring Culture*, Lois J. Zachary states that "Mentoring is a journey, not a destination" (p. xxiii). This notion of *the journey* is popping up all over the culture beyond the field of education. After working as a Faculty Mentor for the past five years, I could not agree more that it is a useful concept if we are dedicated to bringing out the best in those with whom we are working and we are committed to the idea that mentors too, are lifelong learners. For each person we mentor, the journey is unique, and while we strive to include all the

best practices we can in this endeavor, it is critical to keep in the forefront of our minds that "best practices" may mean very different things depending on who and what we are discussing. There is much to be learned along the way, for everyone involved in the process.

Many definitions of what constitutes a mentor exist, reflecting varying contexts in which mentors and protégées work. For the purposes of this article, I am describing the mentor as a person in an educational setting who has experience within the organization and whose job it is to orient, initiate, guide, engage, encourage, and integrate the new faculty

members into their new work environment. How the mentor goes about doing this will look quite different depending on the level of experience new faculty members bring with them and the specific work ethic and personality traits they possess. The successful mentor will have a deep toolbox of tips and strategies to share with mentees, but will also treat each new protégée as the individuals they are, helping them find ways to develop *their* specific skills so they can thrive in the organization and continue to develop professionally.

Brad Johnson and Charles Ridley organize their book *The Elements of Mentoring* (2008) with a focus on behaviors and actions that I find absolutely key to my work. While they do include a section discussing what good mentors *are*, the chapters in which they pinpoint what “excellent mentors do” are the ones that resonate most with my experiences of the last five years. How I organized the categories I include here is based in part on the model from this useful book that caters to mentors of many fields, not only education. Unless noted specifically, however, the categories themselves are mine, based on my experiences working as a mentor. There is much to be learned from varying models.

With this in mind, I discuss below tips, techniques, strategies and practices I have found most useful working with the dozens of new instructors, teaching assistants and seasoned faculty with whom I have been working—nearly one hundred hardworking souls so far. Other educators whose teaching influences my

own work include John F. Fanselow’s books *Breaking Rules: Generating and Exploring Alternatives in Language Teaching* (1987) and his next book *Contrasting Conversations: Activities for Exploring Our Beliefs and Teaching Practices*, as well as John Berger’s deeply influential book, *Ways of Seeing*.

Know your mentees: distinguish, differentiate, discern

Getting to know each mentee as an individual helps mentors to adapt our suggestions accordingly. We need to listen to them in an active way to get a

good sense of where they are at now in their teaching and professional development, and what *their* next steps might be. We will have

something different to offer the brand new instructor fresh out of school than we will the seasoned teacher who is simply new to the program. We should offer training and growth opportunities for all, but find ways to integrate the experienced teachers’ skills into leadership. We can ask ourselves these critical questions:

- What unique strengths, interests and experiences do they have that might be further cultivated for their professional development?
- What do they have to offer the unit/department that will help distinguish their work and give them solid activities to add to their annual review?
- What sort of relationship will serve them best?

Getting to know each mentee as an individual helps mentors to adapt our suggestions accordingly.

Some of our mentees will want more emotional support, others less. Some may want a lot of interaction and advice and others a more hands-off approach. Listening carefully and reading non-verbal cues is key. Underlying it all is the idea that we are genuinely concerned with helping them succeed and move forward on their own professional trajectory.

Make time to talk

This is tricky, but not impossible if we have dozens of people we are assigned to work with at once, but is another key element in helping to build a trusting and productive relationship. We need to find out who *they* are, what their interests, both personal and professional are. Welcome them warmly and make clear that no question is too big, small or very important, repetitive. Make clear that we expect them to need to hear information many times and that it is okay to ask repeatedly. We never know where the great ideas are going to come from and having ongoing dialogue gives many more opportunities to find out. The following are some ideas to help use time wisely, even with groups:

- Invite our protégés for coffee or tea.
- Organize a campus tour and chat informally while we show them around.
- Have a brown bag lunch meeting after the term gets going and bill it as time to talk about “challenges we are facing.” This will often help solve problems before they grow too large and help provide a support

system for all. It will also go a long way in reassuring newcomers that they are not alone in their struggles.

- Check in via email often, even at odd hours, especially in the initial stages of working together, and especially if you can engage them even before they arrive on campus. If mentors prefer, give mentees a cell phone number. Whichever mode we use, be available.
- Use post-observation conversations as another opportunity to check in and chat informally.

Embrace humor

This advice from Johnson and Ridley (2008) is also key, as long as mentors understand that humor here is of the supportive sort, and never drifts into snarkiness or sarcasm, which can have a devastating effect. Many of the mistakes that mentees will make can be made less dire with a smile or with humor, and we can help put things in perspective as noted below. We can focus on them as opportunities to learn and we can help more sensitive teachers to “let it go,” focusing instead on not repeating the error. If we are people who embrace sarcasm in life, it is a good area to be self-aware and regulate, avoiding this sort of humor in the mentoring relationship, where it can have unintended negative consequences.

Employ the first person plural

Why? Because this work we are all doing is a challenge for us all and we are

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all in it together. “You” can sound isolating and accusatory; “we” is collaborative and inclusive. It sends a subtle message that makes an important difference, reminding the mentees that this is something *we all* deal with. The best part is that it is true.

Learn to frame your language positively

We can say almost anything in a positive way. Even critique can be worded carefully so as to propel the action forward and make it a true learning experience. We all know about *affective filters* and resistance from the student’s perspective, but too often we forget to apply that concept to our colleagues and protégés. Be aware of our language and avoid “don’t” statements; instead, reframe a negative statement with the lens of, “When we do X, we get..., but if we try Y, this is what I have seen happen,” to note one example. Practice framing and reframing the language we use in the most positive manner possible. This can be awkward or challenging at first, but is well worth the extra care, and soon becomes a habit that mentees report to be quite reassuring.

Celebrate and note all successes

When we are busy and wrapped up in our daily routines, it is easy to forget to notice what was done well, but it is critical for new instructors and faculty new to the program to be told *what they are doing right* in terms of their teaching, their integration into the unit and every other aspect of their presence in this new workplace. Johnson and Ridley note that we can never affirm their work too much, or as they say,

“Affirm affirm affirm, and then affirm some more” (p. 11). They go on to say, “If you can do only one thing as a mentor, affirm your protégés.” This resonates with me from a personal standpoint, and I have found it to be mostly true in my experience. There is a lot of research out there discussing the potentially negative impact that “too much” praise can have on student motivation, and this idea may well be perceived as similar with regard to the mentoring relationship, but I would argue that unless actually presented with the far more rare situation of an overly confident mentee, our protégés are starved for this sort of positive support. Now, does it mean we should employ so-called “empty” praise? Of course not. Praise is helpful when it is highly specific and put in the context of all that the teacher is doing. It is also to be balanced with the specific suggestions we make to help improve. We might well adapt Johnson and Ridley’s triple affirmation to say instead, *encourage encourage encourage!* I honestly do not think we can do this enough. Ever.

Provide correction

As Johnson and Ridley (2008) point out, it is a disservice not to provide correction, even when painful (p. 32). However, as discussed above, the secret in this lies in the *how*. Framing mistakes positively and as opportunities for growth can actually lead teachers to *beg* us for corrective feedback. No one ever wants to feel attacked, but we all feel respected and well supported when we see the clear steps for how to improve our practices or adapt our thinking. When correcting, we can start gently, using our best positive language, focusing on actions instead of

characteristics, moving to more strident critique and guidance as needed. It *is* our job to correct and teach when necessary, letting teachers know when what they are doing may land them in hot water of one sort or another and to help find solutions that will avoid these trouble spots. There is a fine line here to note because we are not supervisors, or at least not in this role, and therefore, our strategy must be firmly rooted in a model of “correction-as-support.” For example, I no longer engage in summative (evaluative) observations with the teachers with whom I work; however if they *will* be having a summative observation in their second term of employment, I point out what they may be doing that might be flagged as problematic in their teaching when the time comes for another teacher or administrator to observe and evaluate them. In this way, the mentor continues to support by providing useful information and sharing clear expectations of what the mentee will encounter in his upcoming summative observations.

Also in my experience teachers *know* when things are not going well, and not addressing the problem directly leaves them feeling isolated and, often, wanting to hide. By shining a light on the problem while signaling, “I’m here and I’ve got your back,” we embody the mentoring spirit and give a clear road map for how, together, we all make it back to a positive place.

Help put things in perspective

When the inevitable happens and one of the mentees makes a significant mistake, it is important to help them put it all into perspective. Most of the time, the mistakes are not dire. A favorite line

of mine is, “Well, the good news is, we are not doctors. Nobody died here.” That usually makes people laugh, and in this case, it is important to be sympathetic and empathetic, while also propelling the discussion forward to what we can do to fix it, what to do the next time, or what to avoid in the future. Keeping it positive and as light as possible can help a lot. We can remind them that we have *all* made such mistakes at one point or another.

But what do we do if what they have done *is* dire? While rare hopefully, it is our job to stand together with our mentees and walk them through the steps necessary to make reparations, offering to preview what the mentee may write or say when attempting to resolve the predicament. Again, empathy is key here. It can have a life-changing effect on both the mentee and the mentor.

Sharing our own tales

This point is directly related to the one above, and I have witnessed its calming effect. When we share our own mistakes and perhaps what we learned from them, we remind the teachers we are in the trenches with them and have stood in their shoes. The information we are imparting is not Divine, coming down from the mountain above, but is instead, hard earned, just as they are experiencing now. Putting things in perspective is excellent for individual mistakes, but what happens when mentee teachers genuinely feel that they are failing at the job or that they are in a larger sort of trouble? This is an opportunity to share our own real life harrowing stories and what we did to remedy and survive them. It can be enormously helpful for them to know that I too, was put on probation during

my first term of teaching in a particular school, because I was observed leading a class that was deemed too teacher-centered and because I did not stop the students in back who were chatting in Russian right next to my directors *throughout* the observation. Checking my ego at the door, I find it is highly useful to share this sort of information with teachers who are struggling, in order to show them that mistakes, even of the large variety, *can* be overcome with awareness and adaptation of our practices and a willingness to learn.

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Avoid conflicts of interest

Be aware of any potential conflicts in our role as advocate and mentor. When I first began mentoring, I was already a member of our Summative Observation Committee (SOC), meaning that I went into teachers' classrooms to complete the required evaluative observation, which results in a form filed annually in our personnel files. Almost immediately this felt wrong and in direct conflict with the mentoring relationship: How in the world was I going to be able to maintain trust when I was evaluating and scoring someone's teaching? My directors agreed that this was contrary to our objectives and pulled me off that committee, allowing me instead, to consult with the SOC on the value of employing fact-based observation as a starting point for these evaluative discussions. In other words, I could still be involved in order to advocate for teachers, but in a role that did not directly clash with my role as mentor.

Embrace contradiction and different approaches in teaching and problem solving

A mentor's goal is not to create "mini-me" clones of ourselves, but rather to bring out the best that each of our protégés has to offer for a diversified and complementary faculty. This will be manifested in wildly diverse ways, and is to be celebrated too. Even within ourselves, we should embrace contradictory practices at times.

This is key in differentiated instruction and our students will benefit from having teachers who employ a diverse assortment of tools in their toolboxes.

Advocate for mentees

Advocating for mentees comes in many forms.

- Often, mentors are the only ones who have the direct responsibility to advocate for teachers and teaching assistants. For example, if one of the mentee's students complains to advisors or administrators, this is an excellent opportunity for the mentor to become involved and to discuss in private with the mentee their side of the story. This can help to get a fuller picture, to help mitigate bad feelings, and to collaborate to find solutions. The mentor can offer to accompany the mentee to follow-up meetings with any administrators, if that is desired. Working together with the advisors or whoever is talking with the student in question allows everyone to feel supported

and to move to find solutions as quickly as possible.

- Mentors have the unique opportunity to put newcomers' names "out there" by getting them involved in projects they may not have access to or may not yet have the confidence to step up to on their own.
- When we see our protégés in action and have spent time in discussion both professional and personal, we can guide them to areas that will help *them* grow and become immersed in the work culture.
- There are times when it is useful to give our mentees "insider information" and tips for how to approach a particular person or a potentially thorny situation. We must be careful to be ever discreet, however, avoiding gossip at all times and staying within professional boundaries, but we also owe it to our protégés to avoid letting them find information out "the hard way" when possible.

Model professionalism and demonstrate humility

The idea here is obvious but important to reiterate and remind ourselves often, so as to provide the best possible models. If we want our teachers to behave in professionally appropriate ways, we had better do the same.

Be honest, direct, specific and kind

We serve our mentees best when we are direct with them, but tact and diplomacy go a long way in softening any blows they may feel hearing critique

and suggestions. All feedback should be highly specific and framed as positively as we can make it, in order to be as informative as possible without raising teachers' defenses. I have found that teaching assistants and faculty *request* more of the critique-type suggestions when they are framed as opportunities and also practices that I too, have to keep in mind daily.

Engage *with* our protégés

We can create collaborative explorations with our mentees in our post-observation discussions. We go into the observation with "clean" eyes, leaving our preconceived notions of "best practices" behind in favor of an approach where the observing teacher takes fact-based notes on all that the teacher and students are saying and doing, records time markers, groupings, and the strategies she is using to manage her class. In the post observation conversation, we can work together to note observations such as how the groupings were arranged. Suspending judgment for the moment about the efficacy of the teacher's choice for that day, the mentor and mentee can brainstorm together as many alternate possibilities as they can, thereby building *both* teachers' toolboxes and engaging in a project together. After that exercise, the mentor can ask the observed teacher how he feels his own choice worked and why or why not. Delving into the details together will reveal a lot for both mentor and mentee to learn.

Other options exist too; we can:

- invite questions big and small
- ask questions that direct their attention to specific areas

- ask questions we do not know the answers to
- invite them to teach us something we do not know, encouraging the attitude that *everyone has something to learn and something to teach*
- invite them to join in a collaborative research project
- invite them to co-present at an in-house or outside conference workshop
- ask them what *they* might like to collaborate on (this is easier if you do not have 20 protégés!)

Find necessary support in other faculty

As accomplished as we may be, mentors are not always able to answer every question. Tapping into other faculty is a useful and appropriate tool, and it helps send the message that mentoring is a communal and collaborative effort. There are several occasions when we ask for support from other faculty:

- Encourage “buddies” among new faculty and Teaching Assistants (TAs).
- Pair a new faculty member or Teaching Assistant with an experienced teacher who is assigned to the same course, to answer course-specific questions. Serve as liaison for them.
- Establish a network of teachers who are open to being observed while teaching and help facilitate observations, making strategic matches to illustrate specific skills such as managing group work, structuring classroom discussions,

managing time, and engaging students in active learning, to name a few.

- Keep our ears open when we hear of projects that might be excellent “ins” for our newer faculty to become involved with.

Be a “Point Person”

This can aid our mentees in both their professional and personal lives. As noted above, we can be the person mentees contact first. If we know the answer, wonderful, but when we do not, we find out where to direct them, helping to make any introductions necessary.

A resource we instituted in our department during the years of exponential growth was a good list of local “favorites” gathered from the rest of the faculty and staff, most specifically having to do with medical care and schools, but also suggestions for local restaurants, places to shop, and so on. Mentors can organize and update the file periodically or post it on a shared server, which has proven useful for everyone in the organization, and not just the newcomers. Mentees have mentioned this resource surprisingly often as something that helped support their acclimation to their new city.

“See one, do one, teach one”

While this model, originating in the medical field and specifically regarding invasive procedures, has been replaced with newer models, I find it still useful for educational purposes. For example, if we give a new TA a tutorial about how to complete midterm grade report forms, we may have her teach another new TA the procedure—under our guidance for

consistency—in order to help solidify the new procedure and get it “in there” when there is so much else going on. Having to teach someone else the procedure helps ensure that it is truly learned and more easily remembered and has the added benefit of making the newcomer feel like he has contributed something useful.

Reassure

One piece of feedback mentees have reported as especially powerful relates to my assurance that no one expects them to be brilliant their very first term and that we expect they will make mistakes. We understand how many aspects and threads of the job there are, and simply surviving their initial term intact is what we expect. We also assure them that by midterm so much will be clearer and that having the opportunity to start over the next term provides a real opportunity to make changes, fix initial errors, try new approaches, learn from their first set of formative observations, learn from the mistakes they made, ask far more informed questions and *then*, perhaps, strive toward brilliance.

Be prepared to hear personal stories and concerns

There is often an exceptional amount of stress that comes with taking on a new high demand job. Add to that the further stress of moving one’s family long distances and all that entails—kids starting new schools, finding all new doctors, changes in everything from one’s home life to adjusting to a new climate, health related issues and all the uncertainty that comes with “beginning again” – and we have a perfect recipe for feeling overwhelmed. Mentees often just

need a sympathetic ear for all the “extra curricular” difficulties they may be experiencing. Many of the books on mentoring note that this is a potentially fine line to balance; we are neither therapists nor counselors and need to take care neither to take on those roles nor allow a protegee to impose them upon us. But we *can* listen and support, empathize, help brainstorm solutions and resources, and simply allow our newer colleagues the chance to “get it out.” It is surprising how often this is enough. When it is not, we can help find the appropriate resources. I have been surprised and humbled by the many spontaneous hugs requested and offered at the end of a private meeting, particularly ones in which personal and professional hardship stories had been shared and challenges solved.

Confidentiality required

Whether we have just heard a personal story from their home life or have seen something egregious in the classroom, confidentiality is key in the mentoring relationship. One bit of leaked detail can undermine all the trust we may have built up over a period of time, and this makes sense; why should we trust anyone who has blabbed something difficult and personal?

Invest the time

The mentoring process takes a lot of time, thought and care to make effective. It is not always easy but it *is* always rewarding. Invest the time to help integrate new faculty into the organization’s culture. Introduce them to people they may align with while they begin to make connections of their own. Set aside your own busyness for the few

minutes because they need your undivided attention. Most times it will serve you and your institute well.

Feedback from mentees: In their words

Feedback I have received from mentees (collected 2015, see Appendix 1 for the collection form) has been specific and positive and demonstrates the great need this role can serve. Many people note that, “the learning curve was steep, but [the mentor] made the entire process seem orderly and manageable,” and “helped us to enjoy the process of adapting to a new workplace culture and life in a new city.” One mentee observes that, “The affirmation of professional abilities and pedagogical practices that [the mentor] provides can have a transformative impact on the identities of early-career instructors.” Someone else writes that the “greatest gift to me came at the time of my first formative observation. I consider this to be a pivotal moment in my career because it was the first time I thought of myself as a good teacher. During our post-observation discussion, [the mentor] said a lot of things that gave me a great deal of encouragement, but it was not just empty praise. By identifying specific aspects of the class that she considered to be effective and giving clear reasons to explain why they were effective, she both established herself as highly credible and, more importantly, gave me reason to have confidence in what I was doing.

A seasoned teacher new to our department wrote that “having a mentor to answer ‘point of need’ questions I had as someone new to a program, but not new to the profession was useful...and she recognized my previous experience

with and passion for mentoring new and new-to-program instructors.”

Below are some other quotes from mentee instructors:

- “[The mentor was] generous in sharing her personal experiences and expertise in the classroom to promote my success in those early weeks of my new career...[I] asked her advice on many matters from challenges of balancing home and work schedules, finding solutions to classroom management concerns, and brainstorming professional development ideas.”
- “The Mentor makes a difference in the lives of the people she helps...and... greatly helped me settle into the job at hand. In my first term, [the Mentor] quickly identified that my career interests were oriented towards teacher training; since then she has been a tireless advocate on my behalf... I owe my current career trajectory at [the Institute], as well as my overall sense of contentment and progress, to the tireless efforts of the mentor.”
- “During the observation process I never felt judged or evaluated; I felt very much that I was treated as peer who was trying to improve my teaching skills...this was integral in my continued development as a TESOL professional.”

TAs comments are below:

- “Because I was overwhelmed with teaching in [this Institute] for the first time, which includes no small amount of grading and planning, and just figuring out how everything works, in addition to

taking a maximum load of challenging graduate courses, I needed support and guidance. [The Mentor] consistently went out of her way to make sure that I and the other TAs had all of their questions and concerns tended to, whether pressing or less significant. As someone brand new to [this Institute], it was comforting to have the Mentor guide me through the basics of ...the myriad particulars that learning a multifaceted job entails. She helped me create a ‘plan of action’ in the winter of 2014. I was able to observe some experienced instructors, receive critical feedback, and focus on areas of my personal teaching that could use especial improvement. This process was quite useful; as an inexperienced teacher I was able to develop rapidly at a crucial time. Overall, [the Mentor] has been a reliable source of: positive energy, useful information and constructive encouragement.”

- “I have met with [the mentor] to discuss student engagement and for ideas on calling on students,” “review lesson plans and organize thoughts.”
- “It was reassuring not only to know I could turn to her when I needed assistance, but to feel that she took an active interest in my work and wellbeing.”
- “Without her guidance, teaching would have been significantly more stressful!”
- “I was a more prepared teacher right from the start, instead of wasting students’ valuable time orienting myself.”

Effect on the Mentor

These words above from people I have mentored are some of my most fulfilling as a teacher and teacher trainer and remind me that this work is key in helping create a thriving, collaborative atmosphere where we treat the people with whom we work as treasured colleagues we are willing to invest time and resources in helping develop. However, I should be clear that I too, get so much from each of these relationships. Having the opportunity to discuss and observe people teaching every week has sharpened my own teaching skills, freshened my perspective, broadened my toolbox and made me far more aware of my own pitfalls and strengths as an English Language teacher. We can learn something distinct from every single person with whom we interact and have the luxury to observe and explore our shared profession, participating in so many stimulating, cherished relationships. People who have been carefully mentored become great colleagues and future leaders, invested in making our shared work world a positive place to spend our careers and dedicated to being the best teachers we can be. This benefits our students, all teachers, the programs in which we teach, and the field as a whole.

Conclusion

Effective faculty mentors both support and challenge the instructors and TAs with whom we work. Though we may be working with individuals, our aim is to help create a culture of nurturance that helps new faculty find their unique place in the organization, taking advantage of new opportunities for growth. It is also our job to

encourage them to begin taking the reins themselves, step-by-step, so that one day, possessing a large toolkit as described above, they may agree to

mentor another new member of the faculty, thus beginning a unique new journey.

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Laura G. Holland teaches English language and teacher training practica, and is the Faculty Mentor and Graduate Teaching Fellows Supervisor for the American English Institute at the University of Oregon. Her special interests include teaching oral communication skills, teacher training, online professional development with international teachers, and classroom observation for training and professional development purposes.

Appendix 1

Mentee Feedback included was submitted to the Faculty Mentor, Summer and Fall 2015, posted anonymously here, but signed optional statements answering the questions:

1. Name any ways that having a faculty mentor helped you in your work for the Institute.
2. Note any ways having a faculty mentor helped you in getting oriented to Eugene/UO. (This will mostly apply to new faculty, not GTFs, I think).
3. Note any areas of particular challenge we may have worked out together.
4. If your role changed (GTF < New Faculty), what support were you provided?
5. Any special ways I helped *you*.