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Mentoring in the Library

Abstract: Mentoring enables a one-on-one relationship in which a more experienced colleague listens, supports, and makes suggestions to benefit another. It is a form of professional development that can help library workers learn to do our jobs, advance our careers, and strengthen our profession. And, formal mentor programs can help to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to benefit from mentoring.
Keywords: mentoring, training and development, librarians and library workers.

In the course of their careers, librarians and library workers will learn in a variety of ways. Our education may begin with academic degree programs and formal schooling, but subsequently entails some combination of continuing education classes, certification programs, on-the-job training, manuals and documentation, webinars and conferences, professional literature, electronic discussion groups, mentoring, and more. The success of any particular training or professional development activity – one that is worthwhile, and even enjoyable – depends on the subject, learning modality, instructor strengths, and rapport between teacher and learner, as well as practical considerations, such as time and expense. Everyone can potentially benefit from any one of these activities, as we learn to do our jobs, advance our careers, and strengthen our profession. Mentoring, like any of these methods, may or may not be available at all times for all people, but, it, too, is no less impacted by these variables, and it, too, can be highly effective, if approached with intention and care.

Mentoring has long been acknowledged as a meaningful way to learn and grow. Indeed, the word “mentor” derives from a character in Homer’s *Odyssey* who, as Odysseus’ friend, took care of his household and his son, Telemachus, when Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan War. Later, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, disguised herself as Mentor in order to encourage Telemachus to find out what happened to his father and to stand up against his mother’s suitors. This character, as well as his characteristics as an advisor, were further developed

in Fenelon's popular French book, *Les Aventures de Telemaque*, in 1699¹. And, contemporary examples of good, bad, and enigmatic mentors are also found in literature and movies, sometimes launching and/or sustaining the heroes journey, and at other times representing an obstacle or menace from which the hero must break free².

Mentoring can support librarians and library workers at any stage of their careers, from school³, to early career⁴ or well into their careers⁵. It can be formal or informal. Mentors need not be experts. Nor do they need to be in your own organization, or do your particular job. A knowledgeable outside point of view, in service of the mentee, can be of great value. Intergenerational connections can also add value, but even a peer with just slightly more (or slightly different) experience could be a good mentor⁶, as long as they have some experience, knowledge or wisdom, as well as a willingness to share and support.

Mentoring enables a close working relationship of trust. A good mentor shares their own experience (including mistakes) and best counsel (including tough love) with another person in order to help them develop and succeed. The very best mentors can help their mentees formulate and achieve their own goals, rather than imposing their own or attempting to replicate themselves in their mentees. They are good listeners, in addition to being dispensers of wisdom. The reciprocity of their personal connection with mentees facilitates growth by establishing a safe space in which mentees can seek honest advice and trusted guidance, as well as share vulnerabilities and doubts.

Mentoring is usually about big picture issues, policies, and decisions, rather than the intricacies of procedures or workflows. It shares aspects of training, supervising, or coaching, in that there is an exchange of information and ideas for the benefit of the mentee. However, rather than prescribe what to do, or how to do it, mentors listen, advise and encourage. Contact should be sustained over time, although it may be irregular and as needed. Mentors get to know a men-

¹ Roberts Andy, *The origins of the term mentor*, "History of Education Society Bulletin", 1999, no. 64, p. 313-319.

² Myers Benjamin, *Top 10 Mentors in Fiction*, "The Guardian", 4 Mar 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/04/top-10-mentors-in-fiction> [dostep: 2021-10-21]; Rhodes Jean, *The top 25 mentoring movies of all time!*, The Chronicle of Evidence-Based Mentoring, 2021, <https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/top-25-mentoring-relationships-represented-in-film/> [dostep: 2021-10-21]; Walston Zachary, *Why Books are the Greatest Mentors*, Medium, 2020, <https://medium.com/better-advice/why-books-are-the-greatest-mentors-80cd265bc22> [dostep: 2021-10-21].

³ Lacy Meagan, Copeland Andrea J., *The Role of Mentorship Programs in LIS Education and in Professional Development*, "Journal of Education for Library and Information Science", 2013, Vol. 54, no. 2, p. 135-146.

⁴ Slattery Charles, Walker Stephen, *A Mentoring Program for New Academic Librarians*, ERIC, 1999, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED438812> [dostep: 2021-10-21].

⁵ Couture Juliann, Gerke Jennie, Knieval Jennifer, *Getting into the Club: Existence and Availability of Mentoring for Tenured Librarians in Academic Libraries*, "College & Research Libraries", 2020, Vol. 81, no. 4, p. 676-700.

⁶ Mavrinac Mary Ann, *Transformational Leadership: Peer Mentoring as a Values-Based Learning Process*, "Portal: Libraries and the Academy", 2005, Vol. 5, no. 3, p. 391-404.

tee's strengths and weaknesses and encourage them, just as a good supervisor does. But they differ from a direct supervisor who can also prescribe activities or formally evaluate someone. And, rather than seeking to motivate, as a coach might, mentors help discover inner motivation so that, in the end, they may even no longer be needed (even if they continue to be consulted, valued and respected).

The focus of mentoring is on the mentee, not on the mentor; nonetheless, a fruitful mentoring relationship has positive effects on the mentor, as well as benefits for a profession and/or an organization. For instance, mentors connect to people with new ideas and enthusiasms that can energize their own work, and enable positive changes for all. Being a mentor can validate their experience, while enabling them to learn from new perspectives, providing them with the opportunity to contribute to the future of their profession. One can also learn about one's self at the same time. Again, mentoring is about the mentee. But, at its best, its practice reveals the many benefits in working together and supporting each other to make things better, rather than competing with (or imposing hierarchies on) new colleagues or just enabling them to replicate what already exists.

Some important principles for mentors to remember include: While a mentor encourages someone to strive for goals, it has to be the mentee's goals, not the mentor's or the organization's, that inform any discussions or suggestions. Mentoring is not just about opining, but requires listening and discussing. It also requires the active attention, time, energy, commitment, and participation of the mentee. Communication is crucial, whether it is online or face-to-face. Mentors need empathy. They also need to have and express interest and to be present and open. They should listen and ask questions and let mentees guide what needs they have and what is best for them. There needs to be positive feedback, encouragement, and the praising of positive choices and behavior. Mentees need to be acknowledged by a mentor who sees, hears, understands, and supports them.

Mentors and mentees need to get along in order to share ideas, and to trust each other in order to be honest and give useful advice. Although a mentor may not always be right, and may even be misguided, they should have a proven record of success. The success of mentoring is also very dependent on the time that they have to share. If a good match is not found, then mentoring will not work. Or, the power differential can be problematic, especially if the mentor is unethical and uses the relationship solely for their own purposes. And, should they not be a good match, then a mentee should not feel that they are stuck in a relationship that is not serving them. As a role model, mentors are not infallible, or magicians, so it is helpful to set expectations about what they can do, how often they can meet and what their philosophy is. And, since people are different and need different things, mentors should be open to tailoring their interactions to the individual mentee. Together, a mentee and mentor

should be able to admit and analyze failures and inspire, motivate and celebrate achievements.

Despite all the benefits of mentoring⁷, many people go through their lives and careers without connecting to a mentor. Although everyone can benefit from participating in a good mentoring relationship, not everyone has the opportunity because mentoring is time consuming, and it can be hard to identify someone who would be a good mentor, or intimidating to approach someone. But, both the value, as well as the challenge, of mentoring, is that it is one-on-one. It can be shaped to meet the specific goals and needs of the mentee. And, a mentor can theoretically work well with anyone if they are both respectfully open to connecting and sharing. Equitable access to mentoring is crucial so that everyone can enjoy its benefits, and everyone's potential and professional advancement can be developed⁸. Some people will connect with a mentor directly, in the course of their studies, or through their work, or through personal introductions from friends, colleagues or family. However, this means that mentees need to identify, seek out, and approach potential mentors⁹. And, opportunities for people who do not know a good potential mentor or who are uncomfortable (or even rebuked) when reaching out should also be made possible. While networking is often an accepted and necessary aspect of career development, job success should not be about who you know, but what you know. And, while those who consciously strive to move ahead might seek mentors out, a good mentor can also identify and encourage everyone to consider their potentials and futures¹⁰. Otherwise, there will be unfair advantages for some, as well as for a replication of power structures, rather than a broadening of opportunity for all.

Mentoring that is arranged through formal programs, under the auspices of professional organizations or consortia, is much more accessible to all. By identifying potential mentors and matching them to mentees according to interests, rather than backgrounds, more people can access the benefits of mentoring, without having to identify a mentor themselves. This is crucial so that professional development opportunities and career advancement are more equitable. Some examples of library mentor programs include REFORMA (The National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking), which started in 1985¹¹. The New York chapter of the

⁷ Harrington Marni R., Marshall Elizabeth, *Analyses of Mentoring Expectations, Activities, and Support in Canadian Academic Libraries*, "College & Research Libraries", 2014, Vol. 75, no. 6, p. 763-790.

⁸ Harris Roma M., *The Mentoring Trap*, "Library Journal", 1993, Vol. 118, no. 17, p. 37-39.

⁹ Kandiuk Mary, *Promoting Racial and Ethnic Diversity among Canadian Academic Librarians*, "College & Research Libraries", 2014, Vol. 75, no. 4, p. 492-556.

¹⁰ Ghouse Nikhat, Church-Duran Jennifer, *And Mentoring for All: The KU Libraries' Experience*, "Portal: Libraries and the Academy", 2008, Vol. 8, no. 4, p. 373-386.

¹¹ Tauler Sandra, *REFORMA/UCLA Mentor Program: A Mentoring Manual*, ERIC, 1989, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED333891> [dostep: 2021-10-21].

Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL-NY) matches people and prompts them with discussion questions and programs¹². Another notable example of a mentoring program for librarians is the International Librarians Network, which started in 2013. This “peer-mentoring program [was] a facilitated program aimed at helping librarians develop international networks. It was created based on the belief that innovation and inspiration can cross borders, and that by building professional networks beyond national borders, ordinary librarians can learn from one another to become better skilled and more engaged professionals”¹³. Unfortunately, the program ended in 2017, indicating that such programs do require a great deal of ongoing participation, time, and active work to continue. The IDS Project¹⁴ consortium also partners IDS Mentors with their member libraries and library staff members in order to develop and maintain a strong community of sharing and support, although it is in many ways more of a coaching program. And, the IFLA (The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning Section, too, has what they call a coaching program¹⁵, as well as an interest group for new professionals¹⁶.

The support, encouragement, and wisdom of a mentor can be invaluable. And, all could and should have this opportunity. There are many ways to learn more about mentoring, in libraries (and elsewhere), including articles (referenced in this article), books¹⁷, videos, such as TED talks, and other events and conferences¹⁸. Mentoring research within the library field, and beyond it, has established its value; but, although it is popular, it is still far from ubiquitous¹⁹. And, so, although there are people who have succeeded without the help of a mentor, as librarians and library workers, we would all do well to intentionally support mentees, mentors, and mentoring.

¹² *Mentoring Program*, Association of College and Research Libraries (Greater New York Metropolitan Area Chapter), 2021, <https://acrlny.org/about2/mentoring-program/> [dostęp: 2021-10-21].

¹³ Byrne Kate, McKenzie Clare B., Dalby Alyson, *The International Librarians Network*, IFLA World Library and Information Congress, August 2013, <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asdpapers/521> [dostęp: 2021-10-21].

¹⁴ *Mentor Program*, Information Delivery Service (IDS) Project, 2017, <https://idsproject.org/About/Mentors.aspx> [dostęp: 2021-10-21].

¹⁵ *Projects*, IFLA, 2021, <https://www.ifla.org/g/cpdwl/projects> [dostęp: 2021-10-21].

¹⁶ *New Professionals Special Interest Group*, IFLA, 2021, <https://www.ifla.org/units/new-professionals/> [dostęp: 2021-10-21].

¹⁷ Todaro Julie, *Mentoring A-Z*, Chicago, 2015.

¹⁸ Conference, *Mentoring Institute*, 2021, <https://mentor.unm.edu/conference/schedule> [dostęp: 2021-10-21].

¹⁹ Cronin Nicola, *Mentoring Statistics: The Research You Need To Know*, Guider, 2020, <https://www.guider-ai.com/blog/mentoring-statistics-the-research-you-need-to-know> [dostęp: 2021-10-21].

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