

Mentoring for Women in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article is a retrospective, reflexive account of mentoring for women in the ELT setting. After tracing the etymology of the word, it looks at its special significance for women in the ELT scenario. Professional roles are a new development for women in Pakistan, hence the need for mentoring. The article discusses the psychosocial and professional overtones of mentoring by looking at a case study. Among other things mentoring is a complex combination of counseling, tutoring and modeling. It has its phases and requires a formal initiation and closure to be effective. Confidentiality is a pre-requisite in this relationship. The case study highlights the different and changing/evolving roles of the mentor and mentee and its benefits and repercussions for both.

Background

Mentoring is a sustained relationship in which a more senior colleague acts as an advisor for a junior colleague. The concept of mentoring is not new. The word mentoring has its origin in Greek mythology when Odysseus went to fight the Trojan War. He left Mentor as a guide and advisor for his young son Telemachus. Powell (2000) maintains that goddess Athena can also be seen as a mentor. She disguised as Mentos, aided, guided and facilitated Telemachus to search for his father. From this background it can be interpreted that mentoring can be defined as providing direction/guidance and support in a personal or professional relationship over a period of time. In this capacity the person with more experience acts as an advisor for a less experienced person.

We learn and take advice from our parents, teachers, senior colleagues and friends. All of them act as mentors for us in some capacity at different stages of life. Sadler (1999) has pointed out that junior people in higher education can have several experienced persons acting as mentors in various areas like research, administration and teaching. However, in recent times mentoring has become more formal and organized in academic settings (McKenzie, 1995). There are several reasons for this formal structuring including the complexity of work environment and its demands in our current day and age. Moreover, those routes of power in organizational structure have become identified and articulated that exclude people on the basis of gender, race or for other reasons. This requires providing equal access to those excluded and mentoring is one way of providing this initiation.

Throughout the world women have little access to higher management positions

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in the academia. Referring to the gross under-representation of women in higher education, a UNESCO report states that globally men outnumber women about five to one at middle management level and at about twenty to one at senior management level. A resolution of the 1998 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education was that women's active involvement at policy and decision-making levels within higher education and society be increased (UNESCO 1998). In Pakistan only one woman ever became the vice chancellor of a co-education university. The number of women deans and professors is embarrassingly infinitesimal in our academic context. That women themselves do not aspire to these positions may be true in some cases but it is only one of the many factors that exclude women from senior management positions in our higher education scenario. According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) one of the strategic purposes of mentoring is to develop effective change agents and this can gradually transform the role and status of professional women in higher education.

Why mentoring for women specifically?

In our culture women rarely have exposure or insight into any of the aforementioned areas. This leads to diffidence and lack of confidence in their abilities, making them invisible and silent in the work place. Mentoring can make them establish themselves and increase their visibility. It can also lead to gender balance and help them break through the so called 'glass ceiling'.

In fact informal mentoring among women readily occurs though on personal issues. They tend to consult and emulate other successful women in their sphere. This can be used as the springboard for formal mentoring. They need this to:

- Understand the politics of their system
- Have an insight into the power structure of their organization
- Recognize the mechanisms of the financial working of their institution.

Mentoring for Women English Language Teachers (ELT) in Higher Education in Pakistan

Mentoring is a sustained relationship between a mentor and mentee. It requires a fair degree of confidentiality to be workable.

Through continued involvement, the adult offers support, guidance and assistance as the younger person goes through a difficult period, faces new challenges, or works to correct earlier problems. (Zhao and Reed, 2000: 400)

Teachers of English enjoy a special status in the higher education environment of Pakistan. English is a compulsory subject from year one of schooling to fourteen. All the Science subjects are taught in English after year ten of schooling. Therefore English teachers have a special role to play in colleges and enjoy a special status. Unlike other subjects, English classes are scheduled on all working days in the colleges; therefore the most frequent contact of the students is with the English teachers. This is especially

true in higher education where English is the only compulsory subject for graduation. Due to this regularity of contact with the students, the English teachers are usually assigned the role of class teachers. This role does not involve any additional remuneration and the teachers of English often complain about this extra burden placed on them, nevertheless, it confers a special status upon them. This adds to the status and power of the English teacher. There is almost a mystique associated with being an English teacher. The English teachers also nurture this. As the teachers of English are the largest group in any college, they usually have a separate staff room (Qadir, 1996; Neilson and Qadir, 1980). This immediately separates the English teachers from the rest of the teachers in the college. English teachers are high profile people with a good self-image in colleges. In the case of women this situation becomes even more intricate because most of them are the first professionals in their families. The concept of working outside the house in a professional capacity is quite stressful in itself, as they usually have to carry the full load of their home as well. They have no professional female role models to follow and no networks to help in their socialization process in the academic scenario.

Generally teachers employed in colleges/universities are not required to undergo any teacher training in terms of acquiring pedagogical skills. This lack becomes glaring oversight in the case of English because it is not taught as a subject alone but also as a skill or tool to access other subjects and research. The teachers enter the classroom with what they have acquired during 'the apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975).

One often overlooks the ways general schooling prepares people or work.... There are ways in which being a student is like serving an apprenticeship in teaching; students have protracted face-to-face and consequential interactions with established teachers. (p. 61)

It is true that teachers are exposed to the culture of the classroom long before they join the teaching profession. Elbaz (1983: 47), also noted the powerful influence of this past experience in the case of novice teachers who bring with them:

a stock of knowledge-in-use developed from their previous experience as students and from the variety of informal teaching situations which abound in everyday life.

Nespor (1987) and Calderhead and Robson (1991) also endorse in their respective studies that usually teachers (prospective or present) had particular images of teaching mostly derived from their experiences in school as pupils and they 'learn a lot about teaching through their experience as students' (Nespor, 1987: 320).

The process of teacher socialization helps to ease the new teachers into the teaching situation. Socialization is usually understood as the period during which the novice teachers imitate other teachers and learn from them about the acceptability of different ways of acting (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986: 520). However, this is mostly related to teaching practices in the classroom. Mentoring for teachers of English in

higher education is more than teacher socialization and is not restricted to imparting pedagogical skills. This article is a retrospective, reflexive account of mentoring in the ELT setting¹. The mentor maintained a reflective journal for the sessions.

Situating the research

A new teacher (Sophia)² with excellent qualifications joined the Department³ of English. She had clarity of concepts, sound up to date knowledge and good command of English. However, she had a rural background and due to lack of exposure to spoken English in real life situations, a very stilted way of talking and a broad accent. Pronunciation is a very personal area and can make a person feel vulnerable in a work environment where she has yet to establish herself. Moreover, Sophia had never studied in a university. Her entire education had been limited to a small-town college following the annual system of examination. She needed careful counseling about the ambiance and academic demands of a university strictly following the semester system. This young woman had the insight to recognize her need for more fluency in spoken English. Moreover, she was the first woman in her family to work outside the home. She needed not only socialization into the university culture but also mentoring from a senior colleague to gain confidence and adjust in her new environment. She herself requested this guidance from her senior colleague. This mentoring was meant to provide her with the psychological and social support she required as Shawchuck and Heuser (1993: 178) point out that 'Learning happens by mentoring, modeling, hands-on experience, and reflection on the practice'.

Setting up the Mentoring Program

With the consent of these two teachers, the department set up a semi formal mentoring schedule for the two. This was dedicated time. They met in the senior teacher's office twice a week for 30-45 minute to talk about themes already settled by the mentor and the mentee. These were not only related to her subject but had affective overtones as well. It was an arrangement for one year and by the end of this time period the new teacher had become visibly established in the department.

The mentoring process went through different phases. These phases are differently defined in the related literature. Clutterbuck (2001:101) has identified the European (developmental) mentoring as having the following four phases:

- Rapport building and direction setting
- Progress making
- Winding down
- Continuing informally, infrequently as a sounding-board

1 Information gleaned through informal retrospective interviews with the mentor and mentee. Also reading the reflective journal maintained by the mentor.

2 Fictitious name.

3 Department of English in a Women's university.

Compared to this Kram (1983) had identified the following phases in the US sponsoring mentoring:

- Starting
- Middle period — setting personal and career goals
- Dissolving the relationship
- Restarting the relationship — at a different level

However, both Clutterbuck and Kram have an extended period of 30-36 months allocated for the mentoring program. The mentoring of Sophia lasted for a year only. It went through the identified phases and was more related to Clutterbuck's definition.

Another way to define this mentoring may be in psychosocial terms or with reference to professional career.

a. *In psychosocial terms it refers to:*

- Role modeling
- Acceptance and confirmation
- Counseling and advice
- Friendship (Kram, 1995)

This is true of mentoring in any area of academics. In the case of ELT all these factors assume a different status due to the peculiar status of English in our socio-cultural setting. The knowledge of the subject is not enough to win the respect of the students. The pronunciation and style of delivery is equally important. The ELT personnel should know what to say and how to say it. Pronunciation and sentence construction is overlooked in any other subject area and code switching is tolerated but not in the class of English.

After the initiation or starting phase the mentee began to understand how the semester system worked and its demands not only on the time of the teacher but also its stress on the integrity of the teacher. Coming from the annual system, it takes some effort to adjust to the semester system. The mentor facilitated the mentee by letting her observe the mentor's way of dealing with the stress and pressure of the system. Here she was the role model. As Sophia began to absorb the different facets of life on campus, the mentoring relationship also developed with both the mentor and the mentee recognizing the potential in it. After a year the semiformal mentoring sessions were over but the winding down phase of mentoring was slower. Both the participants still retain a bond of friendship forged during this period.

This was a brief discussion of the psychosocial aspects of mentoring.

a. *In career terms it refers to:*

- Sponsorship
- Coaching
- Protection (or guidance)
- Challenging assignments

Some of these aspects overlap with the psychosocial ones. However, in career terms these aspects may have different connotations. Sponsorship refers to the opportunities that may be provided by the mentor for the exposure and visibility of the mentee within the organization. The university organizes a lot of events and functions. Committees are formulated to oversee different aspects of each program/event. The mentor suggested the name of the mentee to be a part of various committees at the rapport-building phase. This inclusion at once made the mentee a member of the team and facilitates her process of socialization into the institutional culture. When people work together as a team they usually learn to support each other and create their own networks. We found that ultimately it had also helped in the separation phase of the mentoring program mentioned above. Sophia was working in two committees at the recommendation of her mentor. She became a part of these groups. It helped her to make a niche for herself and find a few friends.

The novice teachers need not only pedagogical skills but also insights into dealing with students' issues. The university offers counseling sessions for the students to deal with academic and personal issues as and when required. A lot of the students come from lower middle class families and are the first women in their milieu to have the opportunity of higher education. If they are hostel residents then it is their first exposure to independent existence. It is also their first experience of semester system with its continuous pressure of assignment deadlines and evaluation. The stress unnerves them and they need counseling from the teachers to deal with their strain. The young teachers are given orientation workshops to familiarize them with the counseling requirements. But sometimes they are emotionally overwhelmed by the problems of the students or do not have the perspectives and experience to deal with them. Sophia talked over the problems with her mentor who helped her to look for solutions keeping her emotions uninvolved. She needed a few debriefing sessions with her mentor to be able to cope with the counseling sessions. She was the youngest child in her family and had led a very sheltered and protected life. Her experience in life had not taught her coping strategies as her siblings went into a protective mode and sheltered her from life's little barbs. She had to discover these strengths to deal with her students needs effectively and affectively. The mentor had to coach her to exercise maturity in dealing with issues objectively. The mentor did not provide the solution but helped her to arrive at the solution. Her attitude hardly ever had patronizing overtones. Realizing the inexperience and naiveté of Sophia, she was very careful about not hurting her ego or self-esteem. She adopted a nurturing role and encouraged Sophia to articulate her concerns. This began in the rapport-building phase and overlapped through the progress-making phase.

Research was a totally alien notion for Sophia. Here the mentor's role did have the overtones of the teacher as she had to orient the mentee to this concept. However, with her insight and reflective practice⁴ she kept a tight hold over the situation and allowed the mentee the freedom to determine her own pathways and goals, both short term and

4 The mentor maintained a reflective journal to record her impressions of the relationship.

long term, acting as a sounding board for her academic and research related concerns. The mentor was an ELT specialist but facilitated the mentee to discover that her forte was teaching literature written in English by speakers of other languages. This avenue of exploration in itself was a challenge as it was venturing into a hitherto unknown area in our academic world. Sophia's avid interest and the mentor's expertise in designing courses enabled them to plan two courses related to Pakistani Literature written in English and Canadian Literature written in English. These were later offered as optional courses to the students, with the mentor teaching the former and Sophia teaching the latter. This was what Bell (2000) calls a 'learning partnership'. The mentor facilitated Sophia's access to the Canadian High Commission to acquire a selection of relevant Canadian Literature. Sophia browsed the Internet and scrutinized quite a few courses of Canadian literature taught in Canadian universities before putting together her own course outline. This was a challenging assignment for Sophia. It was a also hands-on experience of selecting, designing, planning and teaching a new course. This is a rare opportunity for young teachers. Usually the universities follow a set curriculum that is not modified for quite a few years. The teachers therefore have no input in the selection or design of courses. They may adapt these courses for effective learning purposes but have no say in any other matter. The course designing was an invaluable experience for Sophia. While they were designing the two courses, they had to support the selection of the chosen items and convince each other about their choice. The mentor began the process and Sophia learned from her to think about choosing material with a specific rationale that would suit the purpose of the course. The mentor tried to transfer her reflective skills to Sophia. This critical reflection is required for an experience to be an effective technique for professional development (Ferraro, 2000). Looking at her choices critically and providing a sound rationale for their selection prepared her to present her course outline with confidence in the Faculty Committee. It also made her stand out amongst her colleagues especially the ones who had joined the university at the same time. The mentor had set a demanding assignment for her and 'this challenging work is essential for both technical skill development and professional identity enhancement' (Johnson and Ridley, 2004: 22).

Sophia had limited exposure to research. She had never conducted or written about research. In fact she had not even read any empirical research articles. Her mentor introduced her to the research culture by taking her to conferences held in the city. They would discuss the papers presented at these conferences to give Sophia an insight into the critical discourse and current research paradigms. Her mentor took her to SPELT⁵ meetings and encouraged her to become a voluntary member of one of its subcommittees. This gave her visibility in the local ELT scenario. It also made her a part of a group that was external to her work environment but related to it. She made a few friends here also. This exposure was also her introduction to concepts of research in ELT. The mentor's sponsorship provided Sophia with the contacts to grow in her field.

5 Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers.

There were some indirect effects also of these mentoring sessions. Sophia learned to use the photocopier as an efficient and creative teaching tool. Her mentor was an innovative teacher and would often prepare handouts for the students to supplement her teaching effectively. Due to limited resources she would cut and paste and play with the size of the print to make her handouts attractive and effective. Sophia was fascinated by this practice and eagerly devoted herself to acquire this skill.

Problems in Mentoring

Some problems did arise during the mentoring process. The mentor had to be very careful in balancing her different roles. The mentor wanted to retain this relationship only but knew that it would have the overtones of tutoring and guidance. Initially Sophia just submitted to mentor's views without even voicing her own as is the norm in our culture. Gradually she was weaned away from this habit. The mentor encouraged Sophia to voice her opinion and gave it due importance. This built up her confidence and gave her a feeling of security.

This was the first semi formal experience of mentoring in the department. The mentor had to be quite vigilant to keep the relationship professional and not try to influence the attitudes of the mentee outside the work environment. A delicate balance had to be maintained between the personal and professional persona. This is especially difficult in our culture where women are still in the process of learning to think and act professionally and not in term of familial relationships. A professional attitude is often interpreted as cold or snobbish. Sophia found it intimidating initially and started treating the mentor with the deference due to a teacher or an aunt. The mentor had to reassert her position as a colleague. Gradually the mentee began to assimilate the sustained professional attitude of the mentor and follow it.

However, at times the mentor also felt that maybe she was retarding Sophia's process of socialization or acculturation in the university environment due to her mentoring. In the initial phase Sophia became dependent both emotionally and professionally on her mentor and looked to her for sustained support beyond her mentoring sessions. The local academic culture has a fairly informal drop-in policy into offices of colleagues. The mentor, with her extensive professional commitments could not provide this sustained support beyond mentoring sessions for long and had to confine it to the sessions. Sophia felt rejected but the mentor negotiated the terms and conventions with Sophia and stuck to them. She wanted to be supportive without creating dependence.

Moreover, the mentor was in a fairly senior position in the university. A lot of administrative input was expected from her. This claim on her time sometimes made it very difficult for her to meet her mentoring schedule. A few times these sessions became a part of the lunch hour. The mentor was not happy about it. It disturbed the effectiveness of the session. Also the mentoring had been scheduled for six month only, the mentor felt that maybe it should have been extended for another three months. The relationship had just got comfortable and effective. They had forged bonds of

friendship but when the umbrella of mentoring was removed, the meetings became more sporadic and not as focused. Sophia had not yet reached what Helms (1997: 14) calls the stage of 'autonomy'. She was still at the stage of 'psuedo-independence' (Helms, 1997: 14).

The social context is very important in mentoring. Changing the context can have powerful effects on changing the beliefs and behaviours of those who are functioning within it (Miron and Elliott, 1994). The mentor belonged to upper middle class of the society with a progressive outlook and life style. Sophia was from lower middle class with a conservative stance. The social culture of the two was quite apart. The socioeconomic culture was also different. This needs to be considered when working with women. The mentor reflected that she had to strongly subdue the impulse to 'proselytize' a more forward looking socio-cultural approach. Sophia would have allowed her to do so and maybe also accommodated her mentor's perspective. However, the mentor was conscious of this factor and very deliberately steered away from this aspect. It could have created problems for Sophia in her personal environment. The mentor had the cognizance that this change would occur in due course of time and any precipitation could harm Sophia. 'If mentoring programs and relationships are to be successful, it is vital to consider the context in which they are occurring ...' (Kochan & Pascarelli, 2004: xi). Very few studies exist on this aspect.

Benefits to the Mentor

The mentor indicated that the relationship made her re-evaluate her own position in the university. The mentor got constructive feedback about her role as the senior member of the department. As a consequence 'she was encouraged to engage in critical reflection on her role as a professor' (Nelson & Tawiah, 2004: 389). It gave her greater self-confidence and awareness of her own strengths. She acknowledged the 'feel-good factor' that followed from the experience. It gave her the opportunity to re-examine her own practices, attitudes and values (McCormack, 1996)

The mentoring sessions were conducted mostly in English to assist Sophia's oral skills. This had been negotiated in the first session. The mentor's encouragement helped Sophia to overcome much of her psychological uneasiness related to talking in English. It also enhanced her communicative skills. Gradually Sophia's English became less stilted and more fluent. The hiatus between her communicative competence and performance began to get bridged. The mentor was present at an event where Sophia acted as the stage secretary and conducted the program in English. The empowerment of Sophia was an acknowledgement of the mentor's contribution in her professional development. The recognition of her dynamic role by her colleagues gratified the mentor.

Sophia's queries about certain practices that were taken for granted by the senior teachers made the mentor realize that the younger faculty needs to be initiated into these procedures. Usually the new teachers learn through trial and error or by 'the apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975) as mentioned earlier. Semester system requires a lot of paper work and record keeping. Sophia, coming from the annual system,

found it difficult and cumbersome. She needed initiation into office procedures like efficient filing system and writing inter offices memorandums. In the official world, word of mouth is not as authentic and reliable as little memos. Guiding Sophia through these procedures made the mentor realize the extent of stress felt by the new teachers in understanding the standard operating procedures of a department. She talked about it at the higher level with her colleagues. The result was an eight-hour orientation workshop for facilitating the access of the new teachers into the system. The one to one mentoring had ramifications for the group of novice teachers. It gave shape and definition to what had been under consideration for some time. The institution also benefited.

There are extrinsic benefits but many mentors ‘savor the intrinsic benefit of mentoring ... personal rejuvenation, excitement in working with a talented, energetic junior, and satisfaction that comes from helping some one succeed’ (Johnson & Ridley, 2004: 89) On a personal level, the mentor had the feeling of a sense of purpose and shared values. It also gave her the pleasure to see the mentee grow and develop both personally and professionally.

Conclusion

Mentoring is a special relationship based on trust and confidentiality. In the case of women it usually also acquires overtones of nurturing. Due to the special status of English in the socio-cultural context, ELT practitioners also acquire a special position in academic institutions. This places a certain extra responsibility on them. Their previous academic experience has not prepared them for meeting this responsibility. Most of them learn through the hard school of knocks. However, the process of socialization and acculturation can be facilitated through mentoring programs. The case of Sophia is a success story and it can be replicated with amendments according to contextual demands and issues. However, in co-education institutions mentoring overtones would become different and other dimensions would need to be included.

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