

Why Mentoring? An Interactive Presentation for Beginning Teachers in Adult Education

Presentation #1

Slide 1

Hello and welcome.

This presentation is titled “Why Mentoring?” and is designed for adult educators who are interested in mentorship as part of their professional development.

Slide 2

This presentation has the following aims:

To invite reflection on the meaning of “mentorship.” I’ll highlight descriptions of mentorship that you might be familiar with as well as a couple more that you may not have heard of. They were new to me, too!

To contemplate the purposes that mentorship can play in your professional growth as a teacher.

To identify two or three aspects about teaching and being a teacher that you would want to talk about with other teachers.

Slide 3

To begin, let’s look at a formal definition of “mentor” that is featured in the AIR Teaching Effectiveness materials:

A mentor is an experienced and exemplary teacher who nurtures professional growth in a beginning teacher by sharing his or her knowledge and insights and by supporting the beginning teacher in his or her professional learning and growth.

This definition reminds us of a very important role for mentors in our careers as teachers: we want to learn from people who have wisdom and influence, people who can offer their “knowledge and insights” so that we start to feel more successful as a teacher.

When many people think of the word “mentor,” they are reminded of the person named Mentor in Homer’s *Odyssey*. When Odysseus left for the Trojan War, he left Mentor in charge of the care of his son Telemachus. The goddess Athena supposedly took the form of Mentor so she could give advice to Telemachus, who was struggling with the decision to leave home and figure out what happened to his father.

The verbs in this definition—nurtures, shares, supports—are positive behaviors that we should think about more deeply. While no one would dispute the relevance of these words to our characterizations

of mentorship, at the same time, we know that each of us has very personal expectations, hopes, and motivations for what that nurturance, sharing, and support mean to us as teachers.

Slide 4

I'd like to highlight two more stories that give us a slightly different way of thinking about mentorship:

In ancient Africa, when a child was born, it was thought that everyone in the village should share the responsibility for raising and educating the child in the ways of a particular village. The child was nurtured by every member of the village, but there was always one older child, not a family member, who would be tasked with the responsibility to ask questions and listen carefully to the younger child. In Swahili, the person who served in this questioning role was called, "Habari gani menta" which means, in English, the person who asks "What's happening?"

In southern France, high in the Pyrenees, there is a prehistoric cave called La Grotte de Niaux. The cave is covered in ceiling paintings that archeologists believe were painted around 12,000 and 9,000 B.C. The cave depicts many scenes of horses and bison, but another common motif in the drawings is the scene of a group of adults walking with children to what at that time was considered to be the limits, or the edge, of the physical world. The adults are seen to be encouraging the children to be brave and explore beyond the borders of the present world. Some posit that the origin of the word "mentor" can be linked to interpretations of these ancient cave drawings—that being a mentor can be translated into adults taking children on a tour of the world that lies just beyond.

Slide 5

Let's take a moment to consider the three depictions of mentorship featured in these stories:

First, in the story from *The Odyssey*, mentors are depicted as experienced, wiser advisors.

Second, in the story from Ancient Africa, mentors are depicted as experienced peers whose job is to ask, "What's happening? How are things going?" in your life as a teacher.

And third, in the story from the caves of Southern France, mentors are depicted as supportive figures who embolden you to "tour" your world as a classroom teacher, go to the "edge," and look beyond.

For me, this depiction characterizes mentors as people who try to help you think outside the box or outside your comfort zone.

I invite you to reflect on these depictions of mentorship:

Which depiction do you like most, and why? Can you think about people in your life—in teaching and other areas of life—who have played these different roles?

Take a moment to think about these questions, and jot down your ideas. If you're listening to this presentation with a colleague, pause the presentation, and take some time (5 minutes or so) to exchange ideas.

Slide 6

Now that we have given some thought to the nature of mentorship, let's think more concretely about roles mentors play in adult education. For this purpose, I'd like to introduce you to Steve Hinds, who will share his own experiences with mentors in this presentation.

Steve teaches math, does research, devises professional development projects, and writes curricula, especially for programs that serve adults and community college students who have had difficulty learning mathematics. Steve is presently the director of a project called Active Learning in Adult Numeracy and Mathematics. Prior to this, Steve was an adult numeracy teacher and math professional developer for the City Colleges of Chicago. Before that, he was a curriculum developer at the Center for Elementary Mathematics and Science Education at the University of Chicago. Steve also has worked at The City University of New York central office where he led projects serving adult numeracy, high school, and community college developmental math students. He also has served as a subject matter expert for a variety of U.S. Department of Education-funded projects. Steve began his career in education as a high school math teacher in New Haven, Connecticut.

Slide 7

Now, let's listen to Steve talk about his early mentoring experiences when he first started his career as a math teacher.

As you listen to Steve, think about the different depictions of mentorship we just covered. Please think about these questions as you listen:

What are the different roles that Steve's mentors played in his early years as a teacher?

How did his mentors help him improve his teaching in different ways?

STEVE'S TRANSCRIPT

"I'm a math teacher, I was a math teacher then, and I had two people that I would describe as mentors in my early years. One was a teacher who was a master at the social interactions with students, and I would go to this teacher many days after school, almost crawling to his classroom after school with exhaustion, to talk about ways I thought I would try to motivate students or handle difficult student encounters—either student to student, or me to student. And this teacher was just a great emotional support and source of ideas on communicating with students and creating the kind of classroom that I wanted.

But then I had a different person, another teacher who was really my content mentor. It was the person who taught the highest level math class in the school, who knew a great deal, really more math than me. And whenever I had a content question that really went to the heart of "Why are we really teaching this?" or "How come it's the case that when I divide by zero, it's undefined and not infinity," and I could press questions that arose in my own preparation that were really just about mathematics.

So I think one of the lessons I learned from that was that you shouldn't expect one person to be able to always be all things to a new instructor. And to also not expect that assigning an experienced teacher will always work out and give a newer teacher the support they may need."

Slide 8

I like Steve's story because he reminds me that our needs as new teachers are complex, and to meet these needs, we can seek out multiple mentors who support our growth as teachers in different ways. Steve says, "You shouldn't expect one person to be able to always be all things to a new instructor."

One mentor seemed to be an important source of "emotional support"—the teacher that Steve would "crawl" to after long, exhausting days of teaching. This mentor helped Steve reflect on issues related to the classroom environment, specifically his relationships with the students.

Steve also had another mentor who provided content support related specifically to the teaching of math. This mentor could answer Steve's questions about math and the teaching of math.

Slide 9

Now that you have had an opportunity to think about different characterizations of mentorships, and reflect on Steve's experiences, let's think more concretely about your own hopes for mentorship.

I invite you to think about this question:

As we have discussed, mentors share wisdom. They encourage. They ask questions and push teachers to stretch themselves. At this point in your teaching career, which of these areas would you like most to receive from a mentor, and why?

Take some time to jot down your thoughts in response to this question. If you are listening to this presentation with a colleague, pause the presentation for 5 minutes and share your responses.

Slide 10

I hope that at this point of the presentation, you are starting to envision your own hopes for why you may wish to seek out a mentor or, as in Steve's case, mentors.

Now, I'd like to introduce you to another teacher who will also share her experiences working with a mentor in her early years as an ESL teacher.

Meet Estefany Giehm. Estefany lives in Boise, Idaho, where she teaches ESL and helps to run a service learning program at Boise State University. She has taught ESL at community colleges and intensive English programs in San Diego, Albuquerque, Chicago, and now Boise.

Slide 11

In this clip, you will hear Estefany talk about her experiences working with her favorite mentor, Gail Weinstein.

As you listen to Estefany, please keep this question in mind:

What areas of her teaching was Estefany able to strengthen by working with her mentor, Gail?

Estefany's transcript:

I think that there are many benefits to mentoring relationships. I think that the biggest thing they taught me was how to treat people, how to help my students be confident language learners, how to build

community in the classroom, and just how to work with my fellow colleagues. I got my masters in TESOL and I feel that I've learned a lot from my program. But I feel that that was the technical side of teaching English, how to instruct, how to build lessons, what approaches to take in certain classrooms, and I feel that what my mentors taught me was more of this humanistic side of it. Gail, for example, taught me how to make my students feel valued in the classroom and that was just something that I learned from her example. I was in her class. It was one of my first classes, and on the very first day she would try to learn everybody's name. It was not a small class. I think it was maybe close to 30 people. It was over the class limit, and that first day was a little chaotic. There were a lot of people, some people standing because there weren't any seats, seeing if they could add the class last minute. And she asked us to introduce ourselves, which is pretty typical thing [sic] to do on the first day of class, but the difference was that she required that we learned everyone's names. And she required of herself to learn everyone's names and to get to know each of us individually. And that taught me that I was valued in that class. I was important and that helped me to become more of a participant in the classroom and not just hide in the corner like I would usually do.

Slide 12

I value Estefany's story because she highlights how her relationship with her mentor Gail provided her with an opportunity to watch a model teacher in action. Estefany was an active participant-observer in Gail's classroom. As Estefany comments, "Gail...taught me how to make my students feel valued in the classroom, and that was just something that I learned from her example."

Through Gail's efforts to learn the learners' names, Estefany was able to see firsthand how a teacher can start to build a positive classroom community. The mentor enabled Estefany to feel part of that community. In this way, Estefany could relate to what was going on in the classroom from both the learners' perspective and the teacher's perspective. She could relate to the sense of recognition that the learners felt in Gail's classroom. She also was able to witness firsthand the positive impact of a relatively simple classroom-building strategy.

Estefany later told me that, because of Gail, she tries "to make [her] students feel the same way." She said, "I try to help them realize that they are important to me and to the class." Estefany also summed up nicely the impact of mentors like Gail on her teaching: "Most of what I learned from my mentors was just from serving them, from seeing what they did, and seeing how that affected their class for their students."

Slide 13

Perhaps, like Estefany, you have also had the opportunity to work with an experienced teacher in his or her classroom. I invite you to think through a few questions:

Recall a time when you were able to observe another teacher and learned something new by being in his or her classroom. What was the situation? What did you learn? Were you able to use what you learned in your own teaching?

Take some time to jot down your ideas, and then share your ideas with colleagues.

Slide 14

I hope that reflection exercise, in response to Steve and Estefany's experiences helped to stimulate your thinking about your own mentorship needs and interests.

As you contemplate future opportunities to work with a mentor, are there specific aspects of teaching you'd love to observe firsthand and learn more about?

List one or two aspects, and share your list with a colleague.

Slide 15

I'd like to introduce you to one more teacher, named Amy. I read about Amy when I read a study focused on the early teaching experiences of novice ESL teachers. This study, conducted by two researchers named Yasuko Kanno and Christian Stewart, was interested in how beginning teachers evolve in their identity as teachers as they gain more experience in the classroom. Specifically, they were interested in the changes in identity that beginning teachers experience as they transition from being student teachers in a teacher-training program to being primarily teachers in their own classrooms.

First, let me tell you a bit about Amy's personal and professional background:

At the time of the study, Amy was a teaching assistant in a university-based ESL class. She was also enrolled in a 2-year graduate program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. Prior to enrolling in her graduate program, she had taught ESL for about 6 months in a private language school.

Slide 16

One day in class, Amy drew attention to a student's sentence on the board:

The graph shows that how many Starbucks stores spread in the world.

Amy pointed out the incorrect use of the relative pronoun *that*. But the students asked about the verb: "Should the verb be 'spread' or 'have spread'?" "Is 'spread' transitive or intransitive?" One student checked a dictionary and confirmed that "spread" can indeed be transitive or intransitive, to which Amy doubtfully said, "OK."

Amy rewrote the sentence on the board, but her revision was even more incorrect!

The graph shows that how many Starbucks have been spread in the world.

Slide 17

After this class, Amy shared with the researchers the following thoughts:

"I started to second-guess myself when they offered the passive voice of the present perfect, even though I just felt that this wasn't correct. . . . I felt myself saying, 'I'm not sure' a lot, and just felt them losing respect for me as their teacher every moment."

I invite you to react to Amy's experience. In what ways can you relate to Amy's experience, particularly her feeling that she was losing the students' respect for her? What did you do?

Take some time to jot down your ideas and, ideally, share your thoughts with a colleague.

Slide 18

Amy decided to observe an experienced, well-regarded teacher at the school. She observed that this teacher also was not always able to answer students' questions on the spot. She realized, "Even experienced teachers do not have all the answers."

Amy changed her strategy. She decided that if a student were to ask her a grammar question that she could not answer, she would admit that she didn't know the answer. She would go home, review grammar rules and examples, and then come back to class the next day with an informed answer.

Amy noted that this strategy enabled her to feel like she **"earned some respect back"** and eventually she started to **"feel like I'm more their teacher."**

I invite you to react to Amy's last comment—that eventually, with this change in her teaching practice, she came to "feel like I'm more their teacher."

Consider your own growth as a new teacher. To what extent is "feeling like a real teacher" part of your growth process? What role can mentors play in helping new teachers feel like "real teachers"?

Take some time to jot down your ideas and, ideally, share your thoughts with a colleague.

Slide 19

Thanks for taking the time to reflect on Amy's experience and think about your own evolving identity as a teacher.

I value Amy's experience because it underscores the need to understand teachers' development not only in terms of changes in their practice but more fundamentally in terms of important changes in their professional identity. Yasuko Kanno and Christian Stuart, the two researchers who studied Amy, offer these comments at the end of their paper:

"The central project in which novice L2 teachers are involved in their teacher learning is not so much the acquisition of the knowledge of language teaching as it is the development of a teacher identity. Knowledge acquisition is part of this identity development, not the other way around. Moreover, changes in novice L2 teachers' classroom practice cannot be explained solely in terms of the changes in their knowledge; again, one needs to refer to their evolving teacher identities to fully understand why certain changes occur in their practice" (Kanno & Stuart, 2011, pp. 249-250).

Please note that this quotation does not mean that changes in practice are less important than changes in identity. Changes in practices are clearly important. As you saw in Amy's case, Amy needed to strengthen her knowledge of English grammar and knowledge of how to teach grammar. But an important driver of change in Amy's practice was the desire to regain her students' respect, and the desire to feel more authentic as a teacher. Her classroom practice helped to shape her identity, AND her identity helped to shape changes in her practice.

Slide 20

The implications of this shift in thinking about teacher identity for mentorship are important and exciting.

Mentorship provides a valuable opportunity to work on changes in your classroom practice.

Mentorship also can support your exploration and active crafting of your professional identity as a teacher.

Slide 21

I am excited about this shift in focus because I think it can spark curiosity in mentors and mentees about one another's personal and professional histories about being and becoming a teacher.

Practically speaking, I think a few insights are important for teachers seeking mentorship to remember. None of these insights are rocket science, but I think they are simple enough to go underappreciated in our growth as teachers.

First, know that the transition from being a student teacher to feeling like a "real teacher" is not automatic. This may be a common experience, but we have paid relatively little attention to this important transition. For the most part, we have expected new teachers to handle this transition on their own and that, for most teachers, the process just happens. We now know the process is in fact more complex than that.

Second, take the time to reflect on moments when you feel and don't feel like a "real teacher." Too often, in moments of self-doubt, such as when a lesson doesn't go well, new teachers will quietly agonize. I know I did as a new teacher, because I didn't want others to know that I didn't know how to teach something. Instead, keep a journal where you reflect on these moments of feeling and not feeling like a "real teacher." And then, take the extra step to share these reflections with colleagues and definitely with mentors. You'll discover you're not alone. But you'll also be contributing to valuable professional conversations in our field.

Third, in the context of mentorship, you have the opportunity to ask more experienced teachers about how their teacher identity has changed over time. Relatively little research exists on teacher identity compared to the research on teacher practice. Your conversations with your mentor about teacher identity taps into an important and unrealized source of professional wisdom.

Slide 22

Let's take some time to recap the various themes in this presentation thus far. First, we have thought about at least three ways to conceptualize mentorship—the more traditional view of a seasoned, sage advisor who can impart wisdom, someone who can be less directive and ask questions, yet someone who can push you to think beyond what you already know.

We also have considered, through reflections on Amy's experience, the link between changes in your teaching knowledge as fundamentally a change in your identity as a teacher. In this regard, mentorship becomes a process of drawing out who you are as a teacher, who you would like to be, and the struggles and joys of becoming that teacher.

Slide 23

As a follow-up to this presentation, I'd like to call your attention to a series of Guiding Questions on page 41 in the Mentoring Guide that you are invited to review. As you can see, these questions prompt you to think about your own teaching experience, strengths, teaching approaches, and teaching goals. Reviewing these questions and taking notes on your own ideas would be a wonderful way to prepare for a conversation with a potential mentor.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to this presentation. I hope the ideas and reflection prompts in this presentation have sparked curiosity in mentorship or affirmed your commitment to mentorship as a vehicle for professional growth.

Slide 24

[none]

Slide 25

The Literacy Information and Communication System or 'LINCS' website includes a wealth of resources to support the induction of new teachers through mentorship and enhance teacher effectiveness in adult education. In particular, the Teacher Effectiveness page features a comprehensive Adult Education Teacher Induction Toolkit. The Toolkit is an integrated multimedia resource intended for instructional leaders, mentors and beginning teachers. The Toolkit contains information briefs, instructional strategies and techniques, online interactive tools, online courses, and role-based step-by-step implementation guides.

Slide 26

The *Mentoring Guide for Teacher Induction* and the *Adult Education Teacher Induction Toolkit* give guidance and resources as well as support a systematic process for orienting and training beginning teachers in adult education. The *Guide* includes tools for beginning teachers to assess their strengths, needs, and teaching context; identify professional learning priorities; and work with their mentors to improve their instructional practice. It also supports mentors with effective mentoring strategies and tools to guide mentoring activities, such as classroom observations. It supports reflection and discovery and offers suggestions for improved teaching practice.

Slide 27

[none]