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‘Unexpected’ Mentoring Moments Experienced through Dialogue with Elder Colleagues

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Keywords: Elder knowledge, mentoring, dialogue.

Abstract: This autoethnography focuses on the author’s experience of being unexpectedly mentored by senior/Elder faculty members throughout her learning journey as an undergraduate and graduate student, and as a developing academic and researcher. Now, an associate professor, conducting research on tacit knowledge acquired, over an extended period of time by Elder faculty members in university settings, the author reflects on the significance of unexpected mentoring moments experienced along her own circuitous adult learning pathway.

Background

The larger, three-year SSHRC funded study explores the significance of accumulated tacit knowledge of Elder faculty members who have navigated landscapes of academia for twenty or more years, and the subsequent linking of tacit knowledge acquired by Elder faculty to some of the learning and knowledge needs of less experienced faculty.

Earlier papers informed by this study addressed the aging demographic confronting universities today and the meaning (and sometimes loss) of space, place, and home experienced by Elder faculty who have recently retired or are approaching retirement. In this paper, the author reflects on unexpected mentoring moments extended by Elder faculty throughout her undergraduate/graduate student experience – and beyond, as an untenured and now tenured faculty member at a research university. Unexpected mentoring moments, between Elder faculty (as research participants) and researcher are also discussed.

This autoethnography evolved out of dialogues with Elder faculty members who were invited to share stories of lived experiences in academia. Dialogue seeks mutual, meaningful understanding, not consensus (Bohm, 1996, Bohm, 1998; Bohm, Factor, & Garrett, 1991; Denzin, Lincoln & Tuihiwai Smith, 2008) and involves ridding oneself from a sense of urgency and necessity in favour of authentically listening for the “flow of meaning” (Bohm, 1996, p. x). Dialogues with Elder faculty contributed to a deepened understanding of academic culture, and to the potential for reciprocity when Elders and less experienced faculty share stories and lessons learned.

Layers of self-discovery and learning continue to be illuminated for the author/researcher throughout this research process. Simply put, she experiences ‘being

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1 These findings draw from an ongoing, three-year SSHRC funded study (2009/12) titled: Exploring the knowledge that Elder faculty members gather ‘along the way’: Implications for Elder and less experienced faculty when spaces are created for knowledge sharing.
mented’ while exploring the topic of mentoring between Elder and less experienced faculty. This work is significant in that it explores some factors that contribute to respectful, trusting, and reciprocal relationship development between Elder and less experienced faculty. Findings to date contribute to the ongoing discourse on the co-creation of healthy, sustainable academic communities that thrive, when individuals of different generations, work and learn together.

**Theoretical Lenses**

The intersecting of two theoretical frameworks, *Indigenous Epistemology* and *Conservation Theory* informs the design of this study. *Indigenous Epistemology* recognizes the ‘inner self’ as a great source of knowledge. According to Ermine (1999), “Knowledge must be sought through the stream of the inner space in unison with all instruments of knowing and conditions that make individuals receptive to knowing” (p. 108). Indigenous epistemology, according to Meyer (2005), involved a “[reclamation] of right relationship to self [and] others…signaling a return to the logic of wholeness” (3). Indeed, ‘Indigenous’ spans diverse beliefs/traditions around the world. Sharing Elder wisdom through oral traditions, however, is common ground and a critical value and practice uniting Indigenous communities. *Conservation Theory* refers to the protection of natural resources and seeks collaboration amongst individuals interested in promoting understanding and appreciation (Eversole, et al., 1995; Hiwasaki, 2005; Holsman, 2000). The principles of *adult education* support a holistic view of lifelong learning and a collaboration of community members to achieve a greater whole. Indigenous epistemology and conservation theory, interpreted through an adult education lens, contributes to a deepened appreciation of interconnectivity of all environmental parts. Extending the notion of universities as ecosystems, an “arrangement of mutual dependencies in a population by which the whole operates as a unit [maintaining] a viable environmental relationship” (Hawley, 1986, p. 26), and where “rhythmic actions and interactions [hold all parts] in constant relation to one another” (p. 27), Elder faculty members are critical elements of this ecosystem.

**Autoethnography**

The debate continues as to what constitutes scholarly research. The fulcrum shifts, positing scientific merits of researcher neutrality against the credibility of subjectivity brought about by deep researcher engagement as participant. Qualitative research “seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings” (Golafshani, 2003, p. 600).

Autoethnography, an ethno-autobiographical blend located within the qualitative paradigm, is “a genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). In autoethnography, stories become “[a] construct that allow[s] people to make sense of their worlds and their lives…stories are essential to human understanding” (Clews & Furlong, 2006, p. 198). The story is the *medium* for the autoethnographer, not the main focus. Through evocative sharing (Ellis, 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 1996, 2000), the receiver gains a deepened understanding of the experience the story evolves out of, a lens of sorts, to better understand a particular context/culture and to reflect more critically upon their own narrative.
A serious car accident that interrupted my grade eleven high school year gave new meaning to the phrase, “Life is what happens when we are making other plans.” I returned to school the following September and tried to make up for lost time. Despite my efforts, I fell several credits short of my high school diploma.

I applied to university three years later. I was now a young, single, unmarried mother with a dream of securing a university degree. In spite of my circuitous, non-traditional learning pathway, I gained admission to university in the mid 70s as a part-time student. Mature/Probationary Status was stamped on my file. Lacking a matriculated, high school diploma, I was provided twelve months to prove my ability. After successfully completing three courses, my probationary status was removed.

I continued my studies at night and worked as a non-credentialed social worker by day. After three years of part-time study, I temporarily suspended my studies; this was to be a short-term arrangement. Circumstances leading up to this involved a practicum program component that required leaving my social worker position. Being the sole provider for my son, this was not an option. As life is what happens when making other plans, this short-term arrangement extended into the mid 90s. I was now forty-two years old. In 1994 I returned to university to complete my undergraduate degree.

I applied to graduate school the following year. I recall my first assignment. I was invited to reflect on supports received along the way. I revisited mentoring moments received at the most unexpected junctions in my life, as an undergraduate student and through the application process into graduate school. I kept a learning journal throughout and recorded insights gained, questions, stories, and words of wisdom gifted to me by peers and professors, and struggling to find my voice and assert my perspective. One particular entry as a doctoral student comes to mind:

My supervisor welcomed my perspective on alternate knowledge acquisition traditions, even though mine differed from his own. He encouraged me to explore the literature in support of my beliefs, and to share what I had learned at our next meeting. But my officemate was in tears yesterday. Her supervisor ‘told her’ to find another advisor if she was unable to support his perspective. Indeed, power has many faces. (Journal, November 2001)

Throughout graduate school I frequently reflected on the omnipresent nature of power (Brookfield, 2001) and on power being be both a bridge to self-growth and relationship development or a barrier. I was grateful for a supervisor who embraced the former.

**Arriving Where I Least Expected**

*Better than a thousand days of diligent study is one day with a great teacher.*

— Japanese Proverb (Author unknown)

I had never aspired to teaching at a traditional university. Indeed, my life as a student had been rich and challenging. As an ‘older’ adult learner, I often felt that I occupied a position of privilege as, for the most part, professors assigned value to experiences I had gathered along the way. Was this unique to my program area of adult education? My professors were adult educators. Most ‘walked the talk’ by applying guiding principles that informed this field of scholarship. I assumed academic life, as a faculty member, might fall short of my student experience.
I had heard many stories of a competitive culture, of elitists and gatekeepers who determined whose knowledge was relevant. Subsequently, I accepted the stereotype that academics assigned priority to theory over relevance to ‘real world’ issues. Were professors not generally out of touch with challenges and tensions that shaped and influenced the field(s) they studied within? Albeit jaded, this was my perspective.

I was encouraged to apply for an assistant professor, tenure-track position within weeks of having completed my PhD. Feeling conflicted, I sought the guidance of two professors who had advised me during my master’s and doctoral program. Although my preconceived notions were not disputed in their entirety, I was challenged to view academia through other lenses. What were my experiences as a graduate student? Challenges? How did I mitigate the tensions? Supports I received along the way? Whom did I connect with for support? How might my graduate experiences inform my future work as an adult educator and academic? I was reminded me that ‘chipping away’ at change as an insider was a worthy contribution and that universities need adult educators to advocate from within, with an aim to contribute to a more collaborative and community informed culture. Valuing these insights, I submitted my application and accepted an assistant professor position in 2004.

**Gurus Along the Way**

In order to make deeper meaning of how I arrived at this point in my academic life, I am compelled to critically reflect on what and who brought me to this place in time. I recognize that Elder faculty members played a significant mentoring role throughout my journey.

*Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person.*

– Mother Teresa (2006, p. 106)

There was the first of many hallway conversations, as an undergrad, with my linguistics professor. I was struggling and doubting my ability to achieve a respectable grade. She shared a story of feeling defeated and disillusioned as a student, many years prior. Although our encounter was brief, her story resonated with mine. I was encouraged. Yet, this individual had successfully mitigated many obstacles along the way. She was a professor! Perhaps I could succeed in this course. There were many impromptu hallway and coffee-time conversations. Each time she extended another morsel of wisdom. I was grateful for her candor, admissions of vulnerability, and generosity of sharing.

I often reflect on the impact of those early encounters and on others who provided me guidance, support, and challenges along the way. Although most of these individuals were not assigned as formal mentors, my doctoral advisor provided a space within which ‘power’ was extended, experienced, and shared with mutuality and respect. The recognition that we were both ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’ within this relational context was fostered and cultivated. A generous human being, he had a gift for storytelling. We spent hours exploring, discovering, questioning, and challenging assumptions and beliefs. I was encouraged to step beyond my own comfortable and familiar, to surrender tightly held beliefs and perspectives, and to dig deep to connect with the knowledge acquired through my own lived experiences. He had a passion for life and learning. He shared his wisdom through metaphor, fables, and other stories, providing a lens through which to explore world-views shaped by my own lived experiences. This was a relationship of reciprocal interplay – both ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’ in support of one another’s learning journey.
I have been gifted with many mentoring moments over the years by faculty members who welcomed my questions, challenged my perspective, and who recognized in me an insatiable hunger for learning and knowing. More often than not, these moments involved Elders who were presented to me at the most unexpected times. I suspect they remain unaware of their influence and impact. Impromptu invitations for coffee or a brief office conversation, rare opportunities during faculty meetings or retreats when one seizes the moment to chat informally with another, within that narrow crevice between one agenda item and another, are all spaces for unexpected mentoring to occur. My questions are simple. “What is your experience…?” “How did you deal with this twenty [odd] years ago?” “When you were a junior faculty…?” “What was the culture like back then?” “What changes have most impacted…?” At times the response is simply a sigh. Most often, however, a story unfolds.

Although the Elders who continue to generously share their stories draw from diverse philosophies, backgrounds, and perspectives, their similarity to one another resides in remaining open to broadly engaging with colleagues and to participating in initiatives that are better informed by their presence than by their absence. I continue to be guided by the belief that inclusion is a basic human need and that attending to this need contributes significantly to building community.

Researcher as Mentee

Unexpected mentoring moments continue to be extended by Elder faculty participants who actively engage in the larger study. Elders are invited to reflect on experiences gathered over an extended academic career and to share lessons learned. In response to this invitation, a rich dialogue ensues on neoliberal trends impacting the culture and direction of universities and on the changing nature of academic work. Most Elders express an avid interest in my perspective as a relatively new faculty member, having arrived ‘to academia’ from/at another place and time. It is within this respectful, safe dialogue space, where stories of significant learning moments are shared and explored, that a blurring of boundaries occurs between being researcher or mentee. Upon listening to the taped dialogues, I realize that exploring the knowledge acquired by Elder faculty also addresses my need to make sense of a multi-faceted culture influenced by competing influences, expectations, and agendas.

The mentoring I receive does not focus heavily on managing a productive career via merit and promotion, or securing research funding. Rather, I am encouraged to achieve some modicum of work/life balance, to remain true to my field of scholarship, and to connect with ‘like-minded souls’ to sustain. Some Elders speak of a loss of community, of being displaced and replaced in their faculties/universities. While some storied accounts are beveled with bitterness, others identify mutual responsibility, between university and Elders, to create and engage in spaces where Elder experiences can help to inform future directions. Some others express feeling marginalized and powerless to combat current trends that serve to erode what Giroux (2005) identified as a decline of intellectual culture in universities. I listen and learn from all perspectives and draw comfort in knowing that many Elders remain passionate and active within their universities. Stories span a continuum from high to low engagement. Feeling valued and invited to participate in new initiatives appears to contribute to higher engagement. Feeling disregarded, devalued, and/or perceived as no longer relevant are cited as contributing to low engagement.

Although Elder faculty whose gender and discipline, aligned to my own, did provide some common ground upon which to explore competing tensions and challenges in navigating
an ever-shifting academic landscape, this alignment was secondary to the philosophy and values that informed our relationships with colleagues, students, and with the greater community. Through dialogue, relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003) – being authentically listened and responded to, was fostered and cultivated. Most Elders identified story and metaphor as powerful mediums for knowledge sharing. Schaeff (1998) maintained that ‘humankind’ can/does not exist in isolation, connecting stories to the greater community narrative, provides an opportunity to make deeper meaning of lived experiences and to better appreciate how our relationships with one another continue to shape our own unfolding, lifelong learning stories.

Thoughtful, purposeful, and intentional collaboration versus competition and power were also cited as common values, as was the desire to come together as community, in support of sustaining some of the principles that had guided faculties and universities in the past. Power differentials did not play prominent between Elder participants and myself in the dialogues. As often as I invited Elders to share their learning stories, I was invited to share my own. Dialogue provided a pathway “to search for meaningful understanding” (Kawalilak, 2004, p. 11). Through this process, we became a part of another’s unfolding narrative.

**Summary**

There is great potential for informal learning and mentoring to evolve out of spaces where individuals gather to reflect and make deeper meaning of lived experiences. Within safe space and through engaging in meaningful dialogue, critical reflection provides a pathway for tacit knowledge to be uncovered and for tightly held notions, beliefs, and assumptions to be respectfully challenged and explored. Within current university contexts and cultures, where competing external and internal agendas and tensions have the potential to detract from what is needed to support collaboration and a sense of community, it is critical to recognize that relationships between faculty members contribute significantly to the overall work and learning culture. When spaces are too tightly jammed with expectations and agendas, opportunities for authentic dialogue and engagement cease to exist.

I am cognizant that the Elder qualities that have touched me deeply are not defined by age or years of experience. I also recognize that I am only interacting with those who express an interest to participate in dialogue. Indeed, there are others who remain behind closed doors and who work in isolation. And, there are those who engage and align with a chosen few. They too have their stories. Some may speak of contentment; others will be fraught with tensions and disappointments. All stories, however, if I listen with head and heart, provide a window through which to better understand my own.

**References**


