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Athena, Telemachus, and the Honors Student Odyssey: The Academic Librarian as an Agent in Mentored Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study considers how librarians can develop mentoring schemes that enhance intellectual discourse among honors students. The author defines mentored learning; identifies the need for integrated information support in honors curricula; outlines a project that has employed a mentored learning model; and examines how a mentored learning program may assist in promoting high achievement and low attrition in honors programs. This paper was presented at the 39th annual NCHC conference in November 2004.

INTRODUCTION

The journey is a common metaphor to represent our heroic and not so heroic life passages. In higher education, the passage is a distinctly linear one, building competencies that channel students across intrepid waters towards a "commencement." The honors student journey, if well-traveled, is both a solitary and communal one.

In this paper, I introduce the concept of mentoring as a learning tool for the honors experience. Part One considers how librarians, as ambassadors to the evolving universe of recorded knowledge, can develop mentoring and mentor-like schemes that improve and enrich intellectual discourse among honors students. I will define mentoring and mentored learning; identify its various functions and goals; examine the library's role in the learning community; and describe the need for integrated information support for honors curricula.

Part Two highlights the architecture of *The Athena Project* at Long Island University / C.W. Post Campus where mentored learning practice has been used for practical benefit in structured learning environments. These include program-specific orientation strategies; course-specific bibliographic and information literacy instruction in the classroom; and assignment-specific, individual tutoring in (and out of) the library.

I will conclude by summarizing the mutually inclusive benefits of mentored learning practice and positing how a formal mentoring framework may assist in the promotion of high achievement and low attrition in honors programs.

PART ONE
MENTORED LEARNING AND THE LIBRARY

When Odysseus went off the fight the Trojan War, he entrusted his son Telemachus to the tutor Mentor. The teacher later revealed herself as the Goddess Athena, patroness of the arts and industry, and accompanied the youth when he went in search of his missing father. (Van Collie, 1998, p. 36)

To understand mentoring, I begin with its history. The original term "mentor" occurs in Homer's epic *The Odyssey* where, in the absence of a father, Telemachus is educated and guided in every facet of his young life. Mentes assists Telemachus on his journey to find his father and, most importantly, teaches Telemachus to think and act for himself (Kay, 1990). Homer gave us the name "mentor" in 725 B.C., a term that today has come to mean someone with more experience who teaches someone with less experience. This aspect of mentoring has led through the years to the word *protégé*, from the French *protegere*, meaning one who is protected by a person of experience and influence. In modern times, however, the typical Mentes-Telemachus model or mentor-protégé relationship has changed considerably. In this discussion, I use the term "mentor" in a broad, dynamic and metaphorical manner. In the context of higher education, "mentor" is defined as an active, knowledgeable, and intellectually agile person committed to keeping the teaching and learning of students in focus and guiding students by example to be dynamic learners.

Innes and Flavin (1999) define mentored learning as "a student/teacher partnership that incorporates the intellectual curiosity and desire of two individuals with common interests as they investigate a specific area of study" (p. 41). As distinct from academic advisement, which is mostly one-directional and often one-dimensional, the mentored learning relationship goes beyond a single reference encounter and espouses a holistic approach to learning. Because life in the library is both static and dynamic, library faculty members might synthesize otherwise incongruous research experiences to create bridges of relevance and ever-expanding points of reference across academic disciplines. Over the course of a single academic year, for example, the honors librarian and first-year student might grapple with *Macbeth*, examine water tables in Africa, dissect the Dow Jones, and explicate Jung. Unlike an advisor, the librarian enjoys a close and rich history of student interest and aptitude, enjoining the honor student on his/her journey throughout a diverse curriculum.

One major obstacle of mentoring relationships in education is that the mentor, not the protégé, typically sets the agenda (Sandler, 1992). This orientation to mentoring is pantomimic of the fundamentally hierarchical and didactic relationship of teacher/student that is evident in the standard college classroom. The library, however, offers a relationship beyond the classroom that is a kind of learning partnership. It is in the role of learning *partner* that library faculty can offer a curricular

capaciousness to honors study. While the classroom teacher is an expert pedagogue within a defined discipline, the academic librarian's knowledge base is expansive.

Librarians are great generalists – we know a *little* about a *lot* of things. Often, when approached for research help, the librarian will not possess the subject expertise to dive right into the project. A partnership is established early in the reference interview, an exchange where the librarian probes the student for specific information on a topic. In this first and vital encounter with the student, the librarian frequently concedes a kind of ignorance regarding a subject. This "leveling" with the student tends to temper student anxieties and is quite effective in initiating an adventurous and collaborative approach to research.

The purpose of co-mentoring in a learning environment is to ensure that the two participants approach an intellectual project in which they are mutually interested and about which they have similar background knowledge. For the academic librarian, this requires an agility of mind, humility in ego, and enthusiasm for learning. This relationship is unique in the academy because it allows the student to break out of the hierarchy and the librarian to break into the curriculum. Implicit in *The Athena Project*, the mentored learning relationship in the library is a long-term, fluid, and sometimes passive tutorial that affords the honors student an empowerment in research, as best evidenced in senior thesis work.

Megginson and Clutterbuck (1995) illustrate this concept of "engaged passivity" by elaborating on Homer's representation of Mentor as an earthly form taken by the goddess Athene. When Odysseus returns from his wandering, he and his son Telemachus are faced with their final challenge. Athene does not use all her powers to give them victory but continues to put their strength and courage on trial. Athene withdraws, taking the shape of a swallow to perch on the smoky beam of the hall. "The power of this image is that it puts mentors where they need to be, out of the action, looking on and encouraging, rather than taking over and doing the work for the learner" (Megginson & Clutterbuck, 1995, p. 28).

The honors student journey includes a series of destinations that I describe as sojourner goals. The primary goal of mentored learning is to develop dynamic students who cultivate a learning community for others, both within and beyond the honors program. A major goal for the librarian/mentor in an honors program is to help establish a community of learners in which the librarians themselves are learners and instill learning in others—across academic disciplines and levels of study. This is a long-term engagement with the honors student. From freshman orientation to senior thesis work, the librarian/mentor guides and challenges the honors student to think critically in retrieving, interpreting, and synthesizing information.

Just as the sojourner is a temporary resident, so too are our honors students. The ultimate function of mentored learning is to provide an atmosphere, in and out of the library, for dynamic learning. This involves academic and psychosocial development, requiring strong librarian/instructor/honors program director relationships, and it invariably leads to greater satisfaction with the honors experience.

PART TWO
"NO PROCRUSTEAN BED": *THE ATHENA PROJECT*

To best illustrate the library's role in a mentored learning model, let us consider what mentored learning is *not*, as Altounyan (1995) did in borrowing from another Greek myth. Procrustes, who lived in a cave, often invited visitors to extravagant banquets. At the end of the evening, Procrustes urged his tired visitors to stay the night. If the visitors were too short for the bed, Procrustes put them on racks to stretch them until they fitted better. If they were too long, Procrustes chopped off the bits dangling over the end of the bed.

Unfortunately, like Procrustes' abode, many academic libraries endure a cavernous-like presence on campus—either spatially or psychologically or both. For some students, entrance into the library is a formidable trip in and of itself. For others, the collection is overwhelming. And for many, it is just a domain of arrogance. But for those of friendly exploit, the academic library is the locus for an intellectual orgy of sorts, where students may feast alone or with others on information that it is appropriate and nourishing, offering fertile ground for new ideas.

The image of the Procrustean bed can be applied to two aspects of mentored learning in the library. First, the academic library offers a rich banquet of information and scholarly support. Often, however, the library's role in the academy is one devoid of context. Service is frequently administered like fast food. Instruction tends to be prescriptive, template and stale. In many libraries, there is a tacit "cookie cutter" approach to research. "Want this? Look here." "Want that? Look there." Students, tired by an exhaustive and self-directed feast on inappropriate resources, often put their research to rest on beds unfitting to the assignment. There are few apertures for a proactive, in-your-face, "come along with me" kind of attention.

Second, mentored learning is not cutting people or ideas down to the size that is the preference of the educator or requisite of the organization. Mentored learning in the library is colorful and individual, extending well beyond the bibliographic encounter. Likewise, in this scheme a mentor is not only a tutor who focuses primarily on the task at hand but also an agent focused on individuals and their development. Often, the library mentor will act as a cerebral sparring partner, challenging student assumptions about information, authority, or representation throughout the duration of honors study.

Ragins (1989) suggests that "mentoring relationships may be more likely to occur in organic than mechanistic organizations" (p.16). Compared to corporate culture, institutions of higher learning can be considered organic in structure because we have fewer hierarchical levels and more collaborative networks than mechanistic organizations. *The Athena Project* grew, organically and informally, from a single interest in affecting the research experience of academically gifted students.

Below is a description of three distinct facets of mentored learning practiced in our honors program.

TYPE I: PROGRAM-SPECIFIC ORIENTATION

Our honors program seeks to provide its students with a course of study designed to help them realize their potential in and out of the classroom. Across a liberal curriculum of traditional and innovative studies, the honors program objective is one of enrichment and critical thinking, not acceleration. Beginning students, a diverse group of many ages and nationalities, are the beneficiaries of enriched advisement their first year. The assignment of a freshman honors advisor, coupled with special orientation sections in the College's freshman orientation program, helps to create a unique decision-making community that is both academic and social.

Upon entering the university, each honors student participates in a 10-week orientation program. In this orientation, the students are introduced in a seminar-type format to various facets of campus and academic life. Both incoming freshmen and transfer students are introduced to the library, its resources, and their librarian/mentor within the first weeks of university study. The orientation sessions conducted by the librarian/mentor are designed to introduce the students to:

- the individual serving as "personal librarian,"
- the collective expertise of the library faculty,
- the precepts governing the organization of recorded knowledge in a university library, and
- the complexities inherent in academic research.

This is a conduction, or "heating up," of the post-secondary research experience as well as a pragmatic circuit of the library facility and briefing on its effective access and usage.

In this forum for acculturation, the librarian/mentor conducts written *Interest Inventories* to gauge students' early academic interests and research perceptions. These inventories are retained on file with the librarian/mentor for later consultation and notation regarding student contact, course of study, and specific research activities across disciplines. This documented growth in research activity, interest, and experience is then shared with the student at the senior thesis/tutorial level. In several ways, this documentation provides a cartographic portrait of the mentored learning experience, providing a map of a student's ideological origins, direction, mile markers, wanderings, and destinations over a course of four years.

TYPE II: COURSE-SPECIFIC BIBLIOGRAPHIC & INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Like many large university libraries, ours supports the information needs of thousands of full- and part-time students in a comprehensive range of undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degree programs. Library activity is reflective of this broad constituency—subscribing to hundreds of electronic databases; handling a print collection of over a million volumes; managing several thousand periodical titles; organizing satellite multimedia collections in the arts; and maintaining an opulent but grossly underutilized rare book and special collections archive.

Full-time tenured library faculty hold advanced degrees and academic credentials outside of their discipline. Subject to the high student-to-librarian ratio existent in most institutions, librarians are limited in the ways they might lend their expertise in pedagogical support. Because service is directed to satisfying such a high number and diverse range of information needs, little attention can be made to the "whole" student. Librarians often see students on a need-to-know basis, answering specific questions and identifying information sources (often automated) appropriate to the assignment in hand. In this way, the library becomes insular and task-specific.

In calling for a more "information literate" student, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (Ratteray, 2000) has advocated partnerships across academe. Over the last decade, library initiatives in bibliographic instruction and information literacy have sought to bring the library into the classroom and cultivate a context for effectively using information. In terms of improving student efficacy in research, however, these amplified initiatives often fall short of their intent. Eadie (1992) argues that course-related instruction is simply an oral bibliography and that the generic library instruction session often trivializes information gathering and confuses the student. Tiefel (1995) cites several complications inherent in course-related instruction, including lack of faculty cooperation and a push/pull contention for instructional "authority."

In a single semester, large-library bibliographic instruction programs will teach research sections for over 100 different syllabi across many different disciplines. These sessions seek to detail information sources and services specific to a particular discipline, course, or research agenda. For several reasons, these research assemblies tend to be parochial in approach and function within a rote focal framework. Many sessions have no pre- or post-consultation with the instructor regarding content or outcomes. Some sessions include beforehand a cursory review with the instructor regarding session objectives or special concerns. Sometimes the instructor will not even be present for library instruction. In the worst scenarios, the library fills a slot on a syllabus if an instructor has a schedule conflict and cannot attend his/her class. In this type of context, there is little room for the cultivation of relationships, either intellectual or social.

Mentoring/learning relationships are also course-specific, but contextually rich. There is a continuity and familiarity in library instruction, where one librarian is seen repeatedly in the classroom but in different contexts, a better strategy than assigning librarians to bibliographic instruction programs based on availability rather than subject specialty or resource expertise. Also, the librarian/mentor is always building on a student's past research experience and current competencies. In this way, mentored learning practice in coursework emphasizes a *process* rather than an immediate purpose and helps to achieve a balanced program that assists students in the effective transference of library knowledge from one course to another. Instructors consult with the librarian/mentor early in the design of their research or writing assignments, sometimes in the formation of the syllabus, to invite contextually congruous research experiences for the students and a directive clarity for collaborative instruction.

Much of the honors curriculum involves writing-intensive coursework. This kind of work necessitates a careful approach in the arrangement and administration

of library services. Curiously, we have found that mentored learning strategies help facilitate students' understanding and avoidance of plagiarism. Because the librarian/mentor keeps an active watch on course-specific research work as well as individual student interests and competencies, the mentored learning model has been called upon to support various stages of a writing project. The librarian/mentor may review and validate student drafts or provide written commentary to students and instructors regarding resource allocation or citation. Again, by cultivating an understanding of the *process* of scholarship, mentored learning moves beyond the act of simply surveying literature and citing sources. We believe that a conceptual foundation for academic research laid early in the honors curriculum inevitably enhances instruction and outcomes in each stage of academic development.

TYPE III: ASSIGNMENT-SPECIFIC INDIVIDUAL TUTORING

For the student and librarian, confronting an explosive information universe (not wholly unlike Odysseus and Telemachus facing hundreds of suitors) requires true strategic and tactical cunning. The terrain of the information landscape in the freshman year will be much different in the senior year of study. Rapid developments in information storage and delivery, commercial acquisitions of electronic resources, and migratory patterns in academic publishing prompt continual realignments in our collective approach to academic research.

Content, even in the more static disciplines, is masked by the ways in which information is represented and delivered to the student. The way we look for literary criticism today, for example, will be much different four years from now. The changing face of information can be scary to both students and classroom faculty. The effective conduct of research, in and outside of the academy, requires the ability to think critically and independently. The proliferation of aggregate systems, intuitive search engines, and third-party paper mills invariably affects the ways in which we conceive of information as "capital." One-on-one, personal, and successive research experiences with students are vital for the effective transfer of knowledge and synthesis of ideas.

A requirement of every student in the honors program is the completion of a tutorial and a thesis, which are done in the student's major with the help of a full-time professor from that major. Students who do not complete the tutorial and thesis do not graduate with the honors citation on their diplomas. For the mentored learning relationship, this is a capstone experience in research. Much like course-specific instruction, the librarian/mentor meets with the advising professor and the senior student early in the design of the project. The student and advising professor commence with a meeting plan, and the student and librarian/mentor meet according to this rigorous schedule. This instructional triad has proven to be helpful to students and advising professors alike in that the nuts-and-bolts requirements of the research component are wholly attended to and locally directed while at the same time different learning styles are accounted for and honored. Without this cooperative guidance, students tend to underutilize and misuse information, often favoring citations to information over the "end information" itself.

The locus of control is changing throughout honors curricula, as is the concept of "residency" within library collections, and mentored learning practice involving the library may help to create an improved setting that accounts for different learning styles and that guides developmental learning through uncharted courses. For our students studying abroad, email contact with the librarian/mentor can provide a kind of anchor in research, helping students obtain the information sources they need to support their studies abroad. This project has just begun to explore initiatives in "tele-mentoring," which include asynchronous and "real-time chat" provisions in campus Honors Lounges and dormitory computing facilities that would thread together social and learning environments.

CONCLUSION

Mentoring, like learning itself, is about structural and personal relationships. The process of mentoring dynamic honors students involves more than a single mentor, more than a single setting, and more than passive students. A mentored learning model in education calls for changing roles among students, teachers, and librarians. Technology can be a key transforming element, offering unlimited new ways of learning and communicating *in relationship*.

Guides and travelers come to the journey in two ways, by chance or by mutual choice in planning the journey together. Although typically students seek their own mentors or mentors emerge, informal mentor relationships do not serve the growing need for dynamic learners in a rapidly expanding world where *information* is often mistaken for *meaning*. Institutional support for a formal mentoring program in the honors program is requisite for cultivating learning communities within an institution. This necessarily involves organizational planning, mentor selection and training, mentor/student pairing (or opportunities for mentor/student selection), and evaluation. Within the framework of a formal mentored learning program, institutions might promote higher achievement and lower attrition in honors programs.

The voyage associated with any kind of learning experience is not a placid one. However, mentored learning relationships are mutually beneficial and can ease the voyage by providing dual support in approaching intellectual challenges and cognitive "storms." For the librarian/mentor, the mentor relationship helps avoid isolation (often, academic librarians feel themselves to be on the periphery of curricula) and encourages collaboration with teaching faculty on dynamic learning and curricular innovation. Librarian/mentors gain new insights through reflective discussions and fresh opportunities for serendipity. Mentoring practice affords its participants reflective time to evaluate intuitive processes. By working within the honors program, mentors gain a network for ideas and opportunities to modify their experience in the academy. Not only are more ideas generated in terms of course content and curricular direction, but librarian/mentors gain a sense of relevancy and influence within the institution, which can be meaningful and motivating.

The benefits of mentored learning to an honors student may seem obvious and include developing a greater insight into the process of scholarship, learning practical tricks in information excavation, and expanding one's circle of reference. I have

found, however, that honors students gain more subtle benefits: exposure to new ideas and approaches in research; confidence in information seeking behavior; and adeptness at trusting in what is self-evident. Students have, undoubtedly, become more *creative* in adapting ideas from the literature in many disciplines.

Mentored learning practice is not a panacea for plagiarism, nor is it a remedy for complacent, bored, or needy students. It is not a strategy for validating the role of the librarian within academe. Instead, it is a mutually *in*clusive program that provides the academic and social support necessary to help honors students successfully complete their course of study and transfer marketable discipline-specific skills to the workplace. The mentor's support can be vital for transforming the research endeavor in the academy and affirming the tacit role of the library on the lifelong journey beyond commencement.

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