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The Pitfalls of Academic Mentorships

By Edward Tenner

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“Mentor Is Now Portrayed as Monster,” read the New York Times headline. It referred to a hockey coach and agent, whose reputation for making stars had continued to attract young would-be pros and their parents despite charges of abusive techniques.

The piece reminded me of other accusations made two years ago in the more genteel world of British academe. An article about the late British historian Sir John Plumb had astounded me as the only candidly negative memorial to a prominent scholar I had ever read. With admirers in the royal family itself, Plumb had been not only a world-famous scholar but also one of the great mentors of his profession. I had always admired him for the outstanding students whose careers he had launched. He also was hailed as a courageous defender of fairness; in an article about the historian and author Simon Schama, I had read of Plumb’s battle against what he considered the injustice of examiners who were refusing his pupil first-class honors.

But in an “alternative appreciation” originally published in *Historically Speaking*, the newsletter of the Boston-based Historical Society, in April 2002 and reprinted in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, a former student, Jeremy Black, now a professor of history at the University of Exeter, unveiled another and less flattering aspect of Plumb’s work. Black was responding to what he considered one-sided tributes by Plumb’s protégés. His article could not be dismissed as a mere outlet for the bitterness of Plumb’s hidebound academic enemies. Black asserted that Richard Cobb, an Oxford professor of French history renowned for his sagas of the ordinary French people of the old regime and the revolution, was among those who called Plumb “evil,” and Cobb was as idiosyncratic and anti-establishment as an Oxford scholar could be.

Plumb was not just a leading historian of patronage but a vigorous dispenser thereof, Black argued, and what his students no doubt perceived only as steadfast advocacy appeared to some colleagues as strong-arm

tactics. An Ivy League department head recalled to Black the “extraordinary pressure” he had encountered to hire a Plumb student. Plumb did not hesitate to use his position as a college master to intimidate a young scholar who had written an adverse review of a protégé’s work, warning him over dinner that “this was not the way to secure a career at Cambridge.” At a dinner with Black, Plumb also disparaged another former student while boasting of his success in placing him. “Others were abused, damaged, and harmed,” Black concluded. There was a “malignity” in Plumb’s methods.

Whose picture is more accurate, Black’s crafty don (in both senses of the word) or the grateful disciples’ generous exemplar? The answer may be unknowable, but it raises a far larger issue. The ideal of the mentor has been extolled in business, academe, government, the military, and the professions for decades. I see merit in it, too. But I’m also disturbed that it nearly always is presented as a good in its own right; too rarely are its origins and ethical ambiguities examined. Having had mentors, I can understand both sides of the story.

At the height of Plumb’s career through the 1960s and early 1970s, the word “mentor” was used only occasionally in academe or the corporate world. The French writer François Fénelon’s *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (1699), on the education of Ulysses’ son Telemachus in his absence by his friend Mentor, brought that character into Western consciousness as the archetype of a wise and benevolent counselor. It was one of many classical allusions that educated people of the 18th and 19th centuries were expected to know. Yet even where instructors were supposed to take a close personal interest in undergraduate students, the word was seldom used. For example, when Woodrow Wilson instituted his preceptorial program a hundred years ago, the preceptor was often described as “philosopher, guide, and friend,” but neither Wilson nor anyone else writing about the program seems to have called him a mentor.

The era of the mentor began in earnest only in the mid-1970s. The Yale psychologist Daniel J. Levinson, best known for his studies of middle age, had a precise definition quoted in *The Christian Science Monitor* on February 14, 1977: a person 8 to 15 years older than the “mentee,” a “peer or older brother” rather than a “distant father.” Levinson continued: “He takes the younger man under his wing, ... imparts his wisdom, cares, sponsors, criticizes, and bestows his blessing.” Citing other educational authorities, the *Monitor* correctly predicted that by the 1980s, a mentor would be “as visible a career tool as a school degree and a résumé.”

Corporate mentoring took center stage in 1978 and 1979 with two articles in the *Harvard Business Review*. The title of the first, an interview with a group of senior executives from the Jewel Companies, echoes to this day: “Everyone Who Makes It Has a Mentor.” But it was the second article that caught executive and popular attention. Gerard R. Roche, president and chief executive officer of the prominent executive-search firm Heidrick and Struggles Inc., analyzed his company’s survey of recently hired business leaders and found that most of them -- especially the younger ones -- had had mentors, and that those with mentors took greater pleasure in their careers.

Meanwhile, academics reflected on research by the late Robert K. Merton (a notable mentor himself) and his students on the accumulation of advantage in science, the idea that a small initial superiority can be multiplied over time. A strong undergraduate degree leads to acceptance in a leading Ph.D. program with superior teachers and facilities, qualifying students for positions that help them compete for grants, which in turn make award-winning research possible. Merton called this process the Matthew Effect, citing Matthew 13:12: “For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance.”

Harriet Zuckerman’s 1977 book on the scientific elite and American Nobel laureates had shown how crucial the system of graduate supervision had been; more than half of America’s Nobel laureates by the year 1972 had been students, postdoctoral fellows, or junior collaborators with older laureates, and many others had worked with major nonlaureates. For higher education as for business, the lesson seemed to be that mentoring had helped maintain male dominance. The Levinson quotation in the Monitor was typical, referring only to “brothers,” “fathers,” and “younger men,” even though the article was addressed especially to women. And Zuckerman’s book noted that both American female Nobel science laureates had lagged in recognition and promotion before receiving their prizes. If women were to share in the most coveted positions and honors, especially in fields like experimental science and engineering that depend on the transmission of challenging hands-on techniques, they would need to develop the same close relationship to teachers and senior colleagues that successful men had long enjoyed.

Thus the goal of diversity has appeared to depend on extending the advantages of mentoring to groups formerly disadvantaged by its practice, not only to women but to members of minority groups. Those programs in turn have helped make white males, too, more conscious of mentoring, so that most of us are aware of having had (or not had) a mentor, and of being (or not being) one. The concept has skeptics and detractors as well as enthusiasts, but, like that sour take on Plumb, it has lodged itself. It is time to look at its ambiguities.

Consider mentoring in research. The graduate mentor is not only advising a person; he or she is also perpetuating a legacy or a succession of ideas, methods, and values. The writer Robert Kanigel described one succession in his 1986 book *Apprentice to Genius: The Making of a Scientific Dynasty* (Macmillan), exploring relations among a succession of distinguished scientists, including Bernard B. Brodie, Julius Axelrod, Solomon Snyder, and Candace Pert. The links between seniors and juniors over the years formed what the scientists themselves called a genealogy, a family, a school. Above all, great mentors taught their students how to recognize the crucial questions that would lead to future prizes.

Apprenticeships have always been reciprocal arrangements. Academic mentors may be generous, but in spreading their ideas they are also advancing their own reputations and influence. Those scientists who believe that cultural traits can propagate like genes and use Richard Dawkins’s word memes to describe them could have a field day tracing graduate influence. (Perhaps the mark of a truly great teacher is the spread of complaints that his or her students have formed a vast conspiracy.)

I was a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the practice of mentoring was growing even though the theory was still in its infancy. My doctoral supervisor had one of those impeccable pedigrees that later fascinated Kanigel. The lineage of his teachers stretched back to the giants of 19th-century German history writing that had transformed American academic life. His lectures were some of the most learned I have ever heard, and his major book, while almost as challenging, remains a classic of intellectual history. And he was generous in encouraging me.

Yet there was a problem neither of us had foreseen. Social history, especially the study of popular movements, was gaining on the intellectual history that had originally attracted me to the field. I could scarcely imagine writing a 540-page book on the evolution of a concept like freedom, as my supervisor had done. I found his work awe-inspiring but was not impelled to follow. I selected a topic in social history, the wave of riots that swept the German states in the early 1830s. Following the idea of the 1960s and 1970s that history should be more of a social science, I had a hypothesis that I proposed to investigate in the archives, freeing myself as I imagined from the tyranny of published texts and delving into the substance of daily life.

What I failed to realize was that this kind of social history is methodologically demanding. To undertake it I should have had a guide who knew the territory, a mentor who had asked similar questions of similar sources. I made the big mistake of setting out to define, count, and interpret events without a supervisor familiar with the challenges of historical measurement. The result of a great deal of work was a dissertation that met the standards for a Ph.D. but could not help me win an attractive appointment in the wrenching job market of the 1970s. With dozens of candidates for each position, competence and often even excellence no longer sufficed.

Without even thinking of the word mentor, I had the idea that an adviser should somehow help one get back on track after a setback, work out a plan for revision, or move on to a new topic for a first book. Instead there were misunderstandings. My adviser changed his mind about how the dissertation should be organized, and I had to rewrite extensively. At my final oral examinations he was kindly, even cordial, but the teacher-student bond had still been damaged.

To transform the dissertation into a book, I would have had to return to my notes and microfilms and write an entire new text, but I was so shaken I did not even ask my teacher for advice about reorienting my work, and he volunteered no ideas. My disappointment was all the more painful because my adviser had helped me secure an endowed visiting fellowship at another university. But there, too, I experienced the underside of mentoring. While writing the dissertation, I was supposed to be working with the local faculty members in history and social sciences. But they had students of their own to advise; my adviser in the fellowship program did not even recognize me at a campus reception at the beginning of my second year, although we had seen each other many times at the program's weekly dinner. I was increasingly anxious about my project and did not know where to turn. Amid a privileged life, I felt adrift. In the great chain of historians, I seemed to myself the weakest link.

Perhaps the dissertation is the weak link of higher education, coming when the candidate needs to start cutting loose from the mentor but is instead more dependent than ever. Or to the contrary, the answer may be getting advisers to be mentors in Levinson's sense, not to try to solve students' problems for them but to guide them more actively in working out their own ideas, or at least to point them in the right direction. One of my fellow graduate students at Chicago was flatly assigned a topic by his professor, the history of part of the imperial Chinese bureaucracy. But it was an inspired choice, matching the richness of unexploited material with my friend's linguistic and historical skills.

Even at its best when senior and junior partners enjoy mutual respect and challenge mentoring is not so much an answer as the beginning of another set of questions. Among them is the following paradox. In order to choose a mentor wisely, one needs a broad knowledge of both disciplines and people. But if an applicant truly had this, he or she would not need the degree. To find the right mentor, one needs to already have the education one is looking for.

After some temporary positions, I decided to leave a conventional teaching career and enter scientific publishing. And I encountered another side of mentoring, the more collaborative relationship between science graduate students and their teachers. That seemed much healthier, closer to the spirit of apprenticeship. In fact, candidates usually are assigned immediately to a laboratory group under a single mentor; not for them the shopping and switching still possible in the first year or two of humanities graduate study.

But even in those situations the mentor relationship can be problematic, particularly its impact on intellectual-property rights. Copyright experts have only begun to untangle the rights and wrongs of scientific apprenticeship. In an article in the May 2000 *Vanderbilt Law Review*, Rochelle Cooper Dreyfuss, a law professor at New York University, wrote: "While there has always been something of a tradition to ignore student input into faculty research, that tradition was once accompanied by the equally strong custom of advisers placing their graduate students in jobs. When job markets in academia shrank, that sense of responsibility for students' careers declined. But, unfortunately, the tradition of failing to acknowledge student input survived."

Although plagiarism is relatively straightforward to prove (and increasingly, thanks to the Web, to detect), the use and abuse of graduate-student ideas by senior researchers are still ethically sensitive. In practice, credit in the form of position of co-author names and other public acknowledgment can be self-policing, and a reputation for exploitive behavior will turn away students. But, apparently, not always. As a science editor in the 1980s, I met a biology professor at a Western university who regaled me with stories of his distinguished but eccentric mentor, who insisted on first billing even for work to which he had not contributed. Perhaps the bond has not been examined more closely because many of the sciences have been industrialized, staffed by large cadres of postdoctoral fellows and graduate students. The machinery of credit may simply be too complex to scrutinize in detail. In the artisanal humanities the darker side of mentoring

can be investigated more practically, as Jeremy Black did in Plumb's case.

It is also true that a mentor is only as good as the ethics and concepts that he or she imparts. Andrew S. Fastow, the former chief financial officer of Enron who in January pleaded guilty to fraud, had a classic fast-track protégé-mentor relationship with his chief executive officer, Jeffrey K. Skilling. In fact, Skilling had a whole following of young financial and energy specialists called "Skilling's boys." The group's name suggests that women were largely excluded; was that so bad for them? (Skilling is under indictment but has denied wrongdoing.)

Mentoring presents other challenges even where the ethics are exemplary. It can make it more difficult for the sponsored protégé, fortified by the mentor's advice, to seek needed renewal from other sources. Consider one of academe's most successful protégés, the former senator Bill Bradley. Entering Princeton University with a verbal SAT of 485 (George W. Bush scored 566), Bradley suffered academic setbacks as a freshman but developed study habits that made him an above-average student. It was Bradley's thesis adviser, Arthur S. Link, the foremost authority on Woodrow Wilson, who cultivated his student's scholarly side. Link guided the senior thesis that helped Bradley win high honors in history and recommended him enthusiastically and successfully for a Rhodes Scholarship. He continued to advise Bradley at least into the 1980s, considering him a leader in Wilson's footsteps, a paragon of character and brains who had not only the chance but the duty to become president of the United States.

But there was a price to pay for the high sense of calling that his teacher had imparted. In the decisive Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary in 2000 against Al Gore, Bradley needed other kinds of mentors -- not academics, but grass-roots politicians and the kind of Web activists who propelled Howard Dean's candidacy four years later. The news media turned Bradley's Wilsonian idealism against him. Margaret Carlson wondered in *Time*: "Show too much ethical superiority, too much condescension, and voters wonder whether you have what it takes to do business with Trent Lott and Tom DeLay." Michelle Cottle said in *The New Republic*, "There exists a kind of tragic nobility in the hopelessness of Bradley's campaign. (How could the unenlightened, unwashed masses possibly understand?) Every loss is further proof of the candidate's moral fortitude." (Full disclosure: I am a college classmate of Bill Bradley and agree with Arthur Link's judgment despite its mixed consequences.)

In contrast, Bush probably appealed to voters partly because his teachers had never tapped him as a future leader. And as governor of Texas, Bush had shown his ability to seek mentoring widely, especially from the powerful and independently elected lieutenant governor, Bob Bullock, a conservative Democrat. Yet even for Bush, reliance on senior advisers like Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld has been controversial and may turn out to have been a mistake.

Thus one typical response to the risk of dependence on a mentor is diversification. There is a growing interest in alternative and more egalitarian forms of mentoring with names like "peer mentoring" and "co-

mentoring” that focus on mutual help and advice rather than on intense bonds with superiors. For example, in an article in the spring 2003 issue of the National Women’s Studies Association journal, Gail M. McGuire of Indiana University at South Bend and Jo Reger of Oakland University questioned the power imbalance of hierarchical mentoring and underscored the scarcity of effective mentors. They argued from their own experience as graduate students that mutual support is a more authentically feminist style of development, one that helps overcome the limits of male-dominated scholarship with its separation of reason and emotion. And many corporations have “reverse mentoring” programs in which younger staff members help develop the technological skills of older executives.

In fact, some of the best mentoring may be inadvertent. There are those people who stimulate an immune response of the spirit, calling forth resources that more genial authorities could never have evoked. Think, for example, of the Nobel Laureate physicist William B. Shockley, who started a pioneering semiconductor laboratory bearing his name in Palo Alto, Calif., in 1956. By the next year, eight of his nationally recruited young star scientists had rebelled against his domineering ways and left to form their own laboratory with the backing of the Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corp. Shockley’s mandatory lie-detector tests and other provocations were the greatest thing that ever happened to them, galvanizing them into entrepreneurship. Two of the group, Gordon Moore and Robert Noyce, went on to become founders of Intel; another, Eugene Kleiner, became a leading venture capitalist. Silicon Valley was born. Perhaps the targets of Plumb’s ire benefited as much from his style as his star pupils did, just as Shockley helped make his defectors multimillionaires. The result might be called shmentoring.

It has now been more than 30 years since I parted ways with my graduate adviser. Once I had become a science editor I thought of looking him up and renewing our relationship. But neither he nor I ever made contact. I doubt that either of us would have known what to say to the other. Mentoring, unlike the sibling love and pastoral care evoked by Levinson’s definition, tends in hard times to become a transaction rather than a bond. Professors may expound on the versatility of the Ph.D. and the satisfactions of alternative careers, but the sense of calling that has fueled their success often makes teacher-scholar the only acceptable outcome. A former student who has not found an academic foothold, like a derailed Wall Street protégé, is an unwise investment to be written off. From a mutual acquaintance I heard an anecdote I interpreted to suggest that this was just what my adviser considered me, no matter what I ever would do in my new profession.

Mentoring of the pluralistic kind, however, has become and has remained a great force in my life. I was able to enter science publishing and succeed in it thanks in part to another of my graduate teachers in the early 1970s who offered me a position as a research assistant on a project on the history of disease. From my first employer in publishing, I learned the art of tactful business letters, of which he was the greatest master I have ever known. A science magazine editor told me her private system for finding authors of great popular-science articles before they started publishing in other magazines; I was able to apply her methods to the book world. One of the authors I sponsored, an Israeli historian of science, encouraged me to develop a new

scholarly identity through my writing on the history of technology. And all the while an undergraduate adviser's criticisms of my college papers and the example of his playful but vigorous writing and lecturing styles have continued to inspire me.

For all my gratitude for such support, I remain skeptical about the mentor-protégé bond and see the "Much Ado about Mentors," to quote the title of Roche's late 1970s Harvard Business Review article, as the start of a disturbing trend. Since then, and especially recently, we've seen more and more books and articles on the mechanics and procedures of success. And the danger is that their concepts can easily become social reality, as people identify with the latest trend they read about in the popular press or on the Web. It's easy to go from the statistical probability that mentoring is beneficial to an anxiety that life without a mentor is incomplete and its prospects alarming, just as some people are convinced that everything depends on finding the right gatekeeper, from preschools for their children to literary agents for their manuscripts. Yet the search for a mentor, for a safe initiation into academic or corporate mysteries, can overshadow the entrepreneurial spirit. Roche himself pointed out that mentored executives "do not consider having a mentor an important ingredient in their own success." They credited their aptitudes, hard work, and even luck ahead of mentoring.

The current trend toward overvaluing mentors is understandable but mistaken. We need to recognize not only successful protégés but others who have succeeded without mentors. The Plumb student I knew best was the late historian of science and medicine Roy Porter. Surely Porter's brilliant imagination, his empathy with the sick and his skepticism toward authority, his love of history and of London, would have flourished without Plumb. And I doubt whether Plumb had anything to do with Porter's exuberant use of computerized notes and word processing to write one illuminating book after another alongside a busy teaching and advising schedule. I can't imagine that Porter would have done any less with another adviser. Mentoring deserves neither uncritical support nor demonization because, in the end, all mentoring is self-mentoring.

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