

Whole Person Mentorship

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Background and Purpose

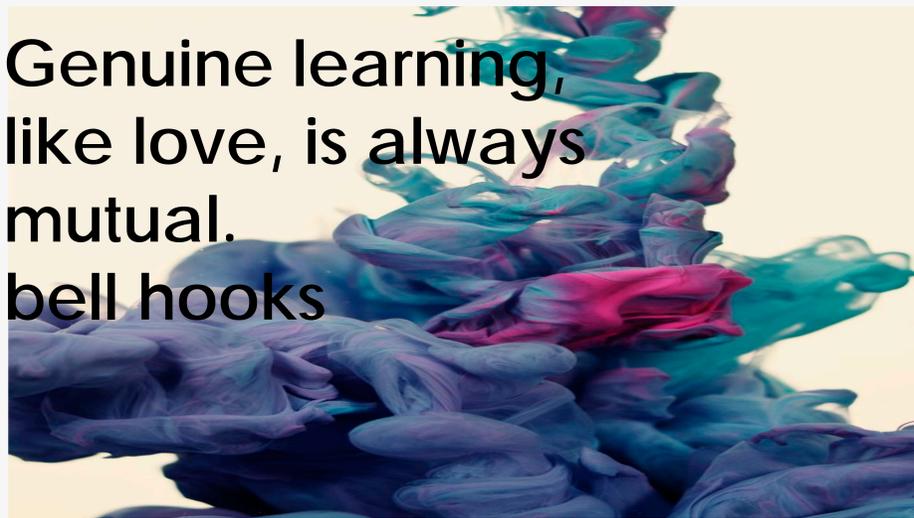
Elimination of bias is a scientific imperative. However, I would argue that truly objective research is impossible; that we are always “in the work” and show up in the questions that we ask, the methodologies that we use, and the ways that we document and disseminate our research. **Rather than perceiving our subjectivity as a liability, I would suggest that it is our own unique histories and experiences that both make us whole people (not just “brains on sticks”) and more thoughtful, astute scientists; better able to sit in the ambiguity and paradox that is inherent in our work and our world.** However, we can only do this if we are brave enough to explore our own **wholeness** and reflect on the ways in which our identities, informed by the layers of context that we inhabit, impact the ways that we show up in our research and ultimately how we impact the world. **Whole Person Mentorship aims to do that; recognizing each of our wholeness (as mentor and mentee) and partnering together as colleagues to support self awareness and growth.**

Supporting Whole People Through Egalitarian Models of Mentorship

Among the many relationships that are established and nurtured in academia, the mentor-mentee relationship directly contributes to scholars' success (Blake, 1999; Keith & Moore, 1995; Long, 1990; Reskin, 1979; McGuire & Reger, 2003). Traditionally, mentorship in the academy is focused on substantive area of interest, methods, or theory use/development. While substantive research skills are absolutely integral to our work and take time, practice, and guidance to develop competency; failing to recognize the whole person (beyond their student or mentor identity) misses out on a valuable opportunity for co-learning and empowerment.

McGuire and Reskin (2003) offer a feminist co-learning model that emphasizes an egalitarian structure. Their model deconstructs the mind/body dualism that is endemic to Western culture (and possibly more pernicious in the academy where the mind is often treated as commodity), and the epistemological recognition of feminist and indigenous methods have gone unrecognized and even denigrated. This dualism is heavily gendered; masculinity being constructed around the mind and femininity constructed around the body (Hesse-Biber, 1996).

Genuine learning,
like love, is always
mutual.
bell hooks



Supporting Whole People Through Egalitarian Models of Mentorship (cont.)

In the academy, this dualism reinforces the idea that feminine qualities such as intuition, relationality, and expression of emotion encumber scholarly activity and that “reason, rather than emotion has been regarded as the indispensable faculty for acquiring knowledge” (Jaggar, 1989, p.145). This approach is limiting. Whole person mentorship allows both people involved in the relationship to understand emotion and embodiment as valuable sources of knowledge. It also disputes the prevailing “hierarchical structure of academic development and the dominant understanding of what it means to be an academic by equally valuing, rational, logical thought, and emotional expression” (McGuire & Reskin, 2003, p. 55). This whole person mentorship also views a person's unique identities and experiences and valuable tools, rather than liabilities in one's academic development or to the fidelity of scholarly research.

Whole person mentorship acknowledges “the self” as important, and sees that the relationship between “selves” is where learning and growth happens for both mentee and mentor.

Effective mentors have treated our relationship as one of mutual learning, disclosure, and empowerment. They have allowed their thinking and themselves to be stretched and shared their stories and struggles. The insight and connection gained from that vulnerability can teach both people in the relationship about themselves and offers an invitation to see beyond their own “stuckness” or blind spots to glean deeper understanding of ourselves and the ways in which we impact the world. Embracing reciprocity and reflection in a mentor/mentee relationship is imperative for personal and scholarly growth.

References:

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Conversation credits to Diane Morrison and Kelly Edwards, two of my dearest mentors

Whole Person Mentorship in Practice:

- **Model professional struggles and personal impacts/realities of life as an academic**, and talk about careers for PhD's beyond academia
- **Personalize mentorship to each student and the specific needs of that student** (this requires knowing a student well enough to do this)
- **Practice ally-ship and listening and discernment**, not judgement or “telling what to do.” This requires being curious about who the student is and who you are and where that interaction/relationship comes together; giving the student autonomy, allowing them to guide and not trying to “clone” , and asking great questions intended to guide
- **Appreciate and allow reciprocity in your relationship** (co-learning)
- **Integrate and demonstrate emotion into academic work**
- **Recognize and appreciate paid and unpaid work**
- **Agree upon clear and reasonable expectations and provide high support and nurturing in a form that the student experiences as supportive.**
- **Model self-acceptance and self-compassion**; grad school can feel really isolating and encourage a “not good enough” mentality. Do what you can to mitigate that tendency which can look like normalizing those feelings and talking about your own struggles
- **Be present with students and do your own reflexive work**; modeling your own process in learning and working
- **Expand your own ideas of what “mentor” means** and encourage students to seek out mentors and learning opportunities beyond their adviser, department, school, and the academy at large
- **Model the importance of community collaboration** and how to identify community partners, build relationships with them and do truly collaborative work
- **Encourage students to build skills communicating in different venues and across audiences**
- **Invite students to learn about how they learn and work** and incorporate structures and systems into their day to facilitate optimal working and learning
- **Inspire and help students to find what makes them come alive and do that thing as much as possible!** Be open to the possibility that this might be outside of academia. If that is difficult to accept, do your own reflexive work as a person/mentor to become OK with that or renegotiate your role/relationship
- **Suggest that students think about and plan for what you want to do when you leave grad school** and encourage them to be strategic about making connections and gaining the skills that would be useful in those roles
- **Encourage students to regularly check in with themselves**—“Do I still like doing this? Are the reasons that I came here still applicable?” If not, re-think what can bring you joy and light you up again...or what has changed? Do you need to rethink your course?” Connect this to students' intuition or “felt sense,” by asking things such as “What does your heart and body say about where you are? Many students will be skilled at connecting to “head” knowledge and less good at “felt” knowledge...support this kind of inquiry by both asking and modeling
- **Encourage students to regularly reflect on their learning**: how has my thinking changed about this? What might connect to this now? Etc.
- **Invite students to connect with people who understand them and their experience in grad school and also with people that are not in the academy.** This will support “whole person-ness” and allow them to be affirmed in their possibly tough grad school experience and also get distance from it and think about the world and people in different ways.
- **Encourage students to be connected to community(ies)** whatever that might mean to them; participate in things beyond the academy and talk about your own community connections

“Do I contradict myself? Very well,
then I contradict myself, I am large, I
contain multitudes.”

Walt Whitman

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