Mentoring Through Collaborative Partnerships Until the End of Time

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MENTORING THROUGH

COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

UNTIL THE END OF TIME...
Until the end of time"...Yes, we could hardly believe those words when we saw them in the advising section of our university’s student-information system, but there they were. We’re not sure if they are a default setting in the system or a placeholder that the IT folks put in, but this phrase perfectly reflects what we do in our university’s School Library Media Preparation program. The relationship that we have with our students can truly be described as a lifelong partnership of learning.

Our graduate students are, for the most part, nontraditional adult learners. They are teachers who have decided that they want to become school librarians, expanding their spheres of influence exponentially. They are professionals who have decided that they want to help students become "critical thinkers, enthusiastic readers, skillful researchers, and ethical users of information" (AASL 2009, 8). They bring much to their coursework and to the program—a wealth of educational experience and rich life experiences.

The time they spend in graduate study with us is about mastery of the content that they need to know to be effective school librarians; it’s about developing the knowledge and skills that will help them to be leaders, instructional partners, information specialists, teachers, and program administrators (AASL 2009, 16–18). But it’s also about helping them develop the dispositions necessary to be successful in the field.

Our philosophy of practice is closely aligned with Ruth Ash and Maurice Persall’s Formative Leadership Theory: “[L]eadership is not role-specific, reserved only for administrators; rather the job of the leader is to fashion learning opportunities for faculty and staff in order that they might themselves develop into productive leaders.” Our job as professors in the school librarian preparation program is to provide learning opportunities for our students in order that they might themselves develop into productive school library leaders. From the point of first contact, we provide scaffolding. We promote collaboration; we model professionalism; and we practice mentoring.
Mentoring is More Than Advising

When students are admitted to our program, they are assigned an advisor. As they progress through their coursework, we certainly advise them—which courses to take, when to take them, when to sign up for clinical experience, when to take their comprehensive exams, and so on. Cassidy R. Sugimoto (2012) asserts that, for LIS Doctoral education, mentoring is more than advising, and we believe this to be true at the Master's level as well. We advise, but more than that, we mentor. We develop a personal relationship with each of our students. As one of our graduates commented in an e-mail:

You all watched and listened as I became a mother as well as a librarian. I just felt like I was having class with a friend, not necessarily a professor. I know I’m not the best or brightest student you’ve ever had, but you have always made me feel as if I could do anything. You make me want to be better and try harder. That’s made the program so enjoyable. It’s like a family.

We have been school librarians, and we know what’s involved. We know that being a school librarian is much more difficult than being a classroom teacher; that on any given day, a librarian will be pulled in a million different directions; that being a librarian can be a lonely job, especially for someone who is used to being a member of a department or a grade-level team. We work, throughout their coursework, to help students understand this and to help them develop a personal professional network consisting not only of us, as their professors, but also of their peers.

Making Connections with Peers

As graduate students, we each had the experience of sitting an entire semester in a course and, at the end of the semester, not knowing the names of our classmates. Because we understand how critically important networking in the school library field is, we deliberately work to help students make personal peer connections as they complete their coursework. In our hybrid courses, which combine online work with Saturday class sessions, we use everything from name tents to peer review of presentations to cooperative work groups to help students form those personal connections. In our fully online courses, introductory class blogs complete with photos and synchronous online class sessions allow students to connect with one another, and an "In the Hallway" discussion board forum provides them a space in which to interact at will, as they would in the hallway during breaks in a face-to-face class. As another graduate shared in an e-mail:

I am so grateful every day to have had the Longwood learning experience. It is not easy to decide in your late 30s to return to school for a Master's degree while trying to manage a family and full-time job. From the very first class in my program, I began to form lifelong friendships with people from all over Virginia. I get excited every time I go to professional conferences because I will get to visit with these friends.

We have an advisees’ course in Blackboard so that we can communicate with our students easily, keep them informed, and, at the same time, provide them the virtual space where they can, once again, connect with other students in the program. While enrolled in the capstone course for the program, students are required to attend the state school librarians' organization’s fall conference. They attend a first-timers’ breakfast where they connect with other first-time conference attendees and board members and are welcomed to the organization and to the field of school librarianship. We were happy to read in an e-mail from one of our graduates:
...TURNING TO MY FORMER MENTEE FOR ADVICE HAS SHOWN ME A NEW IDEAL TO WHICH MENTORSHIP CAN ASPIRE: WE CAN LEARN FROM, AND DEPEND ON, EACH OTHER.

- ANIHO HALVERSON NIJHOFF

When I went to the fall VEMA conference, I was fully prepared to not know anyone and quietly go about the day. Then I ran into Frances in the hall, and got a big hug and a chat. Then I went up the escalator, and there was Audrey with another big hug and a chat. For a minute there I felt like an important person at the conference, and it completely brightened my day!

Clinical Experience Opportunities

Emphasizing the importance of the field experience, Josette Anne Lyders and Patricia Jane Wilson assert that "theoretical and practical learning are needed in approximately equal measure by all library students" (1991, 31). As our students finish their content coursework, they enroll in a three-credit, 200 clock-hour clinical experience. Although they are, for the most part, seasoned classroom teachers, during this clinical experience they have the opportunity to integrate their teaching skills with the content and theory that they’ve learned in their school library coursework and to apply what they’ve learned, and we are there to scaffold and mentor.

The clinical experience course syllabus provides the contract between our students and us and outlines requirements for the course: reflective journaling, collaborative lessons, development of a professional-growth plan and submission of artifacts to document mastery of standards. Surrounding these basic course requirements, however, is an almost individualized clinical experience for each student. Students not only submit written assignments but also teach a collaborative lesson that one of us observes. Our students are located across the state.
WE ARE ALL PART OF THE LARGER COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LIBRARIANS, MENTORS, MENTEES. IT'S ALL ABOUT MENTORING, COMMUNITY, COLLABORATION, AND CARING... UNTIL THE END OF TIME.

of Virginia. We've observed in western-most Lee County, across the Chesapeake Bay in Accomack County, to the north in Loudoun County, to the south in Halifax County, and all points in between.

For the student this observation visit is a culminating, validating event. It brings closure to coursework and confidence in readiness for the job ahead.

For us the benefits are tremendous. Visiting in school libraries keeps us connected to the reality of 21st-century school librarianship; we don't want to become those "LIS professors [who] are out of touch with true practice" (Stephens 2011, 38).

Michael Stephens asserts that "the mentoring should go both ways. Profs should get on the front lines every so often with the person they're mentoring—that way, both learn" (2011, 38), and we could not agree more. In fact, we've learned firsthand that mentoring can be mutually beneficial.

Beyond Coursework

As students complete their coursework, we work to help them to internalize the professional dispositions they need to be successful practitioners. We work with them to develop leadership skills, and we encourage them to participate actively in professional organizations by attending conferences, serving on committees, and submitting presentation proposals. We scaffold our students by copresenting conference sessions and coauthoring articles. Our graduates appreciate this help. For example, one wrote in an e-mail:

Audrey and Frances have both given me their support as I volunteered to help in VEMA as a director-elect two years ago. Frances sent me e-mails while I was preparing for the conference, offering encouragement. And, of course, who was the first to respond to my e-mail about evaluations? The answer is Audrey Church, with a note that made me proud to be a librarian of Longwood University tutelage.

And they go on to do great things! They present at state and national conferences; we are in the audience not only giving them kudos and glowing with pride but also learning from them. They serve as supervising librarians for our current clinical experience students, and we enjoy the "...benefits to be gained from professional partnership between the practicing school librarian and the university professor" (Lyders and Wilson 1991, 35). Sometimes we experience total role reversal as we contact a graduate to ask: "How does this work?" "How do you use this particular program?" Or, "What strategy have you found to be most effective in this situation?" As Aniko Halverson Nijhoff relates, "...turning to my former mentee for advice has shown me a new ideal to which mentorship can aspire: We can learn from, and depend on, each other" (2011, 29).

Each year at our state's fall conference, we host a student/alumni event. This activity allows us to reconnect with alumni and them to reconnect with each other. It also offers the opportunity for current students to meet with program graduates. New mentor/mentee relationships often develop.

We maintain an alumni e-mail distribution list, which we use to share information about professional development events and job openings. We've been known to use it to appeal for assistance as well. For example, as we prepared to highlight our program for the college's accreditation visit last fall, we sent out a request to alumni for "program stories" depicting activities in their school libraries—in less than 10 days, we had over 100 responses, complete with photos, showing 21st-century school libraries filled with K–12 students actively engaged in learning.

Until the End of Time

Elizabeth A. Buchanan, Sarah E. Myers, and Sherrie Langston Hardin suggest:
"A mentor provides support, encouragement, friendship, and is a person with whom to share joys, frustrations, and feelings."

"A mentor offers professional development advice and information and serves as an intellectual resource" (2005, 7–8).

We would agree on both counts and would argue that the mentoring that we do for our graduate students returns to us tenfold. Our university colleagues, even those in our own education department, don’t seem to quite understand the unending connection that we have to our graduates. Once they graduate, they are, truly, colleagues for life. One recent graduate noted:

Thanks so much for all your support and encouragement these past three years at Longwood. You’ve been an outstanding advisor, and I truly appreciate the time and effort you’ve invested in my progress and for always believing in me. I look forward to seeing you at many library events in the future and wish you all the best.

We always look forward (with pleasure!) to interacting with our former students who have become peers. We are all part of the larger community of school librarians. Mentors. Mentees. It’s all about mentoring, community, collaboration, and caring...until the end of time.

Frances Reeve is an associate professor of school library media at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. She is coauthor of “Prove It! Using Data to Advocate for School Library Media Programs” in Educational Media and Technology Yearbook, 2009. She is currently coadministrator of the AASL Blog and president of her state organization, the Virginia Association of School Librarians.

Audrey P. Church is an associate professor of school library media at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. She is the author of Leverage Your Library Program to Raise Test Scores (Linworth 2003), “The Instructional Role of Library Media Specialists as Perceived by Elementary School Principals” (SLMR 2008), and “Secondary School Principals’ Perceptions of the School Librarian’s Instructional Role” (SLMR 2010). She currently serves as the Educators of School Librarians Section representative to the AASL Board of Directors.

Works Cited: