**Re/Learning the student-teaching mentoring relationship: An Autoethnography on blindness and developing mutual mentoring relationships in higher education**

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**Abstract:**

Using Herakova and Congdon’s (2018) Critical Communication Mutual Mentoring (CCMM) model and an autoethnographic method, I explore the moments in which mutual mentoring between professors and myself positively shaped my higher education experiences as a blind student and developed my self-advocacy. I specifically investigate two mutual mentoring moments.

**What Is Mutual Mentoring?**

* Mutual mentoring occurs when students and professors learn from/with each other (Yun, Baldi, & Sorcinelli, 2016).
* Wisakowski (2013) stated that only 15% of students with disabilities attend four-year universities because they do not have appropriate self-advocacy or the communication skills to succeed.
* Mutual mentoring benefits professors and students. Mutual mentoring between students and faculty “[improves] psychosocial well-being of [each other] by creating a sense of acceptance, belonging, and confidence in future success” (Herakova & Congdon, 2018).
* Critical Communication Pedagogy (CCP; Fassett & Warren) allows us to examine the role language in shaping and/or reinforcing oppressive structures and systems of meaning, which is important to consider when mentoring students, especially students with disabilities. Thus, mutual mentoring and CCP are theoretical approaches that allows scholars to examine how higher education institutions can better make an inclusive environment for students with disabilities and professors to learn from and grow with each other (Herakova & Congdon, 2018; Fassett & Morella, 2008; Yun, Baldi, & Sorcinelli, 2016).

**Critical Communication Mutual Mentoring Model**

* The CCMM examines how professors and students mentor each other through the following five components: “dialog, identities and culture,” embracing vulnerabilities through reflexivity and self-disclosure, collaboration and collectivity, and continuous and networked interactions” (Herakova & Congdon, 2018).

**Critical Communication Pedagogy**

* CCMM is derived from Critical Communication Pedagogy, which creates a dialogic space transforming academia into a more humanizing environment (Congdon, 2018; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Herakova & Congdon, 2018).
* CCP calls for students with disabilities and professors to explore the influence of dominant cultural discourses (Congdon, 2018). It also forces educators to reflect on their teaching methods and examine how they could investigate the course content for each persons’ needs in the context of CCMM (Congdon, 2018; Herakova & Congdon, 2018).
* The goal of CCP, specifically in the context of mentoring students with disabilities, is to “enable emancipation through personal and social transformation” (Congdon, 2018).
* Through the telling of personal narratives, my hope is that other students with disabilities and specifically blind students will utilize CCMM in the classroom.

**Autoethnographic Method:**

* Autoethnography interrogates personal and cultural experiences (Alexander, 1998; Ellis, Adams, & Botchner, 2011). Thus, autoethnography is used to not only conduct research but to implement autobiography and ethnography into one (Alexander, 1998; Ellis et al., 2011).
* I make use of documented memories, reflexivity, and storytelling of my personal experiences with mutual mentoring in higher education.

**Personal Narratives:**

Narrative 1: Building a Program from the Ground Up

* During my sophomore year of college I faced a particular challenge of not being able to access the online textbook in my Spanish class. The collaboration between myself and a Spanish professor to address this challenge provided me an opportunity for mutual mentoring. My professor’s willingness right from the start to adapt the Spanish program to make it work for me was so refreshing and we developed a mutual mentorship that culminated in us utilizing email to meet my unique needs.

**Digging Deeper**

* When communicating with and collaborating with my Spanish professor, I utilized dialog, self-disclosure, and collaboration.
* Self-disclosure is when one person discloses something personal about themselves in an effort to get to know someone better (Herakova & Congdon, 2018). Self-disclosure in the classroom when appropriate benefits the overall well-being of students (Fassett & Morella, 2008; Fassett & Warren, 2007).
* When collaborating with my Spanish professor to modify the online platform, we used CCMM and CCP by stepping back and stepping into an environment where our roles were influx (Congdon, 2018). Collaboration is when two or more people (i.e. a group of people) work together to come up with an appropriate compromise (Moreman & Non Grata, 2011). By collaborating with my Spanish professor early and meeting him a few times before the class started, I was able to achieve success in advocating for myself.

**Narrative 2: Self-Disclosure as a Means of Mutual Mentoring**

* Last fall, I experienced the powerful benefits of the self-disclosure component of the CCMM Model. I started corresponding with my communication professor, Mark, in late July. Through email, I self-disclosed to Mark the fact that I am a blind student and that I would need specific accommodations to be successful in his course. What I honestly did not expect was for Mark to self-disclose the fact that he, too, experiences a disability. It was something that automatically opened up a dialog of conversation and vulnerability to enter the space in which we were working.

**Digging Deeper**

* When negotiating my relationship with Mark I engaged in self-disclosure and dialog. Research (Fassett & Morella, 2008; Herakova & Congdon, 2018; Moreman & Non Grata, 2011) indicate that students with disabilities who initiate dialog early with their professors will be more likely to receive support and benefit from mentoring with professors. While Mark and I did not know each other during our first interactions, we put each other at ease by self-disclosing our disabilities as early as possible.
* Vulnerability is a process wherein people share personal tidbits about themselves in an effort to relate to others (Fassett & Morella, 2008; Herakova & Congdon, 2018). By allowing vulnerabilities and stories to make their way into our mutual mentorship, Mark and I developed trust.
* Finally, we utilized CCMM to collaborate and learn from one another. We stepped out of our traditional roles as student/professor and taught one another co-creating our learning environment.

**Bringing It Back to the Theory:**

* Students with disabilities who do not know how to advocate for themselves and do not know how to disclose their disabilities, face challenges in accessing appropriate accommodations.
* CCMM & CCP benefit both the mentor-mentee by reframing teaching as a collaborative process in which academia a more humanizing place (Fassett & Morella, 2008; Fassett & Warren, 2007).
* In the future, I would recommend that professors enact the CCMM into their classroom by opening up channels of dialog (Herakova & Congdon, 2018), collaborate together to meet the needs of the mentor/mentee relationship (Herakova & Congdon, 2018), utilize CCP (Fassett & Morella, 2008 and self-disclose when necessary and appropriate (Herakova & Congdon, 2018).
* Finally, I recommend that all students with disabilities collaborate early with their professors, and that professors listen to and learn from the additional needs of each student.

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