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Going to the Balcony: Two Professors Reflect and Examine Their Pedagogy

Linda Searby

University of Alabama - Birmingham, lsearby@uab.edu

Jenny Tripses

Bradley University, jtripses@bradley.edu

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Keywords

Reflection, Visioning, Goal-Setting, SoTL, Collaboration

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Going to the Balcony: Two Professors Reflect and Examine Their Pedagogy

Linda J. Searby

University of Alabama at Birmingham
Birmingham, Alabama, USA
lsearby@uab.edu

Jenny S. Tripses

Bradley University
Peoria, Illinois, USA

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is twofold. First of all, we want to emphasize the value of taking time to reflect on the effectiveness of our teaching practices, especially when we sense that teaching and learning processes have become 'stale.' Heifetz and Linsky (2002) equate reflection with "going to the balcony from the dance floor" to view our actions from a different perspective, and this is what we attempted to do. Secondly, we want to highlight the professional and personal satisfaction that can result from collaboration with a colleague when investigating elements of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). To give you some background, let us describe how we evolved into this "balcony" place. We share a common history, having been elementary school principals in Illinois for many years. While leading our schools, we also completed our doctoral degrees at Illinois State University under the same advisor. We became friends through serving on the executive board of Illinois Women in Educational Leadership organization and nurtured our friendship by attending professional conferences together and conducting a joint research project. We both transitioned to teaching Educational Leadership at the university level in Illinois, but Linda moved to Alabama in 2005. Our research and collaboration on mentoring aspiring school leaders continued "across state lines" and has expanded over the last five years with additional national presentations and publications.

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Context of the Collaboration: Mentoring Aspiring School Leaders

Research has shown that future leaders who understand the professional and personal benefits of actively seeking out mentors throughout their careers will likely achieve higher levels of success (Allen, et al., 2004). We acknowledge this fact, and have developed a conviction that our educational leadership graduate students at our respective universities in Illinois and Alabama need to prepare themselves for mentoring relationships. Over the past six years, we have investigated protégé preparation for graduate students preparing to become school leaders. We have published several manuscripts on the topic (Tripses, Searby, & Karanovich, 2010; Tripses & Searby, 2008; Searby & Tripses, 2006) and conducted numerous peer reviewed presentations. We have collaborated on curriculum and instructional strategies focused on developing our students' capacities as protégés for their future mentoring relationships. We gave our students an identical assignment to seek a mentor for themselves and write a reflection paper on their experience. And finally, on two occasions we used distance technology to bring Illinois and Alabama administrator preparation classrooms together for common class sessions on protégé development. The

key result of our research work has been the creation of the Protégéship Framework of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that have been noted in the literature to contribute to the effectiveness of mentoring relationships.

Our commitment to protégé preparation continues to be strong. We have been intentional about facilitating the development of protégéship with our students at Bradley University and the University of Alabama at Birmingham for several years now. However, we both felt that our teaching on protégéship had become 'stale.' The next logical step seemed to be for the two of us to "go to the balcony" (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) to get a new perspective on our classroom work with graduate students. Continuing with Heifetz and Linsky's balcony metaphor, our intention was to step back from the "dance" in order to better understand where we have been, where we are, and where we want to go with the work in our classrooms regarding intentional protégé development. We want to share the process we employed to reflect on our pedagogy, as individuals, and as collaborators in the quest to promote protégé development. A glimpse of our collective metacognition as we examined our own teaching may serve as a model for other professors.

Methodology

In the past, we tried to determine the success of our efforts to teach the value of having a mentor by surveying our students after they completed our courses to see if they were still engaged with a mentor. The results were disappointing. The majority of students reported that they did not continue with their mentor after the "seek a mentor" assignment, and all cited time constraints as the reason. We realized the need to deliberately stop surveying students to determine the extent to which they have continued work with a mentor, as we speculated that this was not necessarily evidence that they had internalized the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of protégéship. We hypothesized that they may well have learned much about protégéship, but they had not yet found themselves in the career stage of realizing their real and immediate need for a mentor. Instead, we sought to refocus on our work in the classroom. Our hope was that this inquiry inward, both individually and collectively, would strengthen us in the roles of advocates for intentional protégé development in school leader preparation programs.

The method of personal narrative (Weimer, 2006) from the field of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) was employed for our line of inquiry. The unit of analysis was the protégé development curriculum/instructional strategies currently used by each of us in our courses. McKinney (2007) talks about the importance of reflecting on several years' teaching experience which fits our situation well. The approach used, however, was collaborative since we both believe our teaching has benefitted greatly from the work we have done together. We sought to explore new ways to benefit our students, while at the same time, inquire into the effectiveness of our own teaching practice. Additionally, we sought to look at ways we might provoke further dialogue with others engaged in the preparation of future school leaders (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Future intentions for this line of inquiry will include analysis of the degree of success experienced as a result of our collective work on teaching and resultant evidence of student learning (Weimer, 2006).

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning goes "beyond scholarly teaching and involves systematic study of teaching and/or learning and the public sharing and review of such work" (McKinney, 2007, p. 10). We revisited Boyer's (1990) definition of the scholarship of teaching that "both educates and entices future scholars" (p. 24). We agreed with Boyer and accepted the need to continuously learn about the topic of mentoring, and the challenge to use that knowledge to transform and extend our understanding of ways that graduate students prepare as future school leaders. We accepted that our pedagogical procedures

should be carefully planned, continuously examined, and related directly to the subject. So, we began the examination of our pedagogical practice by spending time in individual reflection about where we have been, where we are, and where we want to go.

The Importance of Reflection

Zull (2002) emphasizes the importance of reflection in the learning process, stating that “while experience is necessary for learning, reflection is required because reflection is searching for connections, literally” (p. 164). Zachary (2000) also concurs that “transformational learning is facilitated through a process of critical self-reflection” (p. 225). Hart (1990) argues that reflection enhances the probability of action being consistent with one’s conscious, long-range goals.

Reflection makes possible systematic analyses and interventions that challenge conventional practice and facilitate the search for new perspectives and solutions to problems. Reflection also raises unconscious thoughts to the conscious level. Assumptions and patterns that guide actions are scrutinized. This is what Schon (1983), in a seminal work on reflection, described as the process of looking at our espoused theories and comparing them to our theories-in-use. Because ideas in our mind are invisible powers which shape our choices and understandings unconsciously, it is important to bring them into the conscious level for deliberate evaluation.

Moving to the Balcony

The reflection journey started as a result of Jenny re-reading some of Zachary’s (2009) recommendations in *The Mentee’s Guide*, and suggesting to Linda that we use the process outlined there to think about our own teaching and the students’ learning in our courses that include the mentoring curriculum. So, we individually revisited the original purpose of our mentoring work through creating our individual personal vision statements for teaching (Zachary, 2009). We took this step because we suspected we might have sidetracked our own learning needs and a closer examination of those needs might be warranted. The next steps in the process involved (1) our individual personal reflection upon our six years of collaboration on protégé development of graduate students preparing to be school leaders; (2) writing our individual visions of ideal future accomplishments; and (3) creating a gap analysis identifying the differences between reality and the ideal. The last step was to synthesize our common gaps and determine a plan of renewed collaboration and dedication to protégé development. A detailed description of this process follows.

Looking Down at the Dance Floor

We started the process of examining our pedagogy by conducting an activity suggested by Zachary (2009) called the Personal Reflection Exercise, modifying the prompts for our situation. Examples of the prompts include: (1) What have been the major professional (or personal) challenges you faced in the experience of teaching protegeship knowledge, skills, and dispositions? Why were these challenging and what did you specifically do to respond to overcome them? (2) How are you different today than you were 5 years ago when it comes to teaching on the topic of mentoring or interacting with leadership candidates, in courses and in internships? (3) What barriers are you creating for yourself? (4) How are you contributing to the success of students through the job you are doing as a professor, when it comes to helping them prepare for mentoring relationships? (5) In what ways have you grown, developed, or raised your skill level?

Individually, we answered the reflective prompts in the comfort of our respective homes in Peoria, IL, and Birmingham, AL, and spent time reflecting on where we had been and where we were in our journey as professors promoting our passion for developing protégéship skills. We found, however, that we could not isolate our reflection on this single focus. The exercise led us to think more broadly about our personal and professional growth, in general.

Crafting Our Vision

The second phase of the reflective process suggested by Zachary (2009) was the creation of a Personal Vision Statement. The purpose of this was to determine where we want to go next, or exploring our desired destination. According to Zachary (2009), “those who craft a personal vision are significantly more effective in their jobs and more likely to achieve their financial and professional goals than those who do not” (p. 21). The instructions were to write the vision statement in present tense, as if the goal is already achieved. Our vision statements follow.

Jenny:

The work Linda and I have done on protégé prep is most evident in the Bradley internship program. I approach a new crop of interns with a sense of accomplishment for whatever role I've played in their level of preparedness to be protégés. At the same time, I eagerly anticipate what I'll learn this semester in working with protégés and their mentors. Mentors and protégés now receive explicit preparation on the mentoring process. I actively seek feedback at several points in the internship from mentors and student protégés focused on protégé learning needs. I thoroughly enjoy learning more about problems encountered along the way and the reflective processes used by graduate students to solve those problems. I've figured out ways to expand upon the understandings on problem solving from my dissertation and feel that I am continuously deepening my knowledge and understanding of problem solving and how that works in the mentoring relationship. Together, Linda and I have continued to deepen our understanding of protégé development. I am much more focused now on my learning needs in order to more effectively meet the needs of my students than I was five years ago. That focus has allowed me to slowly but surely seek a new for me balance between family, work, and personal time. I feel profoundly clear about my ability to steward my talents and relationships.

Linda:

The concept of mentoring from the protégé's perspective is my all-encompassing line of research at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. I strive to keep mentoring at the heart of all I do. I am on task, not procrastinating, but well into my research to determine what constitutes a mentoring mindset in the protégé. I am spending quality time preparing to teach. My favorite class, Mentoring for Educational Leadership, is now taught in a blended/online format, but it is important to be face to face with the students for the introduction sessions and the cognitive coaching sessions. I have participated in professional development to enhance my skills in online teaching. As a part of my ongoing research, I am seeking additional feedback on the Mentoring course, following up on a number of former students to see how they are using what they learned/retained from the course about protegeship. Jenny

and I are continuing to give our joint "seek a mentor" assignment, and looking for new insights with it.

Creating a vision of the desired future was the evidence that we wanted to change our behaviors as professors. We committed to take on new tasks and habits of mind aimed at enhancing our own personal and professional development. Fink (2003), commenting on his extensive work with higher education faculty, would affirm us, as he notes the following:

It is my experience and belief that nearly all faculty have deep inner dreams of what they would like their teaching to be like – and those dreams are significantly different from their ordinary, everyday experiences in the classroom. If some way could be found to encourage faculty to dream their dreams and to have a realistic hope of making these dreams a reality, they would have the basis they need for saying, "Yes, it is worthwhile for me to invest in learning how to be a better teacher" (p. 8).

To summarize, the reflection and visioning exercise provided the framework for us to imagine ourselves in a different place - a more satisfying and fulfilling place - in our work with students in the classroom, as well as in some areas of our personal and professional endeavors.

Identifying the Gap and the Goals

The next step in the process was to determine the gap between where we perceived ourselves to be presently and where we eventually wanted to be, and to create a Gap Analysis chart, which included statements about what needed to be done in order to close the gap between "now" and "the desired future." We were instructed to put a numerical rating on where we judged ourselves to be in current competency, with "1" being low competency, and "5" being high competency. Our individual Gap Analyses follow.

Jenny's Gap Analysis

Competency	Current Competency Level (low) 1-5 (high)	Competencies to be Developed
Connect protégé prep to internship	3	Ability to maintain focus on big picture development of students
Actively seek feedback on student progress as protégés – don't think I know enough about what students are learning	2	Develop additional ways beyond course evals to seek feedback from students on the protégé prep aspect of the program
Use feedback to adapt instruction on protégé development	2	Figure out how to ask the right questions and adapt that to student learning needs.
Focus on teaching protégé development	3	Ability to prioritize my new ideas
Knowledge about Scholarship of Teaching and Learning	2	Read more and apply to my work
Balance	2	Intentionally attend to <u>every</u> responsibility I assume. Develop capacity to back off from some responsibilities I have now. Accept responsibility I have for myself to take care of health, emotional well being, spiritual health, creativity.

Linda's Gap Analysis

Competency Area	Current Competency Level (1-low -5-high)	Competency to be Developed
Stay on task with research project on protégé's mentoring mindset	2	Daily reading of background literature; Setting aside weekly time to attend to details of the new research project; begin interviews in fall.
Give quality time preparing to teach- demonstrate a quest for excellence	3	Prepare syllabi at least two weeks before class; Read the texts thoroughly; Reflect; Read Dee Fink's book on <i>Creating Significant Learning Experiences</i> , follow his model
Teach Mentoring class blended/online	3	Develop student engagement strategies other than just "Discussion Boards"; Attend UAB training
Follow up with students on their perceived protégéship skills	3	Survey former students; assess the retention of essential protégéship skills
Seek new insights into old "Seek a Mentor" assignment	1	Find time with Jenny to reflect & re-evaluate assignment; both use Mentee's guide, decide which parts; find way to do a longitudinal follow-up; Continue to refine Protegeship Framework

The process of reflecting, visioning, and creating a gap analysis was a valuable endeavor for us. The time we took to engage in this inquiry is evidence of our commitment to grow as professors for the ultimate benefit of our students.

Synthesis and Next Steps

A comparison of our individual gap analyses indicated that we have both similar and different goals. We each have goals that are personal in nature. For example, Linda has a goal to stay on task in conducting her current research project, and Jenny has a goal of achieving better balance in her life for emotional, spiritual, and physical health. Each of us has a personal goal to learn something new – Linda to read Fink's (2003) book on *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* in college classrooms and to take a course on improving her online teaching, and Jenny to read more in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning field.

We also see that we have congruent goals pertaining to taking our work with protégé development to the next level. We both want to find ways to obtain better quality feedback from our students on the effectiveness of our efforts to teach the skills of protégéship. Both of us want to spend time reflecting together on the common assignment that we have been giving our students, titled "Seek a Mentor." We want to dialogue about the value of this assignment, discuss how it might be revised based on student feedback and our observations, and determine how to enhance the experience for the students.

In order to work on the goals that we have in common, we created S.M.A.R.T. goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) and action plans for

implementation. Then we pledged to hold each other accountable for the attainment of those goals, keeping in regular contact through email, phone, and Skype. Our S.M.A.R.T. goals follow:

Linda and Jenny's S.M.A.R.T. Goals on Protégé Preparation
S.M.A.R.T. – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound

PROCESS	RESULT
If this takes place....	Then this will happen...
If we find a way to get better feedback from our students.....	we can adjust our teaching so that we facilitate more significant learning experiences.
If we re-examine our "Seek a Mentor" assignment.....	we will provide a highly authentic activity for our students that will also achieve our goal of preparing them well for future mentoring relationships.

Rationale: If we collaborate on teaching protégé development, then we can expect to learn more as teachers than we would if we worked individually.

PROCESS ACTION PLAN

GOAL	TARGET	MEASURE
Deepen understanding of process by which graduate students develop capacities of protégéship	More explicit indicators of knowledge, skills and dispositions of protégéship	A Revised Protégéship Framework
Improved ways of obtaining feedback from graduate students	Develop multiple ways to survey students at various times in their careers	New surveys developed; Plan for administering at various points identified
Create new instructional materials to revitalize instruction in protégéship	Develop new instructional materials based on student feedback and our reflection	Develop at least one new instructional tool or strategy

Goals, Timelines, and Products

Goal	Target Date for Accomplishment	Product
Separately and collaboratively analyze framework against perceptions of student learning	January 2011	Analysis of framework
Determine points to survey graduate students on protégéship and develop surveys based upon framework development	June 2011	Surveys
Use new understandings on protégé development to create new instructional materials	August 2011	Minimum of one instructional tool or strategy for each of us to use in program

(adapted from Conzemius, A. & O'Neill, J. (2005). *The Power of SMART Goals: Using Goals to Improve Student Learning*)

Summary

The process of collaborating to improve our teaching has been both personally and professionally rewarding. We delved into the literature related to mentoring to find a process that we could adapt to renew our teaching focus, both individually and collectively. From that work, we began to plan ways we could move forward to achieve our common purpose of more fully preparing graduate students to reach their potential through mentoring relationships. We went to the literature on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), reflection, and effective college teaching to assist us our inquiry. We renewed our commitment to work together knowing that each of us has benefitted immensely over the years from our personal and professional collaborations. We now have a new perspective on our work, and specific goals that will guide our efforts in the next year. Our hopes are high. The best is yet to come.

We propose that there is potential for this process to be used by other professors at a similar stage of ennui with their teaching. Based upon reflection and collaboration, we realized that our teaching had grown stale. Using the same advice we give to our students about the importance of self-understanding and self-examination, we “went to the balcony,” reflected individually, then came together to create a new path. We feel a renewed sense of commitment and excitement about our teaching, and our hope is that others might find the same by following our model. Our advice is to reflect upon the possibilities, take your own “balcony” perspective on what you are currently doing, courageously face the realities of your current practice, articulate your vision for a more ideal future for yourself as a teacher, and develop S.M.A.R.T. goals to guide you. You may decide, as we did, to collaborate with a colleague in this endeavor. Whether tackling this important journey alone or with someone else, we trust you will find it rewarding. In closing, we share the advice of Parker Palmer (1998):

If you love your work that much - and many teachers do - the only way to get out of trouble (when teaching has gone stale, students don't respond as you'd like) is to go deeper in. We must enter, not evade, the tangles of teaching so we can understand them better and negotiate them with more grace, not only to guard our own spirits but also to serve our students well (p. 2).

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Appendix A

Framework for Protégé Preparation

Characteristics for Effective Protégé ship for School Leaders	
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic understanding of the teaching process Basic understanding of school leadership Understanding of various types of mentoring Awareness of potentials and pitfalls of mentoring
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goal setting Communication skills Capacity to seek out and act upon feedback Reflection

Dispositions	Self-knowledge Willingness to learn. Demonstration of initiative Maintaining confidentiality Awareness of ethical considerations
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Adapted from Daresh & Playko, 1995; Mullen, 2005; Portner, 2002; Searby & Tripses, 2006; Zachary, 2000.

Appendix B

"Seek a Mentor" Assignment

Mentoring Reflection Paper

Finding and working effectively with a mentor can greatly enhance your leadership effectiveness. The purpose of this assignment is to develop the necessary skills to seek out and benefit from mentoring relationships. At some point in your career, you will hopefully give back to new leaders and mentor others.

You will identify a leadership skill/ learning goals you want to develop, seek out a mentor who has the skill to help you develop, conduct an initial mentoring session, and write a reflective paper on the experience.

Learning objectives:

1. Students will self-reflect on leadership qualities they want to develop within themselves.
2. Students will understand and appreciate mentoring relationships.
3. Students will demonstrate the necessary skills to be an effective mentee/ protégé.

Process to follow:

1. Identify a leadership skill or trait that you want to develop and goals for a mentoring relationship.
2. Identify a leader whom you admire for the skill or trait you have identified.
3. Contact that person and request one hour of his/her time to go through a mock initial mentor/mentee agreement discussion. Stress that the obligation is to meet with you for one hour only. Go through the process as if you were actually going to have a mentoring relationship (because ideally, you WILL continue this relationship). Use the "Mentor Agreement Template" to guide the discussion. Plan to include a discussion of "Assumptions" and "Ground Rules."
4. Conduct the one-hour meeting.
5. Write a 3-5 page reflective paper on the experience. Address these topics/ questions when writing the paper:
 - Describe the person you asked to mentor you tell and why you chose that person.
 - Describe how you contacted your mentor
 - Describe the meeting in its entirety (include the ground rules you established)
 - Discuss the goals that you had identified for your mentoring relationship.
 - Describe the assumptions you both held and talked about.
 - Describe your feelings about the session.

- Describe what you learned about a mentoring relationship for yourself.
- Describe what you learned about your leadership potential through the assignment.
- From your experience so far, what obstacles might you encounter in negotiating a future mentoring relationship (with this individual or another chosen mentor)?
- How might you overcome those obstacles?
- Conclude by discussing what you learned from this experience. Do you plan to continue a relationship with this mentor? If so, what plans were made?

Criteria for grading:

- Response is clear, focused, and accurate. All questions are addressed in the paper. Relevant points are made with good support. Reflection indicates solid understanding of leadership strengths and areas for growth as well as the process of initiating a mentoring relationship. Good connections are drawn and important insights are evident. Masterful (A)
- Response is clear and somewhat focused. Reflection reveals some understanding of leadership potential. Reflection on the process of initiating a mentoring relationship may not include subtleties of interpersonal interactions. Most of the questions are addressed. Support of points is limited. Connections are not consistently clear, leading to a few insights. Acceptable (B)
- Response misses the point, contains inaccurate information, or otherwise demonstrates lack of understanding of the assignment and/or basic concepts involved in mentoring. Points are unclear, support is missing and few/or no insights are included. Novice (C or below)

*Please note that grammar, spelling, punctuation, and syntax errors could result in lowered points.