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# Mentoring in Advanced Practice Nursing: The Use of Metaphor in Concept Exploration

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## Abstract

The concept of mentoring has gained increasing importance in assisting advanced practice nurses to reach professional excellence. Beyond role modeling, mentoring implies an experienced individual taking an active role in the professional and personal development of a less experienced person. Attributes of the mentor-protégé relationship, with attendant benefits to both, are described. The concept of mentoring, either in the professional or academic setting, is explored through examining the appropriate choice of metaphors, citing toxic exemplars. Metaphorical illustrations are applied to the concept of mentoring as it relates to the nurturing of advanced practice nurses and the development of the professional discipline.

Key words: mentoring, metaphor, advanced practice nursing

## INTRODUCTION

All the flowers of all tomorrows are in the seeds of today—American Proverb

All roles in advanced practice nursing have common elements. Among these elements are the acquisition of special knowledge and skills beyond basic levels. In the learning process, many advanced practice nurses (APNs) are matched with clinicians, researchers, and/or educators who model expertise in a given specialty area. Because of the clinical nature of advanced practice nursing, nurses frequently supervise novice practitioners or, conversely, are seeking experts to provide guidance through mentoring. It is difficult, through a purely analytic process, to anticipate the perils and pitfalls that can occur in intricate relationships. The use of metaphors, which link the essence of the unknown through analogy with the known, stimulates a different type of mental process which allows one to grasp ideas that are not comprehensible in linear logic.<sup>1</sup> Multiple levels of meaning about a phenomena can be evoked through the use of metaphor, which enables the identification of critical features within complexity, thus rendering the complex comprehensible.<sup>2</sup> Metaphors can provide a way of looking at things by which new perspectives evolve.<sup>3</sup> Through the use of metaphor, the following article explores the concept of mentoring and describes some of the pitfalls

of toxic relationships to be avoided by either mentors or protégés.

In the arena of advanced practice nursing, precepting is a term commonly used to describe the relationship between a student clinician and an experienced clinician who supervises and evaluates the student's clinical practicum. In the best of experiences, the preceptor facilitates

the student's clinical learning, acts as a role model, promotes role socialization, encourages independence, and promotes self-confidence which leads to clinical competency.<sup>4</sup> In other circumstances, the preceptor merely facilitates and supervises the student's clinical experience, taking a less active or no role in the student's professional development. Clinical preceptors are generally assigned to students by faculty to provide clinical learning experiences relative to the student's selected advanced practice role. Some matches between student, clinical site, and preceptor are more successful than others. Past experience, clinical expertise, level of development, personal characteristics, and clinical setting are equally important, interacting elements that influence the goodness of fit between the student and the preceptor.

Mentoring is described as an interaction between an experienced and an inexperienced member of an

organization, with the experienced individual taking an active role in the professional development of the junior person.<sup>5</sup> Inherent in the concept of mentoring is a personal, one-to-one, nurturing relationship between the mentor and the protégé.<sup>6</sup> Mentoring relationships can and do occur in circumstances other than clinical practicum arrangements. Mentors, as opposed to preceptors, are most often self-selected, have no set boundaries of termination, and may be any individual who serves as a personal support to another's professional development. Advanced practice nurses may select mentors related to education, research, clinical practice, and/or professional activities. Educators and clinical preceptors may become mentors to students on their road to professional actualization. Conversely, mentors may be neither educators nor preceptors, but others who develop a mutual, open, supportive, and trusting relationship with the novice in the search of professional excellence. Relationships such as this are unique among selected individuals and not everyone is fortunate enough to experience a mentoring relationship.

The concept of mentoring has its roots in ancient Greek mythology. In Homer's *Odyssey*, King Odysseus left home to participate in the siege of Troy. In his 10 year absence, Odysseus appointed his good friend Mentor to educate and guide his son Telemachus. Mentor nurtured, protected, taught, and guided Telemachus to his rightful place in Greek society. The concept of "mentoring" was thus conceived. Throughout history, there are many instances of the more experienced guiding, teaching, and nurturing those who are less experienced. Over the years, many trades and professions used a master-apprentice relationship to provide guidance, direction, advice, and practical knowledge of a master-craft. Although the master-apprentice approach has largely been abandoned in modern education, the concept of mentoring has persisted throughout time.

Mentoring is defined as a process by which persons of rank, achievement, and prestige, instruct, counsel, guide, and facilitate the development of others identified as protégés.<sup>7</sup> Historically, mentors were senior persons in terms of age and experience who provided the protégé with information, advice, and emotional support over a significant period of time. The relationship was described as a substantial commitment by both parties, and mentors also used their influence to further the career of the protégé.<sup>8</sup> In today's fast-paced age of informatics and telecommunication, mentors may actually be younger in age than the protégé but considerably more experienced in a given area. Unlike the

wise old sage of a bygone era, today's mentors may wear many faces, and individuals may have more than one mentor.

To know someone here or there with whom you can feel there is understanding in spite of distances or thoughts unexpressed—that can make life a garden—Goethe

### DEFINING THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE MENTORING CONCEPT

Yoder (1990) describes the concept of mentoring as having three critical attributes: (1) a structural role, (2) an organizational role, and (3) a career development relationship.<sup>9</sup> Stewart and Krueger (1996) expanded on Yoder's findings to include six critical attributes based on an extensive review of the current literature: (1) a teaching-learning process; (2) a reciprocity or mutuality; (3) a career development relationship; (4) a knowledge or competence difference between novice and expert; (5) a time duration of several years; and (6) a resonating phenomenon resulting in those who have been mentored, mentoring others.<sup>10</sup> Not only are the critical attributes of mentoring needed to define a mentoring relationship, but a positive synergy or "chemistry" must exist between individuals in the relationship.<sup>11</sup> Facilitated mentoring, or matching the novice with an expert, may or may not result in a mentoring relationship. Matches, not unlike some marriages, do not always work. Unstructured or unfacilitated mentoring occurs when the novice and the expert are inadvertently drawn together, usually the result of some mutual interest or attraction and a unique, reciprocal, trusting relationship develops over an unspecified period of time. Both the mentor and protégé learn, grow and develop through the relationship, motivating and stimulating each other in their respective roles. Because of the chemistry of the mentoring relationship, most experiences are personal, intense, and emotionally charged. The mentor has a stake in the future of the protégé, and there is always an element of risk associated with intense relationships.<sup>4,6</sup> Mutual respect, trust, and open communication are essential to successful mentor-protégé relationships. The trust level must be such that both mentor and protégé can share their professional and personal shortcomings as well as their successes. Self-esteem must be sufficient to share not only those experiences that were successful but also those that failed. An open analysis of failures will assist both individuals not to repeat mistakes. Functions of good mentors are listed in Table 1.4.<sup>12,13</sup>

Table 1. Functions of Good Mentors

- Demonstrating role expertise and promoting role socialization
- Providing a vision by role modeling, offering a map, suggesting a new language, and providing a mirror
- Providing a reflective practice that enables the protégé to determine how and why decisions are made and how these decision influence positive outcomes
- Sharing values and customs
- Providing support and structure which involves listening, befriending, expressing positive expectations, and making the experience special
- Challenging the protégé by constructing hypotheses and engaging in spirited discussions
- Setting high standards and demanding performance
- Empowering the protégé to reach autonomy that comes from competency, self-confidence, and responsibility
- Opening doors, facilitating important contacts

### **BENEFITS TO THE MENTOR**

The benefits of being a mentor lie in the quality of the mentoring relationship. Mentors who are successful find themselves ultimately rewarded by the growth and achievement of their protégés. Good mentors are motivated to keep current and benefit from feedback by the protégé; there is a mutuality in the sharing of knowledge and information. Protégés may also assist mentors with their work, learning from mentors but also providing a service. The novice researcher or the novice practitioner working with and assisting a more experienced colleague is illustrative of such a relationship. Lastly, the mentor benefits by developing a positive, long-term personal/professional relationship as the protégé achieves autonomy. If mentoring relationships

are a resonating phenomena, then the mentor has the knowledge and the personal satisfaction that the protégé will offer similar support to others in the future.

To teach is to learn twice—Joseph Joubert

### **TOXIC MENTORS: A CAUTIONARY TALE**

In a perfect world, only good mentors exist. However, in reality, negative, detrimental, or “toxic” relationships abound. Toxic mentoring experiences are by no means restricted to nursing but occur in many disciplines. Considering casually related experiences of several years, the authors used some techniques of qualitative research in the content analysis and categorization of toxic mentoring. Mentoring should be considered an art rather than a science. As befits art, the analysis takes the literary tropes of metaphor and analogy, thus obscuring any personal identification of the discussants. The use of metaphor allows for communication in ways that direct description does not. Metaphors allow for the understanding of one kind of experience or event in terms of another.<sup>14</sup> Human thought processes are largely metaphorical. Based on linguistic evidence, most of our conceptual systems are metaphorical in nature and many of these conceptual systems govern our everyday functions in an unconscious fashion. Negative metaphors are used to illustrate common pitfalls, which result in toxic mentoring.

### **ERRORS OF THE FIRST ORDER: IMPROPER CHOICE OF METAPHOR**

Three inappropriate metaphors are chosen for the icon of mentorship. These are the metaphors of the sculptor, the “show-biz” mom, and the master-slave apprentice. All share the common fault of static asymmetry and may exemplify some mentor-protégé relationships in advanced practice nursing.

The sculptor approach has its origins in older models of childrearing where the parent was responsible for molding the child. John B. Watson, an influential pediatrician of the 1920’s, issued the dictum of the blank slate: “give me a dozen healthy infants, well formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in, and I will guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant chief, and yes even beggarman and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and the race of his ancestors”.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, ideas that suggest sculpting individuals don’t die easily and this theme still emerges in relationships of the superior sculpting the apprentice. This view does not credit the protégé as a growing entity with a free will or acknowledge the mutuality found in a positive mentoring relationship.

The show-biz mom also takes its exemplar from parenting.

This model describes the mother as the superior, with the child in a dependent, helpless role that is submissive to the parent. The mother, like the sculptor, shapes and molds the child with the intent to create an extension of herself. This model is frequently observed in mothers who engineer their child's celebrity and are often viewed by others as inappropriate and overbearing. In this toxic relationship, the mother is enmeshed with the child and the boundaries between mother and child are unclear. Conflict is intense if the child attempts to separate and differentiate from the parent. Often there is rupture of the parent-child relationship as the child emerges from the experience. Media reports of child music and film stars firing their parent-manager are common. In similar relationships between mentors and protégés, the protégé may actually have to physically, then emotionally separate from the mentor to achieve differentiation: to become an autonomous entity with separate boundaries and a well-developed sense of self. Usually relationships of this type are peppered with over criticism and subtle belittlement. The self-confidence of the protégé is eroded and the fear of separating from the mentor undermines independence. Like the show-biz mom, the mentor tightens the control as the protégé attempts to emancipate. Illustrative of this relationship, one student stated "I need a mentor, not a mother who smothers". Also, the protégé may be unknowingly set up to fail in an impossible situation in which the experience only strengthens the dependency relationship.

The master-slave metaphor is illustrative of the most abusive of toxic relationships. The superior, in a position of unchallenged power, controls the experience of the protégé. An example is the faculty-student relationship, whereby the faculty uses the student as a source of free labor. The student is not complete until the work of the faculty mentor is completed as well. Students may be delayed in graduation and pursuit of their own career goals because of the selfishness of the faculty. Even more abusive are faculty members who claim the student's work as their own for personal advancement. Students who find themselves caught in the master-slave relationship often feel helpless to extract themselves from the situation without fear of penalty.

## **MENTORING IN NURSING: THE GARDEN OF GOOD OR EVIL?**

### **ERRORS OF THE SECOND ORDER: ERRORS WITHIN THE METAPHOR**

As a metaphor, the gardener and the garden are symbolic of a dynamic interaction between two distinct living entities

such as the mentor and the protégé. As a basis for this metaphor, it is important to note that the garden has some dependency on the gardener, and the gardener must consider the unique properties of each plant and the various forces of nature. Even in an effort to cultivate the best garden, there are several errors that gardeners can make. As is true with human relationships, there are endless ways in which successful relationships can be achieved but a few clear ways in which mistakes can be made. The following metaphors outline some common errors that occur among gardeners as illustrative of mentors. These are classified as errors of commission and omission. Table 2 illustrates "Tips for the Gardener" to avoid these common errors.

Table 2. Tips for the Gardener

- Don't overwater or overfeed
- Don't overcrowd young plants
- Prune as needed
- Allow plants to grow and develop at their own pace
- Fertilize and replant as necessary; don't give too little too late
- Weed frequently
- Appreciate your garden and each individual plant
- Share your garden with others

### **ERRORS OF COMMISSION**

The most common gardening error, especially with tender young seedlings, is overwatering and overfeeding. This type of "overkill" results in root rot or burning the tender roots of young plants. Developing a strong root structure is essential for building the strength and health of plants and is considered fundamental knowledge for the gardener. The novice gardener, while well intentioned, frequently over-nurtures plants. Novices do not understand that a certain privation forces roots to grow and extend in search of food and water. Strong root systems develop from appropriate use of root stimulant and placement in pots with adequate room to grow, while also being attentive and sensitive to those plants that need to be somewhat rootbound. Closely related to overkill is the overprotective gardener who greenhouses his plants without allowing them to develop hardiness. Mentors who provide too much help, advice, direction, and

guidance are guilty of overkill. In their zest to be helpful, these mentors do not allow protégés to struggle through problems and even experience failure. Such experiences will facilitate the development of problems solving skills that will be essential in resolving difficult situations in the future. Similar to plants, overkill produces protégés who are lacking in hardiness.

The stronger the breeze, the stronger the tress--Unknown

A second error of commission is that of impatience with the normal course of growth.

Impatient gardeners can actually harm plants by forcing accelerated growth. The Runes, a source of ancient wisdom, describes the farmer who was so anxious to have his plants grow well that he went into the garden at night and pulled the young plants by their tender leaves in an effort to accelerate growth. Forcing plants beyond their nature often results in their damage and premature demise. Gardeners who fail to understand that an important part of growth takes place underground and that plants need to put out complex root systems, develop weak plants and poor gardens. Ultimately the health of the plant is based on the health of the root system. Similarly, good mentors will guide protégés to develop a network of professional relationships grounded in scientific and theoretical principles that will positively influence their career growth. Mentors who force protégés to perform beyond their level of expertise may inadvertently precipitate professional failure.

A good word is like a good tree whose root is firmly fixed and whose tops is in the sky—The Koran

### **ERRORS OF OMISSION**

The most common error of omission is to neglect plants by underwatering and underfeeding: basic neglect and failure to nurture. Although some plants are able to survive neglect, their leaves and blossoms are generally smaller and the plant is not as productive as a well-nourished plant. Neglect rarely produces prize-winning plants or accomplished protégés.

A serious error of omission occurs when the gardener fails to distinguish between the weeds and the flowers. The indiscriminate gardener fertilizes weeds as well as flowers, which in turn, overtake the garden. Young seedlings often need protection from overly aggressive weeds that may overtake and usurp them producing a garden that is neither beautiful nor productive. Mentors need to distinguish between the flowers and the weeds among their protégés.

Not all protégés, nor all their characteristics, should be mentored or encouraged. Protégés who are unethical, incompetent, or untrustworthy should not be nurtured. Weeding out these protégés might be necessary and beneficial to the profession of advanced practice nursing.

Closely related to failure to distinguish between flowers and weeds is the failure to differentiate among the plants in the garden and not to recognize the unique needs of each plant. Some plants thrive in sun while others prefer shade. Treating all plants exactly alike results in a mediocre garden in which some plants wilt and die as they are placed in conditions that do not promote growth. Mentors should individualize techniques designed to promote the development of the protégé. Standardized teaching methodologies and ordinary clinical precepting are not considered mentoring but fall under the rubric of commercial farms rather than carefully tended gardens in which flowers and plants flourish.

The final error of some gardeners is the failure to appreciate or to share the beauty of the garden with others. Plants deteriorate if not picked and used. The expert gardener loves the garden, takes great pleasure in the beauty of the plants, and wants others to share the experience. Appreciation and pleasure actually seem to create more beautiful gardens and some believe that plants respond positively to true appreciation. The expert gardener wants the garden to outshine the gardener and continue to flourish. Similarly, the experienced mentor takes great joy in the accomplishments of the protégé and draws others with mutual interests to develop a similar relationship. Some areas of professional practice are exemplary with teacher/mentors associated with talented protégés who subsequently become distinguished peers and colleagues.

Those who love their garden have a very special treasure—for they have found their own private paradise—Unknown

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The art of mentoring needs to be taught to advanced practice nurses who will cultivate professional relationships with others that stimulate the desire for clinical excellence. Where better to demonstrate mentoring than in graduate nursing programs and clinical settings which foster critical thinking and theory-based clinical practice? Professionalism is predicated on mentoring advanced practice nurses who are autonomous yet experience mutual reciprocity and collegiality in relationships.

Because mentoring is a resonating phenomenon, the protégé will eventually separate from the mentor and move on to mentor others. Thus, the mentoring process will continue to flourish and enrich the profession with superior blossoms. Mentoring nurses in search of professional excellence is necessary for the infusion of new knowledge and skills that serve as the scientific basis for advanced practice nursing. The mentoring process could be analogous to a bouquet of flowers. Select the best plants, nurture and cultivate them, and share them with others. Above all enjoy the garden.

Who loves a garden still his Eden keeps - A.B. Alcott

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