


What Is This Thing Called Mentoring?

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Abstract

Mentorship is an important academic formative activity with origins in medieval universities. It represents a form of collaborative self-learning that connects a professor with a student in the pursuit of knowledge. In the mentoring process, university life is replicated. The mentor needs the disciple to project their academic vocation beyond themselves. The student needs the mentor to academically channel their concerns and abilities. Although they need each other, their interest is selfless because their goal is knowledge, which transcends both of them.

Keywords: University activities; teacher-student relationship; academic training; double contingency; operational closure.

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Happily reminiscing about Cole Porter and Willie Nelson.

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Attempting to put into writing something that has been done without labeling, as part of university work, produces something akin to the amazement of Monsieur Jourdain in Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, who delightedly discovers that, without knowing it, he has always spoken in prose.

This surprise is related to the fact that mentorship — being someone's mentor — is intrinsically linked to the university, yet it is difficult to consider it as a third activity, separate from teaching and research. Once the initial perplexity is overcome, it becomes clear that mentorship is a phenomenon inherent to university activity, though it cuts across it. Thus, mentor and disciple naturally engage in both teaching and research. Therefore, mentorship finds its origins, meaning, and existence within the university.

Broadly described, the medieval university was a brotherhood consisting of masters and disciples united in a shared process of learning. Both groups formed a community voluntarily oriented towards perfection in knowledge. They were brought together by a thirst for knowledge, and each academic degree marked both the progress achieved and the entry into the segment formed by those who held that degree.

But the degree obtained did not only imply recognition from peers; it also entailed the commitment to help others follow the same path, which was largely self-learning. While it involved climbing a hierarchy, this hierarchy did not translate into power because its peak — the ultimate goal — was not dominance but true knowledge. It was not a teacher-disciple relationship based on the particular interests of either party, but rather on the collaboration of both in pursuit of truth.

Medieval academic life, although characterized by a hierarchy of unequal knowledge, lacked bureaucratic organization. The academic shared the creative pursuit of research with their disciples. Knowledge was the desired goal, not a consumable good.

In the medieval university, there was no selection process for admission. Instead, there was a self-selection based on the pursuit of knowledge. Commitment was assumed and not strictly binding. One could freely join or leave that university community.

Much is owed by mentoring to this medieval idea of collaborative self-learning. Both the master and the disciple increase their knowledge because it is neither a solitary effort nor the subjugation of one to the other in pursuit of a selfish goal. Instead, they cooperate for the advancement of knowledge.

In mentoring, a learning community is also formed. The professor knows more, perhaps much more, than the student. They are older and have been able to dedicate years to study. However, they are not more intelligent. Talent does not grow with age; only knowledge does. The student has a thirst for knowledge, and their time is long and wide because it is infinite.¹ Their youth perceives the end as very distant. Thus, mentoring mirrors the selfless interest of one in the other. Both need and care for each other, but neither is interested in using the other for personal gain. In some way, it resembles the relationship between the Little Prince and the Fox (Saint-Exupéry, 1943).

1. Everyone knows that young people live their time as if it had no end.

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From this simple reflection, I want to talk about my own experience. Most of the time, it has been students who, after serving as assistants in some courses I taught, expressed interest in deepening their knowledge in that subject. Other times, the reflective behavior of one of these assistants caught my attention. In all these situations, I have thought that I might be in the presence of a great sociologist in the making, one who will significantly advance the discipline, and that I am called to contribute to their formation. I must express with great satisfaction that I have not been mistaken; I have mentored sociologists who are now trendsetters and, of course, highly respected mentors themselves.

The academic semester allows for and requires cooperation. The assistant shows initiative and contributes to the students' learning, who in turn evaluate their teaching abilities. However, the assistant also evaluates their own experience to decide whether to continue assisting the same course or not. As they continue, they rise within the group of assistants and increase their mastery of the subjects. They can suggest bibliography and propose questions for quizzes and exams. Their assistance can improve, demonstrating their learning and commitment to the course. In these cases, my relationship with that assistant has deepened. We have conversations about the subjects taught and the authors covered in the course. We exchange ideas on possible ways to improve the course, topics that can be incorporated, expanded upon, or set aside. In this way, the assistant's contribution becomes significant, and a mentoring relationship is gradually established.

Something similar has occurred when I have posted a notice seeking assistants for a research project. Usually, students who stand out for their sociological vocation apply. They demonstrate a curiosity that needs to be satisfied with the research results. They excitedly discuss unexpected data and seek ways to interpret it, propose bold hypotheses, and generate questions for other projects. Also with them, a mentor-disciple relationship seems to develop. Another common way to establish the mentor-disciple relationship from the student's side has been to seek my advice on bibliography, postgraduate studies, areas of specialization, or other concerns. Others have approached me to offer their help pro bono in research or in finding supporting material for teaching. Some have brought papers they have written and have asked for my feedback. In these situations, the students' interest in pursuing an academic career has been more evident.

Finally, there have been instances where I have noticed, through their participation in classes, that a student possesses intellectual qualities suitable for an academic career. When this has happened, I have been the one to approach the student to offer them a teaching or research assistantship, which allows me to evaluate their capabilities and interest in academic activities.

Once the framework of cooperation is established, it becomes possible for the interest to expand, increasing tasks or generating new opportunities for collaboration and joint work. This can include preparing a new course with greater involvement from the assistant, hiring them as a research assistant, or collaborating on consultancy work. It can also be an invitation to collaborate in the preparation of a written work. Often, the invitation begins with a contract (paid or unpaid) as an assistant in the preparation of an article or book, which, depending on the dedication to the task, the degree of interest shown, and the contributions made, can lead to co-authorship of the text in question. All these options allow us to properly speak of a mentoring relationship.

Chance plays a significant role in the development of a mentor-disciple relationship. Not all students have the same interests, and not all professors seek apprentices. Often, it is not

a rational decision but rather serendipity that brings together those who neither sought nor desired to meet, yet who need each other. An example given by a professor in class might open a window through which a student believes they see the answer to their questions. It can also be a question posed by a student that closely aligns with the professor's research interests.

In my experience, being someone's mentor is a long conversation with another person in which both — mentor and disciple — co-evolve. In other words, this conversation causes both the mentor and the disciple to change in coordination, like a dance. Neither can know, at the start of the communication, what the path of their co-evolution will be or where it will end. The double contingency is dynamic and therefore difficult to predict. It is impossible to convince someone who does not want to be convinced. Only those who are already enthusiastic can be inspired.

Not all students seek a mentor. Some acquire the knowledge they need in the classes shared with their peers. They progress through the courses required by the curriculum and receive their professional degree. They never needed a mentor and never even imagined that a mentoring relationship existed. They wouldn't have been interested, even if they had known of its existence.

Not all assistants are interested in an academic career. Many want to become good professionals to work in private companies, non-profit organizations, or state agencies dedicated to public policy. Since I have devoted part of my time to consulting on Organizational Development issues, I have often had to support very capable students in this professional line. In these cases, I frequently invite them to collaborate on a consultancy project where they can discover their true vocation: professional or academic. I am convinced that both branches of sociology are valid options for those who want to specialize as a "practicing sociologist" (Stark, 2023, pp. 7–8).

There have been times when I have regretted that individuals with great potential for academic life did not pursue it. They neither wished to continue being assistants nor establish a mentoring relationship with me. Their departure saddened me, but occasionally I have learned of their success, which has filled me with undeserved pride, as I did not do much to help them become such outstanding professionals.

I have also had a few cases in the opposite direction. Students from other fields have directly asked me to guide them because, after taking an elective course I taught for their degree, they believed they had discovered their true vocation was to be sociologists. One such case involved an engineer who, during an MBA course I taught on Organizational Development, approached me to ask about the possibilities of pursuing a sociology degree starting from the undergraduate level. He had just gotten married and had convinced his wife to support his studies. I spent a long time meeting with him twice a week to dissuade him from his idea of abandoning his successful career. In the end, I managed to convince him to continue working as an engineer and pursue a postgraduate diploma in Organizational Development, with a strong emphasis on organizational culture. After completing this postgraduate program, his company sent him to Japan, where he developed successfully and eventually became the manager in charge of Asia. A few years ago, he wrote to me, calling me *Sensei*.

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I too had mentors.² I also allowed myself to be guided by professors who were motivated, who seemed to enjoy their subjects, and who possessed that rare and valuable humility to acknowledge when they didn't know something and wanted to use their ignorance to enjoy the discoveries they sought to make. The shared thirst for knowledge allowed us to savor each drop that quenched it. Having a mentor is an unforgettable experience. A professor, who seems to have little time, gifts part of that precious good to the student. They consider the student a member of their community, ask for their opinions, and offer their own. This makes the student feel part of an endeavor that transcends both of them. In this way, the mentoring relationship particularizes both the mentor and the disciple.

I wish to share some anecdotes that I have never forgotten and that allow me to illustrate how my mentors supported me in my academic life.

When I was an undergraduate student in my second year of my degree, Prof. Dr. Domingo Sánchez invited me to be his teaching assistant in the course I had just completed. I gratefully remember the time he devoted to encouraging my academic vocation, reinforcing my self-confidence, and assuring me that I would be able to overcome the barriers that my shyness made seem insurmountable: "The worst that can happen is that the students don't understand, and then you'll have the chance to explain the material to them again, something they'll appreciate even if they still don't get it," he said to me with an ironic smile.

Years later, when I wanted to pursue doctoral studies, it seemed advisable to do so in the USA, since my only proficiency in languages other than Spanish was limited to reading texts in English. In 1976, after many months spent applying to doctoral programs during a time before laptops and the internet, when everything relied on using airmail to receive forms and return them properly filled out, I was accepted. The process did not end there, however. With the acceptance in hand, I now had to apply to a funding foundation to secure funding for my studies. This second process was much faster. Within a few weeks, I was informed that I had secured the necessary funding. The only *sine qua non* condition was that I had to present a letter from the university where I worked, ensuring that my position would be available upon my return. This requirement was due to the fact that Chile was under military dictatorship at the time, and it was common for those who left the country to pursue postgraduate studies to face difficulties upon returning, as they lacked job placement opportunities. I believed that this final requirement would not be a problem. However, the official responsible for giving me that letter was afraid of being punished or facing unpleasant consequences for taking on that commitment. Despite all my efforts, I couldn't convince him. I lost the funding and had to give up on my dreams when I thought the path to realizing them was finally open.

As I left the office where my project and all the efforts I had made to make it successful had just failed, I ran into Prof. Dr. Luis Scherz, to whom I shared my frustrations. He had earned his doctorate at the University of Münster, and his Doktorvater was Helmut Schelsky. He immediately advised me to apply for a DAAD scholarship to pursue my doctorate in Germany: "But I don't know German," I told him. "Then you're going to have to learn," he replied with a smile.

I felt life return to me, and I began the new application process, this time for Germany.

Two years later, after completing the German course in Freiburg, I traveled to Bielefeld to meet Professor Niklas Luhmann and rent a place to live during my doctoral studies. I had

2. I remember my mentors with affection and nostalgia: Domingo Sánchez, Luis Scherz, Niklas Luhmann, and Humberto Maturana.

carefully planned my schedule, so as soon as I arrived at the University of Bielefeld, I went to the office responsible for international students to ask if they knew of any houses for rent. They gave me three addresses. After that, I went to meet for the first time with the person who would become my Doktorvater.

I had prepared a brief presentation of what I intended to research for my doctorate, but Professor Luhmann welcomed me with great simplicity. “We’ll have time for that later,” he told me. He offered me a cup of tea and asked if I had already rented a house. I told him I had three addresses, and he asked for them. He looked them over and told me that the closest one seemed very convenient, as it was next to the Botanischer Garten, which would be great for my daughters.

He immediately called the owner of the house and asked if we could go see it. Then he drove me to the house in his car, where he negotiated the rental terms on my behalf. The owner of the house was an academic from the university, and he was extremely impressed to see Niklas Luhmann at his home. I didn’t have to pay a security deposit, and they reserved the house for me until I arrived a month later. I also didn’t have to pay for the month I wouldn’t be living there. Needless to say, I stayed in that beautiful residence for the entirety of my doctorate.

The second anecdote I want to share is that when I handed Professor Luhmann the final version of my dissertation, he told me to come to his office fifteen days later to receive his feedback. On the appointed day, I went to his office feeling very nervous, and I was surprised that, although Professor Luhmann was usually very punctual, he arrived 30 minutes late that day. When he finally arrived, he apologized for the delay and immediately invited me to sit down. Without much preamble, he handed me my thesis with a smile, saying, “It’s very good, I have no major corrections.” My nerves vanished instantly, and I felt an overwhelming sense of relief... but I had no idea what was coming next. When I got back home, my wife came out to greet me and told me that Professor Luhmann had stopped by to let her know that my thesis was good. He had brought flowers for her and chocolates for my daughters.

Upon returning to Chile in March 1981, after completing my doctorate, I went to see Professor Humberto Maturana, whom I didn’t know, but I was interested in learning about his theory because shortly before concluding my thesis, my Doktorvater³ Niklas Luhmann had begun to use the concept of autopoiesis. In that first meeting, I asked Professor Maturana to teach me his theory, and he said: “I can’t. The only thing I can do is help you discover it yourself.” Although his response intrigued me, I accepted his conditions and spent a year and a half spending one afternoon a week in his laboratory. The rest of the week, I read extensive documents that Maturana gave me, which gradually became more comprehensible to me. In the end, I was able to understand what he meant. Since we are operationally closed systems, instructive interaction, understood as the transfer of information from one mind to another, is not possible. It cannot exist. Communication does not transmit anything; it only triggers (Luhmann would say: irritates) structurally determined changes in the “receiver”. Therefore, mentorship triggers sequential changes in the cognitive structure of the disciple, who thus discovers new ways of approaching knowledge and increases their academic abilities. There comes a moment when this structure contains the potential to trigger that change, which we could call mastery of what they wanted to learn. The disciple then experiences a real epiphany, which they recognize as the comprehension of the knowledge achieved.

3. In German universities, the professor guiding a doctoral thesis is referred to as a Doktorvater. This term captures the essence of a mentoring relationship that leads to that academic degree. However, it must be said that not all German professors deserve to be called by this title.

I could share many more stories about the experiences I had with my mentors, but I believe that the ones I've told — not only highlighting the great humanity of these remarkable teachers — demonstrate that a mentor's dedication goes beyond the academic realm.

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Both the progress of the joint work and the master's proposals modify the cognitive structure of the disciple, making new changes and new learning possible. Mentorship is not unidirectional, in the sense that only the disciple changes. Both mentor and disciple do. The mentor-disciple collaboration allows both to change as a result of the interaction. In fact, this happens in all interactions, such as a class where, as David Stark (2023) masterfully says at the beginning of every Ph.D. seminar: "I'm here to learn. The more you teach me and the more all of us can learn from each other, the better this course will be." (p. 8)

But mentorship is not just that long conversation between the disciple and the mentor that we talked about at the beginning. Often, the student wishes to continue their education by pursuing formal studies leading to a master's or doctoral degree. Although they have a relatively clear idea of what they want to study, they seek their mentor's advice about the universities and programs available.

As part of this shared endeavor, the mentor supports the disciple in continuing their academic career to obtain a doctoral degree. The mentor guides them in applying for scholarships, facilitating access to doctoral work, and opening up opportunities. Typically, this support includes consultations with the mentor's network and recommendation letters for the disciple's applications to scholarships and universities.

In any case, I have had to leave space for the disciple to develop autonomously, without imposing theories, authors, or topics. Even though these are moments when the student has sought and required my advice, I have had to understand that the disciple must develop independently.

As a result of the free evolution of the disciple, differences between them and their mentor arise. These differences can be seen as an expected part of the student's academic development or can be expressed harshly, as a rupture almost equivalent to the "death of the father" as both involve the necessity and affirmation of self-assertion and independence.

Following Norbert Elias's (1978) concept of figuration, both the mentor and the student have invested one of their valencies in the bond that unites them. When this link breaks, something unique within each of them also breaks: the valency invested in that bond. What each one was to the other.

Although painful, I have had to accept the situation generously. The disciple is taking charge of their own development and wants to show their former mentor that they have surpassed the knowledge that was imparted. They feel, legitimately, that their academic development is due solely to their own abilities and not to the mentorship.

It often happens that the mentoring relationship is surpassed by the former disciple, who, as part of their academic and personal development, breaks the ties and strives to assert their own worth. They have advanced beyond what they learned from their mentor and believe that the mentor has been left behind in disciplinary development. Naturally, this moment is experienced by the former mentor as forgetfulness and lack of recognition, but it is essential to understand that both the forgetfulness and lack of recognition are inseparable parts of the self-affirmation process for the former disciple.

As in many other social relationships, both the mentor and the disciple often feel that they gave more than they received. This perception can lead to later disappointments and even incomprehensible resentments.

The former mentor must accept that their ex-disciple needs to continue their development autonomously. They must also be able to understand that their student has outgrown the bond and, perhaps, even surpassed their former mentor. The time will come when both will meet again on equal footing, as colleagues who pursue knowledge on similar or different paths, yet separate and independent from each other.

But it is not enough for the mentor to simply accept this fact. It is also essential to celebrate the success of the former disciple. It hasn't been easy for me; I must admit there is a fair amount of egoism in me. I have had to realize that, under no circumstances, should I view this rupture as ingratitude or, even less, as betrayal. Surpassing the mentor has nothing to do with betrayal. It is, in fact, exactly what the mentor wanted to achieve: to be surpassed by their disciple. This reminds me of something Talcott Parsons taught about the evolution of theory since 1937.

It is important to consider that the disciple owes nothing to their mentor. The relationship between the two during the mentoring period was enriching for both. One offered their knowledge and experience, while the other brought their curiosity and willingness to learn. The disciple saw themselves in their mentor, and the mentor relived their own time as a disciple. No debt remains. If the relationship continues, it will be completely different and on an equal footing.

The mentor accompanies the process of their student's formation and reconsiders topics they have previously addressed or encounters new, significant topics that lead them to learn alongside their disciple. Mentorship is appealing to both. The explanations requested by the disciple or those the mentor deems important to offer acquire a new shine. Learning to know is not the same as learning to teach. The latter is more enjoyable because it requires anticipating questions that may or may not arise. In this way, everything seems to shine with the allure of the unknown. With the student, the mentor regains a part of their innocence.

Mentorship is important for the disciple, but it is also significant for the mentor. In the relationship with the student, the mentor encounters themselves. Both learn. No mentorship is ever repeated. For the mentor, it implies recognition, perhaps the most important one. For the disciple, the doors to the academic community open. The student ceases to be just another individual, and the professor feels the distinction of being chosen by the student. In the process of mentorship, both lose their anonymity and become distinct, concrete individuals.

From the disciple's perspective, there is also an important decision to make: should one choose a mentor from among the professors of their academic unit? Or is it a case where a figure imposes itself? In my experience, I had many professors, some better than others, some kind and approachable, others arrogant and unreachable. I was never interested in those who were popular and had a following of students who laughed at their comments and strutted around as part of that eminence's entourage.

Does being chosen by the mentor boost self-esteem? Does it indicate something about how appreciated the mentor is among the students? When a professor points out that something in the student's work is interesting, suggesting that they delve deeper into that idea and read a particular text, the student begins to feel part of an academic fellowship. It is likely that they will then seek a mentor, who may or may not be the same professor who encouraged them.

Do mentor and disciple share the same experience, from their respective perspectives? Each time two psychic systems share an experience, it is always the same for both and yet diverse for each of them. The diversity of perspectives makes it possible for something new to emerge from that interaction.

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There can always be disappointments. The student fails to spark the professor's interest, and the professor never dedicates more time than what is strictly necessary for the course being taught. The professor answers questions concretely and precisely, without allowing for further reflection or continuing the conversation. Due to the academic evaluation system, which heavily favors research and the publications that disseminate it, many academics feel that teaching is a burden to be avoided. As a result, students — especially those curious and interested ones who stay after class to ask questions — are considered part of that burden. Since teaching takes up time, it is given only the necessary minimum, and thus, students seeking more attention are discouraged.

The tutor can also feel rejected. The student may not be interested in delving into the professor's area of expertise. Their motivation might be professional rather than academic, or they might believe that the professor cannot offer anything valuable because the professor's theoretical approach is very different from their own. Since sociology studies social phenomena, its students often tend to be ideologically driven, which translates into ideologically based prejudices that allow them to reduce complexity. For example, they “know” in advance that Parsons is conservative, which immediately frees them from studying him. Why study him if he is conservative and, according to what they've heard, complex? The same applies to anything associated with that author. Categories are created, much like what Lévi-Strauss (1962) describes as *pensée sauvage*, and then it becomes possible to assign all sorts of objects to these categories. In this way, other theorists, research topics, professors, students, and so on, can be easily classified. This structure simplifies decision-making in an important area of university life.

Finally, my experience is that mentoring is more the exception than the rule. Most professors were never mentors, and if the opportunity to become one had presented itself, they would have done everything possible to avoid it. The same applies to students. Having a mentor means dedicating a significant amount of time to academic activities. It involves studying additional topics and authors beyond the regular semester workload shared with the rest of the students in the same cohort.

This means that mentorship requires time and academic interest from both parties. Despite the challenges it faces, it continues to occur, evoking one of the central values of the university: the formation of a core of reflection and the pursuit of knowledge.

Notwithstanding, the modernization of the university seems to go in the opposite direction. Efficiency, one of the values of modernity, always involves restricting the use of scarce resources, among which time is prominent. Mentorship uses time lavishly. In the modern university, every activity must have a measurable result, whose value can be compared with the resources used. On the other hand, mentorship seeks knowledge but lacks programs, exams, or other indicators... It bears a suspicious resemblance to “creative leisure”, which is enough to view it with suspicion.

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