

Learning the Craft: The Role of Graduate Mentoring¹

By John D. French

Graduate training in history is a survival of an artisanal mode in an educational world of mass production and corporate universities. Shaped by the personalities and quirks of all parties, training is a process of watching, doing and constant practice. The goal of a mentor is to oversee a journey-woman historian as she/he is introduced to the standards, unstated expectations, and craft secrets required for professional accomplishment and success. As a labor historian, I do not idealize the apprenticeship process, all the more so given the drawbacks associated with prevailing models such as “sink-or-swim,” “chip-off-the-old-block,” and “hands off/we’re-all-in-this-together.”

At one end of the continuum one finds “*sink-or-swim*” in which achievement is said to flow solely or directly from individual brilliance, talents and skills. Based on an aristocratic professorial model, one is either “born to be” a great historians or not, which transfers the burden of proof to the student while exempting the faculty of responsibility: either “you have it or you don’t.” While ostensibly based on a “hands off” respect between equals, this “winner take all” approach breeds the vicious jockeying for professorial favor that thrives when the prize is to be anointed one of “the chosen.”

The “*chip-off-the-old-block*” model is far more overtly directive, even commanding in its approach. It plays to the conceit that the student’s decision to chose a particular professor brings with it the expectation that the mentor can, in his/her infinite wisdom, expect to expect to dictate the lines of the student’s work (at times even the country, period, or thematic/ methodological specialization). Beyond its heavy-handedness, such a top-down approach leaves little space for the crafting of the personal intellectual signature that marks a formed historian, as opposed to a phalanx of knockoffs or members of a school.

1. A somewhat reduced version was published in *AHA Perspectives*, , Vol. 45 #8 (November 2007). This piece originated as part of a roundtable discussion on "Graduate Mentoring: Issues and Perspectives" sponsored by the AHA's Committee for Graduate Students at the national convention of the American Historical Association, January 2007.

And finally, one comes to the “*hands off/we’re-all-in-this-together*” approach with its apparent repudiation of demeaning or dictatorial behavior. Loudly disclaiming any vertical power dimension, this democratic-sounding approach feeds the anxiety of young historians-in-training who are desperately trying to figure out how they will ever reach the level of the polished works they read and idealize every day. Students are right to see through the mystification of power implied by this “do-your-own-thing/all-is-well,” since their success does to a significant degree lie in the hands of others and too often “hands off” seems a way of minimizing the demanding work needed to help them take their skills to the next level.

My approach to mentoring recognizes that historians are made not born. They emerge over time through an intensive, idiosyncratic, and exacting process of individual intellectual training that works best within a community of professors and students. I particular eschew the “lone-wolf approach” by working closely with other professors in my field and beyond. The crafting of common expectations and practices is, however, the less important part of the story. I value an atmosphere that fosters ongoing dialogue about the individual students and their development at each stage. I also believe that students benefit from being cohered as a cohort of apprentices within a larger faculty-student enterprise in a given field. Thus, faculty mentors should institutionalize mechanisms for building relationships beyond the classroom: workshops on student work, the holding of regular social events, or the mobilization of students to help an advanced ABD in the final throes of finishing (they thus learn that they too can expect such help in turn).

This broader faculty-student community serves as ballast to the one-on-one relationship that determines the success or failure of mentoring (for a careful delineation of the responsibilities of both sides see Duke’s new graduate handbook). Care, honesty, and frankness are vital to the mutual commitment that underlies a durably productive mentoring relationship. At the outset, we should help students feel comfortable about the fact that they do not yet really know if the history profession, with its attendant sacrifices, is to be their life path. A vital ongoing task is to help students understand their

own skill sets, so they can bolster areas of weaknesses while honing their strengths. This requires detailed written evaluations of class work, training in grant-writing, and (I believe) meaningful committee reports that demonstrate how much we value what they have achieved. The objective is clear: to teach students not to fear the fact that the good is never the same as the truly excellent, and that even the best work can be further improved.

Success in mentoring depends upon building and maintaining the trust and commitment that provides its emotional core (repeated delinquency on reference letters, however understandable, is deadly). It also entails the pursuit of a deepening understanding of the unique trajectory, interests, passions, and talents of each student, so they can craft—in dialogue with the field—a compelling dissertation project capable of winning recognition and grants. Yet this by no means exhausts the content of the apprenticeship process. The mentor should—as needed—help to demystify the power dynamics at play in a department, a profession, and a university, while helping students understand how things actually get decided and executed in our public professional affairs. This includes guidance as to the unspoken rules regarding professional etiquette, personal quirks, or developing relationships. It also involves how to pitch a grant application in light of committee’s likely composition; how to minimize personal conflicts and bureaucratic errors and clean up after them; how to write an evaluation of a visiting candidate for a job or a recommendation for a student; or how to serve on a committee. Most importantly, it also involves familiarizing students in general terms with how to get a job and win tenure, especially given the vast swirl of rumor and gossip that surrounds it (debriefing after job talks, learning how a given question, remark, or answer was or might be interpreted, and so on are all helpful).

A successful apprenticeship demands, in other words, that we be willing to reveal the full range of craft secrets at the appropriate time, while teaching students the sly maneuvering, both in intellectual and small group dynamics, that facilitate success. After all, the mentor and their student are

professional *companheiros*, distinguished only by their roles at this moment, but bound together by our common ambitions and enterprise.