

Human as Document: A Proposal to Study Information Giving
in the Mentoring Relationship

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Abstract

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Human as Document: A Proposal to Study Information Giving in the Mentoring Relationship

Mentoring is a commonly-used tool for the orientation and professional development of new faculty; indeed, some universities require that mentors be appointed for all new faculty members. Done right, mentoring facilitates organizational socialization for the new faculty member, leading to outcomes of general satisfaction, internal work motivation, and job involvement (Feldman, 1976). Faculty members who are successfully mentored are likely to be more satisfied with career and job, more likely to succeed in their tenure review, and less likely to be inclined to move to a different institution (Dougherty & Dreher, 2007; Rice, Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2000). Mentoring matters in the socialization of new faculty.

It seems clear that information transfer is one of the essential functions of mentoring, but mentoring has never been studied from this perspective. It is likely that by examining mentoring through the lens of information behavior theory, we can make useful generalizations about the motivations and deterrents to information transfer in the mentoring relationship, and perhaps develop recommendations for improving the information transfer between mentors and mentees. As a continuation of an earlier study of the information seeking of mentees, this study will focus on the information behaviors of mentors. What motivates mentors to seek and share information in their mentoring relationships? What barriers to information sharing do they perceive in the context of the mentoring relationship? What kinds of information do they share with mentees, and what technologies do they make use of as they share information with their mentees?

Information studies is essentially the study of human culture, in the sense that without information, there would be no culture, and we might all be standing around in caves, wondering where the dinosaurs went. My research is relevant to the discipline, because it seeks to examine a

human relationship as an information practice. In my experience (admittedly limited), this is not a common stance. The model that I seek to construct posits the mentor as an information repository – a new kind of document, if you will – in recognition that there are many kinds of human understanding that simply cannot be documented in the more traditional ways, but which are still of considerable value to the organization. Despite this value, the mentor's institutional or organizational knowledge may be disregarded because of the way the western European culture privileges the document – be it parchment, paper, or silicon. My examination of the information practices of mentoring may serve to remind information scholars of the messy human roots of documentation.

It's difficult to know if I am more interested in the information problem of how to quantify a human relationship, or in the application of information behavior theory to real-world problems, or in the description of mentoring relationships in new ways that help us to understand how mentoring works and how it may be improved. In the concrete world, where I live, mentoring matters a great deal and it is still far too much a hit or miss thing. There is little guarantee that a mentoring relationship will be effective, and there are many who think mentoring doesn't make much difference. If I study mentoring relationships in new ways, and learn to quantify them, perhaps I will be able to convince the doubters that mentoring matters and makes a difference. In the process of studying mentoring, I may be collecting many different data points -- I imagine these data points to be akin to the sensors worn by actors who are playing roles that will later be taken over by CGI. Together, all these bits of data create a picture of a multi-dimensional relationship. But -- in the concrete world -- how may we best structure mentoring programs so they do the most good? We can break the question down in various ways. What is the best way to characterize a mentoring relationship? Should it be defined in terms of

the topics covered, the time spent, or the personality traits of the mentor and mentee? What are the best ways to share information in the mentoring relationship? Should mentor and mentee commit to spending a certain amount of face to face time together? What can mentors do to help their mentees feel comfortable about asking questions? Are there situations where it is better to get mentoring information from a stranger? From someone outside of your department? The study I am proposing here will only scratch the surface of these questions, but specifically I wish to examine the barriers to information sharing and seeking that mentors experience. I also want to know what kinds of information mentors perceive to be most useful, and what motivates mentors to seek information.

The study of information seems to fall broadly into two different categories -- aspects of the document or aspects of its users. My research will occupy a little corner space where the two intersect, in that I am investigating the users of information, but also considering information users as sources of information, viz., documents. I have not yet been able to discover a theory that acknowledges our capacity to be information sources; the theories I have seen thus far seem to represent us as merely helping one another on to find the document that answers the query. These theories seem to privilege the document unreasonably. As noted above, there are some kinds of information that are so contextual, so detailed, that they simply cannot be recorded in a document -- at least not yet.

Literature Review

This literature review will focus on mentoring, both as a process and as a relationship. Two themes have emerged from this literature: 1) mentoring suffers from a lack of formal definition, and 2) there is a persistent belief among scholars and practitioners that informal mentoring is somehow better than formal mentoring. To my mind, both themes are evidence of

the continued need for the study of mentoring, and both demonstrate that the study of information behavior has something to contribute to the discussion. Because there is no consistent definition of mentoring (Berk, Berg, Mortimer, Walton-Moss, & Yeo, 2005; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007; Zellers, Howard, & Barcic, 2008), it is difficult to make any determination about how successful it may be as a professional development tool, though there are many studies of its positive effects (Mullen, Fish, & Hutinger, 2010; Rice et al., 2000; Zellers et al., 2008). The lack of definition is also a challenge for mentors and their mentees. Without established boundaries to the relationship, both mentor and mentee experience constraints in information transfer (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006; Blickle, Schneider, Meurs, & Perrewé, 2010; Stanley & Lincoln, 2005). On the other hand, it is pointed out that general statements about mentoring are problematic because the mentoring relationship is so specific and contextual (Bearman, Blake-Beard, Hunt, & Crosby, 2007). Some studies have attempted to identify the basic elements of the mentoring relationship, and there is agreement that mentoring generally includes both career and psychosocial functions (Allen & Poteet, 1999; Berk et al., 2005; Mullen & Hutinger, 2008). The mentor is responsible for offering guidance and encouragement, as well as constructive and useful critiques of the mentee's work (Berk et al., 2005; Pisimisi & Ioannides, 2005). Other characteristics of a mentor likely to be successful include positive experiences as a mentee, and the choice of a mentee who is like the mentor (Allen, Eby, & Rhodes, 2007). The study of mentoring from the perspective of information behavior can lend coherence to the different definitions of mentoring. Evaluating the relationship in terms of the information transfer involved provides the possibility of a framework for defining the mentor's role. For example, studies of the kind of information shared in successful mentoring relationships could provide mentors with a list of topics to address. The challenge of defining mentoring may be considered analogous to creating a task list for usability

evaluation, in the sense that most tasks can be completed in different ways, and yet for the purpose of evaluation, a list must be compiled (Crystal & Ellington, 2004).

Mentoring literature also emphasizes the difference between formal and informal mentoring. Formal mentoring is defined as when mentoring relationships are initiated by the administration, with or without input from the mentor and mentee (Carey & Weissman, 2010; Zellers et al., 2008). Informal mentoring is a mentoring relationship that develops naturally through shared experiences or interests (Allen et al., 2006; Allen & Poteet, 1999). Informal mentoring may produce a more positive outcome, but women and underrepresented groups have a difficult time finding mentoring (Blickle et al., 2010; Stanley & Lincoln, 2005), since mentors tend to choose mentees who share characteristics with the mentor (Allen et al., 2007). Formal mentoring is often studied as if it were informal mentoring, when there are several differences between the two (Bearman et al., 2007; McGowan, 2004). This literature helps define the question I am answering because it creates a foundation for my own study of mentoring, as well as confirming that there is a gap in the literature on the topic of mentoring as an information transfer process.

Theoretical Framework.

Studies of mentoring make reference to various theories in describing the relationship between mentor and mentee. Three that seem most appropriate to my study are Feldman's contingency theory of socialization (1976), the mentoring enactment theory, as defined by Kalbfleisch (2007), and Kegan's constructive-developmental approach, as applied to mentoring (McGowan, Stone, & Kegan, 2007). Feldman's theory identifies three stages of socialization, including anticipatory socialization, accommodation, and role management. Because the process of mentoring entails socialization to the organization, Feldman's approach creates a helpful

framework for characterizing it. Kalbfleisch describes communication aspects of the mentoring relationship.

I remain uncertain about the appropriate theoretical frame for this study. The theories with which I am most familiar are those that describe the ways that individuals seek information. This situation is different; I anticipate that my subject population will be more likely to share information than to seek it, though it is the human condition to seek information, so I'm sure they will be doing some of that as well. I have focused my reading on articles describing mentoring from a human resources or adult education perspective in the hopes of discovering some suggestions, but so far -- no luck. One article talks about mentoring as a community of practice. Several articles and chapters have referenced Bandura's work, but there is no agreement about which of his theories is best applied to mentoring. Most commonly mentioned are social cognitive theory, social learning theory, and self-efficacy. These theories are of interest because what I am studying is a social process, but they don't seem to describe what I am looking at. When I was studying the mentee's information seeking, the process was easier, because the mentee is clearly seeking information. It may be that the theoretical frame is something that will emerge as I proceed with the study, but at this point, I'm at a loss.

Problem Statement

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Research Questions

1.

Research Design

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Recruitment

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Data Collection

First, I will survey tenured faculty members at the University of Maryland about their mentoring experiences and practices. My sampling frame is tenured faculty members who are currently mentoring someone or have served as a mentor within the last two years. I will limit the survey to faculty at the University of Maryland because that is the population currently available to me. I will not be surveying non-tenure track faculty or tenure-track faculty because neither group participates in formal mentoring as mentors.

The survey will be delivered via the web, and it will inquire about general attitudes toward mentoring, specific experiences with mentoring, and information sharing and seeking practices in the mentoring relationship. I plan to inquire specifically about the kinds of information mentors find themselves sharing, situations where mentors have perceived barriers to information sharing, and the kinds of information mentors find themselves seeking. I will also ask questions about the mentors' best experiences with mentees and their worst experiences. I will ask if the mentors have themselves been mentored and ask them to evaluate that experience. The survey questions will be primarily Likert-scale and other fixed-response types, so that the survey will not take too long to complete. Survey length has an impact on response rate. However, I will include free-response questions so that respondents who wish to provide more information will have the option. When faculty complete the survey, they will be invited to volunteer to be interviewed in greater depth. Interviews will be semi-structured, with questions designed to elicit more details about the affective qualities of the mentoring relationship, as well as more details about the mentor's information seeking and sharing practices.

I will send out the survey under the aegis of the Office of Faculty Affairs, and I will make the data collected available to office staff to help them develop training materials for mentors. After the survey is complete, I will perform statistical analysis on the survey data, looking for correlations between information practices and attitudes toward mentoring. I will also perform descriptive statistics in order to compare the sample of survey respondents with the population. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. I will then conduct content analysis on the interview transcripts to look for emerging themes.

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