Mentoring can be a significant process in assisting individuals toward self-directedness and self-directed learning (SDL). For many, the idea of mentoring is grounded in the functions of giving advice, information, and personal and professional direction. While these are important elements, they are primarily the basic components of the mentoring process and do not lead learners toward self-directedness and SDL. A true and complete mentoring process (a) promotes the enhancement of self-directedness in learners, (b) fosters transformational change in the way they view their world in which they live, work, and play, and (c) encourages autonomy, creativity, and independence. The aims of mentoring seem to be in line with the primary goals of SDL as proposed by Merriam and Caffarella (1999).

The purpose of this article is to examine some definitions of mentoring, discuss the types of mentoring that can occur, as well as present a framework that will provide the mentee and mentor some guidelines for promoting self-directedness and SDL. As discussed here, mentoring toward self-directedness is a cumulative process. While there are numerous settings in which a mentoring relationship could occur, I will discuss the process from a formal educational context. It is essential to remember that the focus of this article is on the mentoring relationship and not the process of coaching, which at times are used interchangeably in the literature. While mentoring is a mutual interaction between the mentor and mentee, coaching is a more controlling and directive activity. It is interesting to note, however, that the ultimate aim of both processes is to promote self-directedness, independence, reflection, and a sense of autonomy.

Defining Mentoring

A sampling of definitions from a formal educational setting is provided as a means of illustrating there is no widely accepted definition of mentoring. Jacobi (1991, p. 506) suggests that “although many researchers have attempted to provide concise definitions of mentoring or mentors, definitional diversity continues to characterize the literature.”

Heller and Sindelar (1991, p. 7) state that mentoring is “simply the advice from a respected, experienced person provided to someone who needs help.” According to Daloz (1999), mentoring has something to do with growing up as well as with the development of identity. Blackwell (1989, p. 9) believes mentoring is “a process by which persons of superior rank, special achievements, and prestige instruct, counsel, guide, and facilitate the intellectual and/or career development of persons identified as protégés.” Lester and Johnson (1981, p. 119) continue by defining mentoring “as a one-to-one learning relationship between an older and a younger person that is based on modeling behavior and extended dialogue between them.” Moore and Amey (1988) define mentoring as a form of professional socialization with the intent of the relationship to develop and refine the mentee’s skills, abilities, and understanding. Perhaps the most inclusive definition is provided by Galbraith and Zelenak (1991, p. 126) in which they define mentoring “as a powerful emotional and passionate interaction whereby the mentor and protégé experience personal, professional, and intellectual growth and development.” It is apparent that mentoring means one thing to one group of educators and another thing to another group of educators, even when they operate within the same formal education setting.

Not all of the definitions have the same focus and meaning. Many do not recognize

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the essence of a good mentoring relationship, such as the necessity of a reciprocal and developmental process for both the mentor and mentee. It is quite evident that mentoring is not just about giving advice on professional and career advancement and opportunities. It is about dialogue, caring, challenging, authenticity, emotion, passion, growth, development and identity.

Two Types of Mentoring

Basically, there are two types of mentoring, informal and formal (sponsored mentoring). Golan and Galbraith (1996) state that:

Informal mentoring is a relationship that occurs that is unplanned, and, in most cases, not expected. A certain “chemistry” emerges drawing two individuals together for the purpose of professional, personal, and psychological growth and development. Informal mentoring seems to be a qualitative experience that has great meaning for the parties involved. (p. 102)

It is very difficult when engaged in the informal mentoring process to explain how the mentoring relationship began, developed, and sustained itself and how the process can be replicated.

Formal or sponsored mentoring, on the other hand, is an intentional process that is the result of a planned and operating mentoring program. Golan and Galbraith (1996) suggest that it “is a method designed to reach a variety of specific goals and purposes, defined within the setting in which it operates” (p. 103). In formal educational settings, both informal and formal mentoring occurs. It is important to realize that the characteristics, roles, functions, and benefits of mentoring are consistent for both informal and sponsored mentorship (Cohen, 1995).

Mentor Functions and Self-Directedness

Cohen (1995) provided to the educational community a reliable and valid self-assessment instrument, The Principles of Adult Mentoring Scale, for use by faculty, counselors, and administrators who want to discover their perceived effectiveness as a mentor. He states that the primary purpose of the scale scores is to “help mentors better locate themselves on the map of their mentoring relationship, so they can contribute as much as possible to the meaning of the journey for the mentee” (p. 23). The scale can be found in Cohen (1995), in the book by Galbraith and Cohen (1995), as well as in the article by Galbraith and Cohen (1997). From Cohen’s perspective, mentoring is viewed as a blend of six interrelated behavioral functions, each with a distinct and central purpose. The collective nature of the six functions constitutes the complete mentor role. It also guides the mentee toward self-directedness.

Briefly the six behavioral functions are examined; however, a more detailed description can be found in the references cited above. In the first function, relationship emphasis, the mentor conveys through active, empathic listening a genuine understanding and acceptance of the mentee’s feelings. The purpose is to create a psychological climate of trust that allows mentees (who perceive mentors as listening and not judging) to honestly share and reflect on their personal experiences (positive and negative) as adult learners or as employees in the workplace. The mentor practices responsive listening, asks open-ended questions related to expressed immediate concerns about the actual situations, and provides descriptive feedback based on observations rather than inferences of motives. The essence of this function is to build a safe, conducive, social, and psychological environment in which to begin the journey toward self-directedness.

The mentor, when practicing information emphasis, the second function, directly requests detailed information from and offers specific suggestions to mentees about current plans and progress in achieving personal, educational, and career goals. The purpose is to ensure that the advice offered is based on accurate and sufficient information of individual mentee’s differences. The mentor asks questions aimed at ensuring factual understanding of the student’s present educational and career situation, reviews relevant background information to develop an adequate personal profile, and asks probing questions that require concrete answers. It is at this juncture that some reflective thought as well as a beginning dialogue takes place concerning their interests and perspectives. It is an initial step toward the pursuit of what their various perspectives mean.

In facilitative focus, the third function, the mentor guides mentees through a reasonably in-depth review of their interests, abilities, ideas, and beliefs relevant to academia. The purpose is to assist mentees in considering alternative views and options while reaching their own decisions about attainable personal, academic, or career goals. The mentor poses hypothetical questions to expand individual views, uncovers the underlying experiential and information basis for assumptions, and presents multiple viewpoints to generate a more in-depth analysis of decisions and actions. This function moves mentees closer to fostering a sense of transformation and meaning as they engage in a mental construction of their personal and professional experiences. It provides an opportunity for reflection and to place the newly discovered information or knowledge in the context of their experiences.

The fourth function, the confrontive focus, is where the mentor respectfully challenges mentees’ explanations for or avoidance of decisions and actions relevant to their development in the educational setting. The purpose is to help mentees attain insight to unproductive strategies and behaviors and to evaluate their need and capacity to change. From the confrontive perspective, the mentor uses careful probing to assess psychological readiness of the mentee to benefit from different points of view and openly acknowledge concerns about possible negative consequences of constructive and critical feedback on the relationship. The mentor also employs a confrontive verbal stance aimed at the primary goal of promoting self-assessment of apparent discrepancies, focuses on the most likely strategies and behaviors for meaningful change, and sparingly provides feedback for impact. This function provides the occasion to engage in more advanced critical thinking and discourse. It is within this function that the mentor reinforces a belief in the positive potential for growth beyond the current situation. Mentees, hopefully, begin to recognize dramatic and fundamental change in the way they see their situation and their
potential for self-directedness and growth. Challenging is an imperative component at this stage of the mentor/mentee relationship.

The fifth function, *modeling*, is to motivate mentees to take necessary risks, make decisions without certainty of successful results, and continue to overcome difficulties in their own journey toward educational and career goals. The mentor shares with mentees appropriate life experiences and feelings as a role model in order to personalize and enrich the relationship. Drawing on personal experiences as well as experiences with other mentees, the mentor does so in order to share thoughts and genuine feelings that emphasize the value of learning from unsuccessful or difficult experiences. The mentor also provides direct, realistic assessment of the mentee’s ability to pursue goals; expresses a confident view of appropriate risk taking as necessary for personal, educational, training, and career development; and makes statements that clearly encourage mentees to take action to attain their stated goals. It encourages personal action, meaning making, and change. Foremost, it provides a sense of belief and psychological support toward the mentee’s ability to be self-directed in all dimensions of his or her personal and professional life activities. Holding a positive and supportive psychological mindset contributes greatly to the decision to engage in new and challenging experiences.

The sixth function, *visioning*, encourages mentees to function as independent learners, to take initiatives to manage change, and to negotiate constructive transitions through personal life events. The mentor stimulates mentees’ critical thinking with regard to envisioning their own future and developing their personal and professional potential. In this function, the mentor makes statements that require the mentee to reflect on present and future educational, training, and career attainments, as well as events that impact their personal lives. The mentor also asks questions aimed at clarifying positive and negative perceptions, reviews individual choices based on a reasonable assessment of options and resources, and expresses confidence in carefully thought-out decisions. Finally, the mentor discusses and shows respect for the mentee’s capacity to determine their future. It is here that mentees gain a sense of autonomy in which they believe in their capacity to make choices and critical judgments. Candy (1991) suggests that with this autonomy, a strong foundation is laid for conceiving future goals as well as personal and professional plans. In addition, mentees have reached a point of independent, critically reflective thinking that supports their self-reliance, responsibility, and control over and for their actions, thoughts, and beliefs.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Moving toward self-directedness is a cumulative process and the ultimate purpose and goal of mentoring. Each individual function adds some element to the self-directedness process. The discussion of these six functions indicates that the role of mentor goes well beyond that of giving only information and advice. It is so much more. Galbraith and Maslin-Ostrowski (2000) state that “to a large extent, the personal, educational, and professional significance of mentoring will depend on the ability of the mentor to develop and maintain a relevant interpersonal relationship with the mentee” (p. 134). They continue by suggesting that, “Good mentoring is a distinctive and powerful process that enhances intellectual, professional, and personal development through a special relationship characterized by highly emotional and often passionate interactions between the mentor and mentee” (p. 147). Good mentoring is about creating a mini-learning community that ultimately seeks to create for both the mentor and mentee an environment that embraces elements of critical and reflective thinking, self-direction, autonomy, creativity, and praxis. It is a significant element in the growth and development of men and women in their journey toward self-directedness and SDL.

**References**


