

Mentoring *Across* Boundaries

Helping Beginning Teachers
Succeed in Challenging Situations

Jean Boreen and Donna Niday
with Mary K. Johnson



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*To the mentors who share so much of their time, commitment,
and enthusiasm working with beginning teachers*



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Foreword

One of the truths of my teaching life has been feeling the need to apologize to former students. I underestimated the complexity of teaching early in my career, and that showed up in the choices I made and the well-intentioned missteps I took as a novice teacher. The same can safely be said of learning to become a good mentor. Across my teaching life, I became (or was assigned to be) the unofficial or official mentor to seventeen student teachers and numerous early-career teachers. In my City High School classroom, I greeted teacher candidates from the university as “guests” who were allowed to borrow my students for a short time. I wasn’t particularly helpful, I’m sure, primarily because I wasn’t sure *how* to help. As a very young department chair, I was thrust into a situation of advising newcomers about teaching without knowing what I should be looking for or how to communicate constructive criticism. I’m struck by the need to apologize for the way I defined and enacted the mentoring role when I first took it on.

In the early days, I offered a brand of “feel good” mentoring that extended emotional support and comfort to the novice teachers assigned to me. I was focused on easing the entry into teaching rather than furthering new teachers’ learning about how to confront difficult problems in their practice. I’m sure I did not help them view their teaching as a site for learning, nor did I offer specific feedback about their individual accomplishments rather than general praise for a job well done. Nonetheless, my role seemed important to all the stakeholders. After all, I was doing a service to the profession. The novice teachers felt all warm and fuzzy. The administration could say they had a supportive, well-conceived induction plan. I felt good about nurturing new teachers. No problem.

Which brings me back to the core of my apology to my early mentees. I'm really sorry. I know I provided support—but not challenge. Or at least not enough challenge to call what I did “educative” mentoring. It took years for me to redefine my role as mentor. Only when I sought out other teachers who would talk about their mentoring experiences—teachers who would question the goals of mentoring relationships and explore the dilemmas they had encountered—was I able to reconceptualize what a mentor could *do*. With clearer purposes for mentoring, I learned to find openings for fruitful talk that could lead to a productive line of thinking with a mentee. I pushed novice colleagues to pinpoint their problems in the classroom to help them talk about teaching in more precise and analytic ways. I no longer settled for “Things aren't going well,” or “The kids were awful today.” I redirected the mentee's focus to student learning and away from teacher performance. I modeled an inquiry approach to my own learning and reinforced theoretical ideas in context in an effort to help novices develop useful knowledge and principled understanding. I sought to become a living example of one person's approach to teaching, making public my struggles and giving voice to my wonderings about how to “do it better.”

But each mentoring relationship posed a distinctly new challenge and required a different set of considerations on my part; I could have used more help in addressing many uncertainties. For example, I was unsure about how to ask building administrators and university partners for assistance or how to counsel a teacher who was clearly headed for burnout. I stewed over how to talk to my male mentees in productive ways and how to sustain a mentoring relationship with past student teachers and colleagues who had moved on to other settings.

The authors of *Mentoring Across Boundaries* have firsthand knowledge of the dilemmas mentors face. They offer scenarios that will help mentors imagine how they might broach difficult problems with their mentees and anticipate future obstacles. This is an important book, a book built on the premise that a mentor can have a lasting positive influence on the careers of newcomers to teaching. Accomplished mentoring depends on *learning* to mentor, though, and I believe the authors have made a substantial contribution to that literature.

Margaret Graham



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