

The role of higher education faculty in mentoring students. An interview with Gerald Cupchik

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Professor Gerald Cupchik is the author of several books and many research articles on imagination, emotion, aesthetics, and related topics. He has mentored hundreds of students both formally and informally across many different realms as a professor at the University of Toronto over the past 46 years.

We began our conversation on the role of higher education faculty, especially regarding mentoring. In this interview, Professor Cupchik looks back at a teaching career spanning almost 50 years and reflects on the process of mentoring. Over time, he realized that teaching is bi-directional and professors begin to learn from their students once they appreciate the limits of their own knowledge and the profound experiences that students of diverse backgrounds bring to the educational setting

Michael: What do you see as the role of a higher education faculty member in terms of mentoring either an undergraduate or graduate level student?

Gerald: Since you brought up the topic up when we spoke last Friday, every time I think about the process of mentoring, something else comes up, so I'll focus on just a few.

First, the mentor is a person of unique knowledge, fostering or facilitating the work and career of the student or even a younger colleague. Mentoring might imply a hierarchy of experience, but there are other kinds of dynamics involved. There is a certain degree of social distancing, since there are clear boundaries between my role as a teacher and their roles as recipients. Our roles are clear. Our worlds are clear. And one should not confuse the boundaries.

I meet people around the world who want advice. I provide information and guidance, based on experience, while at the same time providing a framework for the emotional support of individuals who may be experiencing challenges in their lives that are not directly related to the topic of our mutual interest. Therefore, mentoring goes beyond the domain of knowledge and also encompass wise counsel.

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There is also the need for reflexive awareness of one's role as a mentor, which is always evolving, because both you and the student are changing. Consider challenges involved in mentoring during a pandemic, when we're not having direct, face-to-face interaction. Zoom or Skype can help bridge the distance. With big political change in the world and potential discord surrounding the person, there is a level of uncertainty. This creates an additional need to ensure an emotional experience of stability, while at the same time encouraging openness and future direction.

It bears noting that, from the viewpoint of the student, a mentor can be seen as heroic or as someone who can advance their career. So, a mentor is not just someone who deals with one-on-one teaching and interacting but who can introduce the student or the young colleague to a social nexus that provides opportunity. In my own case, being an undergraduate research student of the distinguished social psychologist Bob Zajonc, or the postdoc of Daniel Berlyne, conferred a certain legitimacy or provenance that has remained with me throughout my career.

Michael: If we now focus on a specific area that you are well known for—imagination. What would you say to a mentor in terms of either using their imagination or exploring or examining the topic of imagination?

Gerald: A student came to me a couple of years ago and she said that she would like to do research on dolls. Dolls! I had never thought about dolls or doing research on this topic. There is a long history going back to the Clarks in the 1940s who used dolls to study identity in children of African American background. The student was interested in adult doll play because she was a member of the ball-jointed doll community. We're talking about adults who collect and fabricate dolls, which can be quite an expensive hobby. These people interact with their dolls alone or in groups. The research question concerned what motivates adults who participate in this hobby; can it be related to childhood experiences? Is there a therapeutic aspect to doll play?

Once I recovered from the 'surprise proposal' of the student, we began to work on a paradigm to study this phenomenon. The two studies worked out beautifully and my former undergraduate, Angelie Ignacio, has two publications from these studies. What's the point of this story? A student comes to me and wants study a topic about which I know nothing. So, who is mentoring whom? I am an expert on paradigm creation. But she is an expert in the phenomenon.

This underscores an important quality of proper mentoring which is humility. Bishop Nicholas of Cusa proposed the “Doctrine of Ignorance” around 1410. In order to learn, we have to understand how ignorant we are. I had to confront my ignorance in the context of doll-related activity, and she had to address her ignorance regarding the development of an appropriate methodology. This was the foundation for our collaboration which worked out wonderfully and led to the concept of “regression in service of the self.”

Finally, as a mentor, one must always be open to opportunity and change. I’m bringing the student into a dynamic process where we are working together to understand a phenomenon and its implications. In the 21st century, we are so impressed by ourselves as “modern” with the latest techniques in science. But we should realize that 500 years from now, if the planet survives, they will see us as naïve. We are impressed by the Renaissance of the 1500s. Let’s hope we are seen the same way.

In short, mentoring involves sharing one’s expertise while at the same time working with others in a culturally diverse and emotionally supportive environment but always with a sense of humility before nature.

Michael: Switching gears to a bigger topic—aesthetics, the appreciation of art. How does mentoring apply to this concept?

Gerald: The philosopher Francis Sparshott, a poet and distinguished philosopher from my university, said to me thirty years ago that:

Philosophers do what philosophers do.
Psychologists do what psychologists do.
And artists do what artists do.

Why do I mention this? As an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, I had a wonderful teacher of art history, Joel Isaacson, and then another wonderful teacher of art history during my graduate training at the University of Wisconsin, Robert Beetem. They introduced me to a whole new area of scholarship. For my part, I realized that an artist’s personality and social world can shape the subject matter of the works and the underlying style. I introduced that perspective to them.

My postdoctoral supervisor Daniel Berlyne emphasized the importance of “disinterested dialog,” a conversation focused on topics with no intrusion of the personal ego or *ad hominem* argument. I used to take walks with Berlyne around the campus between 1972 and 74. I remember him telling me that, when he first took a walk there years before, he was impressed by the students who seemed to ask fundamental questions. When I queried him about his strong behavioural approach, he told me that we need a neutral language to explain our ideas to the “Martians if they ever appear on Earth.” While my Gestalt-oriented ideas differed radically from his, Berlyne’s broad scholarship and British sense of humour remain qualities that I hold dearly.

In this sense, my mentor was a role model who made me sensitive to how one should interact with others; always listening carefully and being supportive. This was important because his behavioural approach differed radically from my own, even though we share methodology (multidimensional scaling) in common. He also provided an opportunity for me to contribute to the “new experimental aesthetics” with my first publication on the topic (see Cupchik, 1974).

Marshall McLuhan would attend our research meetings and he once said to me, after one of my presentations, that my method would not get me what I wanted to understand. When the guy who wrote “Understanding Media,” a cultural icon of the 1970s, says that to you, it raises self-doubts. But he was a sweet and kind man with no malice intended. Again, humility and kindness are sometimes more important and supportive than simply being important or having a great mind.

Years later, I co-edited a book with Janos Laszlo, in honour of Berlyne who died of cancer at the age of 52. Rudolf Arnheim, who contributed a chapter, instructed me “Don’t change a word!” In 1999, he joined me and Colin Martindale in writing a chapter on the history of Division 10 of the APA which was called Psychology and the Arts. He was “old school” but always gracious and supportive. It is so important to take time out and respond to people’s emails. As you know, I do so quickly.

My current mentor, Kurt Danziger, is perhaps the most distinguished living historian of psychology. I cherish the marginalia in my *Aesthetics of Emotion* book. In one case, he wrote “Your love affair with Descartes will lead you to humiliation!” As you can imagine, that section was quickly deleted. His statement “Methodology is not ontologically neutral” reminds me that bias is endemic to all research. Each lecture I give has Danziger quietly in the background emphasizing the need for critical self-reflection. No one is beyond the need for it.

My experience with these distinguished scholars taught me how important it is for teachers and mentors not to be aloof. They were secure in their successes and could readily be gracious. A bit of humour always seems to put serious questions in an appropriate perspective. I learned the same from my own sculpture teacher of almost 40 years ago, Lanny Shereck, who remains a close friend and has five publications with me. While I was the expert in aesthetics research, he was my source of insight into the creative process. To this day, after I share a meal with Lanny and another artist, Michael Gerry, I sit quietly in the back of Lanny's studio and listen to them discussing ongoing painting projects. I learned a lot about mentoring from being Lanny's student and watching him develop over a career as an artists. You can watch my interviews with both Lanny and Michael² and read about them in my book, *The aesthetics of emotion: up the down staircase of the mind/body* (Cupchik, 2016). The role of "mentor" can switch depending on the context. He gives me insight into process that I can then translate into experimental paradigms.

In another context, I study neural dynamics underlying creative imagination work with my colleagues, Oshin Vartanian and Jon Cant. In that case, we have multiple mentors helping each other refine a paradigm in order to study a phenomenon. The point of all this is that mentoring is a process and not a person. The mentor in one situation sits quietly as a student in another.

Michael: You talked a bit about "research on doing research". Where do you start? Where do you begin? With reading the literature? Thinking? Discussing?

Gerald: I begin research by asking a student "what phenomenon are you interested in?" If you turn to lived experience as a guide, you can ask all manner of questions and let the student introduce you to the phenomenon. I ask my students in a 4th year course to pick a phenomenon of interest to them and find four people who have lived it. Each respondent provides two concrete episodes from their lives. The range of phenomena, selected over the last 30 years by my multicultural students would amaze you. The process of engagement with the lived experiences of others provides a richness that informs this learning experience. Students write 50 to 100-page term papers, and it requires courage to do an interview project where the word "hypothesis" is forbidden. This is very different from joining a laboratory where the technique is well-established, and the student's goal is to collect data in a precise manner.

² <https://www.utoronto.ca/publications/aestheticsofemotion/artist-lecture/>

This demonstrates that mentoring can take very different forms. I show them that taking the risk to do qualitative research has value. But I also awaken them to the academic world where conservative forces dominate because people want jobs, grants, tenure, and so forth. My message, as a mentor, is that we must always be reflexive about the research project, understanding why we are studying a particular topic and in a certain way, and how best to fit into the professional world. This emphasis on teaching critical self-awareness was also addressed early in the 20th century by one of my heroes, James Mark Baldwin.

Generally speaking, when you interpose the lenses of theory and method to examine a phenomenon, they should bring it into greater clarity. But sometimes the method can be so salient that it actually obscures the phenomenon. Our goal is to gain insight into phenomena in the world using methods that help test our theories and bring coherence to our accounts of the process. This is why natural history precedes experimental science. We need to observe a phenomenon carefully before studying any one of its facets.

Michael: Could you tell me about mentoring two students with different kinds of grades—one has excellent grades while the other is average?

Gerald: Students with a 4.0 or perfect average clearly have organizational skills and know how to please their professors. I'm always amazed because I ask myself whether the student ever took a risk when writing a paper. The more interesting case is the talented student with the 2.5 average. I have come to understand that students sometimes have challenges separating emotional challenges in their personal lives from the demands of schoolwork. Some students can dissociate the two domains, school and personal life, whereas others cannot. I see this clearly in my recent research on the impact of COVID-19 on student life. Those with multiple demands at home are more emotionally at risk.

My task is therefore to provide a safe and encouraging atmosphere within which students can excel. I am a big believer in coming to terms with the unique nature of our personal lives and history and then using it to nourish professional development. I have said to my students for more than 40 years: "Look inside and find the ways in which you are unique... then learn how to market it!" By adopting this attitude, I have enjoyed some success in resurrecting the human spirit and helping talented students listen to their inner guru on the path to self-realization. The pleasure of nurturing students is more important than the elegance of my data. Thus, my office becomes a safe space devoid of judgment or competition. We all work together on an equal footing. It is important to add that my students, who

come from more backgrounds than you can imagine, are incredibly sweet. The competitive ones stay away from me because they won't last long in my presence.

Given that I primarily teach the children of people who immigrated to Canada during the past twenty years, it is important to make them aware of the world around them. They need to reflect on themselves and their positions in the world. This has nothing to do with GPA but with the challenges faced in grabbing a piece of the action, in other words, a job. It is important to establish that they have choice, which can be hard, given that many come from very traditional families. The goal is always to foster resilience and to show that we can learn from our mistakes and those of others both inside and outside of our communities.

Michael: A final big wrap up question: Your final words of wisdom or advice for young up and coming scholars and researchers?

Gerald: We need to be honest with ourselves. We need to be clear about our goals and the niches that are available to us. We need to be aware of what goes on in the University outside of the University. We need to be aware of who we are in relations to others. My advice is to pick a topic to study that feels natural for you. Pick a topic to study where you can easily have fascination and find the tools to gain insight into that phenomenon.

Learn about the communities of people who do that studying and join them. Networking is crucial to career development. It saved me early on. Being Berlyne's postdoc opened doors in Europe and the rest is history. And here is the crucial bit that I tell my students. Find the corner of the world that you understand better than anyone else. Learn how to observe that corner from a novel perspective and be flexible so that you can shift from one perspective to another. Always be open to change and collaboration. Always work with people where there is no ego and where there is sharing.

Avoid comparing yourself to others. There are always people who are smarter, richer, more beautiful, and so forth compared to any of us. Stop comparing yourself to others. We should enjoy our individuality and respect our struggles and those of others. Everyone has struggled.

By looking into the layers of our being, by welcoming the community from which we come and our ancestry, we become aware of our gifts. While looking at the world around us in a critical and reflective way, we learn to negotiate with that world in an organized manner. We need to find the right community that will give

us respect and nurture us. And always look through the crack in the door to see an opportunity to realize ourselves.

Finding a mentor can be a challenge. Learn to judge the mentor carefully, recognizing the boundaries between that person and yourself. Remember that they do not want to solve your personal problems or take you on as an emotional burden. Nurture the mentor as he or she nurtures you. Give each other space and focus on the task at hand.

Michael: I want to thank you very, very much for this rich, robust conversation. I appreciate it very, very much, and I think this really opens up our understanding of mentoring, aesthetics, and imagination. My sincerest appreciation to you.

References

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