

Mentoring in the Age of Academic Self-Promotion: Or How I Became a Curmudgeon

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Abstract: The quality of our work as teachers and scholars used to stand for itself. That's not so true in this day of 'publish-or-perish,' where it seems that self-promotion may have eclipsed the ideal of sharing and mentoring. This narrative will articulate the changes I've experienced in the academic environment during the last 20 years, as it has become increasingly corporate, image-conscious, homogenized, and risk-adverse. I will explore why mentoring has become so difficult, given the challenges that new faculty typically encounter when leadership opportunities in the school or profession arise. This narrative serves as the concluding bookend to the forward looking one written at the outset of my career, titled "Narratives of the Novice Educator" (Kayser, 1995).

Keywords: mentoring; mentor; self-promotion; career; academia; corporate academia; role model; curmudgeon

I am not the first to examine the darker side of academia. Satires on academic life abound: Richard Russo's novel, *Straight Man* (1997), Jane Smiley's agricultural college novel, *Moo* (1995), Francis Prose's darkly disturbing *Blue Angel* (2000), or even F. M. Cornford's classic send up of Cambridge University in the early 20th century, *Microcosmographia Academica* (Johnson, 1994).

I want to take a more sympathetic approach to the troubling trends I see in academia, using a bit of humor and playfulness. For this I turn to Peter Seller's character, Inspector Clouseau in the *Pink Panther* classic film series. In a memorable scene from *The Return of the Pink Panther* (Edwards, 1975), The Chief Inspector, out of place in his cheap brown suit, sits cross-legged on the edge of an expensive resort's indoor swimming pool. When an attractive girl next to him gets ready to dive into the water, Clouseau leans back to watch. Sellers, with his gift for physical comedy, draws out this scene exquisitely as Clouseau, trying to maintain his dignity by way of denial, slowly tips ever farther backward, as the girl dives forward. Gravity prevails, pulling him head over heels into the pool. The scene harks back to an earlier movie, *A Shot in the Dark* (Edwards, 1964), when Clouseau – having fallen into another pool – emerges drenched to the bone, to deliver the classic line, "It's all part of life's rich pageantry."

The following scenes are from the rich pageantry of my *academic* life, as my colleagues and I, witnesses to the corporatization of academia, have tipped ever

farther backwards into the murky pool of self-promotion. Although based on actual situations, the scenes are fictionalized in order to capture general themes and archetypes of mentoring roles commonly found in academia and other settings.

Mentoring, Ambition, and Guilt

A young tenure track assistant professor, whom I'll call "Dr. Manhurry," asked me how editorship of a special issue of an academic journal should be listed on his vitae. Although the issue was only in the planning stages with the publisher, Manhurry wanted to ensure that he was credited, with an *in press* vitae citation.

I am all too familiar with *self-promotion fever*, spawned in the academic hothouse. As a first year faculty member, eager to prove my credentials, I wrote a series of training modules for a community mental health center, and I inquired about including them on my own vitae, before they were even completed. It was humbling to be told that only works stamped with the seal of a peer-reviewed approval counted in the eyes of the promotion and tenure committee.

I looked at Manhurry, wondering how to explain the inability to staunch the bleeding of normal narcissism when you're constantly proving yourself. Instead, I assumed the guise of the wise older colleague, sharing how similar journal editorships were listed on my own vitae, after the work had been completed.

I am no stranger to self-promotion. After a long incubation, I finally got a book published (Kayser, 2009). I purchased copies to send to many colleagues I had mentored over the years. My intent was to persuade past mentees to adopt my text for their course reading list. In a brazen effort to boost sales, I sent the book accompanied by a flier from my own “shameless commerce division,” a concept stolen straight from the NPR *Car Guys’* radio show.

It was only sometime later, that I remembered the poignant lyrics from a favorite song on a John Denver album (Feller, 1981):

Now the face that I see in my mirror
More and more is a stranger to me
More and more I can see there's a danger
In becoming what I never thought I'd be.

Silence, Subterfuge, and Suspicion

Another ailment pervading modern-day academia is the pandemic of *junior-faculty silence*, when controversial issues break out. New faculty evidently believe they have to be so careful about what they say and how they sound, that, in addition to the pressure to publish, most find it impossible to participate in organizational decision-making, much less get a jump start in developing their own leadership styles and governance roles. When junior faculty do speak up, it usually concerns issues pertaining to *their* workload: Will they have protected time for conducting research and writing? Will they have reduced teaching loads and few committee assignments? Will they have institutional support for their research? Their focus is increasingly on establishing and promoting their academic careers – primarily through peer-reviewed publications and funded research – not on building and supporting the academic unit and university that employs them. With this type of pressure, younger faculty members have little time to learn the requirements of faculty governance.

Thus, it was not surprising to me when a newly promoted associate professor with tenure, whom I'll call “Dr. Provenstar,” said in private conversation, “Now I can say what I want.” She was referring to periodic contentious debates in our faculty meetings, where Provenstar hadn't felt free to express her opinions, for fear of jeopardizing her chance of becoming promoted and tenured.

Provenstar refers to me, tongue-in-cheek, as “the handler,” a reference to my role in chairing the search committee when she was first hired, fresh from doctoral education, and serving as her occasional mentor. The irony of this spy-novel moniker is that I have no skill in the subterfuge of academic politics. What gets me engaged in power struggles are threats to organizational integrity, particularly violations of faculty governance, when I feel there is no choice left but to jump into the fray. Even during my junior faculty years, I knew that there was no magic to growing brave vocal cords except by speaking out, and that leadership skills did not miraculously emerge once the promotion and tenure threshold had been passed. I learned early on that if there was organizational conflict and I stood my ground on faculty governance principles, I actually earned greater respect from administrators and senior colleagues, far more so than if I had simply kept silent and acquiesced.

Younger faculty members seem highly risk-averse, easily accommodating to administrative decisions already made. If they were mentored to practice leadership and governance early on during their junior faculty years, they might express a greater degree of angst and anger when faculty input is ignored or traditional faculty prerogatives are overlooked. Each would face the same choices I have had to make on several occasions: whether or not a particular issue is worth fighting over; whether the risks are worth the consequences of opposing problematic administrative decisions; whether or not one should act, even if the chances of prevailing are slim to none.

Mentoring in Corporate Academia

We members of the academy are deeply concerned about how our professional image has been and will be portrayed. Overtly, we prize mentoring and collaborative relationships, yet just under the surface, we spend an inordinate amount of energy wondering what others – both at higher and lower ranks of the tenure-track ladder – really think about us.

What accounts for this preoccupation is explained, in part, by the present day homogenized, image-conscious world of corporate academia. Members of the faculty are no longer professors who teach, engage in research and scholarship, and perform

service to the university, the profession, and the community. Rather, we have become just one of numerous “ingredients” in an array of academic products that are branded, marketed, and sold by entrepreneurial-oriented universities, both public and private.

Our customers are legion: students who apply based upon their own market research of what a “top tier” school is; university administrators and boards of trustees whose corporate support we need; alumni and donors who bequeath; state legislatures, foundations, and government agencies who fund; national magazines who rank programs in our discipline; newly-minted doctoral graduates who wish to join the faculty; and, especially, our competitors elsewhere.

Like Apple computers, smart phones, and tablets, universities market a corporate image that conveys quality, being the cutting edge of our field, and having intrinsic value to purchasers. We know how to justify the high cost of our degree products: marketing with corporate logos and tag-lines; snazzy web-pages; pastoral landscaping and new buildings; flagpole banners, glossy alumni magazines, uniform letterhead stationery, action-oriented faculty photo shots; and big name conference draws. We continually tout our accomplishments, innovations, location, and the desirable life-style of our city and state.

In turn, the university's central administration markets to us, reminding us how “extraordinary” we are. Having skated over the thin ice of a deep recession and stalled economy to reach the far shore of increased enrollment with minimal layoffs, we now are told “how well-positioned” we are in the market place. Notwithstanding my own quip several years ago at an open house for prospective students – that “I was looking for the recovery group meeting for photogenically-challenged professors” – in corporate academia, we have become the academic Lake Wobegone: all faculty good looking, all staff members strong, and students all above average. Needless, to say, we have abandoned the normal curve distribution of abilities.

Book publishers, of course, have always marketed, but now, in corporate academia, they have gone one-step further, embedding icons in textbook

paragraphs so that pages bear the accreditation-sanctioned imprimatur of “practice competencies.” In effect, publishers now anoint the sanctioned knowledge, perspective, and viewpoints in a convenient one-stop shopping “all you need” package to become a professional.

No matter how well intended and how well written, these types of prepackaged books are one more step on the slippery slope to a dumbed-down profession. Worse yet, there is nary a peep of objection from we faculty who require students to purchase these incredibly expensive textbooks—soon outdated when a new edition is cranked out every other year. That's because, as I noted earlier, we are the very ones clamoring to win the publishing contracts to write these books.

This perpetual cycle of marketing would no doubt puzzle the founders of our profession—whose knowledge derived from reading widely and deeply in the liberal arts and a broad array of disciplines and specialty area, in addition to reflecting on their own lived experience of forging a new practice profession during very difficult economic times. At the beginning of the profession, no standardization or homogenized intellectual climate existed—it was gloriously messy, contentious, and uneven.

Mentoring Roots and Inspirations

The present day corporate environment grates on me, in large part, because of my nontraditional pathway into academia. I am in the last cohort of faculty hired from the local community, and I can trace professional roots back to the origins of the school. The social work practitioner who co-founded our social work program some 80 years ago (Jean S.), served as the field liaison to one of my key professors in the MSW program (Don K.). Along with another key professor, (Betty H.), all four of us worked (in different decades) at the same public psychiatric teaching hospital before joining the social work faculty. These clinical and community practice roots shaped and sustained me throughout my master's and doctoral education, my work as a field instructor and field liaison, and then my own 20-plus year traverse up through the ranks of academia.

The baby boomer in me still sees the campus as it was when I arrived on the scene in my middle-

twenties, as a masters' student in the 1970s: a gritty, architecturally-mismatched hodgepodge of buildings. Three years before I started, first-year MSW social work students – barely into their graduate studies – engaged in a mass student walk-out and boycott of classes, protesting the lack of diversity content in the curriculum, the lack of faculty and students of color, and the lack of financial aid, particularly for students unable to afford the steep private university tuition. Later in that same year, several thousand student protesters from the entire graduate and undergraduate community occupied the campus for several days; built shantytowns of wood and plastic tarp on the campus greens; set up a commune; hanged the chancellor in effigy; and held teach-ins on non-violence – all in a reaction to the aftermath of the Kent State campus shootings. The protesters on my campus resisted, first, the city police and then, the state National Guard troops, which panicked university administrators had requested—to dislodge them and quell the protest.

The courage of those earlier students forced major changes, at least in the social work program and curriculum. By the time I came along, fresh from two-years alternative service as conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, even as a shy person with a deep interest in clinical social work practice—I readily absorbed social work's emphasis on challenging social and economic injustice and the persistent, pervasive, insidious nature of institutional racism and other forms of structural oppression.

Marketing in those days was minimal, primarily done through the school's bulletins and catalog, and word-of-mouth from our graduates. Today, academic life has a much different feel. The pastoral setting of the beautified campus screams wealth and privilege, complacency and complicity with the status quo. The few campus protests that do occur are confined to emails, blogs, and letter writing campaigns protesting a variety of grievances. Each controversy is important in its own right, but hardly the kind anyone is willing to risk their livelihood or academic career over, much less occupy campus buildings to protest.

Real Mentors, Real Risks

My first (pre-academic) mentor taught me important

lessons about taking a stand against corporate conformity and unquestioned authority. In my high school and junior college days during the mid-1960s, I attended an all-male Catholic preparatory seminary. During my final year, we had a weekend spiritual retreat in which the leader (“Father Dignity,” a local parish priest, then in his late 50s) began his first talk to the assembled student convocation with the opening words: “I am a priest. . . I am a man . . . I am a homosexual.” In a room full of repressed teenage testosterone, absolute silence reigned for a near eternity. With our full attention guaranteed, this portly, balding man began to talk quite humbly about his own life as a gay man and priest, trying to live authentically in what he described as the “one-story world.” This was contrasted with the traditional view of life offered by the Church, which aimed for admittance into the “second story” (i.e., eternal life in heaven, obtained as the reward for righteous, faithful living on earth). We students were encouraged to focus on enacting compassion, justice, forgiveness, and mercy with those who were in need in the everyday temporal present.

The risk taking involved by this priest was truly inspirational. In defiance of the direct orders of his Bishop, Fr. Dignity continued to minister to Catholic gays and lesbians. He continued to serve as a mentor to many students, long after most of us left the seminary for secular careers and noncelibate relationships, gay and straight.

From him, I learned that mentors take genuine risks, while also remaining fully human, vulnerable, resilient, and faithful. His stories evoked compassion and empathy in me. His gift was teaching that living in the “one-story world” does not mean seeing life from a single perspective, but rather embracing the diversity of lived experiences and viewpoints from those whose lives may be vastly different from my own.

Doctoral Education Mentors

During my very long doctoral student career, I was fortunate to work with two faculty members – “Dr. Zeitgeist” and “Dr. Rolemodel” – who independently encouraged latent capacities for scholarship that I was not fully aware of, much less confident about. (This is the only time in my life I can recall being characterized as a “diamond in the

rough.”)

Dr. Zeitgeist was not a faculty member in my own discipline. Nonetheless, her research was directly relevant to my dissertation topic, and I was fortunate to overcome departmental opposition to get her on my committee. Dr. Rolemodel, my dissertation chair, embodied all that I aspired to be as an academic: a critical thinker, creative writer, published scholar, funded researcher, and gifted teacher of clinical practice. Both of them asked probing questions about what I was thinking, rather than permitting me to simply defer to the findings and conclusions of other scholars.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, their mentoring prodded me to begin critically thinking for myself. Both faculty members allowed a glimpse of the real excitement and genuine disappointment that can come from conducting research. When one of her own studies brought unexpected negative results, Dr. Zeitgeist showed genuine consternation at how to make sense of this new data – particularly because the findings seemed to disconfirm earlier research that she and her colleagues had done.

Dr. Rolemodel, in turn, inspired me with her creativity and steadfast support. When my dissertation research hit a major snag – whether I would be able to get enough subjects to do the experimental study I had planned – Dr. Rolemodel not only helped me set priorities and problem-solve, she allowed me to set up a practice interview with her five-year old daughter (who was willing to participate), so that I could field test whether the structured protocol I had designed would be feasible with the young children I hoped to enroll as research subjects.

The lesson from this period is that academic mentors go the extra mile, they listen, challenge, probe, problem-solve, and co-create.

Finding a Voice and Niche

When I had completed my doctorate (finally!), and got hired on faculty, I became the classic academic newbie: an assistant professor trudging in the well-worn track of “publish-or-perish.” In marked contrast to the tremendous pressure currently placed by schools of social work on new faculty hires to “establish their research agenda,” obtain research

funding, and publish in peer-reviewed journals, the senior faculty in my era spent an extended amount of time during my first year teaching and modeling what collegiality and leadership in an academic unit actually required. Collegiality was discussed in formal presentations; informal conversations and brown bags; active debates, disagreements, and deliberations in faculty meetings; and was even a specific topic covered in my first year review meeting with the dean.

As a faculty member, I was not only encouraged to find my voice and contribute my viewpoint, I was criticized if I remained silent or did not take part in debates about controversial topics under discussion. If I screwed up, I received direct, and often swift, feedback. When the dean called a particularly regrettable failure, “not your finest hour,” the gentle rebuke had the effect of a wake-up call. It was not going to work to agree to take on a task but do it only half-heartedly or half-assedly. Fortunately, none of my mistakes ended up being career threatening.

Out of these types of nonhierarchical mentoring came a series of fruitful collaborations with senior faculty members, leading me in entirely new directions of scholarship and professional development. Through these collaborations, I became one of the earliest contributors to the literature of narratives of professional helping (Kayser, 1995, 1998) and, later, among the first to apply oral history research methodology to the history of segregation in social work education (Kayser, 2004, 2005, 2007; Kayser & Morrissey, 1998). I was able to exercise leadership and considerable autonomy in conceptualizing these projects, securing funding, collecting and analyzing the data, writing the manuscript drafts – essentially executing the research or scholarly project from start to completion. I found the interaction and collaboration with senior faculty mentors who were co-authors or co-investigators to be rewarding and intellectually invigorating. On the classroom side, I found my niche as a teacher and became a strong contributor to the program's curriculum redesign.

Mentoring Successes: Dancing with the Stars (Backwards)!

Without trying to oversell or idealize another metaphor, successful mentoring is comparable to

ballroom dancing with a favorite partner. While it's true that hierarchical mentors usually lead the dance, collaborative mentoring is more akin to the famous line spoken about the dancing partner to Fred Astaire in the movies: "Sure he was great, but don't forget Ginger Rogers did everything he did backwards . . . and in high heels!" (Thaves, 1982).

Which is to say, the times when I have been most successful as a collaborative mentor have occurred when I have intuitively been in synch with my mentees, following *their* lead. The dance metaphor captures the nimbleness of mind and foot needed to stay within the bounds of what mentees need or feel would be helpful at any given time. Sometimes, it's a glide or a twirl that's helpful. Sometimes, it's holding on. Other times, it's letting go.

In responding to students' discouragements about mastering clinical practice, I frequently have shared lessons learned from previous mistakes or errors I made, which have bearing on the problems mentees might then be facing. Reducing power differentials (and halo effects) in this manner usually has the effect of promoting greater brainstorming, as the mentees begin to contemplate possible consequences (intended and otherwise) of the various options before them, leading to new avenues of action.

With junior faculty colleagues and peers, a Ginger Rogers-type of mentoring has been primarily to act as a sounding board in hearing their concerns. Like me, many new faculty members encounter rough periods during their initial years. This might be because they fell short of incredibly high expectations if a particular course did not go well, or students were dissatisfied and complained, or if a manuscript submission was rejected, a grant was not funded, or if negative feedback was received during their third-year pre-tenure review. At these times, I shared my own experiences of being challenged to grow, how it felt to encounter unexpected obstacles, what it was like to receive the therapeutic kick in the pants about the quality of my research and manuscript submissions, or missteps I made in addressing problematic interactions with senior colleagues or academic administrators. In sharing these experiences, I hoped to convey these messages; "you are not alone," "others also have faced these obstacles," and "you will be successful

if you learn from them and persevere."

Becoming a Curmudgeon

Long before the hiring process begins, faculty candidates already have endured the torturous process of doctoral education, and of trying to fulfill ever increasing expectations of the future academic programs that subsequently will hire them: have expertise in quantitative and qualitative research methodology; have a roster of national conference presentations, as well as articles and book chapters already published listed on a vitae; have research funding already secured; have competence in multicultural and social/economic justice issues; have active involvement in professional organizations, and have the motivation to achieve distinction and obtain promotion (with tenure, if still available). In other words, they have the ability to work within the existing corporate culture.

Although I went through this same process of meeting expectations, at the present time mentoring has become increasingly challenging for me. This is a painful admission to make. I find myself unsure how to (or whether to) serve as a mentor to the new faculty hires. Many either don't have time or don't feel the need to seek out senior faculty for a mentoring relationship—at least in terms of the type I am accustomed to providing.

Reading these words, I recognize the emergence of "*an inner curmudgeon*." This term usually conveys a most unflattering picture: someone cranky, stingy, irascible, bitter about the present, and stuck in the past. In short, an "old fart." My use of the term, hopefully, is different, although I recognize the distinct danger that this narrative could be read as confirming the stereotype. Rather, I think of a curmudgeon in the same way that feminists have refashioned the term *crone* to connote a woman of a certain age, who has achieved a measure of wisdom and wishes to pass her experiences along to women in a younger generation – thus changing a formerly disparaging term into a new construction of positive meaning.

According to Jon Winokur (n.d.), a noteworthy feature of curmudgeons is their lack of a functional denial system:

Curmudgeons...can't compromise their standards and can't manage the suspension of disbelief

necessary for feigned cheerfulness. Their awareness is a curse. Curmudgeons have gotten a bad rap in the same way that the messenger is blamed for the message: They have the temerity to comment on the human condition without apology. They not only refuse to applaud mediocrity, they howl it down with morose glee. Their versions of the truth unsettle us, and we hold it against them, even though they soften it with humor.

Becoming a curmudgeon also has meant withdrawing some of the energy formerly invested in mentoring others, and reinvesting it in myself. With few models to guide me about how faculty move towards retirement, I need to learn how to survive in a corporate environment that, while organizationally necessary for survival, is nonetheless, not always congruent with my values or present state of personal/professional development.

Conclusion

I may have become a curmudgeon, but I am not a fool. I am well aware that marketing, public relations, fund-raising, and endeavors having national visibility are essential for the survival of a private university, and my academic unit in particular. Yet, it feels as if these ventures often come with a heavy price: with so much emphasis on corporate and individual faculty self-promotion, it is difficult to discern when something significant truly is at risk; difficult to discern whether or not to take a stand; difficult to know when to put oneself on the line. It is also difficult to mentor new faculty about the importance of governance, such as taking charge of curriculum design decisions, student admissions and retentions, faculty hires and promotions. The pressure to publish forces younger faculty members' interest in mentoring relationships to others who can help with their immediate career needs – increasing research or statistical competencies, obtaining grants, and getting manuscripts published. Yet when traditional faculty roles and responsibilities are left unattended, those curriculum, admissions, hiring, and promotion decisions inevitably are going to be heavily influenced by administrators' decisions on public relations imagery and what the marketplace can bear.

I worry about the future of my profession, and

wonder what condition it will be in 25 or 50 years from now. I wonder how the next generations of social work academics – the ones who will come after the time when current junior faculty have reached ascendancy in senior faculty tenured positions – will fare. Being socialized from doctoral education onward to work in academic environments requiring conformity to existing corporate structures and knowledge paradigms does not bode well for a profession always in dire need of practice innovation.

Will social work mentorship in the future be in the motif of clumsy, conceited Inspector Clouseau or that of elegant Ginger Rogers? Will it be a dunking in the pool of corporate and individual self-promotion, or a twirl of mentoring partners in synch with each other, in which the results produced stand for themselves?

That future story has yet to be written, of course. But if meaningful mentoring is to occur, something essential must be placed at risk, and by that I don't mean merely the risk of having a manuscript or grant application turned down. Junior faculty need to be mentored in bravery, to be schooled in *organizational dread*, so they feel it in their bones when things go askew. When the corporate culture demands conformity and acquiescence, junior faculty need to find their conscience, and be willing to dance, not fumble. If real mentoring has occurred, they won't find themselves alone. Junior faculty will be joining the chorus of senior faculty, making their collective voices known, both in establishing shared governance with university administrators, and in breaking out of existing frameworks to create the innovative knowledge and practice methods needed for the future of the profession.

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