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A Guide and Supporter

Certain situations in life are not meant to be gone through alone. From terrible tragedies such as the death of a loved one, to joyful moments like graduating college after years of stress and hard work, these experiences should be shared with others. Family, friends, significant others, pastors, teachers, coaches, etc., are all important people that can be present in these moments. These individuals also often have the responsibility to guide one in life and support him or her in all life circumstances. These people may have the label of a role model, but more specifically, I believe these particular individuals who lead others in the right direction and help form their identities have the influential title of a mentor. A successful, active mentor is an individual who incorporates the concepts of knowledge, experience, and emotional intelligence into their mentoring relationships to purposely help another reach his or her goals and be a supporter in the process.

Knowledge is a vital component of mentorship, for it is the basis on which questions are answered and personal and academic development is achieved. Knowledge is an abstract word that varies in meaning for many individuals. I personally believe knowledge is the accumulation of academic material learned in school settings along with personal experiences one endures throughout life. Although academic learning may be standardized to the point where almost everyone is being taught the same information, experiences differ from person to person due to contrasting backgrounds, values, and internal needs. Therefore, it can be concluded that knowledge will not always look nor be the same for everybody. Because of this, I argue that there is no right or wrong knowledge, unless discussing accepted concepts such as math or science where there are confirmed answers, because experiences are shaped by one’s own perspectives and attitudes.

My own definition of knowledge can be related to the prominent philosopher Plato’s concept of knowledge that is heavily portrayed in the book *Theaetetus*. In this novel, the influential mentor, Socrates, has an intelligent, thorough discussion with a young man named Theaetetus. The goal of their conversation is to discover a definition of knowledge. Theaetetus offers three proposals: knowledge is perception, knowledge is true judgement, and knowledge is true judgement with an account (Plato, Williams, Levett, & Burnyeat, 1992, p. ix). Each of these well-educated, thoughtful guesses are refuted by Socrates through brilliant, descriptive analyses of why they cannot possibly be correct. The book ends with no clear definition of knowledge, just an idea of what knowledge is not. This conclusion supports my belief that knowledge may not always have a concrete definition or appearance, but it is applied in numerous situations in various forms that are unique from individual to individual. For instance, one may rely on knowledge gained through real-life experiences to teach others why studying weeks before a test instead of cramming is a smart decision, instead of solely relying on the basic knowledge that is often used by teachers with no lasting influence. A mentor realizes that knowledge is important in his or her mentoring relationships, but remains flexible in the practice of spreading knowledge to tailor the needs of the individual for experiences differ for all.

It is crucial for mentors to apply knowledge to their mentoring relationships to enhance trust, reliability, and guidance in a logical way. Although this process may look different depending whether academic resources or personal experiences are relied upon, there are key characteristics that all mentors need to apply in their mentoring relationships to allow consistency and achievement. A perfect example of these practices is laid out in *Theaetetus* when Socrates compares himself to a midwife. As explained by the legend himself, a midwife is a non-child bearing woman that delivers the offspring of other women. Supposedly, the midwives can determine if women are pregnant and hold the power to cause or prevent major events, such as labor pains or a miscarriage. This practice is greatly similar to Socrates’ work. Instead of watching over women and their bodies, Socrates looks after the labor of the souls of men. His mysterious capabilities include determining if the young mind is pregnant with wisdom and whether it is being sought of a phantom or a fertile truth. So, like a midwife’s practice, Socrates has the important role of delivering the offspring of the mind in a protective and purposeful manner (Plato, Williams, Levett, & Burnyeat, 1992, p. 10-12). It is the mentor’s responsibility to guide their mentee in the right direction of fulfilling their own goals and reaching their definition of success while learning and leaning on the mentor in the process. The mentor allows the mentee to independently grow in their yearning of knowledge and seeking of the truth. Although the mentee may endure pains of labor in the process, it should be trusted through the relationship that the mentor will be a successful midwife and bare fruitfulness from those experiences.

Over the past few years, I have had several opportunities to practice my mentoring skills, specifically exercising my own knowledge to lead my mentees down the right path. In high school, I was the lead female cross country and track runner for my school. Although it was great to win races and be praised for my talent, this role came with several expectations and responsibilities that could be overwhelming if not handled correctly. It was my job to facilitate workouts, inspire my teammates, and live by example through commitment, positivity, and happiness. Eventually, I learned the importance of forming personal relationships with each of my teammates to truly help them be successful on and off the track. I often would hold team gatherings or meet individually with each member of the team quite frequently, for I truly cared for them as a person and desired for them to attain self-motivation and realization. Through this experience, I realized that I cannot always force happiness or the desire for success on an individual, but I can be an active listener and inspire one to be great. By using my own personal experiences of racing such as listening to my body, along with learned knowledge on pacing and self-talk from past coaches, I believe I was able to positively impact my teammates and their running and racing techniques. But more importantly, I shaped these individuals’ lives by being a positive example and friend in all aspects of their life.

As it has been mentioned, experiences are a component of knowledge and a key tool in a mentoring relationship. John Dewey, an influential philosopher, argues that experiences are the foundation of knowledge. It is through experiences that we can learn and grow from thorough reflection to create knowledge and an understanding of life. Experiences may seem to be diverse for every individual, but I believe they all share common features and purposes. Dewey (1917/1981) best summarizes the definition of an experience: “Experience, in other words, is a matter of simultaneous doings and sufferings” (p. 63). The things humans undergo are its doings, while sufferings are the result of the consequences of one’s own actions. These two things happen at the same time, which results in one constantly gaining experiences in his or her life. Of course, these experiences may be good or bad, but they are always something that can be learned from when properly reflected on and given meaning by the individual.

Not only are experiences vital to the understanding of knowledge and its influence on one’s ability to make fruitful decisions and move forward in the right direction, but they are also used to build the foundation of a mentoring relationship. Small talk and common ground are often the first things discussed in any type of relationship, and this is not an exception in a mentoring relationship. It is necessary to learn what has shaped one’s own knowledge and beliefs through personal experiences to best assist them in a manner that respects and supports their way of life. Mentors cannot change the experiences one undergoes, but they can influence others by sharing their own experiences with an open mind and being vulnerable knowing that it may be beneficial for others to learn what others have faced in life. Emphasizing the importance of reflecting on experiences and responding to them in a positive manner is also an important job of the mentor. As asserted by Dewey (1917/1938), “The only power the organism possesses to control its own future depends upon the way its present responses modify changes which are taking place in its medium” (p. 69). Although an individual cannot always control what is happening, he or she can control their response to the situation, which greatly influences the outcome of the experience. A mentor may encourage their mentee to not try to change what happened to him or her, but maybe alter their response and attitude to the stimulus. My grandmother, an important mentor in my life, constantly lived by this practice. Instead of trying to change the past, she taught me through her own way of living to continue forward with a smile knowing that I am so much smarter and stronger from my recent experiences due to my constant reflection in all aspects of life. It is important for all individuals to reflect on their responses to experiences and, if necessary, alter them for the best outcomes in achieving success and growth in life.

The final important component of an active, successful mentor is emotional intelligence. I define emotional intelligence as the awareness of one’s own emotions and perceptions, others’ emotions and perceptions, and the settings in which emotions and perceptions may be affected. In my mind, emotional intelligence is the most important key in mentoring due to its efficiency in completely understanding oneself, others, and the contexts of situations to produce successful relationships. It is the pinnacle of achieving mentor success due to its ability to connect oneself with others in an awareness and participatory manner. The author and psychologist Daniel Goleman (2004) explains that the five components of emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. To achieve emotional intelligence, individuals need to first begin with the awareness of their own emotions to realize their strengths and weaknesses and how they impact others. When emotions are not controlled, it is easy for others to lose respect and trust in a mentor, for the best mentors grasp the idea that they cannot help others until they help themselves. Once one becomes a master of his or her emotions, healthy relationships can be formed with motivation and empathy as the backbone. Motivation gives purpose to one’s actions, while empathy allows one to feel how others are feeling. It is through these skills that one can lead others in a way that goes beyond knowledge and experience, for emotions are the ultimate source of behaviors, reactions, and how an individual chooses to live.

As a mentor, I have learned that a mentor relationship may not always be what one imagines, for sometimes the mentees have no questions and just desire another human being to talk to and form a relationship with. These scenarios are completely okay, and growth is still possible even if is not as obvious as a question being answered or an improvement in some aspect of life. I believe there are opportunities in these situations to share knowledge, experiences, and display motivation and empathy, especially when forming common ground and getting to know each other beyond a superficial level. For example, giving insight on the lessons I learned about studying in college when discussing a certain class was helpful and practical to share for growth in my mentee since she shared her struggle with organizing notes and doing well on tests in a particular class. Development in the mentee may not be external or measurable, but it is paramount to remember that the mentor is nonetheless making an impact on another individual and it their decision to either be remembered as great or awful.

Becoming a successful mentor with a balanced combination of knowledge, experience, and emotional intelligence is a process that develops over time with extensive, persistent practice and a determined attitude. As I take on new mentor relationships throughout my years in school and eventually into my career, I will strive to integrate emotional intelligence, for this is where I am the weakest. Practicing self-awareness and regulation so that I can better empathize with others will be essential to becoming a successful mentor. I will continue to bring my knowledge and experiences into my relationships with an open, respectful mind, knowing that my beliefs and actions are not agreed upon by everyone. It is a privilege to walk with another individual through a mentor relationship and truly have an impact on someone. I will be grateful to help others through these relationships and appreciate the mentors I encounter in my own life.

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