

From Mentee to Mentor: Mentorship as a Relational and Transformative Practice in Undergraduate Education

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Abstract

This reflective essay explores academic mentorship as a transformative practice in higher education, drawing on my experiences as both a mentee and a mentor. Using an autoethnographic approach, I examine how effective mentorship grounded in trust, empathy, and intellectual rigour can shape personal and professional growth for both mentors and students. The essay situates these reflections within established theoretical frameworks, including Vygotsky's social development theory (SDT), communities of practice (CoP), and the cross-cultural concept of guru–shishya parampara. I describe how the mentoring I received during my doctoral studies informed my current practices as a faculty member at a Canadian undergraduate institution, where mentorship extends from classroom engagement to collaborative research. The narrative highlights how authentic academic relationships promote confidence, agency, and a sense of belonging among students. Ultimately, I argue that mentorship, when practiced with intention and care, remains central to cultivating transformative learning experiences in an evolving higher education landscape.

Keywords: transformative learning, undergraduate education, guru–shishya parampara, autoethnography, scholarship of teaching and learning

Introduction

Researchers have long highlighted the importance of academic mentorship in post-secondary education, particularly in undergraduate and graduate programs (Liénard et al., 2018; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). There is strong evidence that meaningful mentorship promotes students' intellectual and personal growth, including improved academic persistence, higher grade point averages, and enhanced professional skills (Chan et al., 2018; Thiry et al., 2012). In addition, mentorship helps students build professional networks, develop a sense of academic identity, and learn the norms of collegiality, all of which contribute to greater satisfaction with their educational experience (Baker & Pifer, 2014; Johnson & Griffin, 2024).

Though widely used, mentorship resists a single fixed definition. A recent systematic review of academic literature found considerable variation in how the term is applied across

higher education (Nuis et al., 2023). Synthesizing this literature, Nuis et al. (2023) characterized mentoring as a developmental relationship in which a more experienced mentor provides career, emotional, psychosocial, psychological, and academic support to advance a mentee's success, competence, and professional growth. Earlier scholarship had similarly categorized mentoring into four core functions: psychological and emotional support, goal setting and career guidance, academic subject support, and role modelling (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). While such frameworks often describe formalized programs, mentorship in practice also extends into informal and relational forms of guidance that are less easily institutionalized. Importantly, mentorship is best understood not as a discrete role but as a relational quality that may characterize supervisory, teaching, and advising relationships alike, such that a faculty member may supervise without mentoring or may mentor well beyond the boundaries of any formal role (Lunsford et al., 2017). It is this relational and developmental quality, rather than its instrumental or programmatic dimensions, that the present essay emphasizes, asking what students come to learn and to become through such relationships.

While the benefits of mentorship are well established, most research has focused on graduate-level mentoring relationships (Liénard et al., 2018; Noy & Ray, 2012). In contrast, the literature on undergraduate academic mentorship remains limited (Anderson & Shore, 2008; Long et al., 2010; Lunsford et al., 2017). There is still little understanding of effective pedagogical practices for mentoring undergraduates or of how faculty engage with undergraduate students in mentoring roles (Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007; Eagan et al., 2011; Greer & Lester, 2025). This gap may be partly due to institutional cultures that prioritize graduate supervision over undergraduate mentoring. Faculty often hold higher expectations of graduate students and therefore devote more time and resources to their mentorship, while experiencing greater challenges when mentoring undergraduate students who are less advanced in their disciplinary knowledge and academic skills (Cronan et al., 2020; Eagan et al., 2011; Gardner & Barnes, 2007). As a result, the traditional mentoring model in higher education tends to flow from faculty to graduate students, while mentoring undergraduates is often carried out by graduate and postgraduate students (Asif et al., 2023; Wolfe et al., 2008).

Additionally, though many faculty may find working with undergraduate students intrinsically rewarding, the institutional incentives to do so are limited (Morales et al., 2017). Universities rarely consider undergraduate mentoring in promotion or tenure decisions, and research grants seldom recognize mentoring productivity (Long et al., 2010). In large research universities, it is even assumed that mentoring undergraduates is best left to graduate students (Evans et al., 2009). Faculty members not mentoring undergraduate students is unfortunate, as mentorship enhances the student experience at all levels of higher education. Evidence suggests that strong undergraduate mentoring improves academic achievement, increases student satisfaction, and promotes higher retention rates, all of which are central to most universities' missions (Gonzalez, 2001; Long et al., 2010; Petrescu et al., 2021). For institutions that primarily offer undergraduate programs, identifying pedagogical practices that nurture meaningful academic mentorship is therefore especially vital.

In this essay, I aim to address the gap in the literature on undergraduate mentorship by reflecting on my experience of mentoring undergraduate students, both within and beyond the classroom. Following Felten's (2013) call for critically reflective inquiry within the scholarship of teaching and learning, I adopt an autoethnographic approach to examine my own mentoring practices at a Canadian university that focuses exclusively on undergraduate education. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that involves the researcher actively examining their personal experiences (Romo, 2005). It requires the researcher to reflect on and describe how their assumptions and motivations interact with the context within which they operate and how they might influence the outcomes of a relationship (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Autoethnographic methods have been widely used to review the role of teachers in academia (Pennington, 2007) and to conduct self-inquiry into specific pedagogical approaches (Winograd, 2002). As a method, autoethnography also carries distinctive ethical responsibilities; because it draws on the researcher's relationships with identifiable others, it requires sustained attention to confidentiality, relational ethics, and the faithful but responsible representation of those whose lives intersect with the narrative (Sparkes, 2024; Tolich, 2010). I have approached these responsibilities by generalizing across mentor roles rather than identifying individuals, focusing on professional learning rather than personal evaluation, and confining disclosure to information already in the public domain; a fuller statement of these commitments appears in the Ethical Considerations section that closes the essay.

To situate my reflections within a broader theoretical context, I draw on the social exchange theory (SET), Vygotsky's social development theory (SDT), communities of practice (CoP), and the guru–shishya parampara because each illuminates a distinct dimension of mentorship: reciprocity and relational exchange, scaffolded intellectual development, community integration, and holistic moral formation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Namhata & Behera, 2023; Vygotsky, 1978). Taken together, these frameworks allow me to interpret mentorship not as a singular model but as a layered practice shaped by cultural context, relational ethics, and evolving professional identity (Baker & Pifer, 2011).

My central thesis is that when practiced with intention and authenticity, academic mentorship can be deeply transformative at all levels of education. Such a relationship is not merely instrumental or transactional but mutually enriching, often leading to enduring connections between faculty and students that extend far beyond formal instruction. Through this autoethnographic reflection, I contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning by placing established mentorship frameworks in dialogue with lived experience. I illustrate how relational, developmental, and cross-cultural perspectives on mentorship can inform pedagogical practice in undergraduate contexts. If mentorship is understood as pedagogical practice, the learning it makes possible is multidimensional: students develop not only disciplinary knowledge and research competence but also confidence, academic identity, and a sense of belonging within scholarly communities, alongside the ethical disposition and agency that sustain continued growth. Rather than advancing a new theory, this essay offers a situated and reflexive account that deepens understanding of mentorship as praxis, conceptualized as an intentional, relational, and ethically grounded educational practice.

What follows is shaped by my own positionality as a faculty member teaching and mentoring undergraduate students, which I make explicit here as a frame for the reflections that come next. My experiences as both a mentee and a mentor to students from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds have led me to view mentorship as a relational and developmental practice grounded in guidance, trust, and professional growth (Yip, 2024). I recognize that institutional and disciplinary contexts shape my understanding of mentorship, and that mentoring practices may differ across settings. The interpretation offered here is therefore situated and reflexive, informed by lived experiences that unfolded across nonprofit work in India, doctoral training in the United States, field research in Africa, and undergraduate teaching in Canada—each shaping my understanding of mentorship as a context-sensitive and relational practice. Because this account draws on real relationships, and as I state in the Ethical Considerations section below, I have written about mentors, colleagues, and students in ways that prioritize relational ethics and responsible representation.

Conceptualizing Academic Mentorship

Academic mentorship is a multifaceted practice that encompasses relational, developmental, and social dimensions, making it difficult to fully understand through a single theoretical lens (Dahlberg & Byars-Winston, 2020; Gardner & Barnes, 2007). To capture this complexity, this essay draws on four complementary conceptual frameworks: social exchange theory, Vygotsky's social development theory, situated learning and communities of practice, and the guru-shishya parampara. Each framework highlights a distinct yet interconnected aspect of mentorship. Together, these frameworks provide a more comprehensive understanding of academic mentorship as a relational and transformative educational practice (Baker & Pifer, 2011).

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory (SET) is a foundational sociological framework that explains social interaction as a process of give-and-take, in which individuals enter and sustain relationships when the perceived benefits outweigh the perceived costs (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Applied to mentorship, SET frames mentors as providing time and intellectual expertise in ways that may yield reciprocal professional benefits, such as increased productivity or enhanced reputation. However, when mentorship is framed primarily in instrumental terms, focused on measurable outputs, performance, or career advancement, it risks overlooking relational and developmental dimensions that are less easily quantified. In educational settings, mentorship often extends beyond reciprocal exchange to include trust, identity formation, encouragement, and moral support (Baker & Pifer, 2011). Clarifying this distinction helps illuminate why mentorship may be experienced not merely as a professional arrangement but as a formative educational relationship.

Mediated Learning and Community of Practice

While SET provides insight into the reciprocal dynamics that shape mentoring relationships, it does not fully explain how learning and development occur within those relationships. Vygotsky's social development theory (SDT) offers a complementary lens, holding that learning is socially mediated; individuals acquire knowledge through interaction with more capable others, such as adults or peers who have already mastered specific skills or concepts (Vygotsky, 1978; 1934/1987). A central concept within this theory is the *zone of proximal development*, which describes the gap between what an individual can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more knowledgeable other (Taber, 2020). From this perspective, mentors are experienced guides who provide structured support, or scaffolding, that enables mentee students to progressively develop competence and confidence in their academic and professional tasks. In this way, SDT highlights the developmental dimension of mentorship. It underscores the importance of guided participation in supporting learning and growth, thereby preparing mentees to engage more fully in the practices of their academic or professional communities.

Building on the developmental perspective offered by SDT, situated learning theory emphasizes that learning occurs through participation in social contexts rather than through passive knowledge acquisition in isolation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation* to describe how newcomers, such as mentees, become integrated into a community of practice by initially engaging in simpler tasks and gradually assuming more complex responsibilities as their competence develops (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In the context of mentorship, legitimate peripheral participation captures the process through which academic mentors introduce mentees to the culture, values, and expectations of their disciplinary community. While subject mastery is necessary, it is not sufficient for becoming a scholar in a field. Mentors, therefore, guide mentees not only in developing expertise but also in learning how to participate in scholarly dialogue, adhere to professional norms, and uphold ethical standards of conduct (Baker & Pifer, 2011). Over time, this guided participation enables mentees to move from peripheral involvement toward fuller membership as independent academics or scholar-practitioners, highlighting the social and identity-forming dimensions of mentorship within academic communities.

Cross-Cultural Perspective of Guru–Shishya Parampara

While previous frameworks highlight the developmental and social dimensions of mentorship, understanding mentorship in contemporary educational settings also requires attention to cultural diversity and how different social and philosophical traditions shape mentoring relationships. Students increasingly represent diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, with their expectations of authority, learning, and relationships often influenced by the environments in which they grow (Johnson et al., 2011). For this reason, a cross-cultural framework can help broaden the understanding of mentorship beyond dominant Western models by recognizing alternative traditions that emphasize relational and holistic approaches to learning.

One such framework is the *guru–shishya parampara*, an ancient Indian pedagogical tradition in which knowledge is transmitted across generations through a deeply personal and ethical relationship between teacher and disciple (Banerji et al., 2017). In this tradition, a guru represents the teacher or mentor, a shishya the disciple or mentee, and a parampara the lineage of knowledge transmitted through sustained relationships between teacher and learner (Khosla & Joshi, 2021).

Historically, the guru provided not only academic or artistic instruction but also moral and personal guidance, supporting the disciple’s holistic development (Namhata & Behera, 2023). This model of mentorship reflects values such as trust, respect, responsibility, and long-term commitment that resonate across many educational contexts, even when the specific cultural practices differ. In this sense, the guru–shishya parampara can be understood as cross-cultural, not because it is practiced universally but because the relational principles underlying the tradition are recognizable in mentoring relationships across disciplines and societies. At the same time, critiques of the guru–shishya parampara tradition highlight the potential for power imbalances between the guru and the shishya, including expectations of deference and the concentration of authority in determining a student’s learning trajectory and progress (Krishna, 2020; Namhata & Behera, 2023). In contemporary contexts, the guru–shishya parampara is often viewed less as a formal pedagogical system and more as an enduring cultural ideal, particularly within lineage-based artistic traditions (Krishna, 2020). Nevertheless, as higher education becomes increasingly global and culturally diverse, the guru–shishya parampara framework offers a useful lens for understanding mentorship as a relational practice shaped by cultural values and grounded in shared commitments to guidance, responsibility, and the holistic development of mentees.

My Experience as a Graduate Mentee

My decision to pursue doctoral studies began years earlier while working in the field in India. As a grassroots professional with a rural nonprofit organization, I witnessed firsthand how insufficient economic incentives for managing local resources often contributed to the failure of development initiatives. Pursuing a PhD at a prominent university in the United States offered an opportunity to deepen my understanding of the economic theories underlying the efficient management of natural resources. This experience ultimately led me to focus my studies on environmental and natural resource economics. In reflecting on the mentorship I received during these years, I focus on the quality of my doctoral committee’s engagement rather than the formal supervisory role they held. Supervision involves institutional duties of evaluation, gatekeeping, and certification, whereas mentorship is a relational quality that may or may not characterize how those duties are practiced (Lunsford et al., 2017); my committee, fortunately, embodied both.

Coursework Phase

Scholars typically divide PhD studies into two stages: the coursework phase and the dissertation phase (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). While finalizing my coursework, I realized that,

lacking sufficient training in economics, I would need to take additional introductory economics courses. My committee members were fully supportive of this extended coursework. This flexibility helped me build a solid academic foundation without feeling overwhelmed.

During this initial phase, my committee scheduled weekly meetings with me to monitor my progress and provide essential support. These regular interactions reinforced the importance of open communication and created a sense of mutual respect, helping bridge the hierarchical relationship between mentor and mentee. However, the supportive relationship I shared with my faculty mentors faced an unexpected challenge when funding for my graduate assistantship ran out. As an international student, maintaining financial stability was crucial for continuing my enrollment. My mentors' candor about the situation and their proactive efforts to help me secure another research assistantship at an affiliated institute within the university reassured me during this difficult period. Their actions demonstrated not only professional support but also a commitment to my well-being and academic continuity.

Dissertation Phase

Once I completed my coursework and comprehensive exams, I transitioned into the research phase of my doctoral program. The guidance provided by my committee during this phase was instrumental in helping me navigate these challenges with clarity and confidence.

With a long-standing interest in the sustainable management of natural resources, I chose to investigate the practical applications of environmental payment schemes. My committee members supported this work by helping me secure sufficient funding to carry out field experiments in rural Africa. While I was in the field, my committee maintained regular email correspondence with me, offering feedback on my experimental design and ensuring that I remained on track. This consistent communication helped me address the inevitable challenges of fieldwork, including logistical constraints and data-collection difficulties. Some committee members even visited the field site to observe the research firsthand. Their visit not only provided practical guidance but also reinforced my confidence and sense of professional support. These collaborations were not one-sided; my prior field experience and familiarity with local contexts also informed our collective decision-making, allowing my committee members and me to learn from one another as we refined the research design.

After returning from the field, I faced the demanding task of writing my dissertation. As in earlier stages of my training, my committee members responded with patience and pragmatic guidance. Rather than requiring a traditional monograph, they suggested structuring my dissertation as three distinct essays. Writing one paper at a time and grounding each analysis in relevant economic theory proved to be a transformative learning experience (Bass & Riggio, 2006). It deepened my understanding of the subject matter and helped me develop the discipline and craft of academic writing (Taber, 2020). By the end of the year, my drafts had evolved into a set of polished articles. Although my committee members provided extensive feedback on each paper, I was listed as the first author on all three. This recognition significantly strengthened my confidence and sense of academic identity. For the first time, I began to see

myself not only as a student but as a developing scholar capable of contributing meaningfully to the academic community (Wenger, 1998).

By the time I defended my dissertation, I had completed three essays, co-authored several papers with my committee members, presented my work at international conferences, and developed a strong network of academic collaborators. My journey from a mid-career development practitioner, uncertain about my place in academia, to a confident researcher and emerging mentor was made possible by the consistent, thoughtful, and ethically grounded guidance of my mentors.

Role of Mentorship in My Academic Growth

Effective mentorship requires a careful balance of personal, professional, and psychosocial support (Dahlberg & Byars-Winston, 2020). At an individual level, the mentorship I received as a graduate student significantly enhanced my confidence as a researcher and scholar (Table 1). My faculty mentors, acting as the more knowledgeable other, granted me considerable autonomy in designing my coursework and research projects while offering constructive guidance to support my academic success (Taber, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). This trust enabled me to take ownership of my academic trajectory and develop a strong sense of competence and agency.

In addition to the formal responsibilities of dissertation supervision, my committee members served as steadfast advocates for my professional growth. They helped me secure funding at critical junctures and wrote letters of support for scholarships and postdoctoral fellowships. Their proactive advocacy ensured that I had access to the resources and opportunities necessary to succeed, while their encouragement to engage with the wider academic community enabled me to gradually move from peripheral participation toward a recognized scholar-practitioner in my discipline (Wenger, 1998).

Equally important was the psychosocial support they provided. My mentors created a safe and affirming environment in which I could openly share my insecurities and anxieties. Their patience, empathy, and consistent belief in my potential helped me navigate challenges and persevere through setbacks (Table 1). These experiences reinforced my understanding that mentorship involves not only academic guidance but also emotional support and sustained encouragement during periods of uncertainty.

Each member of my committee embodied a different facet of mentorship: what appeared from the outside as one role was, in practice, a constellation of styles drawing on distinct traditions of guidance. While my committee members shared a common commitment to my success, their mentoring styles varied. Some focused primarily on intellectual guidance, offering detailed feedback on research design and data analysis, which closely reflected Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding through structured academic support (Vygotsky, 1978). Others emphasized encouragement, reassurance, and personal conversations during moments of uncertainty, interactions that resonated more strongly with the relational principles embodied in the guru–shishya parampara (Namhata & Behera, 2023). Still others played a strategic role in connecting

me to professional networks and funding opportunities, illustrating the resource-based and advocacy dimensions of mentorship described in SET (Blau, 2017). These varied forms of engagement enriched my doctoral experience by demonstrating that effective mentorship is not uniform but adaptive, shaped by individual strengths, relationships, and situational needs.

At the same time, these experiences also made me aware of the inherent power differentials that shape mentoring relationships in academic settings. Faculty mentors often influence decisions on funding, research opportunities, evaluation, and professional advancement, thereby placing them in positions of significant responsibility. I came to appreciate that effective mentorship requires not only expertise and guidance but also ethical awareness of how to use authority. Recognizing these dynamics has shaped my own approach to mentoring, reinforcing the importance of fairness, respect, and accountability in supporting students' academic and professional development.

Table 1. Mentor roles and their alignment with conceptual frameworks of mentorship¹

Mentor Roles	Key Contributions	Lessons Learned	Related Conceptual Framework(s)
Personal Growth	Enhanced self-confidence; instilled values like humility, empathy, and integrity	Trust, autonomy, and cultivating personal values	<i>Guru–Shishya Parampara</i> : Emphasis on trust, respect, and holistic development Social Development Theory (SDT) : Development of competence and self-efficacy through guided support
Professional Growth	Skill development; career guidance; advocacy; introduction to academic collaboration	Providing opportunities, advocacy, and professional integration	Situated Learning / Communities of Practice (CoP) : Movement from peripheral participation to professional integration Social Exchange Theory (SET) : Reciprocal support and access to professional opportunities
Psychosocial Support	Encouragement during challenges; role modelling; effective and empathetic mentorship	Compassion, encouragement, and setting an example as a mentor	<i>Guru–Shishya Parampara</i> : Relational and ethical dimensions of mentorship Social Development Theory (SDT) : Emotional scaffolding and confidence building during challenging periods

¹ Source: Adapted from Dahlberg & Byars-Winston (2020) based on the author's autoethnographic narrative. Additional sources include: Namhata & Behera (2023); Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005); Wenger (1998); Vygotsky (1978).

After completing my PhD, I joined a Canadian university that primarily serves undergraduate students. Over the past decade, I have had numerous opportunities to mentor students both within and beyond the classroom. In these roles, I have frequently reflected on my own experiences as a mentee and have drawn lessons that continue to inform my teaching philosophy and approach to mentorship. These reflections have helped me translate the guidance I once received into intentional mentoring practices tailored to the developmental needs of undergraduate students.

Across the two contexts described below, within the classroom and beyond it, my mentoring practice has worked along the three dimensions identified in Table 1: personal growth (cultivating confidence, autonomy, and academic identity), professional growth (developing disciplinary competence and entry into scholarly communities), and psychosocial support (sustaining trust, empathy, and emotional encouragement during periods of uncertainty). These dimensions overlap in practice, and individual interactions often draw on more than one at a time; the subsections that follow describe the contexts in which these dimensions unfold rather than treating each dimension separately.

Mentorship Within the Classroom

The Canadian university where I work promotes student engagement by maintaining relatively small class sizes, with most capped at around 40 students. This favourable faculty–student ratio creates an interactive learning environment that enables faculty to adopt more inclusive and participatory teaching approaches. Such settings also provide opportunities for faculty to build meaningful relationships with students and to support their academic development more intentionally. In this context, mentorship for me often involves guiding students through new academic challenges while gradually increasing their independence, a process consistent with Vygotsky’s SDT, particularly the concept of scaffolding within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). This work falls primarily within the professional growth dimension identified in Table 1.

I teach business statistics at both junior and senior levels, as well as an advanced course in sustainability management. Drawing on my earlier experiences as a mentee, I encourage open dialogue, critical thinking, and inquiry that extends beyond the syllabus. To make abstract concepts more accessible, I use everyday examples. For instance, when explaining the difference between the mean and median, I demonstrate how outliers such as the incomes of a few ultra-wealthy individuals can distort averages and create a misleading picture of overall prosperity. These examples help students develop conceptual understanding while also building confidence in applying quantitative reasoning to real-world contexts, reflecting the developmental nature of mentorship in which learning occurs through guided interaction rather than passive instruction (Vygotsky, 1978).

Similarly, assignments connect theory with lived experience. In one activity, students analyze how businesses communicate their environmental claims, learning to distinguish between genuine sustainability efforts and greenwashing (deceptively calling a product

environmentally friendly when it actually is not). In another, they link statistical concepts such as Type I and Type II errors to ethical dilemmas in legal or policy decisions. These exercises encourage students to see learning as relevant, applied, and socially responsible, while reinforcing the importance of critical thinking and ethical judgment in professional practice. By engaging students in authentic problem-solving, these activities also introduce them to the norms and expectations of professional communities, supporting their gradual movement from novice learners toward more confident participants in disciplinary conversations, consistent with the principles of situated learning and CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Beyond academic rigour, I emphasize accessibility and approachability as core components of mentorship within the classroom. My office hours and informal conversations provide opportunities to connect with students individually, listen to their goals, and understand the challenges they may face. These interactions reflect the psychosocial support dimension of mentorship (Table 1), where trust, empathy, and sustained personal engagement form the foundation of effective learning relationships (Banerji et al., 2017). At the same time, these early conversations often help identify students who wish to engage more deeply in research or professional development, laying the foundation for more sustained mentoring relationships and gradual integration into the academic community.

Mentorship Beyond the Classroom

For students who express research interests, I offer opportunities to collaborate on projects through my research lab. Drawing from my own experience as a mentee, I maintain regular communication and assign incremental, achievable tasks that help students build confidence and technical skills. This structured progression reflects the principles of scaffolding described in SET, where mentors provide guidance that enables learners to gradually assume greater responsibility as their competence develops (Vygotsky, 1978).

Through these collaborations, I have witnessed students develop genuine curiosity about the research process and evolve into active investigators. Some have initiated projects of their own—examining, for instance, the sustainability implications of e-scooter use or the effects of fairness in recruitment practices on employee performance. Working closely with these undergraduate researchers has also been a learning experience for me. Their curiosity, creativity, and diverse perspectives often challenge my assumptions and encourage me to refine my own teaching and research practices. My role often begins with close collaboration during brainstorming and research design, but I gradually step back as students gain confidence in conducting surveys, analyzing data, and drafting manuscripts. This transition from close supervision to greater independence reflects a developmental shift from guided participation to autonomous practice, reinforcing the role of mentorship in fostering both competence and confidence.

With encouragement, many students have gone on to present their findings at academic conferences and submit papers to peer-reviewed journals. These opportunities introduce students to the norms, expectations, and collaborative practices of scholarly communities,

helping them move from novice participants to more active engagement in the field. In this sense, mentorship beyond the classroom aligns closely with the principles of situated learning and CoP, where learning involves becoming a member of a professional community rather than simply acquiring technical skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

My approach to mentoring also reflects an awareness of the responsibility that accompanies the mentor's role in facilitating access to opportunities such as research funding, conference participation, and professional networks. These forms of support illustrate the reciprocal and resource-based dimensions of mentoring relationships described in SET, where mentors invest time, expertise, and institutional resources to promote the development and success of their mentees (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). At the same time, I strive to exercise this responsibility with transparency and fairness, recognizing that access to opportunities can significantly shape students' academic and professional trajectories.

Just as my own faculty mentors introduced me to academic networks and professional communities, I seek to create similar pathways for my students while maintaining an environment characterized by trust, encouragement, and sustained engagement. These relational aspects of mentorship, central to the psychosocial support and personal growth dimensions noted in Table 1, resonate with cross-cultural traditions such as the guru–shishya parampara, which emphasizes respect, responsibility, and the holistic development of learners through long-term guidance and personal connection (Banerji et al., 2017). While deeply fulfilling, this journey continues, and I learn alongside my students as they discover their strengths, passions, and potential to make meaningful contributions to their communities and professions.

Discussion and Conclusion

Reflecting on my academic journey as both a mentee and a mentor, I have come to recognize the profound influence that mentorship has on personal and professional growth. Members of my doctoral committee exemplified a rigorous yet compassionate approach that not only shaped my academic development but also deepened my understanding of meaningful educational relationships. Through their guidance, I evolved from a mid-career development practitioner uncertain about academia into a confident researcher and mentor with a clearer sense of professional identity. This progression illustrates how mentorship supports the gradual development of competence and confidence through guided learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

While my own doctoral experience was marked by strong mentorship and consistent support, I recognize that such experiences are not universal. Research on doctoral education has shown that inadequate supervisory guidance and limited institutional support are among the factors contributing to delayed completion and attrition in graduate programs (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Mentorship, as I now understand it, is a dynamic and reciprocal process (Anderson & Shore, 2008). It extends beyond the transactional and is a relationship grounded in mutual respect and trust, one that allows both mentor and mentee to grow through continuous dialogue and reflection. Over time, I have come to appreciate that mentorship involves shared learning, in

which mentors refine their own perspectives through collaboration with mentees, and in which students' questions and insights can reshape mentors' understanding of teaching, research, and professional responsibility.

Effective mentors do not impose authority or prescribe rigid pathways; instead, they empower others to explore their potential and equip them with the skills needed to succeed. The values I learned from my mentors—trust, compassion, flexibility, and commitment to lifelong learning—continue to guide my own approach to mentoring. In working with undergraduate students, I aim to inspire the same curiosity, confidence, and sense of belonging that my own mentors cultivated in me. Whether through classroom teaching or collaborative research, my goal is to create learning experiences that are intellectually engaging and personally meaningful. These efforts support students' gradual integration into academic and professional communities, reflecting the principles of situated learning and CoP, where learning involves participation in shared practices and the development of professional identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The influence of compassionate mentoring extends beyond individual students. Over time, mentoring practices can contribute to a culture of collaboration within departments, where faculty share strategies, co-supervise student projects, and collectively support student success. These practices may also strengthen disciplinary communities by preparing students to participate responsibly in professional networks and research collaborations (Baker & Pifer, 2011). Capturing the broader impact of mentorship requires ongoing reflection and documentation through student outcomes, collaborative scholarship, and the sharing of mentoring experiences within academic communities. In this sense, mentorship is not only a personal practice but also a collective responsibility that shapes the learning environment.

As higher education continues to evolve through technological change and shifting cultural expectations, mentorship becomes increasingly vital. Online courses and generative artificial intelligence may expand access to knowledge (Crompton & Burke, 2023). Still, they cannot replicate the depth of human connection or the transformative relationships that mentorship makes possible. From a relational perspective, traditions such as the guru–shishya parampara remind us that effective mentorship depends not only on expertise but also on trust, responsibility, and sustained engagement between mentor and learner (Banerji et al., 2017). A significant academic experience, as Carnaje (2016) suggested, invites students to reflect on and derive personal meaning from their learning, helping them recognize themselves as both learners and contributors to knowledge.

In conclusion, my progression from mentee to mentor has been profoundly shaped by the values and practices demonstrated by my faculty mentors. Their example showed that successful academic relationships are founded on compassion, collaboration, and a shared commitment to growth. These same principles continue to guide my mentorship practice as I support students along their own developmental journeys toward confidence, competence, and meaningful participation in their chosen fields.

Ethical Considerations

This reflective and autoethnographic account was developed with careful attention to relational ethics, confidentiality, and responsible representation—three principles stated at the outset of the essay and revisited here as a closing bookend. Because autoethnography draws on the researcher's lived relationships, complete anonymization is rarely possible; some information about the context in which I trained, including the composition of my dissertation committee and the institutions through which my career has unfolded, is already in the public domain through published scholarship and institutional records. What this manuscript does not disclose, however, is any private or nonpublic information about specific mentors, colleagues, or students. Mentor contributions are described in generalized terms rather than tied to identifiable individuals; the narrative emphasizes professional learning and mentoring practices rather than personal evaluation; and details about students and colleagues have been further anonymized to protect their privacy. I have approached this representation with respect for the relationships that made this learning possible, recognizing the ethical responsibility that accompanies any account drawn from a shared life with others.

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