

# EVOLVING FROM STUDENT TO TEACHER: INSIGHTS FROM THE CONVERSATION CAFÉ ON DOCTORAL STUDENT MENTORSHIP

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*Mentorship has been proposed as a key process for preparing doctoral students as effective educators. However, few models have been described in-depth. To address this challenge, four social work doctoral graduates and one senior faculty member shared their insights drawing on their study on collaborative teaching mentorship, reflecting on their mentorship experiences and inviting feedback from the conference audience in the Conversation Café forum. The resultant discussion supported findings from our research and reinforced that more systematic and reflective efforts are needed to adequately prepare doctoral students for future teaching responsibilities. Specific strategies are summarized.*

*Key words:* doctoral students; mentorship; social work education; scholarship of teaching and learning; instructional skills; teaching experience

There is a consensus among scholars and educators on the necessity of training doctoral students in teaching (Kenny et al., 2017; Oktay, Jacobson, & Fisher, 2013). Yet, there is a dearth of specific pedagogical approaches on the evolving process of doctoral students into educators to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to teach effectively (Fulton, Walsh, Gulbrandsen, Tong, & Azulai, 2018).

Research suggests that ineffective preparation of academic faculty in North America to teach in their programs has been a common and long-standing challenge across disciplines (Lederer, Sherwood-Laughlin, Kearns, & O'Loughlin, 2016; Trask, Marotz-Baden, Settles, Gentry, & Berke, 2008). In regards to social work doctoral education, for instance, Maynard, Labuzienski, Lind, Berglund, and Albright (2017) found that while 90% of programs in the United States have a stated goal of preparing their students for teaching, only 51% of them require students to complete a course on teaching. Maynard et al. conclude that “the preparation of doctoral students to provide quality education to future social work practitioners seems to be largely neglected” (p. 92). They also state that Canadian research on preparation of social work doctoral students for roles as teaching faculty is lacking.

In recognition of the need to prioritize instructional skill development of doctoral students, SoTL research has become an essential strategy for building a “body of knowledge about effective teaching and learning” (Kenny et al., 2017, p. 4). Grise-Owens, Owens, and Miller (2016) emphasize the relevance of SoTL research to social work education, proposing that it “provides a framework for engaging in scholarship that informs our teaching and energizes our service” (p. 10). Developing dedicated courses for scholars and educators to enhance their teaching knowledge has been an acknowledged option, although not the only venue of teaching

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Azulai, A., Fulton, A., Walsh, C., Gulbrandsen, C., & Tong, H. (2019). Evolving from student to teacher: Insights from the conversation café on doctoral student mentorship. *Papers on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching: Proceedings of the University of Calgary Conference on Learning and Teaching*, 3, 120-126.

preparedness (Grise-Owens et al., 2016). In social work, for instance, mentorship has been proposed as a key and aspired learning process for doctoral students in becoming educators (Oktay, Jacobson, & Fisher). This process refers to engaging faculty “mentors” to assist students in teaching “through experience” (Oktay et al., 2013, p. 207). Oktay et al. (2013) suggest that this emphasis on experiential learning can make mentorship transformative and effective. However, few mentorship models have been described in the literature (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Oktay et al., 2013), which has been a challenge because doctoral program graduates often transition to being new faculty members (Lederer, Sherwood-Laughlin, Kearns, & O’Loughlin, 2016; Trask, Marotz-Baden, Settles, Gentry, & Berke, 2008).

Looking more broadly at supporting the evolving process of academics as educators in post-secondary institutions, there is evidence that some universities have started exploring ways to help support doctoral students in developing their teaching expertise (Kenny et al, 2017). According to Kenny et al. (2017), there is a growing understanding that becoming a skilled educator, regardless of the discipline, is a learning process that requires accumulation of teaching experience and practice. In this vein, Kenny et al. offer a developmental framework for teaching expertise in postsecondary education that supports nurturing a “teaching and learning culture” (p. 2). The framework includes five “facets of teaching expertise,” including “teaching and supporting learning; professional learning and development; mentorship; research, scholarship and inquiry; and educational leadership” (pp. 3-4).

Fulton et al. (2018) conducted a study of how mentorship served as a catalyst for developing the teaching capacity of the social work doctoral student mentees, who received mentorship in teaching an online undergraduate course from a senior faculty member at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. Using a qualitative approach based on Schon’s (1988) concept of reflexive learning, the Fulton et al. examined their own reflections on how receiving mentorship in teaching facilitated their development as social work educators through the involvement in collaboratively designing, teaching and evaluating an online undergraduate course. The thematic analysis of the reflections generated five main themes (Fulton et al., 2018): 1) impact of mentorship on mentee identity and socialization; 2) impact of mentorship on mentee professional and academic development; 3) impact of mentorship on mentee perceived personal effectiveness; 4) challenges with the collaborative decision-making; and 5) recommendations.

Fulton et al. (2018) state that the collaborative teaching model enriched the teaching development of the doctoral student mentees, increased their sense of self-efficacy as instructors, and supported building their self-confidence. The collaborative team-based approach was a core aspect of this mentorship model that engaged a small group of doctoral students in teaching development (Fulton, Walsh, Gulbrandsen, Azulai, & Tong, 2015). Although there is a dearth of research on team teaching in social work education literature (Fulton et al, 2018), Zaph et al. (2011) comment that team-teaching may sometimes be intimidating and resisted, which may not be conducive to the teaching and learning process. Contrary to this observation, Fulton et al. (2018) report a positive experience in a team-based collaborative teaching mentorship. This may be due to the extensive period of the engagement time that the students and the faculty spent on the online course development, which allowed the team to develop working relationships, consistent teaching and learning engagement, and negotiate mutual expectations.

The study recommendations for the effective collaborative teaching model are subdivided into characteristics of mentor, mentee, and institution (Fulton et al., 2018). On the mentee level, a combination of enthusiasm for both the subject matter and for teaching the subject matter to others seems to enable mentees to maximize the benefits of participating in the

teaching mentorship program. On the mentor level, a solid teaching experience and comfort in working with groups are beneficial. Fulton et al. (2018) conclude that the development of teaching expertise among doctoral students requires supportive institutional culture, policies, and resources. The study supports the existing guidelines that recommend that social work doctoral students be adequately prepared for future teaching responsibilities (GADE Task Force, 2013). Also, in congruence with other scholars (Oktay et al., 2013), the study calls for further research on faculty mentorship of social work doctoral students as they prepare for academic careers.

## **PRESENTATION GOAL AND PROCESS**

The goal of this conference presentation was to share the findings from the aforementioned study of doctoral student mentorship (Fulton et al., 2018) in order to deepen the collective understandings and promote further exploration and development of mentorship process in support of doctoral student teaching. The sharing occurred in the format of a Conversation Café (Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, n.d.a) that is a 25 minute small group discussion forum, designed to help facilitate meaningful conversations around specific questions.

The Conversation Café participants ( $N = 8$ ) were comprised of faculty, staff, and students who participated in the conference and self-selected to attend the Conversation Café. The presenters first highlighted the study findings, provided participants with a handout that summarized the main insights from the study and then invited them to reflect on a couple of key questions to promote feedback and further discussion on the topic.

The questions for graduate students included: 1) what mentorship strategies have you experienced that supported your teaching, and 2) what challenges or barriers have you encountered that impacted your experience of mentorship in teaching? How were they addressed? The questions for faculty included: 1) what strategies have you used to support effective mentorship of doctoral students in teaching; and 2) what challenges or barriers have you encountered in mentoring doctoral students in teaching? How did you address these challenges? The insights from the participants' reflections on these questions are summarized below.

## **THE MAIN LEARNINGS FROM THE CONVERSATION CAFÉ**

All eight participants had an opportunity to share their thoughts in connection to the proposed questions, indicating high engagement. Participants unanimously supported the findings from the presented here study by Fulton et al., (2018) that equipping doctoral students with the foundational knowledge and skills to develop instructional expertise through engagement in mentorship is a worthwhile and meaningful endeavor. They commented that facing occasional challenges in teaching is expected for doctoral students and that getting the timely advice from others is valuable and useful.

However, participants reported some important barriers in the mentorship process. For example, students pointed to the challenge of securing teaching mentorships due to the limited availability of faculty. They connected this challenge to the voluntary nature of mentorship as an unpaid service, which also contributes to an increase in the workload, and thus, may not be perceived by some faculty as an attractive or feasible prospect. Another challenge, noted by students was a lack of clear guidelines where to begin a search for a mentor, whom to consult, how to locate an experienced and supportive faculty who is also willing to mentor, and what mentorship entails, etc. Students also reported a lack of teaching development opportunities in

general and a lack of guidance where to find these opportunities to enhance their emerging teaching skills. Students commented that teaching for the first time can be intimidating because limited self-confidence due to a perceived lack of knowledge around teaching creates fear. When mentors are not available, students are left dealing with this fear in isolation, which is not conducive to their learning.

Faculty and academic staff participants were in agreement with the aforementioned reported challenges by the students. From the faculty perspective, another challenge was often unrealistic expectations of students from teaching mentorship in terms of the faculty availability, roles and responsibilities, teaching development opportunities, and mentorship outcomes. Faculty noted that institutional limitations are often in place with some programs having limited teaching opportunities for students beyond teaching assistantship and no strategies in place to do things differently.

Based on these reflections, participants voiced a number of recommendations pertinent to the mentorship process that could promote teaching development of doctoral students. These recommendations include: 1) creating institutional guidelines for doctoral mentorship expectations from faculty and students, including clear roles and responsibilities, the matching process, mentorship methods, and contact information; 2) enhancing benefits for mentoring faculty, such as creating a monetary compensation schemas, reduction in a workload, inclusion in academic promotion criteria, etc.; 4) developing, implementing and evaluating mentorship models; and 5) developing new approaches to supplement faculty mentorship of doctoral students, such as peer-mentorship and community of practice around mentorship. Finally, participants pointed to the necessity to enhance institutional supports for diversification of teaching development opportunities in addition to mentorship, such as increasing teaching assistantship positions, teaching-specific workshops and course work, etc.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Educating novice university instructors has been practiced for over a decade in different parts of the world (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). However, empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of training programs for new faculty remains limited, including in Canada (Fulton et al., 2015; 2018).

This paper makes an important contribution to the limited discussion of doctoral student mentorship and their socialization into the role of educators, regardless of the discipline. The learnings from the conference Conversation Café on the various barriers to the effective doctoral mentorship are congruent with the previous literature (Fulton et al., 2018; Oktay et al., 2013). Participants' recommendations to address some of the challenges, mentioned in the previous section, require further attention in the academy. For instance, emotional needs of student mentees (e.g., loneliness, isolation, and fear due to the lack of self-confidence in teaching) must be addressed. The important role of enhanced self-confidence in teaching has been acknowledged in the literature (Sadler, 2013). Also, due to the growing research on the increasing mental health needs of doctoral students in academic institutions across the globe (Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gislis, 2017; Waight, E., & Giordano), emotional well-being of doctoral students requires continuous attention through connecting students to various supports, including mentorship. There is evidence to suggest that effective doctoral teaching mentorship can support emotional well-being of mentees, including feeling of increased self-confidence and a sense of self-efficacy (Fulton et al., 2018).

Furthermore, systemic issues in academic programs can present as barriers to the teaching development of doctoral students, including limited teaching opportunities, a lack of faculty open to mentorship due to already high teaching workloads, or limited organizational capacities to support doctoral teaching development. Some suggested strategies to potentially enhance doctoral mentorship effectiveness and efficacy include the provision of diversified teaching opportunities for doctoral students (e.g., teaching assistantship opportunities, teaching development workshops, etc.), and supporting students in finding appropriate mentors. This recommendation is congruent with other scholars who suggest that institutional support for the instructional skill development in academia may result in higher quality instruction (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). As Kenny et al. (2017, p. 4) commented, development of teaching expertise is more successful in institutions that promote “teaching and learning culture” with high value and support invested in the excellence in teaching and learning practices.

Finally, participants recommended using various resources to develop effective mentorship relationships. For instance, effective mentorship might include not only faculty-student models but also peer models. Developing a community of practice around student teaching mentorship is another suggested strategy, similarly to the “network of practice” mentioned in the SAGES, a mentoring program to support teaching in the Faculty of Science (SAGES) at the University of Calgary (Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, n.d.b). The SAGES refer to mentorship as a partnership, refocusing attention on the reciprocal benefits of such relationship for all parties involved. Research in this area is limited and requires further consideration. Finally, a collaborative team-teaching mentorship, as discussed earlier in the study by Fulton et al. (2018) is a promising doctoral mentorship model, which addresses multiple needs at the same time: the need of doctoral mentees for emotional support, the need for professional teaching development advise, the need for peer support, and an opportunity to resolve the limitations of time and resources required to mentor multiple students (Fulton et al., 2018).

There are several limitations to the presented here study. First, participants who chose to attend the Conversation Café were interested in the doctoral mentorship topic in the first place. This factor, coupled with the small size of the group, do not allow for an opportunity to evaluate how well the reflections of the participants and their recommendations represent doctoral students and faculty in Canadian Universities.

Despite the limitations, this paper makes an important contribution to the limited discussion on the teaching development needs of doctoral students who will become academic educators. The paper also indicates some implications for future research. As current evidence suggests that doctoral programs unsystematically prepare their students to become educators (Lederer et al., 2016; Trask et al., 2008), and given the initial promise of mentorship in addressing this issue (Fulton et al., 2015; 2018), there is a need for further robust research, both qualitative and quantitative, to provide a stronger evidence on teaching mentorship for doctoral students in social work and other disciplines. Specifically, further investigation is needed to better understand the perspectives and experiences of doctoral student mentees and their mentors. Also, it is important to continuously develop, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of the emerging mentorship models for doctoral students as they develop their teaching expertise.

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