MENTORING RESEARCH STUDENTS

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Abstract: *Mentoring is a professional relationship between a mentor and a mentee to support and encourage learning in the mentee. Research in educational institutions is a scholarly activity facilitated by a faculty member who is the research supervisor and also a mentor who can introduce the young students to the challenges of academic research. This is possible through a mature relationship wherein a supervisor cum mentor can facilitate best possible learning outcomes for their research students with help of some interpersonal strategies that can be employed by them. These include being available for the students, attentively listen to them, communicate expectations, develop a collective feeling, provide feedback and broaden their horizon by encouraging them to participation and interact with other researchers.*

Keywords: *mentoring, research, supervisor, relationship, strategies*

1.   Introduction

Mentoring is a professional relationship between an experienced person who is a mentor and an inexperienced person who is a mentee. Mentoring is to support and encourage learning in order to maximize potential of the mentee. The mentor helps develop specific skills and knowledge that will enhance the less experienced person's professional and personal growth. This relationship can be seen in organizations, corporates, and educational institutions.

Research in educational institutions is an activity which requires intellectual curiosity, logical thinking and a scientific bent of mind. In the academic arena research is conducted for obtaining a research degree but it results in generating a new understanding of existing phenomena and building knowledge. Academic research is conducted by novices or the beginning research students at the post graduate level or by research scholars at the doctoral level.

A student wanting to pursue research must possess some inherent qualities. There should be an intention to be involved in research, interest in the area of research,

motivation to sustain interest and continue working even in the face of adversities. They must be inquisitive and curious to want to find out more and more. The researcher has to gain and accumulate knowledge needed to take further the current ideas already existing in the research area. This requires commitment to one's work to see it through to completion, sacrificing time and resources, and a desire to do best research possible and excel. All this requires a scholarly approach.

2. Need for a Supervisor

In order to analyze a variety of factors such as why the research needs to be conducted, what
is the appropriate methodology, who are the respondents, what are the appropriate questions to
ask respondents, what are the findings telling us, and why so, and how best can these findings
be communicated, need an analytical mind and good communication skills. The researcher must
have the ability to remain calm and posses great interpersonal skills. One has to think fast in case
things do not happen the way you thought they should proceed. Besides, excellent written and
verbal communication skills can help the researcher to put forth their finding for others to know.

Students come from different backgrounds, with different experiences and at different levels of their career development. Facilitating personal and academic development and enhancement of research skills in a research student is a faculty member who is the research supervisor and also
a mentor who can introduce the young students to the challenges of academic research. They are responsible for providing help and support and mentor the students in order to enable them to complete the research and produce a thesis to the best of the their ability. The supervisor thus, plays an important role not only as teacher but also as a mentor during student's period of research.

3. Qualities of a Supervisor

There are some qualities that a supervisor must have. A supervisor must have knowledge and an understanding of current researches in the field, methodologies used, and the ability to critique and appraise the new knowledge. They are responsible for seeing the student through the initial research proposal to the final stage of completion and awarding of the degree. The supervisor's inputs are crucial and are a result of many readings, discussions and reviewing of student's work.

Research students contact their supervisors through face to face meetings, emails, telephone or a combination of all these. Each one expects that meetings are

regular, structured and expectations from each other about the standard of work and progress is spelt out from the beginning. The students are provided information about procedures, regulations, resources available, and importance of ethics related to acknowledging others' works. Supervisors and the students must check the progress, the milestones achieved and meet deadlines together. The supervisor must make note of upcoming seminars, conferences and workshops which are relevant for the student.

The supervisor encourages open communication and constructive discussion. Eventually the supervisor guides the student to become an independent researcher and take up independent projects. Students are encouraged to collaborate, share and discuss their work and experiences with other research students. This helps to develop a research culture. Any misunderstandings between the students and supervisors which may affect the progress of student's research work must be avoided. This requires a mature relationship.

4. Strategies for an Effective Relationship

An effective relationship between the student and the supervisor is integral to the quality of the work. As the work progresses the students become mature and independent. The relationship between the student and the supervisor also changes. In fact this is a must especially if the student has to evolve as an independent researcher. A time may come when the student becomes more knowledgeable and an expert in the area of the research. The supervisor in this case must

encourage open discussion and even sort out any points of disagreement and contention frankly.

A supervisor cum mentor can facilitate best possible learning outcomes for their research students with help of some interpersonal strategies that can be employed by them. The ideas presented here are a few insights gained as a result of experiences acquired through interaction with varied kind of students in the process of supervising their research.

4.1 Be Available for Your Students

The new environment can be a little intimidating for the new researcher. They are not aware of and cannot understand the intricacies of their new and dynamic endeavor. Just by being there and spending time especially in the initial stages will allow the students to clarify any doubts or questions that may arise. Even when the work is in progress, questions and doubts can always come up which get clarified by having discussions.

Discussions can also take place on topics not directly related to the research, but all the same generating knowledge which can facilitate learning. It can be very exciting if both engage and interact. Time spent on discussing future goals or current developments in technology, and even politics can make the mentor student

relationship very comfortable. This kind of connectedness can help the relationship to evolve into a productive educational experience. There has to be openness, trust and mutual respect for one another. Lack of engagement and reserved behavior can come in the way of smooth work flow and can be indicative of a strained relationship. It is therefore, important for the mentors to give their time and be there for their research students who are directly under their care.

4.2 Be Attentive and Listen to Your Students

Merely being available in your cabin is not sufficient. The mentor must be attentive and listen with deep interest in what the student has to share. While interacting with the students, the mentor must ensure that there are no external factors such as phone calls to disturb. They must for sometime suspend the activity they are engaged in and lend a ear. This can be time consuming but in the long run helps in building confidence and accountability. Immediate reply to students' emails or answering their phone call or even texting will help. Keeping contact with students with these methods will help the mentor to know the students' progress in their research work.

Constant communication with the students helps to foster accountability and ensures quality work. Responding to and checking with students when they work on weekends i.e. during off-hours can be helpful too.

4.3 Communicate Expectations

In order to develop an achievement culture there must be an unwritten but well understood 'psychological contract' which is an agreement between the mentor and the student of what both can expect from each other. It is very important for students to know what is expected of them. The mentor must create a schedule and set deadlines for the various tasks that need to be performed. This creates a structure which gives direction to the students. The mentor must communicate clearly the standard of work expected of the student. The students must be given enough time to find answers on their own. Occasionally ideas and hints can be provided.

Mentors form expectations for different students' performance and tend to treat them differently depending on these expectations. However, what is important is that each student has to be led towards mastery even if it means that the mentor must adjust their expectations for each student.

The mentor must create many learning opportunities where the students are asked to read and make notes to find out more and more. Students should be made to connect with literature available in the area of their research. Here lies the need for discipline and developing into an analytical practitioner. Mentors who are keenly attuned to their students notice when their students are in the right direction. The mentor must time and again reinforce expectations. Gentle reminders do the job but

sometimes there must be serious discussions on your expectations. Constant reminders help change students' attitudes as well as their interest in the research.

4.4 Develop a Collective Feeling

Human beings are essentially social and believe in interpersonal relationships, These relationships are synergetic which allow each member to improve and become better individually as well as collectively. This collective progress creates a great community. In order to build and develop a research community especially among the research students the mentor must encourage participation. Each one is clear about their responsibilities. All are accountable for their own work as well as for any other duties that may be assigned from time to time. The more the community of researchers is strong and supportive the better is the result. All the student members produce consistent and reliable work in an enjoyable manner. There is wise decision-making that benefits the whole group. Being together, discussing their work with each other brings fresh thinking and innovative solutions for different challenges faced by them.

The mentor knows that collaboration is essential for reaching common goals. When there are strong relationships there is a heightened sense of collective purpose. There is greater trust among all. They are engaged more, and as a result accelerated learning takes place through sharing knowledge. The mentor must communicate the need to collaborate and respect joint efforts. The students are young researchers, inexperienced and are learning to act professionally. Being in a group helps them to feel belonged and responsible towards the other members.

The mentor can arrange team meetings so that all the researchers become familiar with each others' projects and tasks and subsequently support, discuss and collaborate in the familiar environment. There can be one-on-one meetings in small groups as a supplement to team meetings. The students get time to talk about their worries and concerns to the mentor in a secure environment. Sometimes interpersonal problems can also come up. These can also be discussed.

4.5 Understand Your Students

It should be noted that the student researchers undergo tremendous pressures and stress for many reasons. Students may be overwhelmed by the workload and the time commitment research work may require. Many have family responsibilities and could find transitioning between the different roles difficult. They have to therefore, balance between research work, course work and their family. There are some researchers who might be working part time to earn money. The mentor must be empathetic and understanding towards the students.

Students work at different pace. Some work fast while some may need more time. Students at different levels also work at different pace. Postgraduates may need more time as compared to doctoral students. All struggle to keep up with their research

work. Some succeed and some initially fail. The mentor has to be understanding. Negativity must not creep in. Criticism has to be constructive and balanced with positive reinforcement. It should not be demeaning. Student's perseverance and enthusiasm has to be appreciated. This will help them to overcome difficulties. Finally, they will emerge and evolve as assets for their team and the institution.

4.6 Provide Feedback

Constant feedback is an essential and an ongoing part of the research process. Mentors must provide feedback to research students.This is internal feedback. Some of the ways in which the mentor can give back is by reviewing the process being followed by the researcher. Encourage oral presentations within the department or the research institute in a group so that fellow students can also give feedback.

This feedback will enable research students to make appropriate modifications in their research from time to time. The mentor or the supervisor must critically read their students' work. The students must give sufficient time to their mentor when seeking feedback on the drafts of their thesis.

A student can obtain feedback from external sources too. They can be members of the academic community who are mentors to other students. Getting a different perspective on one's work is always a good idea. Useful, descriptive and objective feedback is helpful in improvising. This can maximize individual's growth.

Since the research students are adults, and may have grievances too. In such a situation an open conversation in an environment of mutual respect and understanding should take place. All grievances and complaints by the students are mainly related to unsatisfactory progress. The mentor and the student must resolve the issues and it is the supervisor's responsibility to ensure academic support throughout the candidature of the student enabling them to achieve a high standard of research.

4.6 Broaden the Horizon by Encouraging Participation

By encouraging participation the mentor can help to explore unfamiliar but relevant topics. Students should be encouraged to criticize and scrutinize research papers and articles. This can take place once or twice a week. Sometimes informal lunches together, or an outing can also be refreshing.

Besides, the mentor must encourage students to participate and interact with other researchers. This can be done by getting involved in departmental seminars, as well as local or national level conferences. The mentor must inspire and encourage students to travel for conferences to other cities or even countries. The participation must be in terms of theoretical or theme or research based paper presentations or posters. Efforts should be made in finding other research opportunities by making contacts with others in the field.

The students may not be aware of such opportunities. It is the duty of the mentor and the department or the university to disseminate such information to the students. If possible let the department or the university find ways to fund the travel of the students. All these efforts indicate an increased interest on the part of the mentor in their students' personal, academic and professional development.

5. Conclusion

All these strategies are helpful as mentors have a lifelong impact on their students. A mentor has a number of responsibilities too towards their research students. Besides keeping a close contact with their students, they must provide information related to the institution and university requirements and procedures. Constant feedback on the drafts of the thesis and finally certifying at completion that the research thesis is worthy of examination takes the relationship to its logical end. But a positive teacher-student relationship can inspire students to learn and achieve for life and build a lifelong relationship.

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