

Remembering the Power and Satisfaction of Mentorship

January 23, 2012

by Ella Diaz

Mentorship, both the act of mentoring and being mentored, is a well-known practice amongst Chicana and Latina scholars, educators and activists. We know firsthand of its efficiency, and the deep sense of satisfaction that comes with offering and taking advice, of extending a hand in friendship and in solidarity with each other. Working against hyper-competitive workplaces, against the culture of silence to which we often conform in our universities and institutions, and against individualistic notions of success, mentorship is our intervention in capitalist structures and neo-colonialism.

I want to write about mentorship in my first blog for *Mujeres Talk* because it perfectly captures my experiences between 2010-2011 as a scholar and as a Chicana. Having graduated with my Ph.D. in 2010, and as an adjunct instructor, I entered a period of uncertainty. So many of us recent graduates enter this space—a disconnected zone where we are unsure of our next steps towards creating a career and a viable practice in our given field. The fact is, the times have changed, and with all signs pointing towards adjunct positions as permanent ones, academia needs new conversations and new professional strategies.

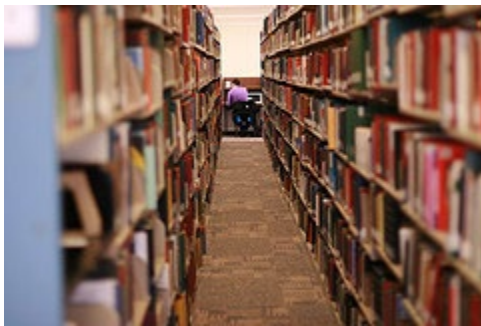


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But, with this said, a fundamental dysfunction in academia persists, despite changes in the professional opportunities in our fields; that dysfunction is what I call the culture of silence in universities. No one tells you what the next steps are. There is no workshop, no final debriefing meeting in which the transition from graduate student, to ABD, then Assistant Professor is demystified. Failing to share our concerns, our uncertainty, our questions, is deeply alienating for us Chicanas and Latinas who often navigate terrains communally and in dialogue. Chains of migration, familial and social networks are not only a major part of our support systems and cultural capital; they are also integral to our epistemologies and research methods. So finding oneself in a void of silence in our doctorate programs and then in our professions can be doubly difficult for Chicana and Latina scholars and professionals.

As it has been said for three decades, this is why MALCS is invaluable. MALCS is single-handedly the most important mentoring organization for emerging and established Chicana and Latina scholars, institutional workers, and activists. I personally experienced the power and deep sense of satisfaction that comes with taking good advice and embracing hands extended to me over the last

year. Here I offer my experiences with seeking and receiving mentorship in a series of tips and lessons learned. I am mostly offering my thoughts on how to be a good mentee.

A few months before graduating I had made the good decision to present at a Latina/o Literature and Culture Society meeting. I did so because I needed a project to carry me through completing my dissertation that, well, wasn't my dissertation. I also noted who the scholars were who were sponsoring the meeting of the Society. Thus the first tip I can share with you about seeking mentorship is you must make an introduction with a possible mentor that showcases your work. In other words, networking is good but it only carries you so far: it's not about talking about your work or alluding to what you do; it's about showing what you do. So plan panel presentations around audiences. Be bold enough to invite a favorite or inspiring scholar to one of your presentations. Mentors need to see and hear your work because, ultimately, it's a two-way street. Of course, a senior colleague and established professional will want to work with new talent; but we must remember that part of our feminist practice and cultural heritage is dialogue and collaboration. Therefore, a mentor seeks an intellectual / professional partnership.

My strategy to present my best work at the Latina/o Literature & Culture Meeting proved successful. Showing my work through a polished speech complemented by slideshow brought me two mentors who connected with my work and then connected me with other scholars who they felt I could forge meaningful partnerships. Literally, one of my new mentors recommended I contact another scholar and share my presentation notes. I did so the next day and was invited to the MALCS Article Workshop. I participated in this workshop and was contacted by the editor to develop my work quickly for publication. I dropped everything else I was working on and developed the work. My first scholarly length article was published in *Chicana/Latina Studies* this fall 2011.

The next tip, then, is to follow up on every single piece of advice or instruction given to you by your mentors. Mentors experience a deep sense of satisfaction when you take their advice, run with it, and create successful outcomes. This is their reward, their payment, for guiding your path. There is nothing really quite like having your words, thoughts, ideas honored by careful attention and good listening skills.

Following up on these two experiences, I shared my professional documents with my mentors: my CV, my letters of interest for positions, my teaching statements, etc. They, in turn, gave me careful edits and some even shared their own professional documents. I revised all of mine accordingly. I strongly believe that my newly developed documents catalyzed the job interviews I recently received.

Upon receiving my first real interview, I met with my mentors, I spoke with them over the phone, and I emailed. At times it was overwhelming to compile all of their specific and general advice; but I created a document and recorded all vocabularies, scenarios, and strategies. I kept talking with them right up until the very day of the interview. I have been invited for a campus visit. Now, I can't tell you what happens next because I post this before I leave for the visit; but I will tell you that, after reflecting on this whirlwind of a year, I realize how carefully it was orchestrated by me and my mentors. Those two weeks of conversation, of taking advice, of listening to phrasings, practicing new vocabulary, and heeding strategies for preparation for potential questions asked at a job interview—all of it has been a training ground; it was literally a two week professional development seminar led by some wise, savvy, and thoughtful women. Whether or not I receive the position is not important; the training I received is invaluable and will assist me indefinitely.

So the final tip for pursuing mentorship is to be honest with your mentors. Share with them your fears, what you perceive to be your weaknesses professionally and/or academically. There is always an answer for every question and a solution to every problem. Speak candidly so that they can help

you overcome your professional fears and foster the professional confidence that will propel you to the next leg of your journey. When they offer solutions, or unfamiliar options, digest them and try them out.

In closing, I hope you find my thoughts on making the most out of being mentored useful. I look forward to my upcoming posts and hearing your thoughts about them. Wishing everyone a happy new year!

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Comments:

1. *Anonymous* January 26, 2012 at 12:37 AM

I'm so glad you are posting your experiences and expertise, specially right now that I'm close to my own transition from grad school to professional practice, and I haven't find and/or figure out a way to prepare myself for that. I'll take in consideration all your suggestions and

will do as best will help me. Thank you Ella. Best, Erika.

2. *Anonymous* January 26, 2012 at 8:18 AM

Hola Erika, I am glad my thoughts are timely for you. And next tip: JOIN MALCS! Here you will find other artists and scholars who work with artists, as well as opps to publish. Saludos, Ella

3. *Anonymous* January 31, 2012 at 8:09 PM

right on target. Very helpful. Saludos, ella

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