



CLASSIQUES  
GARNIER

FORSDICK (Charles), « Preface », in DUCHÉ (Véronique), MANZIN (Gregoria) (dir.), *Mentoring through the Centuries. On The Dynamics of Personal and Professional Growth*, p. 7-12

DOI : [10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-12921-9.p.0007](https://doi.org/10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-12921-9.p.0007)

*La diffusion ou la divulgation de ce document et de son contenu via Internet ou tout autre moyen de communication ne sont pas autorisées hormis dans un cadre privé.*

© 2022. Classiques Garnier, Paris.  
Reproduction et traduction, même partielles, interdites.  
Tous droits réservés pour tous les pays.

FORSDICK (Charles), « Preface »

RÉSUMÉ – Le mentorat fait aujourd’hui partie des missions professionnelles attendues dans de très nombreux secteurs. Les textes littéraires peuvent aider à questionner la pratique du mentorat et mettre en lumière ses intersections avec d’autres pratiques relationnelles et de développement. Les activités de base des sciences humaines – lire la littérature, analyser l’histoire, étudier les interactions humaines sous leurs multiples formes – constituent en elles-mêmes une forme inestimable de mentorat à part entière.

MOTS-CLÉS – Mentorat, définition, histoire, littérature, dynamique, sciences humaines

ABSTRACT – Mentoring is part of the set of professional responsibilities expected across a wide variety of sectors in our contemporary world. Literary texts can assist in the interrogation of mentoring as a practice and can also illuminate its intersections with other relational and developmental practices. The core activities of the Humanities – reading literature, analysing history, studying human interactions in their multiple forms – are themselves an invaluable form of mentorship in their own right.

KEYWORDS – Mentoring, definition, history, literature, dynamics, humanities

## PREFACE

Many of us are or have been mentors. Many of us are or have been mentees. And in a context of peer or reverse mentoring, many of us – at whatever career stage we might be – fall into both categories simultaneously, with the self-reflexivity this situation affords us serving more broadly to enhance our understandings of the practice of mentorship. Although present in multiple forms and across most areas of human activity, mentoring is increasingly part of the set of professional responsibilities expected, in particular of more senior staff, across a wide variety of sectors. It manifests itself formally and informally within most organisations. It can be a voluntary activity outside fixed structures, offered for example by professional associations to those aspiring to success in a particular career path. Mentoring can also be an invaluable means of enhancing the presence of those in underrepresented groups in a specific profession or organisation, and may address perennial issues of under-recognition associated with promotion either delayed or denied. In short, mentoring takes multiple forms, is conducted in multiple contexts, responds to multiple motivations and lends itself to multiple outcomes.

For some, to act as a mentor is an ethical responsibility as they attempt to ensure that the profession they eventually leave is more equitable and representative than the one they initially entered; in this way, it can be a means of indirectly repaying a debt to those who previously mentored them; but for others, the task becomes a chore, an undervalued activity that prevents them from focusing on aspects of their work that they consider more visible and more valuable. Any such scepticism can additionally be increased by the advent of a mentoring industry, associated with training programmes, jargon, formal accreditation, the apparatus of consultancy – and a sense that mentoring risks on occasion being a fundamentally corporate and even conservative practice, a cloning model aimed at compliance and perpetuation of a status quo rather than at the

forms of creative and (on occasion) disruptive questioning associated with genuine personal and professional growth. At its best, however, mentoring still involves a transfer of knowledge and experience from which both mentor and mentee can learn reciprocally. It is more open-ended than goal-oriented coaching in its creation of a supportive environment in which a mentee can test ideas and explore options in ways that may not be feasible in more formal supervision. Moreover, mentoring as a practice continues to evolve beyond its first historical manifestations. The traditional one-to-one model has given way to other configurations, such as mentoring in groups, and any insistence on the value of face-to-face meetings has been challenged by the new possibilities afforded by digital technologies. And the transgenerational logic of a hierarchical apprenticeship approach, whereby an established practitioner shares their insight with a newer recruit, is deliberately disrupted by the new dynamics of processes such as reverse mentoring, which encourage an ostensibly more experienced mentee to be guided by a more junior mentor in order to see the world (or at the very least the workplace) through fresh eyes.

Just as definitions of mentoring are capacious, covering a variety of understandings of the practice outlined already, so its historical roots may be seen as equally expansive. The origins of the term and practice are well rehearsed, associated with precedents in ancient history and classical literature that have been persistently instrumental in shaping understandings of the role of mentor and mentee and the processes in which they engage. The roots of mentoring are often seen to derive from Greek myth, specifically from the character Mentor, son of Alcimus, who became in later life a friend of and counsellor to Odysseus. On Odysseus's departure for the Trojan War, he passed to Mentor responsibility for his son Telemachus, reflecting in the process the transgenerational transfer of knowledge and experience with which mentoring is now often associated. It is striking, however, that Mentor's influence remains largely ineffective, with more valuable advice being provided at the point when the Goddess Athene, whose influence is evident throughout Homer's *Odyssey*, takes on his appearance to offer more targeted guidance to Telemachus. She urges the young man to visit his father's former comrades, whose stories encourage him to undertake a journey of his own in search of Odysseus. This is the process that allows him to develop qualities associated with masculinity and adulthood.

The literary genealogy that begins with Homer extends to Mentor's reappearance in the late seventeenth-century didactic novel by Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque, fils d'Ulysse*, a critique of the reign of Louis XIV and an advocacy of political and economic models based on cooperation rather than competition. This text fills a gap in the narrative of the *Odyssey*: Mentor accompanies the eponymous Telemachus on his journey through countries such as Egypt, Tyre, Cyprus, Betica and Salentum, dispensing wisdom along the way, but he is again revealed to be both divine and female (on this occasion Minerva, goddess of wisdom, in disguise). The text's influence in eighteenth-century culture, politics and economics, both in France and more broadly, was extensive. The book's reputation was cemented in the 1760s by its inclusion by Rousseau in *Émile, ou De l'éducation*. Here, it is one of only two novels that the protagonist receives during his education, a process completed by a journey during which *Les Aventures de Télémaque* serves in many ways as a guide. Rousseau not only underlines the place of mentoring in a formal educational context, but also provides in his book the frame for a series of key questions posed and answered more broadly in the chapters that follow: in taxonomic terms, how does the mentor differ from the teacher or guide? What are the dynamics linking this mentor and mentee? Is mentoring part of broader processes of social conforming or rather of existential questioning? And how is mentoring different from other, more formal pedagogical processes?

These literary origins serve to underline the ambiguities of mentoring as a practice, and highlight the ways in which cultural and historical representations can help us better explore the lived dynamics that often diverge from conventional understandings of the phenomenon. In this sense, literature has the potential to prize open our understandings of mentorship. It can illustrate what successful (or unsuccessful) mentoring might look like, can set out the multiple contexts (formal and informal, professional and familial) in which mentoring takes place, but also challenges and regularly disrupts our understanding of its functioning. Literary texts can also illuminate those intersections of mentoring with other relational and developmental practices that are often difficult to unpick. Although a gendered and transgenerational form of mentoring is at first implied in the *Odyssey*, in the relationship between Mentor and Telemachus, the advice of the older man, as noted

already, proves largely ineffective, and it is Athene's interventions – in the guise of Mentor, and in that sense as the original 'mentor' – that prove definitive in the younger man's development. In Fénelon's novel (as well as in its adoption by Rousseau), the contestatory potential of the mentor's intervention – challenging the status quo and encouraging her mentee to imagine other possible futures – is brought to the fore.

The contributors to the present volume continue this work of attenuation, drawing on a broad corpus of literary representations and historical precedents that go far beyond the now largely predictable origin story associated with Mentor and Telemachus and their various literary re-figurings. The chapters are a reminder of the complex, multidirectional and relational dimensions of mentoring. They provide a framework for considerations of some of the key aspects associated with being human, including the accumulation of wisdom, engaging with the machinations of power, the experience of ageing. Pauline Eaton's study of (quasi-)mentoring relationships with varying degrees of success in two novels by Marie NDiaye is exemplary in this respect, in that it asserts the need for a clearly shared ethical framework for the practice and highlights the perils of entering into such a process without this framework in place. In her work, NDiaye foregrounds issues of equality and power, and focuses on the often unspoken motivations of the mentor and mentee. Her bleak conclusions suggest that the nature of the mentoring dynamic often leads to inequalities between mentor and mentee. At the same time, however, cultural representations can suggest the extent to which the clear taxonomies and responsibilities inherent in this polarised view of mentoring fail to tell the full story. In Fatou Diome's *Celles qui attendent*, for instance, analysed in this volume by Charlotte Mackay, there is a blurring of boundaries in mentoring, with characters acting as neither fully mentor nor mentee, drawn into the process that Umberto Eco described as one based in "love, reciprocal trust and exchange". Several contributors in the chapters that follow focus on similar interrelationship of friendship and mentorship, terms that can become, in often enabling ways, semi-synonymous, although the overlaps between the two may bring with them certain perils in terms of the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship.

In all of these aspects, literature also affords us the potential to help us fathom the affective dimensions of mentoring. In NDiaye, for instance,

we seen an almost anthropological interest in dynamics of mentoring, beginning with the initial mutual disclosure that the process requires, passing via the negotiation of a bilateral relationship, and ending in the outcome of the process, expected or unanticipated, positive or negative (or often, more ambiguously, in-between). It is this reciprocity that leads to a focus on issues of emotional detachment and attachment, with an emphasis on the latter leading to the intensity of the experience of mentoring. In the case of Pietro Giordani and Giacomo Leopardi, studied in this volume by Luigi Gussago, a brilliant mentee ultimately outshines his established mentor, leading to the deterioration of their relationship. In another chapter, Mark Nicholls detects a very different relationship between Sergei Diaghilev and Vaslav Nijinsky, one in which friendship tips into eroticism as mentor and mentee become lovers, interdependent in each other's lives. The collaborative potential of the mentoring relationship can be compromised by personal passions or by the narcissism of a mentor for whom only one pathway to development (their own) is feasible. Yet alternative models, with long pedigrees, persist, as Clément Marot and Nicolas Gueudeville's collaborations around the work of Erasmus (explored in this volume by Anne-Laure Metzger-Rambach) make clear. The hallmark of successful mentorship may be seen as the progressive empowerment of the mentee, the creation of a context in which self-reflection can occur, and the ultimate acquisition of independence.

Finally, this collection is a reminder that, while literary and historical sources can assist in the interrogation of mentoring as a practice in the present, a focus on the relationship of mentor and mentee can also allow us to read literature in new ways. Each representation of a mentor-mentee relationship is *sui generis*, a case study in the dynamics of the exchange of knowledge and experience. Foregrounding mentoring permits the reader to consider the distinctiveness of those relationships and to tease out the vectors on which they depend: conventional understandings of mentorship often imply a unilateral process, whereas the chapters in this volume all reveal its more complex bilateral and even multidirectional nature. The focus on the interrelationships between what is customarily a pair of protagonists lends itself to broader considerations of personal motivation, of forms of communication and of the types of longitudinal development that accompanies ageing. At the same time, each instance of mentorship emerges in a particular socio-cultural niche. Carefully

contextualised and historicised attention to the practice allows us to understand the changing dynamics – intergenerational and other – of mentorship. Certain texts – such as the *Odyssey* – place mentoring as one of their central considerations, while others benefit more unexpectedly, in often unanticipated ways, from being read through this prism. Charlotte Mackay's analysis of Fatou Diome's work from this perspective suggests fresh and previously unimagined readings, for instance: it reveals how attention to non-traditional mentoring outside a conventional mentorship frame highlights the (a)symmetries of knowledge transfer as well as the ways in which the mentor-mentee relationship can be a means of re-interrogating literary representations of friendship.

As the chapters that follow make clear, the dynamics of the mentoring relationship, with the differing and often divergent motivations of mentor and mentee, are all aspects that lend themselves to creative and often narratological development, the latter in terms of plot, character and mode of focalisation. Mentoring thus supplements more conventional ways of understanding relationships between characters – in terms of friendship, of homosociality, of eroticism – and allows an intense focus on the questions of mutuality, reciprocity and relationality inherent in human and social interaction. The volume is highly suggestive in terms of showing how literary sources and historical examples, beyond those very obvious ones which I too discussed at the opening of this preface, might enhance the ways we conceive of mentorship and improve the means by which we prepare both mentor and mentee for the challenges of the process. At the same time, as Kirk Weeden's study of adapting Molière in contemporary Australia makes clear, it is important to recall that the core activities of the Humanities – reading literature, analysing history, studying human interactions in their multiple forms – are themselves an invaluable form of mentorship in their own right.

Charles FORSDICK  
University of Liverpool  
United Kingdom