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The Chronicle of Mentoring and Coaching,
2025, Vol. 9, No. 3
doi.org/10.62935/s2405p

THE CHRONICLE of MENTORING & COACHING™

Mentorship Matters: How Faculty Guidance Shapes Counseling Students in Early Clinical Training

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Mentorship is a key medium through which faculty socialize graduate students into counselor education. Students undergo a critical period of development during their clinical courses, facilitated through mentorship relationships with course faculty. This study utilizes narrative inquiry to broaden, burrow, story, and restory pre-practicum students' (n=9) experience with faculty mentorship. Central themes describe effective ingredients of faculty mentorship.

Keywords: Relational mentoring, counselor education, pre-practicum, student-mentee, faculty-mentor

Introduction

> "What [gives] the giant sequoia trees their strength?...they actually have very shallow roots but the roots of nearby trees intertwine and support one another. These biggest and oldest of trees, these images of power and strength, literally hold each other up" (Jordan, 2004, p. 25).

Like the shallow root systems of the giant sequoia trees intertwine with one another to provide strength and stability, so too do two lives intertwine in the mentoring relationship thus serving to support one another's growth and success. Mentorship in graduate education is crucial to developing professionals' socialization (Schlosser et al., 2011). Mentorship is identified by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP) as a critical component of clinical internship supervision (CACREP, 2024).

During supervised practice (practicum, and internship) and clinical courses, student-mentees undergo an accelerated period of development (Atieno Okech & Rubel, 2019). During this stage of professional development, students begin practicing skills, applying knowledge, and directly interacting with clients and credentialed providers in behavioral health settings. This study aims to increase understanding regarding the role of mentorship in developing counselors-in-training during their counseling skills-focused course, occurring immediately prior to practicum and internship in the behavioral health setting (also known as "fieldwork"). Narrative inquiry is used to broaden, burrow, story, and restory (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) the experiences of nine pre-practicum students under the mentorship of faculty teaching their early, pre-practicum clinical training. This qualitative research method explores how persons derive meaning from their experience through storytelling, while highlighting the situational and social contexts of their narrative(s). Narrative inquiry allows researchers to interpret lived experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Themes describe effective ingredients and the transformative power of relational mentorship.

Literature Review

At its foundation, mentoring is a positive relationship where a less skilled individual learns knowledge and techniques from a more senior person (Green & Bauer, 1995; Schlosser et al., 2011). Well over 50 definitions of mentorship exist, highlighting different components such as the mentor's provision of psychological, social, and emotional support (Levinson et al., 1978; Byars-Winston & Dahlberg, 2019), facilitation of career development, and aiding the mentee to achieve specific competencies (Brown et al., 1999; Murray, 2001). Relational mentorship is critical to the perpetuation of the counseling profession. Relational mentorship represents an interdependent developmental relationship that fosters mutual growth, learning, and career development for both mentor and mentee (Ragins, 2012). In counseling and counselor education, student counselors-in-training and provisionally licensed practitioners are required to receive ongoing supervision from an independently licensed, experienced clinician. One central element of this relationship is the mentor/mentee, master/protégé dynamic (CACREP, 2024).

When training students in practice-focused professions such as medical and mental healthcare (e.g. nursing, medical doctors, psychiatry, counseling, occupational and physical therapy), mentorship is key to successful apprenticeship and completion of fieldwork. The application of knowledge is learned through "apprenticeship to

a master…it is in the laboratory, combined with the best of apprenticeship, that practice is learned as a whole and experientially" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 1). The education of new counselors replicates the apprenticeship process through a four-part clinical course sequence, which consists of: (1) pre-practicum laboratory experiences facilitated by a licensed counselor and counselor educator; (2) practicum in a counseling clinic training facility and/or within a community-counseling agency; and (3) internship parts 1 and 2, during which counselors-in-training are paired with a licensed clinician and provide counseling services at a community site. During each stage in the clinical course sequence, counselors-in-training experience evolving relationships with the faculty member assigned to each class, as the faculty serves as the university supervisor. This supervisory relationship includes a strong mentorship component, which is tempered by the faculty member's simultaneous role as evaluator. This "tempering" occurs because of the dual relationship created by the faculty member's multiple roles as a source of connection and support, as well as an educator responsible for ensuring the student meets minimum standards as a clinician and assigning a grade for the course (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019).

Despite the complexities of the university supervisor and counselor-in-training mentorship relationship, elements of relational mentoring remain central to effective mentoring. The core aspects of relational mentoring in effective relationships include the use of communication skills, conveying unconditional positive regard, authenticity, and empathy (Stark et al., 2019).

Methods

The authors employed narrative inquiry to broaden, burrow, story, and restory (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) written reflection papers from nine pre-practicum students. Broadening includes a looking outward, examining cultural, social, and historical contexts of the participant's story, while burrowing looks inward, considering emotional, experiential, and personal dimensions. Story and re-story describe the construction of the narrative as it is remembered, followed by reflection and analysis, then integration of new insights into a reconfiguration of the narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). During the application of this approach in this study, the faculty's written feedback on each observed real-play counseling session was also reviewed. Students completed two extensive reflection papers over the course of the semester. Students also met one-on-one with the faculty-mentor to discuss their self-rating on a skill assessment instrument: Counselor Competencies Scale – Revised (Lambie et al., 2016), professional development over the course of the semester, and factors that promoted or hindered their growth.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study was received in October 2024. Students who completed pre-practicum in the fall of 2024 at the counselor education program of the research team's institution were eligible to participate. The research team reached out to students who completed pre-practicum in the fall semester of 2024 by visiting their practicum class in January 2025 (after all grades had been submitted for their pre-practicum course). The principal investigator (PI) explained the study and distributed informed consent documents for review and signature.

Students who signed the consent form were provided with a copy of a QR code to scan with a device and complete the anonymous demographics survey. Upon completion of this process, the PI logged into Canvas (a Learning Management System learning portal) and downloaded the reflection papers. All identifying data were then removed from the assignments, and a pseudonym was put in its place. The faculty-mentor's post-lab feedback was also downloaded, and all identifying details removed; the faculty-mentor is a member of the research team, thus only her verbal consent was obtained to utilize this feedback as data. A total of nine participants consented to the study, please see Table 1 in Appendix for participant demographic information. The demographic make-up of the sample parallels that of all students enrolled in the counseling program at this institution.

In line with narrative inquiry, the researchers initially reviewed the data from a broad perspective, engaging in open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1968) while recursively revisiting the literature to consider the relevance of emergent themes in existing research. For example, the researchers identified the faculty as employing communication skills to encourage student reflection on their strengths. Returning to the literature, this process was identified as the relational mentor intervention appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry focuses on mentee strengths and abilities and provides feedback to cultivate conversations about "the good, the better, and the possible" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 63). This process of broadening enabled the study findings within the context of existing research.

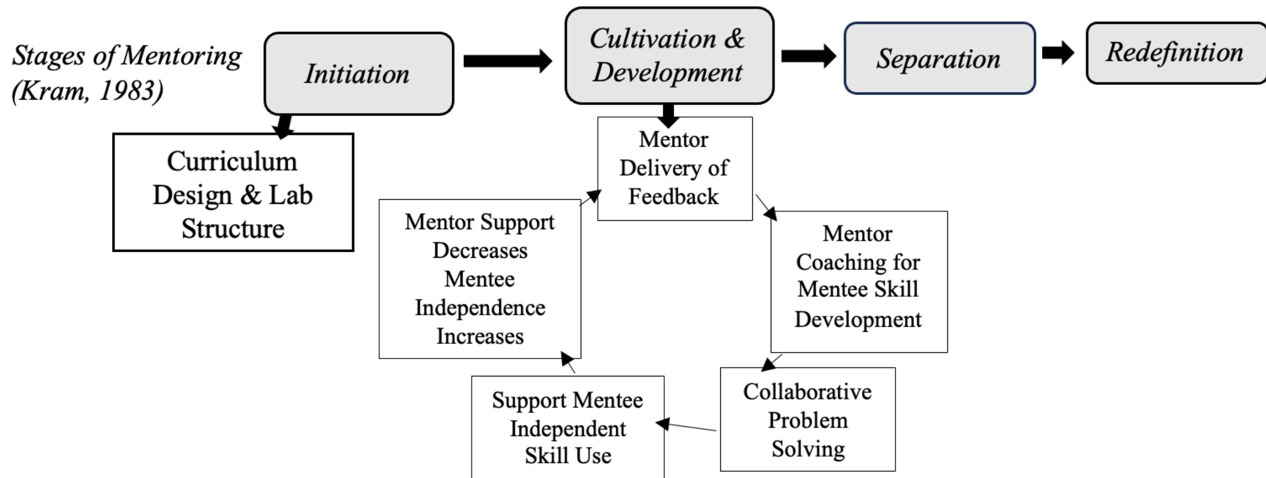
Shifting back into data analysis, the team "burrowed" into the coding process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 11, identifying concepts through "up-close examination" of the data that describe the relationship between codes (Wei, 2023, p. 38). Researchers used Atlas.ti to manage data analysis and employed Atlas.ti's Artificial Intelligence (AI)-assisted coding to support identification of codes, themes, and associated relationships. The story of the relationships between concepts and themes was then crafted.

Results

Emergent themes describe a scaffolding process whereby the faculty served as a mentor to pre-practicum students engaging in Kram's (1983) first two stages of mentoring: 1) initiation and 2) cultivation and development. This process

is supported through curricular design, and laboratory structure which together facilitates: 1) Skill development, 2) reflective practice, and 3) the creation of a psychologically safe learning environment. Furthermore, the structure of the class created unique opportunities for peer mentorship, skills-practice feedback loops, and relational mentorship interventions. See Figure 1 for an illustration of the relationship between study themes, and Kram's (1983) mentorship model.

Figure 1.
Stages of Mentorship: Pre-practicum Student Experience with Faculty Mentor Initiation



Curriculum Design & Lab Structure

The design and structure of the pre-practicum course weaves together supportive interactions with the faculty mentor, with didactic delivery of content. During the first class, students complete an agreement form titled the "Art of Helping Confidentiality Agreement" that outlines norms to ensure psychological safety during class activities. Students are then instructed in constructive approaches to delivery of peer feedback, learning strategies such as ask – tell – ask (Miller & Rollnick, 2023), initial strengths-focus followed by increasingly constructive feedback (Berg-Smith, 2014), use appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) to provide brief and specific overview of what was observed, and share what they might consider doing differently. Highlighting student-mentees' strengths is key to cultivating the mentoring relationship (He, 2009) and maintaining a psychologically safe space.

In-class lessons define counseling skills and concepts, with the faculty-mentor modeling implementation of skills and concepts to facilitate discussion. Student-mentee large and small group discussion explores how and when to employ said skills and concepts. Student-mentees then break out into individual lab rooms to practice implementation of newly acquired information. While in the lab rooms, at least one peer, the faculty, and the Teaching Assistant (TA) observe students.

Cultivation & Development

Feedback Loop

The faculty-mentor provides feedback by showing session demonstration videos and facilitating large-group discussions on how feedback is constructed and delivered to the clinician in the demonstration. This process is reinforced with the faculty-mentor's provision of weekly individualized feedback for each student regarding their observation of the student's skills practice. Students also practice providing feedback to peers every week.

During each lab, students observe one another through a two-way mirror with audio delivered through headphones. While watching, students complete a coding sheet that describes specific skills used, ratio of reflections to questions, strengths or "shining moments", and areas of growth or things they may have done differently. After the practice session, students share their completed coding sheet with the student-mentee and deliver their feedback verbally. For Example, participant Alex (pseudonym used to protect participant privacy) describes this process as initially inciting anxiety, but these feelings eventually gave way to a sense of accomplishment and increased confidence:

…how anxious I was for other people to watch me during sessions. I did not think it would be beneficial for me or that it would cause me to be self-conscious. I was wrong. The observations and

constructive feedback were so helpful. I enjoyed the end of sessions because I knew the observers would give me a boost of confidence as well as some things I need to work on. I listened and tried my best to incorporate the feedback into my counseling self and I believe it worked.

Like the mentor-protégé relationship model, the circular approach to feedback provided to student-mentees supports their progress through several stages (Gray, 1988; Haines, 2003). These stages include 1) delivery of information needed for mentee growth, 2) mentor's use of coaching to support learning of new skills, 3) mentor and mentee collaborative problem-solving, 4) providing support as the mentee attempts skills independently, and 5) enabling the mentee increasing independence by decreasing the level of support.

Self-Reflective Practice

Psychological safety is necessary for students to be willing to experience the vulnerability, and risk-taking necessary for learning (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety in the learning environment is supported by the scaffolding of skills related to providing feedback, and the structure of the class. Faculty-mentors also facilitate psychological safety through relational mentoring techniques, such as genuineness, providing mentees with nonjudgmental and unconditional positive regard, and empathizing with mentee experience (Stark et al., 2019). Receiving strengths-focused, yet constructive, feedback from the faculty mentor and fellow students supports the development of skills and self-reflexive practice. This reflexive process allows students to work with feelings of doubt, mental challenges, and reluctance, while also seeking the "material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the complexity" (Dewey, 1933, p. 12). The faculty-mentor and student-mentee relationship, as well as relationships among peer mentees, serve as the foundation for reflective practice.

Within mentor-mentee relationships, reflective practice occurs when the mentor and mentee make the implicit, explicit, and seek opportunities for mentee change and progress. Self-reflection is considered one of the primary vehicles that support growth in the mentorship relationship (Byars-Winston & Dahlberg, 2019). In counselor education, self-reflexivity is critical because the counselor's personality and behavior have a uniquely significant impact on the therapeutic process, making it essential for beginning counselors to develop both self-awareness and technical knowledge (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019).

Participant Zia (pseudonym) describes self-reflection as "unlearning" stating, "I have also discovered there were some things I also need to "unlearn" and are areas for growth." Another participant, Jay, describes an introspective process that leads to "self-knowledge" regarding "internal processes" as well as awareness of values and how they define their "therapeutic self."

Skill Development

Participant development of one or multiple skills is supported by curriculum design and lab structure, the feedback loop, and the practice of self-reflection. Azzie, one of the participant student-mentees, describes the pre-practicum course as:

> A valuable and transformative experience, as it has significantly enhanced my understanding and provided deeper insights into the critical role that style and tone of communication play within the counseling session…I strongly feel that I have gained much, particularly in my realization that communication within the counseling session extends beyond words to include non-verbal cues, tone, listening skills, and other essential elements. One aspect of my growth that I can confidently and emphatically assert is the realization that effective counseling is not only about what I say during a session, but also how I say it, and, more importantly, how well I listen and connect with the client's experiences.

Azzie shares mentoring and educational experience as "transformative" in helping to not only understand and practice counseling skills but also improved their awareness of how other variables – like non-verbal cues – impact the counseling process. Participant Jenn echoes this stating that he has learned to "use at least three reflections for every one question, and I keep my reflections short so that I am not speaking for more than 30% of the time." Jenn also describes feeling "comfortable tracking the client's issues, thoughts, and emotions and linking them together in my reflections," citing "examples from the textbook" and "hands on experience during the real plays" as most helpful in developing counseling skills. The concept of "real play," a key aspect of skill development in the pre-practicum class, is borrowed from Dr. William "Bill" Miller's Motivational Interviewing. Motivational Interviewing describes real play as critical for clinical skill development, as it allows clinicians to pre-select safe topics and goals to address during skills practice, and removes the complications caused by "trying to act like someone you are not" (W. Miller, personal communication, April 11, 2025).

Discussion

Mentorship in Fieldwork: The Uniting Theme

Although these aspects of the educational process may be seen as typical of practicum, internship, and clinical training, and not necessarily specific to mentorship, there are several unique mentor-specific threads that tie these phenomena together. The first aspect of mentorship present in pre-practicum is the individualized relationship between student and the faculty-mentor. The mentorship nature of this relationship emerged as a theme in this study and is a documented phenomenon in fieldwork (practicum and internship) for behavioral health providers

(Nolinske, 1995).

When students enter fieldwork courses, they seek mentors who demonstrate professional expertise, accessibility, and genuine care while providing constructive feedback and guidance (Stark et al., 2019). Due to accreditation standards in counselor education, faculty members for these courses are licensed clinicians with experience in the counseling field and provide direct supervision in class. These same standards define supervision as a "tutorial and mentoring relationship" (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs, 2024, p. 36). By providing credentialed and experienced individual to instruct fieldwork courses and provide supervision, counselor education programs create master-protégé mentoring relationships.

In the pre-practicum class, this supervisory relationship culminates in a one-on-one meeting with the faculty-mentor to review the student-mentee's assessment of skill development using the Counselor Competencies Scale - Revised (CCS-R; Lambie et al., 2016). Mentor and mentee also explore the mentee's career goals, program of study and remaining courses needed for graduation, internship placement, scholarship and fellowship opportunities (such as those offered by the National Board of Certified Counselors), and next steps after graduation.

This final meeting unites their professional development up to this point with their goals and career plans. This process is reminiscent of that described by Nolinske (1995), where the pre-practicum faculty-mentor manages multiple roles to meet the complex needs of students at this stage in clinician development. These multifaceted mentoring roles include serving as sponsor by advocating for student opportunities, coach by providing goal-oriented strategies, advisor through academic planning, and educator/supervisor by supporting the development of critical thinking and clinical reasoning skills (Nolinske, 1994).

Although the results of this narrative inquiry provide valuable insight, the generalizability of results is limited to the small and isolated sample (i.e. students are from one counselor education program in the southwest United States). In alignment with the qualitative tradition, readers are encouraged to consider the applicability of results to their lived experience (Shenton, 2004).

Conclusion

This study utilizes narrative inquiry to broaden, burrow, story, and restory pre-practicum students' (n=9) experience with faculty mentorship. The faculty-mentor and student-mentee relationship that develops during pre-practicum coursework aligns with Kram's (1983) first two stages of mentoring: 1) initiation and 2) cultivation and development. Curriculum design and lab structure create norms, consistency, and transparent expectations to ensure a psychologically safe environment for student-mentees. Faculty-mentors and student-mentees participate in a feedback loop that supports students as they provide one another with feedback that highlights strengths and abilities, and provides specific feedback grounded in skill development. A parallel process occurs with faculty-mentors, who model affirmative inquiry and relational mentorship by exhibiting transparency, unconditional positive regard, and empathy for mentees. Through these processes, mentees develop self-reflective practice while also increasing competency and confidence in their ability to implement counseling skills.

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Appendix

Table 1.
Demographic Information

Demographic Characteristic	Number of Participants	%
Race/Ethnicity		
Multiracial	1	14%
Latino//x or Hispanic	5	72%
Native American	1	14%
Gender		
Cisgender female	6	86%
Cisgender male	1	14%
Sexual Identity		
Bisexual	2	33%
Heterosexual	3	53%
Questioning/not sure	1	14%
Age		
34-42 years	1	14%
26-33 years	3	43%
18-25 years	3	43%
Consented to data collection: N=9; Completed demographic survey: N=7 (not every participant responded to every question)		