

Strategic Questioning as a Mechanism for Trust and Camaraderie Development in Mentoring

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This paper explores how the intentional design of mentor questions can foster trust and camaraderie in undergraduate mentoring relationships, particularly within small university settings. While traditional models of mentoring emphasize career and psychosocial support, less attention has been paid to the communicative strategies that initiate and sustain meaningful relational bonds. Drawing on past research, this paper argues that the questions mentors ask are not neutral but relationally consequential. Using Social Penetration Theory as a guiding framework, we examine how progressively deeper, person-centered questioning facilitates self-disclosure, psychological safety, and mutual understanding. The paper also integrates insights from interpersonal communication research, particularly the importance of empathic responsiveness and emotional support, to show how certain question types can accelerate rapport and trust-building. It proposes a typology of mentor questions across four categories: rapport-building, value-alignment, empathy-driven, and growth-oriented, each suited to different phases of the mentoring relationship. This approach not only helps mentors build deeper, more authentic connections with students but also supports more equitable and effective mentoring practices. The findings have practical implications for mentor training and program design in higher education.

Keywords: Mentoring, trust, social penetration theory, question design, interpersonal communication

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Introduction

Mentoring relationships in higher education play a crucial role in shaping students' academic performance, identity development, and overall wellbeing. While structural factors such as availability, accessibility, and institutional support are undeniably important, the quality of communication between mentors and mentees often determines whether a relationship evolves into a meaningful developmental partnership. Particularly in small college settings, where faculty-student interactions are more personal and sustained, the opportunity to cultivate deep, trusting relationships is significant—but often underutilized. Much of the existing literature on mentoring focuses on roles and outcomes, such as career advancement or psychosocial support, but pays less attention to the interpersonal mechanisms that initiate and sustain trust and

camaraderie. This paper argues that one such mechanism—intentional question-asking—plays a foundational yet underexplored role in building emotionally resonant mentoring relationships.

Drawing from interdisciplinary research in behavioral science, interpersonal communication, and counseling psychology, this paper explores how mentors can use specific types of questions to foster psychological safety, elicit self-disclosure, and promote relational depth. Anchored in Kram's (1985) two-function mentoring model (career and psychosocial support) and enriched by Mayer et al.'s (1995) model of organizational trust, the framework also incorporates Carl Rogers' principles of empathic understanding and the dynamics of Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). These perspectives suggest that the types of questions a mentor asks—and how they respond to the answers—can serve as powerful tools for cultivating mutual respect and emotional

connection. By examining different categories of mentor questions and their impact on trust-building, the paper offers both theoretical insights and practical guidance for improving the quality of mentorship in academic contexts.

Literature Review

Mentoring in higher education is widely recognized as a valuable practice that supports student development across cognitive, emotional, and professional dimensions. Particularly in small university environments, where faculty have greater access to students and more opportunities for one-on-one engagement, the quality of mentor-mentee relationships can significantly impact academic success, retention, and student wellbeing (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Campbell & Campbell, 1997). While mentoring frameworks often emphasize roles, goals, and outcomes, there remains a significant gap in understanding the interpersonal processes—especially the communication behaviors—that initiate and sustain meaningful mentor-mentee bonds.

This literature review integrates research from educational psychology, interpersonal communication, behavioral science, and social psychology to explore how specific types of questions foster trust and camaraderie between mentors and mentees. It highlights the roles of trust, psychological safety, and relational depth, and situates these within the theoretical framework of Social Penetration Theory (SPT), which offers insight into how self-disclosure unfolds through layered interpersonal dialogue. We argue that strategic, thoughtful questioning is an underutilized but powerful tool for building mentor-mentee rapport—particularly when grounded in mutual curiosity, empathy, and reflection.

Mentoring Relationships and Student Development

The benefits of mentoring for undergraduate students are well documented. Students with strong mentoring relationships experience higher GPAs, greater persistence, increased career clarity, and more positive psychological wellbeing (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Nora & Crisp, 2007). These outcomes are especially pronounced in small college environments where students have more frequent and informal access to faculty and staff mentors (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Despite this, effective mentoring is not a given. It is shaped by how mentors and mentees interact—particularly in the earliest stages of relationship formation.

Kram's (1985) seminal model outlines two major mentoring functions: career development (e.g., sponsorship, exposure, coaching) and psychosocial support (e.g., role modeling, counseling, acceptance). While these functions have been foundational in mentoring research, they don't fully account for the micro-level, communicative behaviors that build emotional connection. In

other words, we know what good mentors do—but we know less about how they do it, especially when it comes to creating environments where mentees feel safe, seen, and supported.

Communication and Trust in Mentoring

Relational trust is fundamental to successful mentoring. According to Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman's (1995) model, trust is based on perceptions of a mentor's ability, benevolence, and integrity. These dimensions translate into the mentee's belief that the mentor is competent, genuinely caring, and consistently ethical. However, building trust is not simply about displaying these traits—it is about communicating them in ways that mentees can perceive and internalize.

Early mentoring conversations are often transactional: schedules, goals, course selection. Yet these surface-level interactions may fail to build emotional connection. Instead, research in interpersonal communication suggests that mentors must engage in different forms of active listening, empathic responsiveness and understanding, and self-disclosure to foster deeper trust (Burlinson, 2003; Rogers, 1951). Importantly, the types of questions mentors ask can signal their openness, curiosity, and willingness to meet the mentee as a whole person, not just a student.

Social Penetration Theory and the Role of Self-Disclosure

Social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) offers a particularly useful framework for understanding how mentor-mentee relationships evolve. The theory proposes that interpersonal closeness develops through gradual increases in self-disclosure across two dimensions: breadth (range of topics) and depth (level of intimacy). Relationships start with superficial layers (e.g., biographical information) and, with trust, progress toward more personal and emotionally meaningful layers.

In mentoring, this suggests that trust and camaraderie are unlikely to emerge solely from institutional roles or time spent together—they require the strategic, reciprocal exchange of personal information. Mentors who ask reflective, open-ended questions about identity, motivation, or life experiences encourage this process of depth-building. Moreover, SPT emphasizes reciprocity: when mentors also share selective, appropriate aspects of their own journeys (e.g., struggles, uncertainties, career pivots), they normalize vulnerability and humanize the relationship.

A mentor might begin with broad questions ("What are your academic interests?"), then gradually move toward deeper ones ("What kind of work feels most meaningful to you?" or "Have you ever felt out of place here?"). As mentees respond and mentors validate their disclosures, the relationship moves from transactional to transformational.

Psychological Safety and Vulnerability in Mentoring

Closely related to trust is the concept of psychological safety, defined as the belief that one can speak up, ask questions, or express doubts without fear of ridicule or reprisal (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety is critical for students who may already feel marginalized or unsure of their place within academia—such as first-generation, BIPOC, or LGBTQ+ students (Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintrón, 2007). For these students, mentoring must be more than guidance, it must be an affirming space.

Mentors play a central role in cultivating safety. Detert and Edmondson (2011) found that people in subordinate positions (e.g., mentees) are more likely to speak openly when leaders actively seek input, admit fallibility, and show interest in others' perspectives. In mentoring terms, this translates to mentors using inclusive language, inviting feedback, and asking open-ended questions that do not presume a "correct" answer. For example:

- "What are some things you wish professors knew about your experience?"
- "Have there been moments where you felt supported—or unsupported—on campus?"

Such questions both communicate care and encourage honest dialogue, which is essential for building rapport.

Strategic Questioning as a Mentoring Tool

Mentors who use generative questioning—questions designed to elicit reflection, insight, and emotional resonance—can foster stronger and more growth-oriented relationships (Stelter, 2014). This contrasts with informational or administrative questions ("Have you registered for classes?"), which may serve logistical purposes but do little to advance relational intimacy. Generative questions might include:

- "What values guide the decisions you make?"
- "Can you describe a moment you felt proud of yourself here?"
- "What's a challenge you've overcome that most people don't know about?"

These types of questions create opportunities for meaning-making and signal that the mentor is genuinely invested in the student's development—not just their performance. They also align with Hall and Burns' (2009) argument that reflective dialogue is essential to identity development in mentoring.

Purposeful Questions in Action

Based on the previous discussion of mentoring theory, social penetration theory, and communicative research we identify four types of questions that a mentor can use to foster trust and camaraderie in a mentoring relationship. These are aligned with different stages of relational development and levels of emotional depth.

1. Icebreaker and Rapport-Building Questions

To be used in the early stages of the relationship, aiming to reduce anxiety, build initial comfort, and show interest in the mentee as a person. Most, if not all mentoring relationships will start at this stage and some may not progress to the next one; each relationship will be different based on a variety of factors like age, gender, personality, compatibility, etc. The purpose at this stage will be to establish psychological safety and reduce perceived hierarchy. Questions at this stage should be non-threatening, open ended, and focused on identity, interests, and current experiences. The questions signal benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995) and initiate the outer layer of self-disclosure in line with SPT (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Some examples include the following:

- "What brought you to this major (or field of study)?"
- "What is something you are really enjoying (or struggling with) this term?"
- "How do you like to spend your time outside of class?"

2. Values-Alignment and Motivation Questions

Once some comfort is established, mentors may be inclined to ask deeper questions that explore the mentee's goals, values, and sense of purpose. Ideally, this stage will build a deeper understanding about the mentee's aspirations. Questions at this stage should be reflective, forward looking, and centered on meaning and motivation; they should aim at fostering trust by affirming the mentee's individuality. These questions tap into the deeper layers of disclosure and establish relational alignment – key for camaraderie and mentorship longevity. Examples include:

- "What kind of work or projects make you feel most energized?"
- "Where do you picture yourself five years from now?"
- "What values are most important to you when making big decisions?"

3. Empathy Driven and Emotionally Supportive Questions

The questions at this stage should be aimed at exploring the student's challenges, emotions, or setbacks while at the institution. They should be asked in a way that validates the mentee's experience and encourages openness while creating vulnerability and fostering the practice of empathic responsiveness. This is a transitional stage as it moves the relationship to a deeper emotional place; questions should be emotionally attuned, framed with care, and focus on support, rather than solutions. They should demonstrate positive regard (Rogers, 1951) and promote psychological safety (Edmonson, 1999). Some examples include:

- "What's something you've found unexpectedly difficult lately?"
- "How have you been coping with the stress of the semester?"

- “Is there anything that’s been weighing on you that you haven’t had a chance to talk about?”

4. Empowerment and Growth-Oriented Questions

The latest proposed stage is not going to be possible to achieve with every student. This stage will be part of relationships that have matured and will help mentees reflect on their growth and learning trajectory, reinforcing a sense of autonomy and self-competence. The questions, if used correctly, will affirm progress and promote self-efficacy. They should strengthen integrity and ability perceptions in the trust framework and invite mentees to reflect of the development of their identity. In contrast to the other three stages, the questions here should be action oriented, based on perceived strengths, and reflective of past experiences. Some examples include:

- “What’s something you’re proud of that you’ve accomplished recently?”
- “How have you changed since starting college?”
- “What’s one area where you’ve surprised yourself with your growth?”

Discussion

By intentionally selecting questions based on the stage and context of the mentoring relationship, mentors can facilitate gradual self-disclosure, signal empathy, and build relational depth. This question-based approach is both practical and grounded in theoretical frameworks, allowing mentors to move beyond surface-level advising into truly transformational mentoring.

Implications for Equity and Inclusion

Research suggests that intentional communication strategies are particularly important for mentoring students from underrepresented or minoritized backgrounds. Crisp and Cruz (2009) argue that relational mentoring requires a commitment to cultural responsiveness and the validation of diverse identities. Mentors must not only ask good questions but also know how to listen to answers that reflect different lived experiences.

Moreover, institutions often underestimate how intimidating faculty mentors can appear to students who have not grown up in traditional academic environments. By using relational, humanizing communication—rooted in the principles of SPT and psychological safety—mentors can create safe spaces where students feel empowered to bring their full selves into the relationship.

Conclusion

The formation and deepening of mentor-mentee relationships is not automatic—the process is facilitated through intentional communication, particularly the strategic use of questions that promote trust, vulnerability, and shared meaning. Social Penetration Theory provides a powerful lens

to understand how disclosure and relational depth evolve through conversation. When mentors use open-ended, empathic, and inclusive questions, they create opportunities for mentees to feel seen, supported, and understood. In doing so, they not only build better relationships, they cultivate environments where students are more likely to thrive, both academically and personally.

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