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# Informal Co-mentoring for Student Success

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A partnership between teachers and business partners that evolved into a strong co-mentoring relationship is presented in this paper. The findings indicate systemic planning, shared goals, respect, trust, and communication created and sustained the co-mentoring partnership. The benefits of co-mentoring relationships are discussed (e.g., no power differential, involves a reciprocal knowledge and skills transfer, career advancement, increased work satisfaction, enhanced self-esteem, and a sense of well-being). The author relays how and why a co-mentoring relationship worked for the participants and how it may apply to others interested in co-mentoring relationships. The importance of future research on the same co-mentoring relationships and others like it is presented.

*Keywords*: co-mentoring, educational partnerships, mentoring in education in America, informal mentoring

## Introduction of the Problem that Initiated this Study

Generation shifts in the workforce have changed business operations since Baby Boomers and Gen X held the majority seats (Hechl, 2017). Regular turnover is prevalent in industries that employ a high percentage of Millennials, and many have invested much in retention efforts for young employees (Hechl, 2017). Workforce research on Gen Z shows that they do not change jobs as frequently as Millennials and that Gen Z employees tend to be more demanding of their employers in areas of pay, professional development, and a focus on diverse and inclusive environments (PurdueGobal.edu, n.d). They, too, will quickly move on if they find their job boring or feel undervalued (PurdueGobal.edu, n.d).

Hechl (2017) advocates for mentoring the new workforce to support promotion and retention efforts. High school students often lack practical exposure to the workplace. Mentorship from teachers and business partners can provide them with insights into workplace culture, expectations, and the skills needed to succeed in various careers. Teachers and business partners can impart critical skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and soft skills. By understanding workplace expectations and developing necessary skills, students enhance their employability. Mentorship helps students gain confidence in their abilities. With guidance and support, they can learn to navigate workplace challenges and express their thoughts and ideas effectively. School/industry partnerships can help students identify their strengths and interests, guiding them in their career choices (Hechl, 2017).

By partnering with businesses, educators can align curriculum and provide activities with workforce relevance. Business partners can spend time with students discussing a wide range of topics including their job, how to prepare a resume and prepare for an interview. Similar partnerships can equip high school students with the skills, knowledge, and connections they need to transition into the workforce successfully. This collaborative approach goes beyond the benefits that the participants receive through reciprocal learning, it ultimately benefits both students and employers by creating a better-prepared future workforce

## Background

The leaders in the school district where this study occurred saw the need to connect their high school students with industry through strong educational partnerships to provide professional models, mentors, and lessons on workforce skills. When students have opportunities to talk with and learn from people from the field, they are more apt to internalize the lessons and prepare for the workplace accordingly. Their eyes are opened to the mores and expectations of the workforce in high school with adult guidance rather than stumbling upon them after being hired. The goal of the partnership was to educate the students in becoming college and career-ready through real-world workforce lessons that were provided by the business partners. Two business education teachers in a small high school worked with business partners from the local power company who rotated in and out depending on lesson topics and the business partners' talents and skills. The business partners supported the business education program and worked to advise and mentor students in business knowledge and skills.

The lessons of this co-mentoring project were varied; a few examples follow. Soft skills, or employability skills were modeled, practiced, and taught through each lesson and interaction. The employees discussed employer expectations and the importance of working for an organization that provides benefits and growth opportunities. Each year, a networking luncheon was held for students by employees from the power company and city officials to use the etiquette training and networking lessons that they had learned throughout the year. Classroom lessons taught by business partners were many. Employees who worked in the business office modeled how to use Excel spreadsheets and shared the tips and tricks that they used in their work. Marketing and social media specialists presented how to market a product or service to the students. This lesson was used to market the school's robotics club at the BEST Robotics Competition each year. An employee taught several lessons on how to make and market business portfolios as the students made them. Grant writers collaborated with classes on different occasions on how to write a grant (e.g., for the city's parks and recreation department, and for sidewalks in residential areas). Upper management from the company participated in mock interviews for the students. Different employees were in and out of the high school regularly and sometimes returned depending on the need for follow-up.

This study focuses on the co-mentoring that occurred between the teachers and the business partners involved in the high school-industry partnership. The teachers and business partners naturally became co-mentors and worked symbiotically with the goal of student success. This co-mentoring partnership has lasted eleven years and is still going strong even though its members have changed many times due to promotions and retirement over the years.

Next, after this introduction and background, a literature review is presented on mentoring, which includes information on traditional, peer, and co-mentoring. It is followed by how the co-mentoring relationships between the teachers and business partners evolved. The purpose of this study follows the mentoring evolution, which is followed by the research methodology, the findings, a discussion, implications, the summary, and finally future research suggestions.

## Mentoring

### Traditional Mentoring

Through a thorough literature review on mentoring, Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) found multiple definitions for the concept of mentoring. The definitions depend on the author's experiences in mentoring and the type of mentoring being defined. Mullen and Klimaitis reported that mentoring practices are expanding and changing, also impacting their definitions. Traditional mentoring, peer mentoring, and co-mentoring are reviewed in this section.

Traditional mentoring relationships focus on a mentee who is inexperienced in one or more aspects of their life, usually professional and psychosocial development (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Meetings are planned by either the mentee or mentor containing interactions to fill the gaps in the mentee's knowledge through experience, professional development, networking, skills development, and other related activities (Johnson, 2017). The mentor acts as the mentee's teacher and guide over time (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Until recently, mentoring focused on deficit building, not on identifying and working from the mentee's strengths and talents (Block, 2018). Mentoring in the work arena is now more focused on the skills and strengths of the participants with an eye on what they can contribute to the organization (Block, 2018).

### Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring begins with people in similar situations who come together to learn from one another as they traverse a situation or time period (Cowin et al., 2021). Usually, peer mentoring takes on one of two different meanings to accomplish its goals. Lunsford et al. (2017) describe peer mentoring occurring at universities where upper-level undergraduate students mentor first-year students with goals of increasing academics and retention. Peer mentoring in this environment offers the advantage that peers are perceived as more approachable and available than faculty mentors (Lunsford et al., 2017). Peer mentoring in this situation would be peers mentoring peers with the traditional mentoring dynamics or hierarchy.

Peer mentoring takes on a different meaning when people come together in a similar situation to learn and grow together while sharing their strengths and talents. Cowin et al. (2021) discuss personal experiences with peer mentoring as a junior faculty with three other new faculty in the same department to work on tenure and promotion expectations and traverse the academy together rather than independently. The meaning of peer mentoring in this situation is void of hierarchical positions and embodies Peter Block's ideas of focusing on each person's talents instead of their deficits (Block, 2018) and working together to achieve set goals and responsibilities. The receptivity of peers when living through the same work situations causes social support within the group (Skaniakos & Pirainen, 2019). The participants recognize their learning as an ongoing process of experiences and connection to prior learning (Cowin et al., 2021). Peer mentoring is similar to co-mentoring. The two terms are often interchanged with one another.

### Co-mentoring

Co-mentoring occurs when participants work in a thinking partnership to support and extend each other's professional and skill development (McGuire & Reger, 2003). Unlike traditional mentoring, there is no power differential in co-mentoring relationships (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021; McGuire & Reger, 2003). Also called reciprocal mentoring, the co-mentoring participants share their expertise and learn from each other in a mutually advantageous way (Haddock-Miller et al., 2024). Co-mentoring is usually a dyad relationship (one-to-one) formed with common goals and values (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Career benefits provided by mentoring relationships are career advancement, increased work satisfaction, enhanced self-esteem, and a sense of well-being (Singh & Kommu, 2023).

Over the years, co-mentorship has been reported as a "superior alternative to the traditional mentor-mentee dynamic" (Fern, 2023). Co-mentors take the role of a trusted counselor or guide, like the traditional mentor. What makes co-mentorship the choice for those who use it is that both participants have something to share, and their relationship is equal, void of hierarchy, providing each other reciprocal guidance and counsel (Fern, 2023). This idea that both individuals have different strengths and much to offer and gain in the relationship motivates them to maintain regular communication. Without hierarchical power the mentoring relationship is open and respectful of each other's ideas and advice (McGuire & Reger, 2003).

Many co-mentoring relationships begin as a collegial relationship that evolves, acquiring perceptible characteristics (Fern, 2023). Unlike the unplanned meetings of colleague interactions, co-mentors focus on and share their strengths and talents (Block, 2018) within regular check-ins, they talk through professional challenges, and work to create solutions without the need for small talk (Fern, 2023). Co-mentorships can occur within the same department between close colleagues, or co-mentors can be chosen from different organizations to complete shared goals or tasks. Often, working with someone from outside your organization adds dimension to the work and increases the diversity of the results (Block, 2018).

The co-mentoring observed through this study was reciprocal in nature, where the two teachers collaborated with the business partner(s) assigned to the lesson for their experience and skills. In this mentoring process, anyone could assume the roles of mentor and mentee, depending on the goal of the interaction. The teachers took the role of mentor when the partner brought new concepts, or a new lesson, to the classroom and asked for teaching strategies or technology tools to use to teach the concept. The business partners brought new ideas and ways to implement business concepts in the workplace. The business partners acted as mentors in the classroom to the teachers and students when they presented their workplace lessons, and when they worked with the teachers to extend and follow up their taught lessons. Both the teachers and the business partners entered the relationship with the expectation that they will be transformed by the experience and learn from each other (Haddock-Miller et al., 2024). The reciprocal mentoring occurred naturally because all involved wanted to be successful in the classroom with the students. As these relationships evolved, it became common for participants to realize the career benefits addressed in Singh and Kummo (2023) of increased work satisfaction and enhanced self-esteem.

## The Co-mentoring Evolution

The business partners arrived for their scheduled presentations to the high school students, usually nervous and not really knowing where to start, what to say, and how to say it. Overall, they felt inadequate for the assignment of teaching a room full of teenagers. The teachers realized their trepidation and began meeting with them while the students arrived in the classroom and completed a short warm-up at their desks. The teachers gave the presenters pointers and provided strategies that they could use to engage the students. The business partners listened and felt more confident in what they were doing when they shared their work strategies with the students and teachers. The co-mentoring between the teachers and business partners was not planned but developed over time through the opportunities that provided optimal times for frequent mentoring experiences. The mentoring episodes were timely and generated a sense of affirmation and positive energy. The pre-lesson meetings were most relevant for first-time presenters. When the employees returned the next semester to reteach lessons they taught the first semester, the business partners often emailed the teachers in advance with questions, or for ideas to make their last presentation better.

The idea of co-mentoring indicates that both participants bring something to the relationship that will contribute to the other's development and growth. The business partners brought to the partnership knowledge from the field. They shared new strategies with both the students and the teachers. The teachers were able to reinforce what the business partners presented in class with future assignments. The knowledge and strategies shared between the teachers and business partners may not have been equal, but the relationship was equitable. Both helped the other to learn and grow, developing new skills and confidence. One business partner stated,

> I was a little nervous when asked to work with the students on grant writing. I think that I do my job well and I know that I am very task driven. I was not sure that I had anything to teach to others. After my first visit, I could not wait to do a follow-up. The students were very receptive, and I could see how they enjoyed learning from me. When the project was through for the semester, I signed up at work to become a leader in my office and to mentor new employees. I am so glad that I got the opportunity to go to the high school, because it made me feel confident in becoming a leader at work.

## Methodology

### Purpose

This study aimed to examine the elements that facilitated the informal co-mentoring relationships between the teachers and the business partners that developed to establish optimal learning opportunities for high school students. The research question for this study was "What were the factors identified by the participants that facilitated the co-mentoring relationship and sustained it over time?"

### Research Design

The research design was a qualitative, descriptive case study in its natural setting. The methodology enlisted multiple data collection methods to obtain valid and reliable information (Lincoln & Guba, 1991; Merriam, 2009; Yin 2014) on the informal co-mentoring between the teachers and the business partners within the educational partnership on which the study focused. The research design enlisted two of the four types of triangulations described by Denzin (1989). Methodological and data triangulations were employed to attain a thorough, credible review of the process and benefits of the co-mentoring relationships that developed between the partners from their perspectives and told through their stories. Triangulation allowed the research question to be analyzed from multiple perspectives to check and establish validity.

### Data Collection

Data collected consisted of interviews, focus groups, and document reviews. This paper reflects the transcripts from three formally scheduled meetings with company employees and two with the two business teachers. Notes from informal conversations occurring throughout the school year between the participants and the researcher provided insights for the study, too. Pre-existing data that received analysis and interpretation through the lens of emerging findings included transcripts of observations, business partner focus groups, and teacher interviews. Copies of pre-existing documents (e.g., memos, emails, and meeting minutes) were made available to the researcher. The pre-existing documents allowed triangulation of multiple perspectives on the research question addressed in this paper. They evidenced the strength of the communication and support taking place within the co-mentoring relationships and provided insight into reciprocity that occurred between the participants during the period of a year.

The semi structured interview method was used with Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, et al., 2008; Shuayb, et al., 2009) to encourage participant stories that developed around the members' beliefs about their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Appreciative Inquiry is a research tool that uses a strength-based, co-constructing process to find the best in people and partnerships. It focuses on finding the strengths in what is studied, instead of identifying a problem in need of fixing, which is more common in research (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

Informed consent from each participant was obtained, and then all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. During each interview, field notes were taken of any emphasis that the interviewee put on spoken words, facial expressions, and non-verbal communication. Completed transcriptions were offered via email to all interviewees by which to comment or clarify any point within the dialogue. This member checking led to member validation of the study and was defined by Lincoln and Guba (1991) as crucial in improving accuracy and obtaining credibility. It was also one way to ensure that the voices heard as a result of this research were as intended by the members.

The interview and focus group transcripts were systematically analyzed using open and axial coding, developed by Strauss and Corbin and discussed in Creswell (2013). The coding was used to highlight, categorize, and confirm comments on co-mentoring relationships, collaboration, support, and similar themes. The concept of co-mentoring was discussed in the conversations with teachers and business partners.

## Findings

Systemic joint planning between the teachers and the business partners led to a common focus and shared goals for the partnership. This planning and sharing of ideas and skills between the teachers and the business partners became the informal co-mentoring that occurred before each lesson and/or through email. The co-mentors' work relationship that had a common focus and shared goals united the participants and their work across the classroom borders. The co-mentoring relationships were reciprocal. The reciprocal sharing and learning of skills were aptly described by a bookkeeper who came to share how Excel spreadsheets are used in the business office.

> My co-worker and I put together a presentation on how we used Excel at work. We included several tips and tricks that make our work easier when using Excel (the power of the apostrophe, custom sorts, and drop-down menus were a few of the tips that we planned to share). When we arrived, the teacher met us at the door and said that she had our presentation on the Smart Board and wanted to run through how to use it while the students were completing a questionnaire on Excel. She showed us where to touch and how to use the markers to write additional text that we wanted to add to the presentation. She also had an Excel spreadsheet on the screen

> to use to demonstrate our tricks. I quickly walked through a couple of the tricks to make sure that I could use the Smart Board as the teacher looked on. Just before she went to sit at a desk, she stated that she had already learned two new things just helping me set up and could not wait to complete the lesson with the students. I looked at her and said that it was me who had just learned how to present from a Smart Board and to actually use a spreadsheet to do my tips and tricks verses using presentation software to show them.

Teacher support of the business employees in classroom teaching was identified by the business partners as necessary to realize the shared goal of high-quality, real-world instruction for the students. The business partners commented that their lessons improved after gaining specific strategies to use in their presentations. Similarly, the teachers identified that the sharing of skills and experiences by the business employees was crucial to the teachers in learning new things. The new skills helped them make real world connections for the students between what was taught (classroom lessons) and why both the students and teachers needed to learn it (real world applications) after the partners left. In this co-learning, the foundation for authentic change was cast and the intellectual and emotional commitment for meaningful lessons and classroom transformation were created (Lick, 2000).

Joint respect and individual trust propelled the co-mentoring relationships forward and kept the business partners returning to share their expertise as did the small successes and student appreciation. The partners trusted that the teachers would help them prepare an interesting slide show or activity to go with their lesson's topic. They also trusted that if they lost the students' attention, a teacher would be there to get things back on track. Employees who presented at the school, returned to their workplace and shared stories with their colleagues of their successes and the support they received from the teachers, which encouraged other colleagues to want to share their work with students, too. The business partners stated that they felt a sense of accomplishment after presenting a lesson for the students.

Regular communication on real world issues and workforce events was identified by both the teachers and the business partners as important in making connections between classroom lessons and real-world applications. Email conversations between the industry partners and teachers shed insight into the collaboration and conversations that occurred when planning for the lessons or field trip events. Most emails were of a scheduling nature, a minimum of four emails between the key schedulers (usually the program manager and lead teacher) occurred for each event. Some of the emails contained the sharing of ideas and strategies to use in the next classroom lesson, which helped to minimize the face-to-face time before class. A thank-you email often followed events from a teacher or a designated student. Telephone calls and texts extended the communication between partners, but these were neither recorded nor submitted to the researcher. The lead teacher stated,

> Staying ahead on planning all the visits, trips, and events with the program coordinator is the hardest part of this partnership, but we all look forward to the visits, trips, and events! This partnership has really opened new avenues of learning for our students. I learn so much from the business partners, and I get to be a part of our students' learning. I am proud to be a small part of the big picture.

Leadership mattered to the co-mentoring success. Leaders in both the school and the business saw the value of the partnership to their employees and the students and were committed to the co-mentoring process providing time for planning, communication, and collaboration. The leaders had a vision for what was needed and how to aid and support the mentoring relationships. The teachers reported that the school and district leaders encouraged their collaboration with one another and the business partners. Leadership from both organizations are seen regularly in classrooms and at events such as mock interviews and the etiquette luncheon each semester. The superintendent in the city school system stated,

> You know you are doing something right when you receive phone calls from a bank president, a county commissioner, two preachers, and several businesspeople asking to be a part of this partnership that gets to interview students, judge business portfolios, and attend networking luncheons. I am usually the one calling these people, but now they are calling me asking to join us!

## Discussion

### How and Why the Co-mentoring Relationship Worked

This article explored a co-mentoring partnership that bridged classroom teaching and learning with workforce lessons and skills. The teachers and business partners came together to share their strengths, talents, and skills to better prepare members of the future workforce. Although very different in their work, the teachers and employees from the local power company became unlikely, but effective co-mentors.

Co-mentoring united the participants by sharing their expertise to meet the service or professional needs of others as they occurred. They functioned as a self-directed, co-mentoring team that empowered one another and openly shared ideas and perspectives. The partners developed the capacity to listen to and work with one another to provide quality work-related instruction. The value added to one another's work built reliance on the other (e.g., suggesting strategies for gaining and keeping students' attention, sharing skills to continue the classroom conversations).

The shared culture grew strong and mutually beneficial. The relationships were informal, developing from need and opportunity. The partners became involved in one another's learning and helpfully provided feedback to support that learning. To be sustainable, the co-mentoring relationship required respect and trust to sustain the closeness for collaboration. Time for collaboration between the partners contributed to the culture (e.g., time to plan and discuss future lessons where the business partners taught or co-taught the classroom lesson, time for providing details and application examples for concepts taught in class). Shared goals and a common focus helped to create the climate needed for the success of the partnership and its sustainability.

Communication and support of one another strengthened the relationships and were valuable in building the trust and respect mentioned earlier. Communication ensured that the purpose and goals of the mentoring relationship were achieved. The business placed one person in charge of scheduling the different business partners for the lesson topics provided by the teachers. This person visited the classrooms regularly and always came with the business employees for their first visit/presentation. Regular and ongoing communication permeated these relationships. The program coordinator stated that, "Communication is critical to getting all the right people assigned to the right lessons on the right days! The teachers are great to work with and will answer emails the night before a scheduled event. Communication equals success."

Co-mentoring reframed teacher development and student workforce learning. It strengthened the business partners' skills by teaching new skills to the students and teachers. The business employees shared that this partnership gave them confidence in their knowledge and ability to share their expertise with others.

## Implications

The implications from the co-mentoring relationships that developed through the school/industry partnership include but are not limited to the following. Co-mentoring fosters a culture of collaboration among its participants, leading to improved teaching practices, student learning experiences, and a shared sense of accomplishment. This collaborative approach in education suggests that partnerships can provide practical knowledge when applied to real world situations. Co-mentoring also creates a shared culture of learning that benefits all stakeholders. This indicates that creating environments that allow for ongoing learning and feedback can promote professional growth and organizational success.

Participants gain confidence and develop new skills through sharing their expertise. This implies that co-mentoring enhances the professional development of teachers and business partners, as they work together to create a more knowledgeable and capable (future) workforce. Effective communication is vital for achieving the goals of co-mentoring. The need for organized scheduling and regular check-ins suggests that establishing structured communication channels is critical for the success of professional reciprocal relationships.

Co-mentoring adds a layer to traditional approaches to teacher development by integrating real world experiences and expertise from business partners. This study highlights the results of practical, skills-based co-mentoring for educators. Establishing common objectives and a unified focus are essential for the effectiveness and sustainability of mentoring partnerships. This implies that collaboration works when all participants are aligned in their aims and objectives. The sustainability of co-mentoring relationships depends on mutual respect and trust. This necessitates the cultivation of a supportive environment where open communication and feedback are encouraged, which leads to stronger co-mentoring relationships. Overall, this study highlights the potential of co-mentoring as a strategic approach to enhance educational outcomes while simultaneously developing the professional capabilities of the educators and business partners involved.

## Benefits of Co-mentoring Relationships

Co-mentoring can benefit you and your organization in several ways. Reciprocal mentoring allows employees to learn new skills and adopt best practices from their peers (Haddock-Miller et al, 2024). This reciprocal knowledge transfer contributes to professional growth and organizational knowledge of the participants. When employees from different backgrounds collaborate, they bring diverse perspectives to problem-solving (Block, 2018). Co-mentoring relationships can increase job satisfaction and engagement, as the co-mentors feel supported and valued (Fern, 2023). This can lead to lower turnover rates as individuals are more likely to stay with an organization that invests in their development (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019). Co-mentoring works best when participants establish and work toward common goals (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). This alignment ensures that everyone is working towards shared goals and increasing the overall effectiveness of the organization. By incorporating real-world experiences and insights from various partners, co-mentoring helps organizations be more adaptable to change (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). In summary, the ability to learn from peers can benefit any organization, facilitating job satisfaction, enhanced self-esteem, a sense of well-being and accomplishment (Singh & Kommu, 2023).

Leadership is needed to put processes into practice, support co-mentoring relationships, and realize the value of mentoring to their organization. Co-mentoring has the potential to intensify professional development and employee learning in any organization. It promotes the growth of participants through support, feedback, reflection, and reciprocal learning (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Co-mentoring can strengthen community among participants and improve group culture. It can transform the norms and programs within any institution (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019).

## Summary

Hopefully this unlikely example of co-mentoring relationships in the workplace has provided a glimpse into the dynamics of co-mentoring, but more, the complexity of human relations and reliance on one another that make co-mentoring so significant in personal and professional growth. This is but one study that illustrates the interdependence and relational intensity found in mentoring relationships. Co-mentors prioritize the success and positive growth of each other in an equitable, unbiased learning environment. Because co-mentorship is a non-hierarchical relationship, the participants must be self-aware and committed to the shared goals and outcomes. I think that co-mentoring is a splendid upgrade to traditional mentoring and will remain a successful way to improve people and their workplace far into the future.

## Future Research

Questions that I would like to follow up on with the teachers and business partners in future research studies include a) As new people enter the partnership, how do you continue the trust relationship? b) How has mentoring kept the commitment to the partnership strong? c) What lies ahead for this co-mentoring partnership that is twelve years strong?

This study presented a partnership containing two teachers and many business partners who acted as co-mentors and worked together for common goals. It would be interesting to zoom in on the specific dyads that mentored one another within this group. Specific concerns and conversations may offer insight into the culture-building and processes among the dyads. This magnification would also provide insight into how specific processes influence their context. Also needed is more exploration of unlikely co-mentoring relationships such as the one analyzed in this article. Experimentation with traditional mentoring alternatives will provide insights and opportunities for others.

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