



# Reflections on Mentoring

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Reflections on Mentoring

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## Reflections on Mentoring

Last May, I received an e-mail message from Shelley Robbins bearing the subject line "ABCT's Outstanding Mentor Award." My first thought was that our association was polling its members about possible nominees for this honor. Upon opening the message, I realized that Shelley had written to say that I was to receive the award at the 2010 conference in San Francisco. I was very touched and surprised; I had no idea that my past and current graduate students had nominated me. Mary Jane Eimer later contacted me, checking to see whether I would be present at the conference. There was no question that I would be there, award or not. Like one of Konrad Lorenz's ducklings, I imprinted on ABCT many years ago, having missed only two meetings since my first conference in Chicago in 1978. When I have mentioned this to my graduate students, they often remind me that they were not even born in 1978.

Late this winter, Kathleen Gunthert asked me to write an article on mentoring for *the Behavior Therapist*. I have no special qualifications for doing so, other than having mentored Ph.D. students since 1984 and having learned a great deal from my own mentors, Steven Reiss and Edna Foa. Steve

was my advisor in graduate school, and Edna was my internship and postdoctoral supervisor.

Mentoring is more than the explicit teaching formalized in the classroom, clinic, or laboratory. It also includes the informal transmission of practical, tacit knowledge -- the tricks of the trade that seldom figure as topics in the graduate curriculum itself. Among the many possible mentoring topics, I concentrate on only three of them in this article: presenting at conferences, writing, and interacting with media. I summarize lessons that I have learned and that I transmit to my graduate students.

#### Presenting

Our Ph.D. program in clinical psychology at Harvard University has a clinical science emphasis. My colleagues and I aim to produce researchers who are also equipped to provide evidence-based interventions. Hence, we emphasize the importance of students presenting and publishing their research.

I provide feedback to students developing their first posters, stressing the importance of simplicity. A good poster is a visual sound bite. Hence, students need to use bullet points, not complete sentences, and figures, not

tables. The objective is to stimulate discussion and make it easy for people to grasp the key points of the study.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of conference posters contain far too much material, producing a serious information overload for attendees. Presenters cram too many details into their posters to ensure that the facts are handy should someone ask them an obscure question about the research. A better strategy is to have a hard copy of the study available as a resource for answering such questions.

Many students speak on symposia. When mine have an upcoming presentation, I work with them as they go into rehearsal. I have them develop an initial Powerpoint presentation, emphasizing that I do not expect their first practice talk to be anything other than a very rough draft. In the presence of me and other supportive listeners, usually fellow graduate students, the student rehearses the talk four or five times over the course of a week or so, revising the slides and the oral delivery itself.

I tell students that I was so nervous during my first talk that my hands were vibrating so much that I thought I would spill the water in my Styrofoam cup whenever I tried to take a drink. Everyone is anxious before talks early in their careers. Yet despite feeling very anxious, people can

still learn to give fine talks. Moreover, the more one speaks the more fun it becomes.

### Writing

Like most professors, I provide detailed feedback to students on their writing, and I urge them to study everything from the relevant section of the American Psychological Association's (2010, pp. 61-86) publication manual to Strunk and White's (1979) classic with its famous admonition, "Omit needless words" (p. 23). I emphasize that the more one writes, the easier it gets. Fluency comes with practice.

Mentors need to provide clear, constructive feedback without demoralizing students. If students become overly anxious about their writing, they can become paralyzed by perfectionism and never accomplish anything; perfectionism leads to procrastination. I have often told students that I expect that their first draft will be "junk," and that's okay. I tell them that my first drafts are always junky, even today.

Some years ago, I handed an undergraduate several folders containing articles and papers on phobias relevant to his honors thesis. He was delighted to discover a term paper on the topic that I had written in 1979 for a class taught by

my advisor, Steve Reiss. It was covered with highly critical comments about my writing. I thought I had written a great paper. Steve disagreed. He was right. I took Steve's comments to heart, and continued to work on my writing. A substantially revised version of the term paper appeared several years later in *Psychological Bulletin* (McNally, 1987).

Because I was a much lousier writer than my students are today, I make a point to give them a copy of my old term paper. It puts things in perspective for them, reducing worry about their own progress.

As a postdoctoral fellow, I had the good fortune to discover Robert Boice's (e.g., 1983a; 1983b) empirical work on fostering the productivity of academic authors, later summarized in several masterful books (Boice, 1990; 1994; 2000). As a faculty development officer, Boice devised and tested intervention programs that enabled professors to counteract procrastination and overcome writer's block. He drew on behavioral principles, such as stimulus control, self-monitoring, and contingency management, noting how the great novelists had used these same tricks to ensure their steady productivity (Wallace & Pears, 1977).

Through his research, Boice identified the best methods for establishing consistent output, and he debunked many myths about writing along the way. He found that productive authors schedule relatively brief periods to write each workday ranging from about 15 minutes to two hours or so. Moreover, they record their data. Indeed, professors and graduate students who do not record their writing behavior will inevitably overestimate how much time they actually spend writing versus taking coffee breaks, daydreaming, and checking their e-mail.

Boice also found that people who block out one entire day per week to write or who write in binges lasting for many hours are rarely as productive as those who commit an hour or so every workday to their writing. The bingers encounter two problems. Their post-marathon exhaustion makes it hard for them to write again for days or weeks later. When they do attempt to resume their writing, they feel rusty and experience difficulty picking up where they left off. The successful academics, Boice learned, block out moderate amounts of writing time in their busy research, teaching, clinical, and administrative schedules.

I am a "Boicean." Since 1983, I have kept a wall calendar near my desk that I use solely to record the amount

of time that I write each day. I activate the stopwatch on my wristwatch whenever I begin to write, and I stop it when I take a break. I try to squeeze in at least 15 minutes of writing per day, and I try to avoid exceeding two hours. Self-monitoring can be sobering. For example, I may spend three hours at my desk, yet rack up only one hour and 15 minutes of actual writing, with the remaining time spent thinking about what I want to say next, double-checking an article that I am citing, or getting coffee.

Although I strive to complete five writing sessions per week, unavoidable emergencies occasionally occur, resulting in missed sessions. For these days, I enter a zero on my calendar. I have found Boice's behavioral methods very effective, and I recommend them to my students.

Contrary to Romantic myths about authors requiring the inspiration of their Muse, great writers have been great behaviorists when it comes to creative work. Inspiration is often the consequence, not the antecedent, of writing. Examples abound. Ernest Hemingway counted the number of words he wrote each morning, recording the data on a chart, so as not to kid himself about his productivity (Plimpton, 1965). His publisher, Charles Scribner, ridiculed him, apparently because Hemingway's methods violated Scribner's

concept of The Artistic Genius. In a 1944 letter to his editor, Max Perkins, Hemingway bluntly dismissed Scribner, saying the publisher knew nothing about how writers actually work (Hemingway, 1984, p. 56).

Other authors used different dependent variables. Goethe (1836/1984, pp. 202-203) recorded pages completed per day. Anthony Trollope (1883/1999, p. 271) counted pages and tracked time, writing from 5:30 to 8:30 each morning before heading off to his day job working for the post office.

Writing on a schedule and tracking output are methods of nonfiction authors, too. When the great 20th century political journalist, Walter Lippmann, was an undergraduate at Harvard, he got to know William James quite well. The psychologist gave him great writing advice. As Lippmann's biographer wrote, "James also taught him discipline -- that every writer should set down at least a thousand words a day, whether or not he felt like it, even whether or not he had anything to say" (Steel, 1980, p. 18). James followed his own advice; despite being a late bloomer, dying relatively young, and suffering repeated bouts of debilitating depression (Simon, 1998), he still managed to produce 307 publications (Simonton, 2002, p. 38).

Will structured writing periods boost productivity while sacrificing creativity? Will quantity trump quality? For several reasons, these concerns are unfounded. First, behavioral self-management methods foster creative ideas as well as increase the number of manuscripts completed (Boice, 1983b). Second, although quantity does not ensure quality, authors who produce the best work almost always produce the most as well. The notion that the giants of science and literature produce only a handful of masterpieces is incorrect. High quality is almost always accompanied by immense productivity, even though the latter does not guarantee the former (Simonton, 1984, pp. 81-83). As Simonton (2002, pp. 37-38) observed, the number of publications of history's giants is impressive: Albert Einstein (607), Wilhelm Wundt (503), Sigmund Freud (330), Francis Galton (227), and Charles Darwin (119), to name but a few. As W. H. Auden once remarked, the chances are that "the major poet will write more bad poems than the minor" (quote in Simonton, 1984, p. 83) because the great poets produce more poems overall than the minor poets ever do. Yet we forget the lousy poems, and remember the good ones.

In addition to scheduling regular writing periods and recording words, pages, or time, authors have used other

tricks to maintain their creative output. For example, it is helpful to end one's daily session in the middle of a paragraph rather than working to closure by finishing a section of the manuscript. By doing so, it makes it much easier to pick up where one left off the day before. As Hemingway (1964) put it, "I always worked until I had something done and I always stopped when I knew what was going to happen next. That way I could be sure of going on the next day" (p. 12).

Victor Hugo used contingency management methods while writing his novel, *Notre-Dame of Paris*. He had been down in the dumps, finding it difficult to get started. Hugo then hit upon the idea of confining himself to his writing room after having his valet lock away his formal clothes "so that he would not be tempted to go out", as his wife put it (p. 7, quoted in J. Sturrock's Introduction; Hugo, 1831/1978; Wallace & Pear, 1977). Lacking any suitable clothing until he finished his daily writing session, Hugo had no choice but to work on the book instead of goofing off and procrastinating.

Most authors arrange their writing environment to minimize distractions and maximize their productivity. Yet sometimes their stimulus control methods border on the

bizarre. Consider Friedrich Schiller's, as described by his friend and colleague, Goethe. Goethe had dropped by Schiller's house one day. Although not at home, Schiller was soon to return, and his wife invited Goethe to have a seat in her husband's writing room. Immediately thereafter, Goethe began to experience intense malaise. As he recalled, "At first I did not know to what cause to ascribe this wretched, and to me unusual, state -- until I discovered that a dreadful odour issued from a drawer near me. When I opened it, I found to my astonishment it was full of rotten apples. I went to the window and inhaled fresh air, by which I was instantly restored" (Goethe, 1836/1984, p. 189).<sup>1</sup> When Schiller's wife returned moments later, Goethe asked her why her husband stored rotting garbage in his drawer. She explained that Schiller was able to write only when he could smell the aroma of rotting apples.

As a struggling young author, F. Scott Fitzgerald submitted many short stories for publication, receiving over 100 rejection slips in the process. To motivate himself to try harder, he pinned them to a wall in his apartment (Mizener, 1965, p. 105). Aware of Fitzgerald's motivational trick, I adapted it during my first year on the academic job market. I received dozens of rejection letters in response

to my job applications, enabling me to “wallpaper” my writing room with them as a reminder to work harder.

I mention these anecdotes to illustrate how authors maintain their productivity. I don’t necessarily recommend that graduate students have someone lock away their clothes until they finish their daily writing session or store rotting garbage in their desks to stimulate creativity. Rather, I aim to demystify writing, and to urge budding authors to apply behavioral methods in their daily work.

#### Educating the Public via the Media

Psychologists can use the media to help educate the public about our field. There are two ways of doing this. One is to write Op-Ed essays and evidence-based trade books for general readers. The second is to serve as a resource for journalists. The second route is by far the most common, and I help students learn how to do this.

I have had several students whose research caught the attention of the media, enabling them to explain complex or controversial issues to the public. When students have an interview scheduled, I brainstorm with them about the questions they are likely to receive and the answers they might provide. I sometimes play the role of the journalist, doing practice interviews with my student. I emphasize that

they must "remember their ABCs" when interacting with the media. What students say must be *accurate, brief, and clear*. Accuracy entails sticking close to the data and avoiding careless generalizations about one's findings.

Brevity is likewise essential. Editors can print only short replies from interviewees. They must abbreviate long-winded answers, sometimes inadvertently distorting their meaning. This is especially true for television. In my experience, a typical prerecorded (not "live") interview lasts about one hour, yet producers choose only a few sound bites of several seconds duration to air on the show. Accordingly, effective interviewees must distil the essence of their message in a sentence or two, and do so accurately.

Finally, clarity entails avoidance of jargon. During a live interview for BBC television several years ago, I used the phrase "psychophysiologic reactivity." My interviewer winced off camera, signaling me to translate this phrase into ordinary language to avoid befuddling the viewers. I quickly clarified, "That is, an increase in heart rate and sweating on the palm of the hand, associated with an increase in anxiety." I should have thought my replies through ahead of time to ensure that I had ready translations for any jargon.

Many psychologists grumble about journalists, blaming them for garbling the facts, exaggerating findings, or seeking to write something sensational as a way to sell newspapers and magazines or to boost television ratings. In my experience, this cynical view is inaccurate. Most journalists are highly responsible individuals who want to get the facts straight. Moreover, they do not want to anger and alienate their sources in our field by distorting what we say. By remembering the principles of accuracy, brevity, and clarity, we can avoid misunderstandings of our work in the media and help educate the public.

#### Conclusion

In this article, I focused on only three topics that figure in my mentoring of graduate students. Accordingly, I close by recommending two superb books that provide essential information about academia that rarely appears in the formal graduate curriculum (Boice, 2000; Darley, Zanna, & Roediger, 2004). Yet both books are more than just survival guides; they teach graduate students and new faculty members how to flourish as well.

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## Footnote

<sup>1</sup>For some strange reason, my copy of the English translation of this marvelous book is incorrectly entitled "Conversations with Eckermann." The correct title is "Conversations with Goethe." Eckermann is the author. Johann Eckermann was a young author who worked as Goethe's secretary during the final years of Goethe's life. After work, Eckermann would share a bottle of wine (or two) with Goethe, getting the great man to expound on all sorts of topics. Eckermann took copious notes of these conversations, later transforming them into a book. Because I quote from my copy, the title in the reference list corresponds to the incorrect one.