

From Sowing to Harvest: Growing Mentoring Relationships

by Brandie Disberger

Mentoring relationships can be highly impactful or viewed as an item to fulfill a professional requirement. The difference is based on how both individuals approach the experience. How the seed is sown has a dramatic impact on what is harvested from the relationship.

As a former high school agriculture teacher, I lived the life of a beginning teacher and later served as a mentor. Through my graduate degree and as a faculty member I have spent the last four years conducting qualitative research focusing on the beginning agriculture teacher experience, including how they utilized mentors. These experiences provided insight into best practices to establish high quality mentoring relationships.

As a mentor, I remember having “reach out to my mentee” on my to do list each month. I would send them a text, e-mail, or give them a call, whatever I was comfortable doing. In return, the beginning teacher may or may not respond and if they did, it was usually something along the lines of “I’m doing fine.” I felt like I did my job, checked it off, and returned my focus to my program. Looking back, I was doing a disservice to myself and my mentee by not working to grow both the mentoring relationship and the beginning professional.

Advice to mentors...

- Work to **build the relationship** early based on common interests or experiences, open up to the beginning teacher about your background, prior experiences, and what it was like for you as an early career teacher. The most beneficial mentoring relationships identify and build upon similarities between the pair.
- Ask the teacher **how they want to communicate** when they have a quick question. Text, e-mail, GroupMe, or another option. Respond to these specific questions in their preferred mode of communication.
- Guide **monthly reflection**. Schedule a phone call or virtual meeting for about 30 minutes in length with the teacher after they have started school. A day in advance, drop them a reminder about the meeting. This interaction will lay the foundation for the mentoring meetings. During the call, pose the following questions to the mentee:
 - How are you?
 - What has gone well?
 - What have you struggled with?
 - In the month to come, what are you excited about?
 - In the month to come,

what are you concerned about?

- How else can I help?
- Let’s talk again in a month, what day and time works for you so we can get it on the calendar?
- Every month during the school year, have the same conversation. It may feel like it would get redundant, but I have conducted this conversation with the same teachers for three years and we both benefited from and discussed different items in each conversation.
- **Visit the mentee** at their school within their first semester. Request a tour of the program and school, ask for them to identify a class for you to observe, and to set up an introduction with an administrator of their choice. During this experience, provide both positive and constructive feedback with the purpose of growing the young professional. Invite the mentee to tour your school and watch you teach as well.

Why does it work? The power of reflection is well documented in experiential learning, as pre-service teachers they were most likely guided to reflect in their education classes and through the student teaching process. However, as a beginning teacher they are rarely asked to reflect. They know they should but feel there is no

time. This mentor-led conversation forces them to reflect on the last month and think about month ahead. As a mentor, hold them accountable for coming up with at a response to every question. Some teachers struggle with what is going well, others struggle with what they are challenged by, but all teachers need to be guided to consider both.

As a beginning teacher, I was formally assigned a mentor in my school who was the industrial arts teacher in the next classroom. He was excellent at listening, supporting me through school policies and procedure questions, and teaching me about the community. I also benefited from agriculture teachers in neighboring communities who would answer my thousands of questions about FFA events. However, the conversations I appreciated the most were with a peer, another first year teacher who helped me remember that it was not “just me.” That being a beginning teacher had its rewards and challenges.

Advice to mentees...

As a beginning teacher, you should seek multiple mentors to support your professional development. Consider seeking the following mentors:

- A teacher within your school. A **school-based mentor** can answer questions about policies and procedures within the school and problem solve student management challenges. It is important to have a mentor who shares a common time during the day to talk such as a plan-

ning period or lunch time.

- An **agriculture teacher mentor** within your FFA region or district can answer questions about FFA events and activities. When they are teaching in the same region, they can also identify where you can purchase supplies and equipment and help brainstorm SAE opportunities for your students. An added benefit is the increased chance of casual conversations that can happen during gatherings for student career development and leadership development events.
- A **peer mentor** can exchange ideas, tools, and resources with you. They are also getting established as a professional and may be able to relate to some of your experiences while offering ideas they used when they were challenged. A peer can also appreciate the successes you are experiencing as a beginning professional.

Work to develop at least one of these relationships into a more formal mentoring experience. Ask the mentor to guide you through frequent reflections (consider monthly) to hold you accountable for reflecting. This process guides you to think about how are going and helps you to look forward and properly plan and prepare. Early career professionals can get very focused on day-to-day activ-

ities and miss big events headed their way if they are not guided to think about the “big rocks” in the future.

Ask to observe your mentor in the classroom. Much can be learned from such as observing student management, organization, and engagement strategies. Most likely, you will return to your classroom with new ideas and strategies.

The best mentoring relationships are built when the mentor and mentee share common interests. Work with each of your mentors to get to them better. Learn the preferred modes of communication for each other. A mentoring relationship should be a two-way street, when a mentor shares a resource with you, show appreciation and share something back in return.

Make mentoring more than a requirement, make it a mutually beneficial experience for everyone by communicating regularly, exchanging resources, and growing a lasting relationship.



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