PURM
Perspectives on Undergraduate Research & Mentoring

No 'Or' Exists. There is Only 'And': Online Research Mentorship in a Figurative Threshold

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Too often, available opportunities and resources in higher education go to those who already have high amounts of cultural capital. Similar to how in the United States economy it is easier to make money when a person already has money, it is easier for students to succeed when they already have certain privileges (e.g., a white cis-gender male identity from a middle-class family). For mentorship to result in social justice, we believe mentorship must recognize the contextual landscape within which it operates. When we cultivate such an awareness, mentors can make mindful decisions about whom to support and when to provide limited resources vis-à-vis energy and time to mentees.

A potential pitfall of such decisions is flawed, binary thinking: "Do I help X student *or* Y student? Do I uphold rigorous standards *or* extend compassion and care? Do I teach my mentee to survive in corrupt systems *or* teach them to transform systems for justice?" For mentorship to be critical, mentors must not only avoid simple binary distributions of resources, but they must also be reflective about their practices as mentors. Critical mentorship is co-constructive and reciprocal, operating *within* and *between* oppositional roles (e.g., faculty/student). Critical mentorship explicitly "prepares the student (i.e., mentee) for a world that is historically inequitable and characterized by dynamic changes in social, political, economic, and power relationships" with the goal of amplifying "the mentee's cultural capital" (Longmire-Avital, 2020, para. 2).

This article, co-authored by mentors JT and Marissa and mentee Oveen, articulates how we avoided the traditional binary thinking of mentorship by extending Ketcham et al.'s (2017) co-mentoring model to include critical questions about cultural responsiveness, especially during times of crisis and separation. This article also demonstrates how JT and Marissa deployed feminist principles like compassion, empathy, and care to co-create a positive mentoring environment for Oveen, built on reciprocity, respect, and trust. As such, this article takes the form of a braided dialogue, intersecting our voices and experiences in ways that illustrate the critical mentorship model we co-constructed and co-narrated. What we collectively realized is that we cultivated and navigated figurative thresholds that allowed us to create spaces of care *and* development, especially within online settings during the depths of the pandemic.

Lost and Found in the Thresholds

Spring 2020 was a difficult semester. The pandemic struck in the middle of my (JT) Honor's First-Year Writing (FYW) course, which introduces students to the research process. Each student crafts a research question pertaining to their lived experiences and interests. After students read and annotate relevant articles addressing their question, they engage in immersive experiences, such as interviewing relevant stakeholders or compiling ethnographic field notes, to compare with the literature they reviewed. When Quinnipiac University faculty received the news that the pandemic would force us to go remote for the remainder of the semester, students had just begun their immersive experiences.

The rupture I experienced at 'losing contact' with my students worried me. Even though the focus of the Honor's FYW course is on writing and not research methods, students typically need support connecting their personal experience with the literature they read in the previous phase. They need frequent feedback in synthesizing sources to generate new knowledge, a tall order (according to Bloom's Taxonomy). Along with the dreadful feeling that accompanied news updates about COVID-19, I felt as though going remote meant losing my class entirely. I had no way to purposefully check in on students, encourage their progress, and demonstrate my interest in their interest—an important socio-emotional motivator for inquiry-based learning (Schraw et al., 2021).

Teaching is inherently a vulnerable practice. Even though I do not hide anything from students, I always worry they will see through me, so to speak. For one, I am appointed institutional power by having a Ph.D., meaning I'm a 'certified' researcher asking students to 'play the part' for a few months. With the sudden shift to remote learning, I was certain other hypocrisies would emerge: I am a middle-class professor with secure internet, relative economic stability, and enough comfort to let my mind pursue intellectual interests. Could my students do the same? Did they have stable shelter? Did other worries conflict with their ability to 'do research'?

One student, Oveen Joseph, had chosen the research question for his FYW project, "How does the media shape perceptions of climate change?" His planned experience was to watch different media outlets for a week and reflect on how his beliefs shaped his media exposure. Before the pandemic, I knew Oveen as a highly engaging social being. He cracked jokes that added flavor to the class without being disruptive. He tended to have a following of students who looked to him for approval. Whenever I needed to jumpstart discussion or jolt the energy in the room, I would set him up for commentary. Once we went remote, I worried about students like Oveen who lost a particular dynamic in which they thrived. And yet, at the end of the semester, Oveen sent me an email that said, "I really enjoyed doing research. Are you working on any projects that I can help with?"

Oveen's question felt like a flash of light piercing an otherwise darkening world. We now know that students who feel comfortable approaching their faculty are more likely to thrive in college (Guzzardo et al., 2021). Of course, I enthusiastically answered, "Yes!"

I was in the process of working with Marissa McKinley on a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) sponsored project related to writing and identity. Specifically, we were studying the use of ePortfolios in shaping a professional identity, such as how a student in Engineering might begin to view themselves as engineers by piecing together various experiences in a digital assemblage in ways that promote intentional reflection. When I introduced Oveen and Marissa, that flash of light branched and spread like heat lightning. Not only could Marissa and I involve Oveen as a 'participant-observer,' a student trying to figure out his identity while also helping develop a tool for doing so, but Oveen would also be given a chance to socially thrive, despite the isolation of the pandemic.

Immediately, we knew that Oveen was not just a research assistant but someone with valuable lessons from which we could learn; thus, we decided to employ a co-mentorship model infused by culturally responsive teaching. Ladson-Billings (1995) defined culturally responsive teaching using three propositions:

- Teachers and students share in the learning process, which requires understanding of one another's social and cultural histories up to and beyond the learning encounter.
- Relationships are fluid, always in process, and interdependent on one another; the more diverse a community, the healthier the relationships.
- Knowledge is also fluid, always in process, and shaped by those within the learning community.

With a newly formed partnership, centered on vested research interests and social values, Marissa, Oveen, and I would soon find ourselves in a "threshold" (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012): the space between worlds in which we find ourselves in the constant process of becoming. Based on this idea, we might always be in a threshold of some kind, such as the fact that every semester I learn something new about myself as a teacher, as a learner, and as a human being relating to other human beings. The hybrid world of the pandemic is another such threshold, as Marissa, Oveen, and I experienced the complications of existing both in person and online at the same time. Thresholds are not linear. In fact, Mazzei and Jackson (2012) defined a threshold as being

> in the middle of things. It exists as a passageway. A threshold has no function, purpose, or meaning until it is connected to other spaces. That is, a threshold does not become a passageway until it is attached to other things different from itself. Thresholds contain both entries and exits; they are both/and. A single threshold can be not only an entryway, but also an exit; therefore, the structure itself is not quite as linear and definitive as one might think. In other terms, thresholds can denote excess, such as in having a low threshold for pain. The excess of a threshold is the space in which something else occurs: a response, an effect. Once you exceed the threshold, something new happens. (pp. 449-450)

I have lived much of my life in various thresholds. For one, I'm white Cuban-American. My skin color places me in a particular threshold of privilege, a passageway to social capital denied to other members of my family; on the other hand, my cultural background depends on a very fluid hyphen. When I lived in Miami, Florida, where I was born, I found myself closer to Cuban. When I lived in Georgia, where I went to graduate school, the hyphen tilted American. Thresholds are, indeed, both/and entries/exits.

Although Marissa, Oveen, and I were living separate lives across states during the COVID-19 pandemic, we converged in an online *Zoom* space where our lives merged. It was as if, during one of the most stressful times in the world, our online space became our refuge—our place of care, comfort, and resolution from the outside world during the pandemic. And so, in the corners of our home offices, and shaped by mine and Marissa's past mentorship experiences and peer-reviewed scholarship on co-mentoring undergraduate research (e.g., Ketcham et al., 2017; Shanahan et al., 2015), the three of us met bi-monthly to discuss not just the CCCC research project but also our goals, hopes, fears, and the community we needed to thrive within. Our online meeting space acted as a passageway, connecting us all remotely for a time, creating a safe interdependent haven, and allowing us to depart, each of us with our own research goals but with a unified vision for our CCCC project in mind. It became a space not just for me and Marissa to model scholarship, but it also became a place for Oveen to author his story.

Hurdling the Excess

My family and I (Oveen) moved from Sri Lanka to Swaziland (now Eswatini), seeking refuge from a tumultuous and racially charged political atmosphere, resultant from years of civil war, occasionally returning to Sri Lanka to renew visas. Moving to the U.S. came as a sort of surprise to me. We boarded a plane, and I was under the impression that we were flying back to South Africa. Lo and behold, I was dumbfounded that it was snowing in Africa in the middle of the dry season. Seven-year-old me came to the eventual realization that we had landed at John F. Kennedy International Airport in America. There is a deep sense of drive and tenacity that is engraved in you when you watch your parents move you across the globe and start building a new life from scratch. We moved to America with little to no money, and slowly, we clawed our way to a position where I had the privilege of attending Quinnipiac University. Spending my early educational years in New York City public schools, I was used to seeing a diverse group of people, many of whom looked a lot like me. Quinnipiac seemed to be the exact opposite, where seeing another face like mine was rare. My drive and tenacity were further spurred on by my existence in spaces that were predominantly white. I aimed to excel and not let societal and institutional predispositions beat another young man of color down. I set this goal without the prior knowledge of a looming pandemic would quite literally stop the world in its tracks.

2020 was an especially arduous year for me. I was just beginning year two of my undergraduate career when I met tall hurdles that I needed to overcome. I felt overwhelmed by the pressure of being a Resident Assistant at Quinnipiac and fostering a sense of community during a pandemic that seldom allowed for traditional human interaction. I was overwhelmed by the combination of Anatomy and Organic Chemistry courses—courses dreaded by every pre-medical (Pre-Med) student. I was overwhelmed by the second job I was working to support myself and to set myself up for success for medical school. The icing on the cake was emotionally dealing with a long-term relationship coming to an end. How was I meant to strive for my goals when it felt like all odds were stacked against me?

The mindset that I had cultivated during that time was a byproduct of external stressors and internal expectations that I had placed on myself. I stuck to the analogy that whatever trajectory my life was on was comparable to climbing a mountain, with the occasional summit to take in the journey, and sometimes looking up and realizing that I was nowhere close to where I wanted to be in life. I had this notion that 'it was lonely at the top.' I was fixated on the idea that my struggles, my battles, my hurdles could only be overcome by me, and, in a way, that was true. I felt trapped in my head, with a flurry of thoughts that suggested that the only way to get through the day was to become numb to it. Perhaps this was spurred on by the isolation we all felt due to the pandemic (Hwang et al., 2020). I was frustrated with being at that threshold—at a point where I was struggling to achieve the goal I had set for myself at the start of freshman year. I was struggling to maintain, let alone exceed, expectations placed on me by my family, supervisors, instructors, and myself. I existed in a place where my previous life experiences, goals, and passions seemed almost meaningless and inapplicable to the stresses I was dealing with. I existed in a threshold where there was no space for respite or comfort. I felt like I was in limbo, not knowing to look forward or back.

Through starting my work with JT and Marissa, I began to emerge from this negative mindset. A few months into our ePortfolio research project, I started to actualize how I felt about my role in the world. I went from feeling in this limbo to drawing inspiration and meaning from everything I was learning and the wisdom that was being passed down to me. I began to realize the value of so-called soft skills such as time management and task prioritization. Initially, I had an internal expectation for perfection. (I mean, I was a student who was working closely with two professors I looked up to. I wanted my work to be perfect so I could help my professors and make them proud.) It didn't take long for me to realize that in our commiserating, JT, Marissa, and I were bonding over the stresses of

balancing our professional lives and our academic responsibilities. It was through our bi-monthly Zoom calls that we transcended the delineation between 'professor' and 'student,' and, in doing so, we permitted true learning and wisdom to be exchanged.

As a student, being able to have discursive conversation and contribute to the work of professors felt incredibly gratifying and galvanized my personality. It helped me realize that even though I tend to be an easygoing person, I equally love questioning things and trying to leave things better than I found them—a credo that came from the experience of working on a qualitative project. They took a sophomore, alienated by his own expectations, who also had social and institutional backdrops stacked against his favor, and taught that eager mind how to question and act on his intellectual interests. In retrospect, the mentorship JT and Marissa provided for me played a fundamental role in the development of a very compassionate mission statement. It was like being able to see distant hills and valleys from a mountain summit after a long period of fog.

When I compared my life and struggles to climbing a mountain, I found a sliver of peace that came at the cost of feeling isolated. After a few years of growth and the chance to reflect, I still stand by that analogy, but a few things have changed. I believe that climbing to the top of the mountain is a goal or task that anyone can set out to do. However, I was sorely mistaken thinking that it was 'lonely at the top.' In the work I have done with JT and Marissa, I have realized that along that journey to the top, you are going to meet people along the way that are willing to help you reach your goal and, often, those people can set you on a slightly altered route to the top. I urge that people take the time to evaluate the relationships they form and the thresholds they enter, as their mentors may be the ones that pull them out of limbo and help them progress. This idea is applicable outside of academia and has the potential to send positive ripples of compassion that change not only a person's life but also the lives of students, mentees, friends, and family.

In the Thresholds Together

Much of my (Marissa's) scholarship falls within the framework of the rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM). As a scholar, I am especially interested in health syndromes such as Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) that challenge perceptions of bodily normality and gender norms. More specifically, in my PCOS scholarship, through a feminist lens, I respond to discursive tropes labeling the PCOS body as a non-normative identity (McKinley, 2019; McKinley, 2023). My work explores the rhetorical agencies that are afforded by women with PCOS as they work to refigure discursive narratives about PCOS and push back against normative representations of the female identity (McKinley, 2019; McKinley, 2023). My PCOS experiences brought me to my research topic—to examining PCOS within the contexts of RHM and feminist rhetoric. Before I met JT and Oveen, I found myself in a different kind of threshold, one that often privileged medical authority and frequently valued the scientific knowledge of the provider over the embodied knowledge of the patient. During my Ph.D. at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), I saw a need to bring power back to those fighting a chronic illness such as PCOS. Simply, I saw a need to make an "epistemic and ontological turn to the body" (Fonow & Cook, 2005, p. 2215). When I decided to pursue an RHM dissertation in a Composition and TESOL Ph.D. program, I was met with tremendous opposition from various authority figures and gatekeepers. On many occasions, I was reminded that I was not in a rhetoric program and that it would be difficult—if not nearly impossible—to find a faculty member who would support me and my project. I took these words with a grain of salt and leaned on my stubborn but willful nature to advocate for myself and my research project. I persisted.

During my third year of my Ph.D., and in Fall 2016, IUP hired three faculty to teach in our program; among those faculty was Matthew Vetter, a scholar in writing, rhetoric, and digital humanities who was interested in the ways that technologies shape writing and writing pedagogy. That fall, Matt was my assigned teaching mentor, which meant that he would not only advise me in my course planning

for FYW but would also observe me teaching two of my FYW classes throughout the semester. By the time I began teaching at IUP in Fall 2016, I was an experienced teacher, having taught fifty-seven sections of university courses at two previous institutions. Prior to meeting Matt, I was skeptical about how he would shape my pedagogical strategies for teaching writing. I worried that he would overlook my teaching experience and would advise me to abandon my teaching approach, slow writing, which emphasizes reflection and deep connection-making. However, within the first few minutes of talking with Matt about my pedagogical approaches to teaching composition during a one-on-one meeting, my fears became completely abandoned.

As I explained how I integrate slow writing into scaffolded writing-to-learn activities when teaching FYW students, Matt carefully listened to my ideas and offered suggestions for how I could deepen my students' learning. Together, we reviewed the course schedule that I had developed for English 101 (EN 101), and we located places within the schedule that could be enhanced by integrating course readings. It was during this time that Matt referred me to the open-access pedagogical resource *Writing Spaces*, which contains peer-reviewed essays about writing, directed toward FYW students. There, we located readings that would further prepare my EN 101 students for the undertaking of their second major composition project, the Rhetorical Analysis of a Text. After further examination of the essays included on *Writing Spaces*, and after further discussion of my FYW course schedule, I left Matt's office feeling energized about teaching and impressed by his brilliance. That day, I walked away from IUP's campus knowing that a good mentor empowers their mentee and encourages them to develop their strengths, beliefs, and personal attributes. Given that Matt embodies these qualities, I soon scheduled a time to meet with him to discuss my PCOS dissertation topic.

When I first shared with Matt my dissertation topic, he received it with interest and enthusiasm. He saw the potential of my topic and its unique contributions; thus, he agreed to serve as my dissertation advisor. Right away, Matt helped me focus my PCOS topic, and together we outlined the conversations that would be included in my five dissertation chapters. With a plan in place, after the Spring 2018 semester, I left Indiana, Pennsylvania, and moved home to Georgetown, Ohio, to write my dissertation.

By August 2018, I had not only drafted a Prologue and three dissertation chapters but also received exceptional and timely feedback on my work from Matt. To assist me with addressing his feedback, Matt and I often conferenced on the telephone and discussed ways to address his critiques. Because of Matt's assistance, I defended my three dissertation chapters in October 2018, wrote and submitted my final two chapters to him in March 2019, and defended the rest of my dissertation in May 2019. The amount of progress I made on my dissertation was undoubtedly due, in part, to Matt's time and commitment to me and my project. Without his mentorship, it is unlikely that I would have graduated from IUP's Composition and TESOL doctoral program, earned a university-wide teaching award and a departmental research award for my three dissertation chapters, and eventually acquired a book deal with Lexington Books to publish my PCOS monograph. Matt's impact did not stop there; his mentorship model now informs how I mentor students like Oveen as they work on writing and research. It is because of Matt that I deploy feminist principles like compassion, empathy, and care in my mentorship practices, allowing me to co-create with my mentee a positive working environment—whether on ground or online—built on reciprocity, respect, and trust.

Online Critical Mentoring

With the pandemic isolating everyone, historically underrepresented minority (HURM) students faced familiar challenges in dramatically new ways. Economic inequities increased (Wilson, 2020). Mental health affected communities of color and communities living in poverty at much higher rates than wealthy and white communities (Spolar, 2021). Now, to survive academically, HURM students also needed material resources (e.g., laptops and high-speed internet) and socio-emotional support (e.g.,

mentors).

In Spring 2020, we (JT and Marissa) began envisioning our CCCC ePortfolio project, detailing it and our research design. The project aimed to analyze ePortfolios as a "self-portraiture" of students as they transitioned into their disciplines and professions (Bennet et al., 2016, p. 11). Because higher education operates via hidden inequities that privilege particular identities over others, we wanted to explore possibilities to utilize ePortfolios as a digital tool for diverse students to tell their stories and shape lifeworlds that honor their cultural capital.

We soon ran into a challenge: funding. On a whim, Marissa suggested to JT that we apply for a 2020-2021 CCCC Emergent Research Award. She felt confident that the organization would likely fund our research project, given our unique approach. Marissa knew that scholars from IUP had been recognized with CCCC awards in previous years, and that in 2018, Matt and Alexandria Lockett, a teacher-scholar at Spelman College, earned a CCCC Research Initiative award for their project, "How do Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies Faculty Engage Wikipedia? A Scaled Survey of Attitudes and Uses?" Given IUP's track record with CCCC, and given Marissa's previous mentorship experiences with Matt, we felt it appropriate that Marissa reach out to him for assistance. We reasoned that Matt could advise us on preparing our grant proposal for the Emergent Research Award. Luckily, we were right; we soon met with Matt to discuss the details of our ePortfolio project.

When we met with Matt, the world was in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. It seemed like everyone's lives were dramatically affected and that academic scholarship—and even mentorship—would be the furthest thing on anyone's mind. However, Matt agreed to support us in our project. Matt is a dedicated mentor and sees it as his responsibility to assist his current and former mentees in their professional development, further aiding them in the development of their scholarly identity (Ketcham et al., 2017). Matt expertly advised us on our ePortfolio project, helping us earn a 2020-2021 CCCC Emergent Research Award.

With the grant's support, we were able to provide Oveen with funds to meet his material needs, and we also sustained the following protocol:

- Regular meetings that began with Oveen's reflection of previous tasks, the value of engaging in such tasks, and Oveen's goals for personal/professional development.
- Shared resource keeping that allowed Oveen to increase his agency in corresponding with various stakeholders, such as deans and faculty during outreach initiatives.
- Research methods training for Oveen, such as performing discourse analysis and organizing data into themes.

Literature on mentorship indicates that when undergraduate students engage in mentored research experiences, they are more likely to show increased interest, motivation, and preparedness for research careers (Pfund, 2020). Additionally, for students from marginalized and underrepresented groups, mentorship enhances recruitment into graduate school and research-related career pathways (Hathaway et al., 2002; Junge et al., 2010; Nagda et al., 1998; Thiry & Laursen, 2011). Since working with Oveen as mentors in August 2021, we have modeled and deployed the same dedication that Matt showed us. For instance, we have helped Oveen become certified in responsible human research via CITI training, we have asked him to read and annotate scholarship on research ethics, which includes reading "The Belmont Report" and reading about the Tuskegee Vaccine Trials, and we have slowly introduced Oveen to qualitative and quantitative research methods, as discussed by Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and John W. Creswell. Further, we have involved Oveen in the recruitment of study participants and in the collection, analysis, and dissemination of ePortfolio data. Beyond these activities, we have remained dedicated to meeting with Oveen bi-

monthly to discuss his understanding of the assigned readings, to listen to and answer his questions, and to discuss his mentorship experiences and what he wants out of his experiences. During meetings, we have logged Oveen's insights and noted how we can improve upon our mentorship.

We believe that we have applied an "ethics of care" framework to mentorship (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Kittay, 1999; Noddings,1995; Robinson, 2011; Tronto, 1993). Noddings (1995) explained that such an approach emphasizes engrossment, motivational displacement, and reciprocity. Further, the approach considers how the carer responds to the needs of the caree. In a mentor-mentee context, we have assumed the role of the carers, listening to Oveen and understanding his position. Informed by Oveen's experiences, we are better able to develop and improve upon our approaches to mentorship. Thus, our mentor-mentee relationship is reciprocal and is largely determined by Oveen's needs.

As a research team, we meet in this "in-between space in which we 'constitute one another'" (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p. 449). We exist in a "figurative threshold," where a

> threshold has no function, purpose, or meaning until it is connected to other spaces . . . [where] a threshold does not become a passageway until it is attached to other things different from itself (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, pp. 449-450)

Together, as a team, we (Oveen, JT, and Marissa) represent that passageway, for our realities, attitudes, and understandings of research and mentorship are entangled—assembled in a network of complex figures of embodiment and being. Together, no "or" exists; there is only "and."

Assembling Thresholds

As a Pre-Med student navigating research in the social sciences I (Oveen) felt out of place. I did not know how to apply my knowledge in science with the current work we were doing. However, in meeting with JT and Marissa to discuss our work and research findings, I realized how I was perceiving not only medicine, but also my identity as a scientist, a researcher, a student, and—more importantly—a member of not one, but many institutions, both past, present, and future.

I began feeling like I was intentionally assembling an identity that mattered to me, rather than feeling like a passive piece of someone else's assemblage, such as being positioned as a particular type of 'professor' at an institution such as ours—one that values employability as the ultimate marker of a 'successful identity.' I understood how we embody and live the work we engage in, how we *constitute* one another in a social ensemble of learning, rather than being fixed individuals in the *coded opposition* of mentor/mentee (DeLanda, 2016). In relationship with Marissa and JT, I never felt reduced to a single identity such as a student. The *emergence* I felt in our critical assemblage helped me (re)position my social role in other ensembles, like when I began mentoring The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) students via online ensembles; these students embarked on their own research projects.

Conclusion

Amid challenges and uncertainties, mentorship has the power to bridge gaps and transform lives. It is a practice that not only transcends the boundaries of privilege, but also empowers people to overcome obstacles and create meaningful change. Despite the disruption caused by the pandemic, the thirst for knowledge and resilience brought us together. As a research team, we embarked on a journey of growth and discovery, and, in turn, embraced the figurative threshold we existed in. Through our collaboration and the guidance of our respective mentors, we overcame personal struggles, shattered societal expectations, and found purpose and inspiration. The power of mentorship lies not in perpetuating binary divisions of privilege, but in embracing inclusivity,

compassion, and critical thinking. It is a beacon of hope that reminds us that no “or” exists, only “and,” as mentorship opens doors, nurtures potential, and paves the way for a brighter future.

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