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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Mentoring for renewal: Moving beyond professional development

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This reflective narrative reframes mentoring beyond its conventional role as a vehicle for career advancement and professional development. Drawing on two years of participation in the Women in Academic Leadership (WiAL) Program, this autoethnographic account explores how mentoring functions as a space for nurturing ideas, identifying opportunities, and sustaining personal growth. In this context, the mentoring relationship is conceptualised as a socially mediated site of learning that enabled processes of social integration, meaning-making, and sharing of cultural understanding and wisdom. Through our shared experience as late mid-career to senior academic women, we argue that the most transformative dimensions of mentoring are often its least visible: the quiet expansion of possibility, the lighting of alternative pathways, and the relational holding of potential. We offer this account as a contribution to conversations about reflective practice and career communities in higher education, particularly for those navigating institutions where traditional markers of progression are opaque, political, or structurally limited.

Keywords: mentoring, autoethnography, professional development, higher education, Women in Academic Leadership, reflective practice, career communities

Introduction

Mentoring in higher education is most commonly framed in transactional terms: as a mechanism for career advancement, skill acquisition, promotion readiness, and professional networking (Kram, 1985; Zachary, 2011). This framing, while not without value, risks reducing the complexity of mentoring relationships to the sum of their measurable outputs. What of the conversation that reframes a problem entirely? The peer who holds space for an idea not yet ready to be spoken aloud? The relationship that does not accelerate a career but quietly deepens a sense of professional self?

This reflective narrative explores these less visible dimensions of mentoring, using our experience within the Women in Academic Leadership (WiAL) Program as both context and catalyst. WiAL was designed to bring together members via a community approach to support each other to progress in academia (WiAL, 2019). Over two years of active engagement, and reflecting on six years since the program's inception during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have come to understand mentoring differently: not only as a ladder toward achievement, but as a form of renewal—an ongoing, relational practice that sustains curiosity, nurtures possibility, and opens doors we had not known to look for.

This paper is offered as a contribution to ASCILITE 2026's theme of Reflective Practice and Career Communities, which invites consideration of how regular reflection and engagement in professional networks guide career decisions, build resilience, and sustain growth through uncertainty. This sub-theme sits within ASCILITE's broader conference theme, *The Future is Connection: Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society*, which highlights the continuing importance of meaningful human connection in digitally mediated learning and professional communities. We suggest that in a digital society, the relational and human dimensions of mentoring

explored here are a necessary partner to the technological and digital forms of connection foregrounded by the conference offerings. We write as late mid-career and senior academic leaders and women, aware that our experiences are particular rather than universal, and that autoethnography as method asks us to dwell in that particularity rather than explain it away.

Context: The WiAL Program and its community

The WiAL Program emerged during the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period that foregrounded the isolation already characteristic of many academic careers. As Tight (2010) observes, academic work frequently positions individuals as what might be described as solopreneurs—managing independent research agendas, teaching portfolios, and service obligations with limited structural opportunity for collegial collaboration. Against this backdrop, WiAL offered something deliberately different: a community oriented toward mutual support, shared knowledge, cross-institutional perspectives and lived experiences, and the kind of generative peer relationship that institutional structures rarely create by design. This specific mentoring relationship focused on academics seeking promotion, recognition and leadership development at associate professor and professorial levels. However, it has prompted reflection on how similar mentoring models might support professional, third-space and technology-enabled learning roles across the broader higher education community.

The program's stated benefits include access to advice on academic promotion, seminars on topics nominated by the cohort, development of skills including communication, leadership, storytelling, visibility, and strategic planning, and the expansion of networks beyond individual workplaces. These are, in themselves, valuable. But our reflection attends to what lies beneath and beyond these stated aims to the ways in which the program created conditions for a different kind of growth.

WiAL's origins are also worth noting in relation to ASCILITE's own community mentoring initiatives, which underpinned the model. That a conference community committed to learning and technology should generate such a program speaks to a broader recognition that professional transformation requires more than expertise transmission; it requires relationship, trust, and the willingness to sit alongside uncertainty together.

Method: Autoethnographic reflection

This paper employs autoethnography as its methodological orientation. Autoethnography does not claim generalisability, nor does it seek to represent a population (Ellis et al., 2011). Instead, it offers what Chang (2008) describes as a systematic analysis of personal experience to understand cultural and social phenomena. In this case, the phenomenon under examination is mentoring itself, i.e. how it is experienced, what it makes possible, and what it quietly produces structurally beyond the visible record of outputs and achievements.

This account is co-authored by our WiAL group which consisted of two mentees and the mentor; however, the group members each became reciprocal mentors allowing the analysis to draw on both mentee and mentor perspectives. Our method involves collaborative reflection across our two-year mentoring relationship within WiAL, drawing on memory, correspondence, and the kind of interpretive conversation that characterises relational autoethnography (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). We have worked to identify recurring themes and moments of significance: instances where the mentoring relationship did not simply support a career goal but shifted a perspective, seeded an idea, or illuminated a pathway not previously in view. The data is our own, no program records or third-party data were used. Analysis proceeded through independent written reflection by each author, followed by group discussion to identify convergent and recurring themes across our accounts.

We acknowledge the limitations of this approach. Autoethnography is not neutral; it is shaped by the positionality of its authors. As late mid-career to senior academic women with established careers, our reflections carry the particular privileges and constraints of that position. We do not speak for all who have participated in WiAL, nor for mentoring relationships in higher education more broadly. We speak from within a specific, situated experience, and offer it in the spirit of what Bochner and Ellis (2016) call evocative autoethnography: the invitation to recognise, in one account, something of one's own. Our hope is to inspire others to consider mentoring in a similar manner.

Findings: Mentoring as renewal

Ideas and intellectual renewal

One of the most consistent themes in our reflection is the generative function of the mentoring relationship in its capacity to produce ideas, not merely to develop competencies. Academic workplaces, as noted, can be isolating; and isolation, over time, tends to narrow the aperture of what we imagine to be possible. In our experience, the WiAL community functioned as an antidote to this narrowing, not only through formal knowledge transfer but through the kind of lateral thinking that emerges when people with different expertise and experiences sit with a problem together.

This resonates with what Sanfilippo (2025) describes as the overlooked dimensions of mentoring: the identification and opening of opportunities, the nurturing of nascent ideas, and the support of personal growth that is not yet expressible in professional terms. For us, the mentoring relationship became a space in which ideas could be voiced before they were fully developed, tested without consequence, and returned to us refracted through another's understanding. This is not the mentoring of performance management, but of intellectual companionship.

Opportunity and pathway opening

The three of us came to our mentoring relationship with different profiles and needs. One was working toward formal promotion; the other was navigating a broader reorientation of professional identity and direction. Our mentor was able to sit with us both as someone who themselves had navigated formal promotion pathways experiencing challenges and changes in priorities and direction throughout their academic career. What surprised us, in retrospect, was how thoroughly each of us benefited from the other's process. The one seeking promotion found, through our conversations, a clarified sense not just of criteria to be met but articulating the kind of academic she had become and the impact of that journey. The one exploring new directions found, in witnessing her peer's focused intentionality, a reminder that structure and ambition are not antithetical to creativity and exploration. As such, previous constraints were reexplored, opening creative solutions rather than bounded exploration.

This mutual learning reflects what Eby et al. (2013) describe as the relational complexity of peer mentoring: the recognition that in effective mentoring relationships, all parties are changed by the encounter. Careers, as we experienced them, are not simply advanced by mentoring; they are, at their best, reimagined through it. The opportunities that emerged from our relationship were not always those we had anticipated. They arose within conversations that began elsewhere and arrived somewhere unexpected.

Holding space: The affective dimension of mentoring

A third theme we have come to describe as the practice of holding space. Academic careers are frequently characterised by pressure, uncertainty, and what Archer (2008) has termed the emotional labour of navigating institutions that were not designed with women's leadership trajectories in mind. In this context, the mentoring relationship offered something that is difficult to quantify but was, in our experience, foundational: the experience of being genuinely seen, and of having one's emerging ideas and hesitations met with care rather than evaluation and judgement.

This is not sentimentality. The capacity to hold space, to be present to a colleague's process without directing or foreclosing it is a sophisticated relational skill, and one that the WiAL community actively cultivated. Peer seminars, and informal connection all contributed to an ecology in which this quality of presence was normalised. The result, for us, was a mentoring relationship characterised by both intellectual rigour and genuine warmth: conditions under which renewal, as distinct from mere development, became possible.

Mentoring as dialogic, reflective, and situated learning

A final theme that emerged in our reflection was the role of dialogue, reflection, and situated learning in shaping the mentoring experience. Mentoring conversations in WiAL functioned as instances of communicative action

(Habermas, 1984), in which mutual understanding was pursued through dialogue, reflective listening, and the exchange of lived experience. The relationship unfolded as one between co-learners, each bringing distinct values, beliefs, cultures, and professional identities to the interaction. Through this dialogic process, the program supported the negotiation and expansion of participants' worldviews and illuminated Habermas's (1984) interrelated lifeworld dimensions of culture, society, and personality, particularly within a culturally and linguistically diverse mentoring context. Viewed through Habermas' lens, mentoring enabled us to test ideas, reframe assumptions, and make sense of professional identities within a complex academic environment.

We observed the dialogue morph into the co-construction of meaning. In our experience, these exchanges generated reciprocal learning and fostered a sense of empowerment, helping each other to remain critically self-aware, professionally grounded, and oriented towards ongoing development with an openness to new ideas. This is consistent with peer learning scholarship (Boud & Cohen, 2014), based in the relationship facilitating the accumulation of social capital, the sharing of practical wisdom, and the shaping of professional identity across both cognitive and affective domains.

The WiAL experience also demonstrated the value of reflection-in-action (Schön, 2017) as a mechanism for transformational learning. As participants, we made sense of mentoring encounters in the moment, revisited them through later reflection and further dialogue, and we developed deeper insight into our own assumptions, practices and leadership orientations. This reflective process extended beyond the immediate program and informed our commitment to "paying forward." Going forward to provide learning by supporting current and future colleagues and emerging leaders.

The informal and trusting character of the mentoring relationship in WiAL also created conditions conducive to the transfer and transformation of tacit knowledge. In line with situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), learning was embedded in the social context of participation and shaped by the relationship between more and less experienced members. Knowledge, therefore, emerged as socially situated understanding developed through interaction, observation, and shared practice.

Discussion: Beyond the metrics of career progress

Academic careers are typically evaluated through a lens of achievement: appointments held, grants secured, papers published, citations accumulated, awards received and promotions attained. These metrics are not without meaning; they index real contributions and, in many institutional contexts, determine access to resources and influence. But they are also, we suggest, insufficient as a framework for understanding what a career is or what it can be.

Mentoring, when reduced to the service of these metrics, becomes a technology of productivity. When understood more expansively, it becomes something closer to what Wenger (1998) describes in his account of communities of practice: a relational context in which identity, knowledge, and possibility are continuously negotiated and renewed. Our experience in WiAL suggests that the most durable value of mentoring lies precisely in this expansive register. Its capacity to sustain us not merely as professionals accumulating achievements, but as people engaged in the ongoing project of becoming. This is particularly significant for women in late mid-career to senior academic leadership, who frequently navigate institutions in which the pathways to influence are less legible, the politics more opaque, and the costs of visibility more complex (O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2016). In such environments, the question mentoring can most usefully pose is not only "how do I advance?" but "toward what, and on whose terms?" The WiAL community, at its best, created space for exactly this kind of interrogation.

Insights and recommendations

On the basis of our reflection, we offer the following insights and recommendations for those designing, facilitating, or participating in mentoring programs in higher education. While promotion support is valuable, our experience suggests it represents only one dimension of what mentoring can offer. Programs that create space for less structured, more exploratory conversation may be better positioned to support the kinds of renewal we have described.

Importantly, institutions should recognise and resource peer mentoring alongside hierarchical models. Our account suggests that horizontal relationships among colleagues navigating adjacent challenges can generate forms of learning and support that senior-junior mentoring alone may not replicate. WiAL's community model, in which experienced academics support and learn from one another, reflects this understanding.

Mentoring programs should also attend to the affective and relational dimensions of the work, not only the intellectual and professional ones. Our experience suggests value in equipping mentors to hold space, listen generously, defer judgement and sustain curiosity. These practices may be as important as familiarising mentees with promotion criteria or organisational landscapes.

We also encourage those in mentoring relationships to document their experience not only in terms of outputs and milestones, but in terms of the more subtle transformations: the idea that took hold, the door that was noticed, the permission that was quietly given. These are the textures of renewal that careers and communities are ultimately made of.

Our findings also suggest that mentoring can be especially powerful when it is dialogic, reflective and relational rather than directive. Mentoring programs would, therefore benefit from intentionally creating structured opportunities for reciprocal dialogue, critical reflection and trust-building to support deeper professional learning and identity formation. For the ASCILITE community specifically, these insights suggest scope to broaden and strengthen ASCILITE's mentoring initiatives across the varied roles that shape technology-enhanced learning. Such initiatives could encourage participation not only for career advancement, but also for personal development, career navigation and sustained participation in communities of practice.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that mentoring in higher education carries dimensions that its conventional framing as professional development does not capture. Drawing on two years of participation in the WiAL Program and six years of that community's existence, we have offered an autoethnographic account of mentoring as renewal: as a relational practice oriented not only toward advancement, but toward the expansion of what we can imagine, attempt, and become. One of us was promoted. One opened new doors and deepened the foundations of her future work. All of us learned, from and with each other in ways that the language of professional development only partially accommodates. We filled each other's knowledge gaps and supported sense-making; while holding each other's uncertainty with care, we helped each other see more clearly what was possible. We offer this account not as a blueprint but as an invitation: to take seriously the transformative potential of mentoring relationships that hold space for the whole person, and to build communities in which renewal, not only achievement, is understood as a legitimate and central aim.

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