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Credibility: What Role Does It Play in a Peer Mentoring Relationship?

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Overview

Peer roles develop over time. A new mentor begins to interact with students and then gradually becomes more secure in their role (Packard, Marciano, Payne, Bledzki, & Woodard, 2014). Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that not only does the mentor become more secure in their role, but as that security develops, legitimacy is also conferred by those with whom they work. In fact, students may not even seek out a mentor if they do not see the mentor as being credible and helpful (Packard, 2003). What may seem a straightforward expert-novice interaction of peer mentor/mentee can be complicated when there are questions of expertise, legitimacy, and credibility. In this chapter we examine whether the title of peer mentor, in and of itself, bestows credibility or not through surveys and reflections about the peer mentor/mentee relationship. We look at how students define credibility, ask if credibility matters in the higher education context, and examine the roles of a peer mentor to see if they play into the issue of credibility.

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Introduction

Over the years, peer mentoring has been utilized in many different ways by many different higher education institutions. Peer mentoring in general uses a more experienced student to help a less experienced one. In so doing, both benefit from the relationship (Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). The experienced student, or mentor, typically experiences personal growth (Falchikov, 2001), and the less experienced student, or mentee, has access to advice, support, and knowledge of the mentor (Astin, 1984; Falchikov, 2001; Miller, Groccia, & Miller, 2001; University of South Australia, 2003). Loane (2015) notes that this reciprocal relationship is valuable because it helps mentees transition to and become involved within the institution and contributes to students' academic and social support, retention, and academic achievement.

While there is no consistent definition of mentoring because of the variety of responsibilities, Colvin and Ashman (2010) found support for five specific roles that peer mentors play. The first role is that of being a connecting link. The connecting link role helps students inside and outside the class to get involved with their campus and education, find activities/resources/events that interest them, and perceive where they belong on campus. The second role is that of peer leader. Peer leaders develop and maintain leadership traits in the areas of authenticity, initiative, goal identification, planning, delegation, support, attitude, and example. Learning coach is the third role. This role facilitates learning in the classroom and guides students through the process of discovering how to approach learning. He/she fills the role of motivator and coaches students through the learning process. The fourth role is that of student advocate. A student advocate defends or maintains a cause for students, helps students find their own voice, understands the needs and wants of the students, helps students solve their own problem, and acts as a liaison between students and the instructor. The last role is that of being a trusted friend. A trusted friend develops relationships with students that goes beyond the classroom, keeps confidences and promises, is approachable, is genuinely concerned, gains the students' respect, and demonstrates character and competence (Colvin & Ashman, 2010).

Recognizing these roles can help both the mentor and the mentee understand expectations and the impact they have on the relationship. It can also lead to an understanding of how the legitimacy and credibility of the mentor is developed by mentors and seen by mentees.

The peer/student role is a complicated one that takes repeated interactions to evolve as those involved have to navigate ideas about expertise and credibility. Mentors have to develop skills and students need to learn to trust the mentors. Similarly, Colvin (2007) in her study of peer tutors found that not all students utilized the tutors even when they were available. Often students waited to see if the tutors could help them in ways the students wanted to be helped. If that did not happen, the students disregarded the tutors.

Collier (2017) speaks of peer mentoring and the benefits of students learning from students and the costs that institutions can save by using peers to increase persistence and completion. One factor is that credibility, according to Collier, is “made up of two components, expertise and trustworthiness” (p. 14). Hovland, Janis, and Kelley’s (1953) research supports Collier’s claim. Credibility is based on the trustworthiness someone is perceived to have and expertise, which is the degree of knowledge one possesses. Collier (2017) notes that mentees will automatically see the peer as trustworthy because both the mentee and the mentor share the same role: student. Lelis (2017) found that students who were in no position of authority but rather all in their first year of study were still seen as credible because they were both students. As the mentee receives information from a mentor, they must decide if the information is credible based on several factors: the understanding that mentors are message sources (Pornpitakpan, 2004) and the source’s perceived self-interest influences how the mentee sees both trustworthiness and expertise (Collier, 2017).

Expertise comes because the peer mentor has already completed courses the mentee still needs to complete. In their study of how researchers develop credibility, Billot, Rowland, Carnell, Amundsen, and Evans (2017) found, “publication and citations were commonly mentioned as indicators of credibility” (p. 6), implying that external factors impact credibility. The more awards and publications acquired, the higher level of expertise the researchers gained which in turn increased their

credibility. Such external factors may impact ideas about peer mentor expertise as well.

Overall, however, credibility is difficult to define. Nordhagen, Calverley, Foulds, O’Keefe, and Wang (2014), along with many others, grapple with a definition of credibility as it does not have a universal definition. Many view credibility from their own perspectives of who they are and what their work means, and are influenced by attitudinal beliefs and structural factors (McKinney, 2006). Collier (2017) also hypothesized that perceived motivation is important, and shares the idea that learning happens through role modelling (Bandura, 1977). In addition, the type of mentoring impacts the credibility of the mentor. The mentee is more apt to accept the expertise of a peer relationship over a hierarchical mentoring relationship because the mentee views the peer as trustworthy.

Because she is already an upper division college student ... The mentor models the role of a successful college student by sharing her knowledge of faculty members’ expectation for students, along with time-tested personal strategies that the mentor had used in successfully meeting those expectations. (Collier, 2017, p. 15)

The peer mentor is considered more trustworthy because she is a student too, and her motivation to help is assumed to be that “one student helps another because they are both in the same boat” (Collier, 2017, p. 14).

The Study

We now report on a study which sought to determine how students working with peer mentors perceived credibility. Specifically, the research questions were as follows:

- How do students define credibility in an academic setting?
- Does credibility of a mentor matter? Why or why not?
- Does helping students develop an understanding of the role of the university mentor (i.e., connecting link, peer leader, learning coach, student advocate, and trusted friend; Colvin & Ashman, 2010) affect perceptions of credibility?

Background

This study took place at a large open-enrollment university in the western United States. Established in 1999, the University Mentor Program (UMP) has served thousands of students as they transition to university life. Mentors (peer mentors) serve in the University Student Success (SLSS 1000) course after completing a preparatory two courses to apply and be selected to serve as a university mentor. The SLSS 1000 courses are taken primarily by incoming freshmen, students who are coming back to university after a break, students who have been in university but have not been successful in the past, or students who may be on academic probation. Previous research has been conducted on the effectiveness of peer mentoring in this program and has found it to be beneficial to university students. Student mentees felt they were more apt to connect to campus, engage in their learning, and rely on their peer mentor for support so they did not feel alone or discouraged as they navigated the demands of college life (Ashman & Colvin, 2011; Colvin & Ashman, 2010).

In addition to research on a broader scope of peer mentoring, a study which was not published but was used for internal programmatic justification, marketing, and improvement, was conducted on the UMP in spring 2010. Results showed that students valued the advice given to them by the mentor, that mentors motivated them to be more effective students, helped them have a positive attitude about life and school, were a good example of how to be a successful student, and that acting as an example helped the mentors become better students themselves.

Methodology

To extend the 2010 findings and answer the research questions for this study, in 2016, the researchers administered survey questions related to credibility in collaboration with the UMP to look closely at how credibility is created and what role relationship plays in credibility. Two surveys are routinely administered to each student in the SLSS 1000 course. The

purpose of the surveys is for the peer mentors in the UMP program to receive feedback from each student in their class about how they have done as a mentor during the semester. The pre-survey is given near the beginning of the semester, and the post-survey is administered near the end of the semester. The researchers collaborated with the UMP leadership to add questions about credibility to their survey so that students would not feel overwhelmed with an additional survey. The following credibility questions were added:

1. How do you define credibility in an academic setting?
2. Does credibility of a UMP mentor matter? Why or why not?

Within the first few weeks of the semester, the pre-survey was given to 772 students in 33 sections of SLSS 1000. After the pre-survey was given, five sections, with a total of 109 students, signed an informed consent form. Mentors created a presentation that was shown to students in these five sections in fall 2016 shortly after the pre-surveys had been taken. The presentation demonstrated to students what the mentors were trained to do. Part of the presentation included the five roles of mentoring, namely trusted friend, learning coach, peer leader, connecting link, and student advocate (Ashman & Colvin, 2011). Another part of the presentation demonstrated how each of these five roles is part of the student/mentor relationship. UMP mentors were given one of the roles of mentoring to explain and then shared in their own words what that role means and how they see that role in action in their mentoring roles with students. Additionally, the presentation demonstrated the process and training each mentor went through to become a mentor. Following the presentation, students were able to ask the mentors questions. This gave mentors an opportunity to further enhance their credibility as they shared their knowledge and connection of the roles to the relationship they could have with the students. Post-surveys were administered to all 33 sections of SLSS 1000 near the end of the semester.

In addition to the survey, throughout the semester, students in the five sections who listened to the presentation were asked to respond to the following prompts in discussion posts:

1. Please give an example of a time your mentor has fulfilled one of their roles this semester.
2. How has your mentor proved to you they were credible?

Students in these five sections were also asked to respond to two classmates' posts as part of the assignment and complete a final reflective paper about mentoring over the course of the semester.

Survey responses from all sections and discussion posts and final papers from the five sections receiving the presentation were analyzed by the researchers who independently read and re-read to understand what was being said. Through this process the two researchers kept separate notes about observations, relationships, and interesting participant comments which were then shared and discussed between them to help develop prominent themes and subthemes. After consistency was achieved between the two researchers, thematic analysis was conducted on the data, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which can be used to capture "both manifest (explicit) and latent (underlying) meaning" (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 298), where familiarization with the data is imperative. Such an analysis was an effective way to determine the impact that helping students develop an understanding of the role of the university mentor had in creating credibility. All names used from coding analysis are pseudonyms and comments are verbatim.

Results

Results were collected from the pre- and post-surveys in order to answer the three research questions asking how students would define credibility, whether the credibility of a mentor mattered, and if learning more about the five roles of a mentor affected the issue of credibility. Themes from the discussion posts and reflection papers were used to examine how the five roles of the mentor contribute to an understanding of credibility. There were a total of 377 coded responses in the pre-survey and 281 in the post-survey.

Defining Credibility

Survey results were examined for keywords. Word counts were then tabulated based on the number of keyword occurrences, including double coding where multiple definitions were mentioned in single responses. The themes reflecting how students defined credibility the most included trust, experience, and no response/other.

Trust The theme of trust relates to things such as belief in the mentor and the honesty of the mentor. This theme received the greatest number of comments in both the pre- ($n = 183$) and post-surveys ($n = 130$). Students made comments like “credibility is being trustworthy,” “the quality of being trusted and believed in,” and “that you keep your word.” Students felt credibility in an academic setting meant they could trust the person/material/and so on. Students also equated trust with honesty. They made comments such as “being honest,” “being honest in your dealings and admitting [you] aren’t perfect,” and “credibility is the honesty in doing/citing yours and other’s work.” This demonstrated that students feel credibility in an academic setting can mean a variety of things in the area of honesty.

In comparing pre-surveys to post-surveys in the area of trust, students felt trust of the mentor was more important than any other definition of credibility. There was a difference however in how students hearing the presentation responded versus those who did not. Out of all of their responses, students not hearing the presentation began the semester listing trust as important 54% and at the end only 46% of the time. However, students who did hear the presentation started the semester listing trust 29% of the time and at the end of the semester increased to 48% of their responses listing trust as important.

Experience Experience included comments (pre-survey: $n = 89$, post-survey: $n = 86$) related to experience, knowledge, and applicable credentials. The following comments describe how students define credibility in

an academic setting: “having the experience and training to validate/backup what [you’re] saying,” “for a mentor, that they have gone through [experiences similar to student] or are going through and can help you through [your] experience,” and “having the experience and knowledge of something.”

Experience was also identified as having credentials. Comments by students like “degrees and experience,” “having a documented record of your credits,” and listing words such as “reliable” and “reliable sources” show that students think being credible is based on the credentials earned and being reliable. Responses for all sections, regardless of receiving the presentation or not, stayed about the same from the beginning to the end of the semester.

No Response/Other When asked about credibility in an academic setting, many students (pre-survey: $n = 54$, post-survey: $n = 43$) either responded with “I don’t know,” left no comment at all, or responded with comments that did not fit into any clear category. Comments like “use it well,” “it was good,” and “important” did not seem to fit anywhere so they were added together under “other.” Those students who did not hear the presentation stayed about the same in this category moving from 13% of their responses in the pre-survey to 17% in the post-survey. Responses in this category dropped, however, for the students listening to the presentation. Their pre-survey percentage of “no response/other” was 19%, but by the end of the semester dropped to 11%.

Altogether, results show that students define credibility in an academic setting most often as being trustworthy and having experience. Early in the semester, before students had experience with a UMP mentor, often they did not know what credibility in an academic setting meant, shown by leaving the question blank or responding with comments such as “I don’t know.” However, students who had heard the presentation were better able to define credibility for a UMP.

Does Credibility Make a Difference?

The second question on the survey asked the students if credibility of a UMP mentor mattered, and why. Responses (pre-survey: $n = 309$, post-survey: $n = 248$) showed that credibility, indeed, did matter. The themes reflecting how students viewed credibility making a difference, most, out of all responses, included trust, experience, helping, and acting as an example.

Trust One hundred and sixteen pre-survey responses and 128 post-survey responses reflected the theme of trust. Being able to depend on the UMP mentor, knowing they will follow through with what they say and that what they are saying is true is how students felt they could trust their UMP mentor. Trust received the highest number of responses for this question. This was especially true for students who heard the presentation where they learned about the roles of a UMP. These students responded that trust was important 25% more by the end of the semester for a total of 53% of their responses reflecting trust or a component of trust. The students who did not hear the presentation stayed exactly the same with 43% of their responses indicating that trust was key by the end.

Experience Experience was the second highest mentioned attribute of why credibility of a mentor mattered (pre-survey: $n = 61$, post-survey: $n = 67$). Students felt that if the UMP mentor had already completed the course or was ahead of them in university, along with having had training to be a mentor, it gave the UMP mentor credibility in the form of experience. Students felt that if the UMP mentor had experience, then they should listen and follow the advice of the mentor. All students regardless of listening to the presentation or not equated credibility with experience almost equally at the beginning and the end of the semester.

Helping To the student, helping was an important attribute of a UMP mentor in being willing to put in the effort to get to know them, to help them when they struggled, and to show them they cared by the things they said and did for the student. Although this attribute was listed often

by students (pre-survey: $n = 36$, post-survey: $n = 32$), there was not much change in any of the responses how often this attribute was mentioned when comparing pre- to post-surveys.

Example Primarily the attribute of example, meaning how the mentor acted as an example to the mentee, was used by the students in describing how they looked up to the UMP mentor. There were only 14 pre-survey responses and 13 post-survey responses in this theme. However, all of the post-survey responses indicating that example was a component of credibility came from those who did not receive the peer mentor presentation.

No Response/Other Similar to definitions, 46 students (pre-survey) and 32 students (post-survey) gave no response to the prompt asking whether credibility matters. For example, one student said “yes” credibility mattered, but then did not give any other comment. Others gave comments that did not fit any of the other themes identified, such as “leadership,” “passionate,” “gives feedback,” or simply put comments like “she is good” or “because.” Students who heard the presentation dropped from 28% (pre-survey) to only 6% of no responses (post-survey). However, students who did not hear about the UMP roles, increased from 3% (pre-survey) having a no response/other comment to 15% by the end of the semester.

Connecting the Five Roles of a Mentor with Credibility

In order to answer the research question *how do the five roles of the mentor play into the issue of credibility*, discussion prompts and reflective papers were coded to understand if students receiving the presentation connected credibility with the five mentor roles and, if so, how. Every student commented about the roles in some way. About 403 discrete codes were analyzed. The roles are presented in the order of the number of responses: trusted friend, peer leader, student advocate, learning coach, and connecting link.

Trusted Friend There were 120 responses focused on a mentor being a trusted friend. Being a trusted friend responses included caring about students, relating to them, being there to help, listen, give advice, and in general being trustworthy. Some of these responses were explicitly about being a trusted friend. One student said, “This semester, John proved his credibility as a mentor simply by living the role of one. He was a constant trusted friend.” Another said, “She proved she was really credible because she always helped and never had a bad attitude. She knew how to be a friend to the students.”

Others did not specifically use the word trusted friend but said such things as “Mary has been a perfect peer mentor! I loved how she was so willing to put in extra time to have one-on-ones with us, each of us. It really made me feel like she cared.” In this way students identified qualities of being a trusted friend and also associated it with being a good or credible mentor.

Peer Leader Peer leadership was identified 106 times as being something that a mentor needed in order to be credible. Peer leader responses focused on mentors being an example, sharing personal stories, leading activities in class, being inspiring, and being an overall leader. One student noted that Sarah was “an example to everyone.” Another was more explicit:

She was a peer leader because she was an exemplary student. She kept good grades, she stayed organized, she was always prepared, and most importantly she not only encouraged us to achieve our wildest dreams through setting goals but she showed us how it was possible ... I think it was all those things that really made Naomi a credible person in my book.

In general, being credible as a peer leader was seen as being an example to the students in the peers’ own personal life.

Student Advocate Student advocate was identified as important for being credible 69 times. Students identified such things as helping, explaining things, being a go-between, and answering questions as being

a student advocate. Here responses focused on being an intermediary between the students and the instructor. Jacob said, “I loved Erica! She gave everyone her number if we had any questions about anything ... She was always in favor of the students in class.” Hannah said,

There have been times where Nora has helped me out when I didn’t know which assignments were due for the class. I appreciated this because I knew the due date was that night and I was stressed ... She has also helped me with rescheduling appointments when I needed.

Still another student felt the mentor helped them to stand on their own:

Doug is a credible mentor in many ways, but through all the advice and encouragement the thing that has stuck out the most and has helped me the most to succeed, is the confidence and moral support he has given me through this first semester.

While students identified student advocate as being important, it was also clear that they were not entirely sure about what the role of student advocate actually was. A number of times students said things when identifying the role of a student advocate such as “I knew Jay was a credible mentor from the start. I needed help understanding Canvas [the university learning management system] and he gave me some pointers.” While this identifies credibility with a role, the definition fits better with learning coach indicating students are somewhat confused about the role of student advocate.

Learning Coach Learning coach was identified with credibility 64 times. Learning coach comments related to such things as teaching the class, teaching learning techniques and strategies, challenging students, explaining concepts, and relating lessons to students. Students reported times when mentors helped them with learning strategies in class.

Kaleb played a significant role as a learning coach ... On a couple of different occasions, Kaleb shared his own strategies. I really liked this. He was

able to explain what he does, and why. I found this to be very helpful (Kylie).

Another student noted,

Brendan is a wonderful learning coach because he knows what he is talking about when we discuss a topic in class. Or how when we talk about a certain topic, he always has a story to go along with it ... he also was willing to help me understand any concept that I had confusion on.

A few even connected credibility directly to the role of being a learning coach:

I can attest to Marianne's credibility by the way she conducted her role as a mentor. Marianne taught the class [note: UMP mentors often present topics to the class under the direction of the instructor] multiple times, things we needed to know, showing that she was credible and knew the subject matter well.

While the vast majority were positive, one student in particular noted that their mentor could have been more credible:

Sarah I really thought did an amazing job, but I think she would have done so much better if she had taken more time in class to work and teach and then on a deeper level get into the groups.

In general, being credible meant the UMP mentor understanding the class material and being able to relate it to students in a way that was meaningful to them when they facilitated learning in the classroom.

Connecting Link Connecting link was related to credibility 44 times. Comments included such things as connecting students to activities and resources on campus, helping them understand the college environment and campus in general, and making it easier to connect with the instructor.

Mary noted, "Sarah would send out many notification messages on canvas, which was super helpful reminding us about due dates,

announcements and activities going on around campus. You should always keep the mentor program around.” Another student said,

He was my connecting link to events or information that is found here on campus and I really appreciated that. He almost was like the older brother that you wished you always had that went to school here before you to tell you all of the secrets about the school.

While most did not explicitly connect this theme with credibility, this student said, “she helped me so much to find the places I needed ... having a credible mentor really made all the difference.”

In summary, many interesting findings emerged when the researchers compared the group which listened to the presentation and the group which did not. Regarding how students perceived how the five roles of the mentor played into the issue of credibility, the themes of trusted friend and peer leader were focused on more than any of the other roles.

Discussion

This study sought to determine how credibility is defined by students, whether it matters, and how it might be related to the roles of a mentor. Previous literature indicates that mentees base credibility of a mentor on their experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991), prior knowledge (Collier, 2017; Hovland et al., 1953) or credentials (Billot et al., 2017). In this study, students, early in the semester, defined mentor credibility as things such as “trust” and having “experience.” At the same time, many also indicated that they did not know what credibility meant. Other attributes listed as important for the credibility of a mentor on the pre-survey were helping and being an example.

By the end of the semester, comments indicate that having the five roles of a UMP mentor explained and demonstrated early on in the semester can influence student ideas about credibility over the course of the semester. All students, including both those who listened to the presentation and those who did not, by the end of the semester, listed *not* experience but trust as the most important attribute of credibility.

Experience and knowledge (Collier, 2017; Hovland et al., 1953; Lave & Wenger, 1991) matter, but not as much as previous research indicates. Responses included both defining and identifying its importance. Therapy research may shed some light on the importance of trust. Giffin (1969), a psychotherapist, notes that whenever patients are interacting with their therapists, trust is the most important component of their relationship. It may be that students feel a similar need in a mentor/mentee relationship.

These findings also suggest that credentials (Billot et al., 2017) do not mean very much to students. Surprisingly, none of the students viewed credentials as a significant definition of credibility by the end of the semester. In the same vein, however, what can have the greatest impact is building trust in the mentors and belief that they will help the mentees achieve their goals.

When looking at the importance of credibility of a mentor and whether credibility actually matters, there was disparity between those who listened to the presentation and those who did not. At the beginning some students in both groups did not know how to respond to the question asking if credibility matters to the role of a UMP mentor. At the end, more of the students who listened to the presentation were able to articulate the importance of why credibility matters. Interestingly, those who did not hear the presentation increased in the number who answered “I don’t know/no response/other” in response to this prompt. This may be because being educated on the roles helped students define and apply the roles to credibility. On the other hand, those who did not learn anything specifically about those roles may have either been more confused or not understood what particular aspects of the role were being applied in the mentor/mentee relationship. This could imply that if students are educated early in the semester on what the five roles of a peer mentor are, much like the students who heard the presentation, students may benefit by viewing their peer mentor as more credible than if they did not learn about the roles.

By the end of the semester, the attribute of helping went down for the nonpresentation group but up in importance for the other group. This could suggest that this attribute complements the roles of a peer mentor. On the other hand, students hearing the presentation did not list example as an attribute that mattered on the post-survey. This may be because

being an example became subsumed in the specific roles that UMP mentor was performing. Students who understood the roles better, felt that credibility mattered and the ways it mattered were by being able to trust their mentor, the amount of help they received, as well as the experience of the mentors.

These findings support the idea that a general understanding of the five roles of a mentor is important to credibility. This became apparent in examining post-surveys, reflections, and discussion posts from students who listened to the presentation early in the semester. These students understood the roles, identified credible behaviors, and were able to articulate them more so than those who did not. Even more importantly, two roles are identified as being key: those of trusted friend and peer leader.

A strength of this study was the ability to both qualitatively and quantitatively analyze student ideas about mentors and credibility. A limitation was that this data was not subjected to inferential statistical analysis and comparisons between the group not listening to the presentation and the one who did cannot be examined for significant differences. Future studies could utilize questionnaires for matched pre/post analysis.

Conclusion

Similar to Collier (2017), this study suggests that trust and experience matter in a peer mentor/mentee relationship. However, we also found that trust is the most important aspect, even more important than experience. That finding is also supported in the ways students talked about the five roles of a mentor—the most important ones were trusted friend and peer leader. The other three roles—student advocate, learning coach, and connecting link—were mentioned but were not a primary focus. Thus, those involved in peer mentoring programs should think about ways that credibility can be enhanced especially through trust.

Future research is needed to understand more about exactly how trust is created if not through credentials of the mentor, nor totally through their previous experience and knowledge, and how complex the role of trust is in a mentor/mentee relationship. Greater insight could also be gained by reviewing psychotherapy research to determine if there are

connections to the peer mentor/mentee relationship that might help explain the importance of trust. Understanding the role of trust in these relationships could contribute to increased retention rates, higher grade point averages, and the overall success of mentor relationships.

Points for Discussion

Questions such as the following need to be considered when developing peer mentor/mentee relationship:

1. Can trust be built without the mentor having previous experience or is it a reciprocal process?
2. Are there intentional exercises that can be created to increase trust in mentor/mentee relationships?
3. Does trust develop differently if students are non-traditional?

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