The Power of Models and Examples in Education and Higher Education

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Abstract: Scholars, teachers, and advisors are not self made. Nor are we self-taught or following the flow- of out-of-touch guidebooks that many university presses rush to publish, contradicting each other. To develop best requires models, examples and professors who are also our colleagues sometimes our friends, while we are their students. For decades, academics uncritically referred to "supervisors", "directors,", "junior" and "senior," and especially "mentors". When I reflect on my time within universities and academic since I entered college in 1967 and graduate studies in 1970, I see clearly the rise and decline of models and examples.

Résumé: Les universitaires, les enseignants et les conseillers ne sont pas autodidactes. Nous ne sommes pas non plus des autodidactes ni ne suivons le flot de guides déconnectés que de nombreuses presses universitaires s'empressent de publier, se contredisant les unes les autres. Développer au mieux nécessite des modèles, des exemples et des professeurs qui sont aussi nos collègues parfois nos amis, alors que nous sommes leurs étudiants. Pendant des décennies, les universitaires ont fait référence sans réserve aux superviseurs, directeurs, junior et senior, et surtout aux mentors. Lorsque je réfléchis à mon passage dans les universites et le milieu universitaire depuis mon entrée au collège en 1967 et mes études supérieures en 1970, je vois clairement la montée et le déclin des modèles et des exemples.

Scholars, teachers, and advisors are not self-made. Nor are we self-taught or following the flow of out-of-touch guidebooks that many university presses rush to publish, contradicting each other. To develop best requires models, examples, and professors who are also our colleagues—sometimes friends—while we are their students. For decades, academics uncritically referred to “supervisors,” “directors,” “junior” and “senior,” and especially “mentors.”

In earlier essays, I began to redefine collegiality. I urge that the accepted concepts and vocabulary were outdated, inappropriate, and sometimes offensive. “Junior” and “senior” radically exaggerate

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often small distinctions for the sake of power, ego, and control. "Mentor" is probably the most often self-servingly abused, as one female colleague compellingly and factually convinced me. (See my "Academic collegiality is a contradictory self-serving myth," *Times Higher Education*, Feb. 10. 2022; "Collegiality needs a reboot," *Times Higher Education*, Mar. 7, 2022.)

These are among the myths and mystiques that partly define but more seriously and contradictorily limit universities and especially the arts and sciences today. (See for example, my "Myths Shape the Continuing 'Crisis of the Humanities,'" *Inside Higher Education*, May 6, 2022; "The inseparability of 'historical myths' and 'permanent crises' in the humanities," *Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities*, 3, 9, Sept., 2022, 16-26; and "The persistent 'reading myth' and the 'crisis of the humanities,'" *CCC/College Composition and Communication*, 74, 2 (Feb. 2023). 575-580.)

When I reflect on my time within universities and academia since I entered college in 1967 and graduate studies in 1970, I see clearly the rise and decline of models and examples. My conclusions are reinforced by the experiences of my professors, colleagues, and students over at least 60 years (For context, see my "Recreating universities for the 21st century without repeating the errors and myths of the 20th century?" Busting Myths, *Columbus Free Press*, Aug. 7, 2022; "Learning Through Teaching," *Inside Higher Education*, Nov. 23, 2022; "Lessons from the 1960s: Paths to Rediscovering Universities," *Against the Current*, 223, Mar.-Apr., 2023, 12-14; "Finding a permanent job in the humanities has never been easy. The lost golden age of hiring and wider social appreciation of the disciplines never existed," *Times Higher Education*, Mar. 22, 2023; "Humanities could change the world—if only they could change themselves," *Times Higher Education,* Apr. 18, 2023; and "Lessons for Becoming a Public Scholar," *Inside Higher Education*, April 28, 2023.)

Although there was no "golden age" for higher education, nor did all students have my good fortune, there is no doubt that a major shift took place especially after the 1970s and early 1980s, and exacerbated in the 21st century. In part generational, it is also structural and contextual.

My own experience is illustrative. Unknown to me at the time, my career path began in secondary school in the 10th grade with one young teacher, first his course on world history, reinforced and

extended by his Advanced Placement European History two years later. Bruce Forry was in his late 20s, early in his /exemplary career.

He was a leader among a demanding but stimulating group of young public school teachers who worked collaboratively with professors and peers to develop and present experimental, innovative, and advanced courses at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon University) in the 1960s.

In both courses, we rearranged our traditional chairs into a seminar-style circle for brief lectures but more often intensive, instructor-led discussions. We read college-level textbooks along with primary source collections and texts, and some visual materials. Never was a minute wasted. Mr. Forry combined close control and supervision of 15-18-year-olds with contagious intellectual excitement. He taught us to read, question, and synthesize. He taught me to respect direct, always constructive criticism. All those with whom I remain in contact, including my 11-year younger brother, remember him well; amazingly, at 89, Bruce remembers us by name.

At the end of my first year at Northwestern University--a middle-sized, selective, private university--I completed my distribution (now general education) requirements and chose my disciplinary major. Following my best high school experience, I selected British and European history with only a glimmer of my own future as a history professor.

I was a shaggy-haired, bright, but politically immature child of the 1960s, a New Left, late adolescent-early adult. My advisor was a middle-aged, conservative New Englander and distinguished scholar named Lacey Baldwin Smith. Despite our differences, not only did Lacey welcome me into his office and my major, but he also invited me to his home for dinner with his family.

At the end of the next year, with all his graduate students abroad researching dissertations, Lacey invited me to be his teaching assistant. Unable to pay me, he gave me credits for two courses, one for teaching two discussion sections and the other for extra reading, preparation, and meeting with him weekly. The experience for a 20-year-old was transformative, another major step on my just-emerging path.

The next year, Lacey and I spent hours in his office studying the then printed-only guide to departments of history to select potential graduate schools. He repeatedly offered to write recommendations in that pre-computer age. My undergraduate history and sociology education firmly supplanted my parents' hope that I would apply to law school for security and wealth.

With Lacey's support and advice, in autumn 1970, I left the United States for the University of Toronto for intellectual and political reasons. My first semester in British history was rough and rudderless. Neither the professors nor their course contents met my anticipations or intellectual needs. The faculty did not respond to my queries about my studies or their approach to the subjects.

Depressed, I expressed my concern to a slightly older fellow student over lunch one day. A US Army deserter, he understood me. Bob suggested, "you should meet that young guy up the street," referring to a young social, educational, and urban historian with a joint appointment in History and History & Philosophy of Education. That was Michael B. Katz, whose first book, *The Irony of Early School Reform*, transformed the history of American education.

I arranged a meeting, taking my partner with me to help with nervousness. After hearing my story, Michael picked up his telephone and arranged my (and my Woodrow Wilson Fellowship) transfer to his program (with a joint concentration in history of education and history) with him as my advisor. That meeting transformed my life.

Michael was pioneering in the then-new social, urban-quantitative history, with an in-depth case study of the Canadian industrial city Hamilton, Ontario, in the mid-19th century. The "new histories"--directly influenced by the French Annales School, British Marxist scholars, and Peter Laslett's and E.A. Wrigley's Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure--changed historical practice from the 1960s through the next few decades. As an undergraduate and graduate student, I read and reread the classics old and new from Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, to Christopher Hill, E.P. Thompson, and Eric Hobsbawm, and the path-breaking US studies by Herbert Gutman, Eugene Genovese, and Stephen Thernstrom, among others.

Katz taught me more than I can enumerate. From baby-sitting for a fair wage for his young children (with whom I remain in contact) and having dinner with spouses, to playing squash weekly,

and allowing me to submit the first draft of my MA thesis in long hand (in the pre-PC age), he demonstrated that collegiality and friendship need not limit direct but always constructive criticism.

Together, we entered the computer age. My papers, thesis, and dissertation were typewritten. The quantitative analysis for the MA thesis where my studies of the history of literacy began derived from data entered on 80-column IBM punch cards then sorted on a large machine. For my dissertation, I advanced to data analysis on magnetic tape with a computer that occupied the space of several large rooms.

Michael's Social History Project group met every two weeks. Faculty and graduate students met semi-formally with visiting local and international scholars. We sat around a table tennis table that four fellow students urged Michael to buy so we could play competitively at lunch time, then remove the net to use it as a seminar table. Students and professors shared their work in the most constructive setting. Kenneth Lockridge, then at University of Michigan, and Egil Johansson of Sweden's Umea University became my colleagues and friends.

Michael also taught us that history and theory are inseparable, and that interdisciplinary approaches should follow from the nature of our problems and questions. (See my *Undisciplining Knowledge: Interdisciplinarity in the Twentieth Century,* Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.)

All my major books had their seeds in his seminars. And he powerfully demonstrated that there is no necessary contradiction between scholarship and political concerns and interests. (See my "The best scholarship is political but with no ideological stamp," *Times Higher Education*, July 26, 2022.)

I will never forget that when I completed my MA thesis on 19th century urban literacy, Michael copied and mailed it to the two leading scholars in the field, Lawrence Stone at Princeton University, and Roger Schofield at Cambridge University. Stone sent Michael a cursory note. But the other, Roger Schofield of the Cambridge Group and a student of Peter Laslett and E.A. Wrigley, wrote me a long hand-written letter. He and I became colleagues and friends until his premature death.

Before I completed my MA, Michael became one of my closest friends, strongest supporters, and firmest critics. I recall him responding to my first dissertation chapter drafts, "Don't send them quite so hot off the typewriter," and two years later telling me, "You have enough grad student published articles now"

He maintained those roles until his death in 2014. I had the honor of dedicating more than one book to him, and organizing, then publishing a conference tribute session with one student from each of his teaching universities and almost every decade of his career. His widow and one US-resident daughter joined us. We recently visited them in Philadelphia.

Also at Toronto, I had the great good fortune—through Michael and then through the two of them--to meet, study with, become colleagues and decades-long friends with Jill Ker Conway, who left her native Australia for Harvard and then "followed" her Canadian husband to Toronto, and Natalie Zemon Davis, who joined her mathematician husband there. Natalie was the first woman to be tenured in History at the University of Toronto, and Jill the second. Each of them was in the early phases of their field- and university-redefining roles.

My wife-to-be and I first met them when Vicki was a student in the landmark first course taught in Canada on the history of women co-taught by Jill and Natalie in 1970-1971. The next year, I took Jill's seminar in US intellectual and cultural history. We began to have lunch together, preferring chopped liver on bagels in Kensington Market to the Faculty Club, and dinners with spouses in our tenement apartment. We served either cheese fondue or baked lasagna on a tablecloth on the living room floor. In 1975 Jill became the first woman president of Smith College, one of the first US women's colleges.

Natalie and I shared questions, comments, and readings when she was studying oral culture and collective reading in early modern France, and I was conducting dissertation research on 19th century urban literacy. As her children grew up, Natalie left Toronto first for UC-Berkeley, and then for decades at Princeton. She transformed early modern European cultural and social history.

Jill remained our close friend until her death a few years ago. We visited her at Smith and later in Boston. At 96 and still publishing books, Natalie remains in regular contact. We visited her in autumn 2022.

I do my best to practice, adapt, and model what Bruce, Lacey, Michael, Jill, and Natalie taught me and showed. So do my students. We need to show others. These humane, professional, and personal practices demand reinforcement in our troubled times. (See "A post-retirement career as a public academic meets the moment's need," *Times Higher Education*, Sept 18, 2021; "Teaching outside the box: A retired professor's continuing education," *Inside*

Higher Education, Mar. 25, 2022; "Universities are not giving students the classes or support they need," *Times Higher Education*, May 17, 2022; "Recreating universities for the 21st century without repeating the errors and myths of the 20th century?" Busting Myths, *Columbus Free Press*, Aug. 7, 2022; "Universities Must Help the New 'Lost Generation,'" *Academe Blog*, Sept. 16, 2022; and "I'm retired but I'm still running my own unofficial university," *Times Higher Education*, Dec. 21, 2022.)

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