

# PERFORMING MENTORSHIP IN COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH TEAMS

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*This paper shares preliminary findings from a reflective inquiry into the nature of collaboration and mentorship through digital spaces within a national SSHRC-funded research team the authors form a part of. Our research collaboration has been marked by particularly close friendships, co-creation and mutual learning that have helped to deepen our research and provide a meaningful and enriching experience for everyone involved. Proposing that mentorship and collaboration can be viewed as a performance, which can be enacted in diverse ways depending on the context and intention, we share the digital and arts-based methods our team uses to both foster mentorship relationships and routinely reflect on how we are performing and experiencing mentorship within our team in order to identify and respond to our emerging needs, challenges and opportunities to enrich our collaboration.*

Team-based research opens valuable opportunities for interdisciplinary knowledge exchange and mentorship amongst established and emerging scholars in their roles of principal investigators, collaborators and research assistants. However, while research teams may be adept at cooperating on purely administrative tasks such as on funding applications, many struggle to enact meaningful collaboration, knowledge sharing and mentorship (McGinn et al., 2019), especially when connecting digitally. Studies show few research teams are willing to engage in a self-reflective practice or commit the time necessary to identify and fully address challenges and tensions embodied within and/or arising during research (Yassi et al., 2016; Petrarca & Bullock, 2014; Rodricks, 2018).

We write as a group of researchers who have spent over 8 years collaborating in two consecutive national SSHRC-funded research projects, where our relationship has been marked by a deep friendship, co-creation and mutual learning that transcended what one may ordinarily experience in professional research contexts. Indeed, the quality of relationships in our team has been the foundation for deepening our research and developing a fulfilling experience for everyone involved. Amidst the sometimes-grueling work of grant writing, budgeting, data collection, transcription, analysis, and knowledge translation, we also create space for curiosity, play, and deep connection with each other which elicit unexpected insights about our research topic and opportunities for fruitful, reciprocal mentorship (Preston et al., 2014). Our team's connection was strengthened when we were able to gather in person at various junctures in the first five-year research project we collaborated on, as sharing space and energy allowed us to create trusting and genuine relationships. However, as we embarked on a second multi-year project with fewer opportunities for in-person gatherings-and possibly none at all due to the pandemic-we questioned how or if digital space can facilitate the trust, vulnerability, safety and support we experienced in-person. In this paper we present the concepts and digital and artistic

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tools we have employed in our current research project to both foster mentorship relationships amongst our research team, and routinely reflect on how we are performing and experiencing mentorship within our team to identify and respond to our emerging needs, challenges and opportunities to enrich our collaboration. We propose that strengthening mentorship relationships and engaging in reflective practice can optimize the research outcomes and professional value of collaborative research teams in any field. We share our experiences not as a prescriptive or definitive set of approaches, but rather an opening towards possibilities of enrichment that can be adapted and expanded by other research teams.

### **Conceptualizing Mentorship as Performance**

Our current research project examines mentorship within the fields of art for social change and arts education through three action-research field studies. The first field study, based in Toronto, examines peer mentor relationships within a theatre-based peer education intervention designed to address the unique sex education needs of newcomer youth in Canada. Using the analogy of the “artist doula”, the second field study in Montreal investigates the supportive practices deployed by an artist mentor as they help artists from marginalized communities in the creation of a performance piece about difficult lived experiences. Our third research site, whose preliminary findings we share in this paper, is a reflective inquiry led by the co-authors of this paper into how we perform reciprocal mentorship in a digital space amongst our team of research collaborators, research assistants, and the principal investigator.

Central to our inquiry is the conceptualization of mentorship as a performance, which can be enacted in diverse ways depending on the context and intention. We propose that ongoing reflection on mentorship supports research teams in modifying their interactions—their *performance* of mentorship—in real-time in order to foster meaningful, equitable and fulfilling experiences for everyone involved. While the metaphor of mentorship *as performance* mirrors the artistic basis of our particular inquiry and collaborative mentoring practices, we propose a performative lens through which researchers across disciplines explore and re-envision their research relationships as a space of dynamic possibility and co-creative action instead of falling into prescribed patterns of research relationships (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021; Stoeger et al., 2021) that may not serve their research or professional needs.

For instance, early on in our project our research team paused to reconsider what mattered most to us for our monthly video conference meeting agendas. As a geographically-distanced research team, these video conferences were crucial for touching base about logistics and offering project updates. However, when we reconsidered the way we perform as a research team within this digital space—the roles and practices we engage in, and the intentions behind these interactions—new priorities emerged. Most significantly, team members expressed a strong desire for personal check-ins, an opportunity to share updates from our professional and even family life—sometimes seeking advice but often just wishing to be heard. Personal sharing offered an opportunity to nurture a similar friendship and intimacy with newer team members, such as the project's graduate student Research Assistant who most of us only met virtually. Often, personal sharing also led to deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in mentorship faced by emerging artist-scholars and influenced logistical decisions for our collaboration. Further along into our research, as our field studies and literature reviews developed, we also noticed an increasing interest in sharing our knowledge, so we added a second monthly "Cookies and Tea" virtual meeting to accommodate this need, alongside further

planning meetings on a needs-basis. Thus, we attended to nurturing a performative space of welcome and attention to our research within the complexity of our lives.

While personal sharing might occur more naturally in co-located research teams, through spontaneous conversations during breaks, in research teams that are distanced by geography or more recently, by social-distancing protocols due to the COVID-19 pandemic, such bonding moments may require more intentional practice. In our case, personal sharing arose naturally due to our team members' longstanding relationships forged in our previous research project. For other research teams, personal sharing may not be the most suitable approach, at least from the start. Teams may want to gently build up connections through more informal check-in, icebreaker, or team-building activities. Alternatively, teams may identify other priorities for their moments of connection, such as opportunities to seek advice and more formal mentorship on research activities. However the core learning is that, when viewed and discussed through a question of *how are we performing our mentorship?*, even routine and mundane activities such as video conferences can be transformed into fruitful opportunities for meaningful gestures of generosity and collaborative engagement.

### **Postcards from the Team: Reflecting on Mentorship**

Our reflective inquiry into our team's performances of mentorship, draws insights not only from discussions during video conferences, but also from posts made in a shared internal website; interviews with our research team exploring our experiences and conceptualization of mentorship; and diverse arts-based methodologies. For example, one team member has conducted interviews with artists to identify the metaphors they use to illustrate mentorship; youth from one field study have been fostering opportunities for mentorship through the creation of music videos; and in our previous research project, we created found poetry from research interviews to explore how we were collaborating.

In our current collaboration, the research practice of creating and sharing postcards has elicited particularly rich reflection and dialogue on mentorship in our research team. Our postcard intervention arose from our desire to incorporate an arts-based method for data collection and analysis, and our appreciation for performative inquiry. In her body of work on this approach, Fels (2012; 2015) invites reflection on what philosopher David Appelbaum called a "stop" moment: those moments that interrupt, disrupt, surprise, or awaken us. These "stop" moments, or "tugs on the sleeve" as Fels calls them, may occur in our artistic, research and educational practices as well as our everyday life. Exploring "how we perform and are performed by our environment, our roles, our contexts, our relationships with others and the 'scripts' that we create" (Fels, 2012, p. 51) in these "stop" moments opens an opportunity to consider different ways of responding or engaging in the world (Fels, 2012; 2015). Embodying this reflective practice, postcards combine narrative writing, a found or created image, and a relevant quote, thus creating a performative offering.

We have found that this postcard creation process can be an accessible introduction to creative methodologies for reflective practice for researchers who do not identify as artists, offering an opportunity for people to express themselves with both images and language in a succinct format. No moment or question is too large or small to elicit a postcard; researchers are invited to follow their intuition and focus on what is most meaningful to them, capturing otherwise transient experiences, observations and interactions.

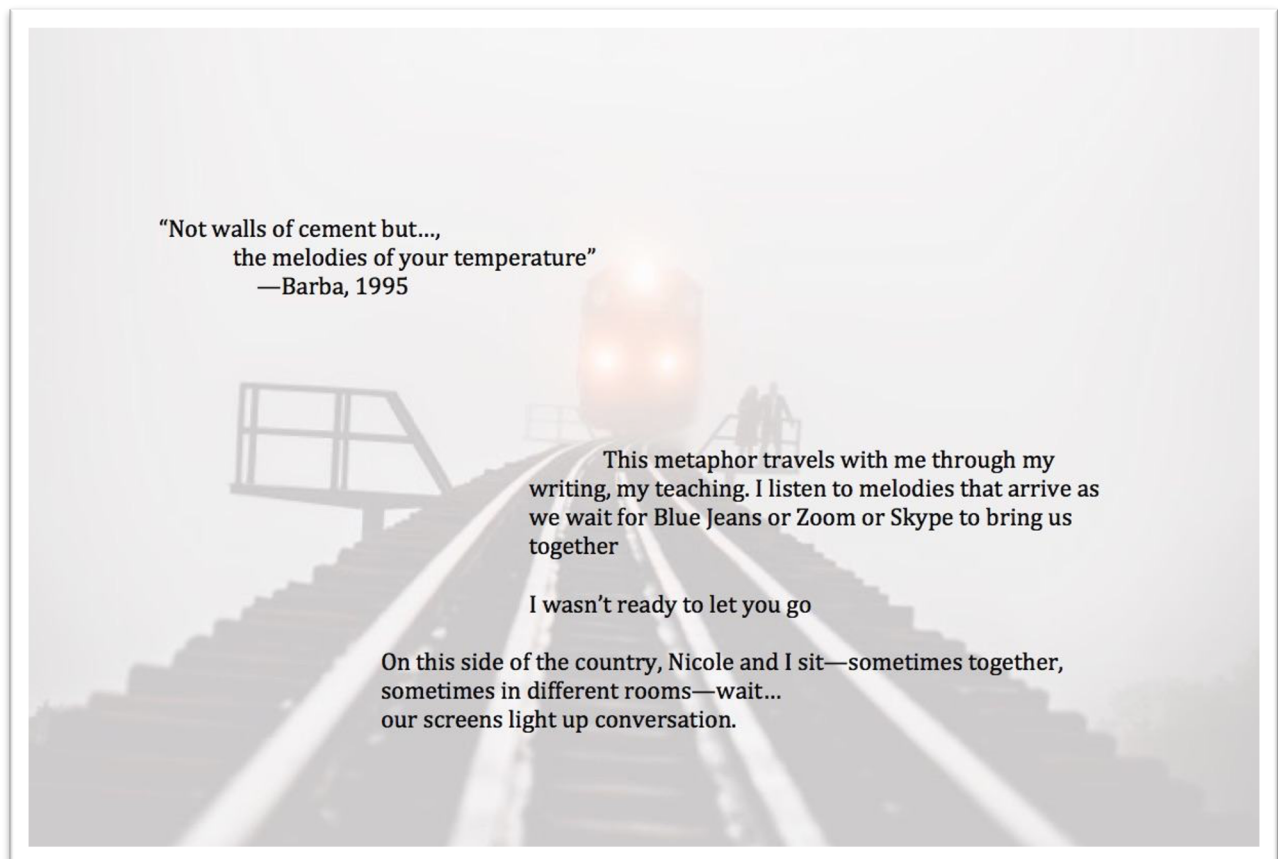
Creating postcards has invited our research team to reflect on how we are performing mentorship with one another through digital space and helps us to engage in meaningful, responsible action in relation to mentorship. Our postcards also create a means of communication to make visible tensions and unspoken resistances, oft times expressed metaphorically, thus serving as catalysts to draw attention to what troubles us.

To date, our team has created over 21 postcards in response to four broad prompts:

- **Postcard 1:** What draws you to engage in a national research project with long-distance collaborators? (Feb 2020). (See Figure 1)
- **Postcard 2:** Reflecting on your experiences/relationship with the website, think about a "stop moment" that raised a question or sparked reflection in relation to the website (March 2020). (See Figure 2)
- **Postcard 3:** Mentorship in COVID-19 (Summer 2020).
- **Postcard 4:** If you could go back in time to visit a prior version of yourself, what knowledge about mentorship would you share with them? (Jan/Feb 2021).

### Figure 1

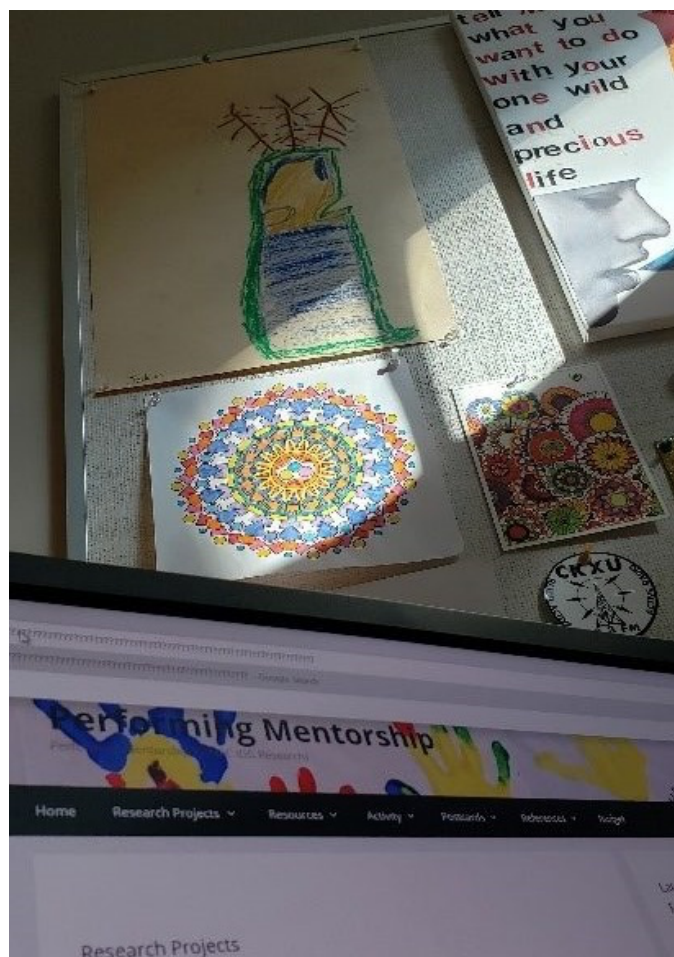
*Response from team member to Postcard Prompt #1*



Sharing our research postcards on an internal website and engaging in preliminary analysis of emerging themes has allowed our research team to identify and adapt to challenges while building on the strengths of our collaborative relationships. For instance, the postcards have expressed the value of trusting relationships to support collaboration across geographical distances and digital connections; how organic, non-hierarchically mentorship within team-based research fosters intergenerational knowledge exchange; and the importance of establishing multiple avenues of digital communication to suit diverse needs. Some postcards identified barriers to collaboration and mentorship that have arisen in our research team such as finding time to engage with our collaborative work while juggling other professional, scholarly, and personal commitments; experiences of exhaustion and burnout; financial inequalities due to grant structures and policies that limit compensation for researchers; and technical challenges or hesitation navigating diverse online platforms. The practice of writing postcards opened a space where our team could share experiences of disagreement or feelings of unfairness, frustration or confusion which may not have emerged so easily in direct conversations, and explored how, when openly addressed, these can also be resolved through emergent trust being performed in mentorship relationships.

## Figure 2

*Extract of response from team member to Postcard Prompt #2 (notice quote in image)*



*The space I've made for myself in my office aligns beautifully with the space we're building together online, and yet I find myself unable to fully step into the website in the way I step over the threshold to my quiet, comfortable office.*

*Is it habit that keeps me offline? Is it resistance of some kind? Lack of motivation? I'm not sure, but in following the ray of sunlight across my own artful board onto our home screen I feel a little 'pull on the sleeve' that beckons me to lean in.*

Our reflective practice on mentorship also helped us understand and navigate the additional multi-faceted disruptions on an individual and team level caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out just when we were set to begin our two in-person action research field studies. Although COVID-19 forced us to pause many of our research endeavours, digital spaces allowed us to continue to mentor and support one another through this difficult and disorienting time. Indeed, we were forced to rely more on digital spaces to engage in mentorship (even amongst those in the same city), despite many of us longing for more in-person shared space to connect and engage in mentorship. However, the postcards and conversations we shared about this difficult time highlighted how hope, optimism, creativity, and embodied practices, such as walking and dancing, have served as antidotes to the challenges we've faced due to COVID-19.

### Concluding Thoughts

Our mentorship, field studies and analysis continue, and we anticipate including at least one more round of postcard submissions to prompt reflection on the full research project experience closer to the end of our project. Data will be analysed through qualitative and arts-based methods to surface key insights into the experience of performing mentorship within a research team across digital spaces. We hope sharing our experience here will be fruitful for researchers, educators and arts-based facilitators who wish to—or, under present circumstances, who have to—build and maintain mentorship relationships through digital space.

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