

Limed: Teaching with a Twist

Season 4, Episode 1 – Not Just a Cup of Coffee: Why Mentoring Matters

Matt Wittstein (00:11):

You are listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy. Welcome to season four of Limed: Teaching with a Twist. This season we're twisting things up a bit and themeing the show all season. We'll be talking about mentoring and mentoring relationships and higher education, a critical piece of teaching excellence. In this kickoff episode, our guests, Titch Madzima, Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler, and Sabrina Perkins, share personal stories of mentorship and explore why mentoring is essential in higher education. Together they impact what mentorship really means, the challenges institutions face, and how approaches like mentoring constellations can shape a more inclusive and impactful future. Enjoy the episode, and if you do, please rate, review and share our podcast with your network. I'm Matt Wittstein. Hi Titch. Hi Sabrina. Hi Maureen. It is so good to have you here for season four of Limed: Teaching with a Twist, I would love for you all to introduce yourselves, and as you do that, I want you to think about who some of your mentors were and what are the most important, valuable qualities you found in them that were supportive of you getting to where you're at.

Titch Madzima (01:44):

Thanks Matt, and thanks for having us on this podcast. So my name's Titch Madzima. I'm an associate professor in exercise science. I'm also the Japheth E. Rawls professor in undergraduate research and science and the chair of the Department of Exercise Science at Elon University. So when I think of my mentors, I'm really grateful to have had in graduate school an amazing advisor. We basically nicknamed her mom, but just a true leader, someone who was incredibly caring but also had such high standards for ethics and just for the way she carried herself. One of the things I really appreciated about her is how she really was able to treat all her students. She had an individual approach to all of us and how she mentored all of us and our needs and was so adaptable to where we were, our skillsets and helping to maximize our skill sets. And then as a faculty member, I was super grateful to have two amazing mentors that really helped me. One mentor shared a similar ethnic identity as I did, as did or racial identity as I did and another mentor didn't. And I really value those two perspectives that I was able to get that mentorship from.

Sabrina Perkins (03:09):

Thank you so much, Matt for inviting us on. I'm Sabrina Perkins. I'm an associate professor about to start my ninth year at Elon. I'm a developmental psychologist and I have disciplinary expertise in infancy and I also do research on the scholarship of teaching and learning focused on mentoring relationships in higher ed. So recently actually together with Titch, we served as co-leaders for a recent Center for Engaged Learning seminar on mentoring meaningful learning experiences. So my interest in mentoring is in part influenced by my own experience of being mentored as a student and grad student and early professional. And so I'm a queer first gen college student from a low income background. And when I think about my own mentors, I just feel super fortunate that the majority of the relationships that I cultivated throughout that whole time of my career have been characterized by people just using feminist practices, encouraging authenticity and

helping me feel empowered in myself. And I've been able to hopefully use some of that in my work with the students that I mentor.

Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler (04:30):

I'm Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler. Sometimes the students at Elon University call me MVP mainly because I have a really long last name. I'm a professor of psychology and I direct the Center for Research on Global Engagement at Elon. And I almost hesitate to share this, but I just celebrated my 30th year at this institution. I really began to study mentoring when I directed our honors program over a decade ago. And then I co-led a seminar on excellence in mentoring undergraduate research through the Center for Engaged Learning with colleagues Paul Miller and Brad Johnson, who is an international expert. And I was very inspired by the seminar and our participants and also my work of over 30 years of mentoring students. I love your question, Matt, and when I think about why is this so important and how does my own mentoring relationship, especially when I was an undergraduate influence, my work is in an undergraduate focused institution and it was my undergraduate research mentor, Dr.

(05:32):

Debbie Best at Wake Forest, and she inspired me. She is one of the greatest connectors I've ever known. She will put students together at a conference and call us siblings or cousins or she just created a family, a familial relationship, even though I didn't even know these students until I would get to the conference. She was very supportive, like mentioned about his mentor. Mentor held very high standards. My first undergraduate research experience was actually in France and I didn't always understand the children. They didn't really always understand me and the integration of these high impact practices of undergraduate research and global learning, that sort of kicked off my interests in both undergraduate research and mentoring. And I study that now. So thanks. I think that's probably enough, my way of introduction.

Matt Wittstein (06:24):

That is fantastic. And I think through some of my own mentors, I often think, and what I heard from you all a little bit is that they let you be yourself, but they really push you to be the best version of yourself. And it sounds like that's in different ways for each of you, which is fantastic. So to kick off the sort of questions I have for you, I think it's really important to get some context of why does mentoring matter, why is it generally important? And then maybe more specifically in the context of higher education, especially in different higher education contexts, why does mentoring matter?

Titch Madzima (07:03):

Yeah, I can kick it off Matt, just with some thoughts and I'm sure everyone's going to add in. I mean, because mentoring matters for so many reasons and some of the first things that comes to mind and something that Maureen just mentioned about her mentor as being a connector. And that's such a huge aspect I think of a mentor, someone who's modeling what your professional life could look like, but someone who's there to give you perspective, not necessarily to have you walk the same path that they have, but then to give you guidance through your perspective, particularly when the mentee actually opens up that door for the mentor to give that feedback and perspective. That's I think a really powerful tool. And I often think of a mentor different stages as someone who's going to pull you up to a different level. And that could be for a year, it could be for 10 years or 20 years sometimes with some of our mentoring relationships. But those are some of the things that come to mind.

Sabrina Perkins (08:19):

Whenever I think about the importance of mentoring, I actually think about how it's important for both people. So kind of building off of what Titch was saying, when we look at how the research on mentoring started, there was a lot of inspiration I think from psychology. So some theorists that came to my mind were Erickson and Daniel Levinson, and both of them were really interested in looking at how in various life phases, people's experience goes through stable periods and periods of change. And they both saw mentoring as something that happens in meaningful ways, both for young people who are being mentored, but also for people who have more experience who are doing the mentoring. So I think building off of what Titch shared about the benefits for students, there's also benefits for faculty who serve as mentors. I think most of us would probably point to our mentoring that we offer as some of the most fulfilling parts of what we do on a daily basis. I think this is related to the concept of generativity that Eric Erickson wrote about, which is how we sort of pass on and support future generations beyond us. So it's almost like a legacy in a way. Our colleague here at Elon, Dr. Eric Hall published some work on award-winning mentors and found that oftentimes those mentors talk about how the process of mentoring students help them feel more engaged in their own work and how their students brought new ideas and fresh perspectives that help to inspire them and reinvigorate them into their professional networks and fields.

Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler (10:15):

That was really well said Sabrina. Thanks for harkening back to Eric's work with his colleagues that came out of the research seminar that I co-facilitated so many years ago, and it's great that we're still seeing that group be really productive. When I think about when everyone picked their head up and realized that mentoring mattered, it really was kicked off in higher education by the Gallup 2014 poll, a large study of alumni. And basically they discovered that students who are alums who reported that they had at least one meaningful relationship we're more likely to be thriving in their work. And this caught everyone's attention. All of us on this call today are very active mentors, whether it be in undergraduate research or an identity work like is talking about. So we have all known personally, but I think that was a real moment for higher education when policies and practices on college campuses started to really adhere with this idea that all students need mentoring relationships.

(11:16):

So I think between our experiences that we have personally and our research that we've been doing, and also national research, which has been supported many times now in the Center for Engaged Learning polls, that students who are reporting that they have one or more significant relationships, whether that be with faculty, staff or peers, are showing some really positive outcomes. And so I think we have both research and our personal experiences to draw from here. And I love Sabrina. These relationships are mutually beneficial. They're reciprocal, don't necessarily given the intensity of really sustained mentoring relationships that are relational. As you described, Sabrina, it's important work. It's very time consuming work. And so I think we're all doing it because we know that it matters to us and to our students.

Matt Wittstein (12:10):

So we've talked a little bit about our own mentors and you've also shared why you all believe mentoring is important. I think it's really important for the context of a season about mentoring in higher education to at least establish what is our operational definition of mentoring and higher education. And I realize this isn't going to be a perfectly clean definition, but if you were to

define mentoring in higher education contexts, what would that include? What might that not include? Where are spaces where people get confused about what is and what is not mentoring?

Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler (12:53):

I mean, having been involved in institutional works on this very topic, I guess one salient thing to mention is that there is not a universal definition of mentoring. I think that's important, and scholars have recognized that that might also be beneficial in some ways because of the importance of considering mentoring in context. So I think the one thing people can agree on is that mentoring needs to be developmental, it needs to be tailored to individual students' needs. It's sustained. I do not have the definition we created right in front of me, but we worked on creating a definition with iterative processes of getting buy-in from many, many constituents at our own institution. And we've since floated it out there. If you're interested, there's a webpage, a web text on the Center for Engaged Learning website, which is called Mentoring Matters. And our definition is there, but some of the key elements are the ones I've just mentioned and also the things that Sabrina and Titch have talked about, that we think about everyone's identities involved, that we think about reciprocity and mutual mutually beneficial relationships. These are sustained relationships. Mentoring does not happen in one meeting over a cup of coffee. We love coffee, it's great, but it's not unto itself a mentoring relationship. And so these are some of the elements.

Titch Madzima (14:15):

This is from Moore, Vandermaas-Peeler, and Peeples, Maureen's work with Jessie Moore and Tim Peeples. But mentoring relationships are fundamentally developmental and learner-centered and within college and university environments, specifically mentoring relationships are distinct from other meaningful relationships in that they promote academic, social, personal identity, cultural and career-focused learning and development in intentional sustained and integrative ways. They evolve over time, become more reciprocal and mutually beneficial, are individualized, attending to mentees, developing strengths and shifting needs, mentors expertise and all members identities, and they function within a broader set of relationships known as a mentoring constellation. I thought that was such a great definition. I think it really covers so much.

Sabrina Perkins (15:19):

I think there are a lot of areas that whenever I hear people talk about mentoring that it feels like there might be just different understandings of some of these dimensions. So one of them is the fact that this is a long lasting relationship. So I think sometimes we hear mentoring kind of getting thrown around on different university campuses, and Maureen can tell many audiences, mentoring is not just a cup of coffee. This is something that takes a very long time to develop and it involves a deep knowing of the other person and also ourselves in relation with that person. So that would be one thing that I think is a common kind of misconception. Another one we already talked about, which is that mentoring relationships are mutually beneficial. That does not mean that we get the same things out of the relationship. It means that we both benefit in different ways.

(16:21):

So obviously the types of support that I'm giving my students in mentoring is not the same benefit that I'm getting from them, but they still teach me things that I can take with me and grow from. And then one other thing, and I'll stop is mentors have to have more achievement and experience within the area that is involved in the mentoring context. So if I view us as equals and neither one of us has more experience in that area, that is not a mentoring relationship, that is a supportive

relationship and it's beneficial, but it's not mentoring. So those are just a few that come to my mind.

Titch Madzima (17:03):

That's so great. Sabrina. I totally concur. Something that you said just kind of came to mind about that just getting coffee or that it is not necessarily mentoring and I think mentor relationship has to be formalized in some way. I mean, sometimes a mentee can say, Hey, will you mentor me or through undergraduate research, but I think there has to be some sort of formalization to the relationship and that can happen organically too. And then the other thing you mentioned too about just the expertise aspects that the mentor does need to have some fruit on the tree, I think is so true. But something that else came to mind and that leads into the mentoring constellations is that one mentor can serve all the purposes for a mentee. And so it's really important for students or people who are seeking mentorship to really know why they want that person to mentor them and what and what that relationship entails. I think that can be really important. Like any relationship, no one person can serve all our needs too. So

Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler (18:15):

I just love your answers so much, Sabrina and Titch. I'm just smiling and it just makes me so happy. You've lifted up so many important points. I think we've mentioned the constellation model a few times, so it might be worth saying that this model is predicated on the idea that mentoring is complicated and that there are multiple areas of support that people need. So it could be academic support, social support, cultural or identity support, and the idea that one person, one primary mentor can serve all of these needs is I think arcane and really not what we see in practice. We did lots of interviews over a hundred interviews as part of the work for an institutional self-study recently, and we found out that that's exactly what's happening in practice. People have multiple mentors. It was almost an intervention to ask students about a constellation model because as they began talking within 20-30 minutes, they were naming multiple people that they hadn't thought of. Right away, they're realizing that this area of support are important. And so I think in the literature it's often this traditional relationship hierarchical one mentor, one student. And what we are all saying here is that actually a constellation model embraces the idea that students have diverse needs and that one person shouldn't even be expected to fill them all.

Matt Wittstein (19:34):

So I want to come back to the mentoring constellations as a participant in the most recent Center for Engaged Learning research seminar on mentoring meaningful learning experiences, my group used that constellation model and constellation mapping. And one of the things that we found really valuable was to acknowledge that the supportive people also matter, not necessarily in the exact same way as the mentors, but that map that constellation does include those more broad supportive people, which may not have that characteristic that Sabrina talked about of having more achievement or experience, that they're really there simply for support in a lot of different ways, a lot of different areas. So I just found that interesting as you all were talking about that one of the connections I made. I do want to ask, when we think about some of the strengths and challenges of mentoring in higher education historically, I often think about how mentoring relationships were probably some of the hidden curriculum for a very long time that we're just now trying to unhide. So I'm curious what you all see as some of the historic challenges and the challenges that still need to be addressed through mentoring and mentoring programs.

Titch Madzima (20:58):

I think one challenge that comes to mind I think is lack of diversity of mentors or available mentors in higher ed, and particularly in institutions like ours, like Elon, and where a lot of students from different backgrounds may not see or people, mentors or people available to mentor them with similar identities that are obvious or sometimes hidden too. And so I think historically could have been a barrier for students from certain groups or backgrounds seeking out mentorship. I think it could have been a big barrier and probably served other populations of students really well because they have seen many faculty that share similar identities to them. So I think that's something I think work is trying to really seek to identify to correct and help improve mentoring and that perspective.

Sabrina Perkins (22:04):

Yeah, I mean, I think building off of Titch's point, the majority of US institutions of higher ed were built for white, wealthy Protestant elite land owning men. And obviously that is not what our student body looks like now. And I think we're still catching up a lot in terms of making things accessible and improving the way that we're able to support and work with students that don't come from that traditional background in the US. So I think building off of Titch's point, a lot of us in general, a lot of faculty were never really trained on how to be mentors. I think I even took one class on how to teach. There is not much out there in a lot of grad programs, and a lot of us especially have not gone through training on mentoring students that have been historically excluded from higher ed and considering the fact that a lot of full-time faculty in the US are many white faculty, including myself, were never trained on how to work with students that come from these historically excluded racial backgrounds.

(23:25):

So there's a lot of complex things that we need to learn as mentors in order to support an increasingly diverse student body. But I think the good thing is that mentoring skills can be learned and can be developed. And there are some people maybe that should not be mentors, but a lot of us who are interested and willing to get better, we can develop those skills. So I think there are a lot of opportunities that are out there for faculty that may come from more sort of dominant backgrounds, but also faculty who themselves, as Titch was describing, come from historically excluded backgrounds to learn about their own identities and things that they can offer to students using strengths-based perspectives that are informed in many different areas like cultural areas or sociopolitical or diversity informed approaches, disability informed. There's so much that we can all learn in different areas of working with a range of students.

Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler (24:34):

Again, my colleagues have made such great points. I support them all. I guess I would point out that as we've been talking about this constellation model, there is a gap between practice and research. We don't have a lot of evidence of how to help students build their constellations, how to help students find agency to identify these relationships too. I think you mentioned it earlier that sometimes it's hard to know if it's a mentoring relationship with undergraduate research. We have a structure around it, but think about students who do come from these historically underrepresented and excluded groups. They may not see somebody, as you pointed out too, who looks like them. They may not know how to approach the whole thorny topic of finding a mentor at lots of students. In the interviews that we did reported actually being afraid to have conversations with faculty, and we create cultural supports and institutional supports, and we believe that this is our work, and yet students are telling me I'm still afraid to go talk to

somebody. So we need to, I think, identify ways, multiple pathways is the conclusion we can keep drawing. There's not one right way to find a mentor. So knowing that sometimes it's in the cohort, sometimes it's in the residence hall or student employment, just creating multiple pathways for students I think is one of our challenges and opportunities.

Matt Wittstein (25:53):

So this has been some wonderful conversation to kind of wrap up and lead where I hope our season's conversation goes. Where do you want mentoring scholarship and practice to go in the next 10 years?

Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler (26:09):

It's a great question, Matt. I think that for me, and you've all heard me talk about it so much, but I think the Constellation model offers so many opportunities to think about how mentoring relationships can work in any context. So I think we often think about undergraduate research, but it is much more than that. So students have peer relationships that are very important in terms of their support and belonging to a particular campus community, for example. So understanding this complexity is challenging. Mentoring relationships are so dynamic that if we only study them at one point in time, we are really missing. I think the evolution of a mentoring relationship. There's so many fascinating things to study, I guess is what I want to say. So I am hopeful that the research on mentoring really explodes in positive ways and helps us understand what the gaps might be between our theories and our models and what's happening in practice. We haven't mentioned this specifically, but in addition to studying award-winning mentors, Eric Hall and colleagues have identified these salient practices of mentoring, and they're tied very much to undergraduate research. But it could be interesting to look at what are the salient mentoring practices in different contexts. So those are just a few ideas, mainly continuing to close the gap between theory and practice.

Titch Madzima (27:31):

Yeah, I think, I'm not going to repeat what Maureen said, but I think the mentoring constellations I think is going to be something that mentoring should focus on in the years to come.

Sabrina Perkins (27:47):

I agree. And I'll just add that we still have so much work to do to understand mentoring relationships from students that have these underrepresented experiences or historically excluded from academia. So there's so much that we need to do in terms of understanding strengths-based perspectives instead of this kind of traditional deficit lens where people were viewing students coming in already behind or already with these issues. And I think we have a lot to do in terms of viewing what are people coming to university with, or even what do communities have outside of the university? What kind of strengths do they have outside of the university? I think there's also a lot of work that we still need to do in terms of understanding identity intersections and how that impacts people's experiences of privilege and oppression within the academy. And I think we need to do a lot more in terms of understanding not only how to support students from historically underrepresented groups, but also faculty with those experiences and thinking about retention of students and faculty and how to promote career advancement. So I think it is a lot of work, but it's also very exciting to be in this work at this time when it feels like we can make such a difference for so many people across the board.

Matt Wittstein (29:25):

Well, thank you all so much for this conversation and opening up our new season of Limed: Teaching with a Twist. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Sabrina Perkins (29:34):

Thank you.

Matt Wittstein (29:35):

Thanks, Matt.

Sabrina Perkins (29:36):

Thank you. Matt.

Matt Wittstein (29:45):

Limed: Teaching With A Twist is a podcast produced in collaboration with the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University. For more information, including show notes and additional engaged learning resources, visit www.centerforengagedlearning.org. Limed Teaching with a Twist is a creation of Matt Wittstein, associate Professor of Exercise Science at Elon University. Original music for the show was composed and recorded by Kai Mitchell, an Elon University alumnus. If you enjoy our podcast, please take a few moments to subscribe, rate, review, and share our show. We aim to bring insightful and relevant content to educators each month, and we would love to hear from you. If you're interested in being a guest on the show, do not hesitate to reach out. Our most updated information can be found on the Center for Engaged Learning website. Thanks for listening, and keep it zesty.