

Limed: Teaching with a Twist

Season 4, Episode 6 – Mapping Mentoring

Matt Wittstein (00:11):

You're listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy. In this episode, we're exploring mentorship, not as a single relationship, but as a constellation of connections that shift and evolve over time. I'm joined by my fellow research collaborators, Jen Aumiller from the University of Maryland School of Medicine, Sarah Burns Gilchrist from American University, and Alexis Hart from Allegheny College. Together, we talk about what led us to study mentorship, how we developed a constellation mapping approach to better understand students' support networks, and what happens when students are asked to visualize the full range of meaningful relationships in their lives. We explore questions of trust, belonging, and the limits of traditional mentoring models, along with what this work might offer mentors, students, and institutions. Throughout the conversation, one theme comes up again and again. Mentorship doesn't live in a single dyad and students themselves are often mentors, whether they realize it or not.

(01:19):

Enjoy the episode. I'm Matt Wittstein. Hi, Jen. Hi, Sarah. Hi, Alexis. I am so happy to see you all. It has been a little bit too long, but I'm happy to have you here to talk a little bit about mentoring. Before we get started with learning about your research project, I want to just ask you to introduce yourselves really quickly, who you are, where you're from, what your role is, but also I'd love for you to share one thing that was really impressionable on you about your own mentors at some stage in your life. Jen, why don't you go first?

Jennifer Aumiller (02:01):

Sure. Hi, I'm Jen Aumiller. I am the Director of Graduate and Postdoctoral Training and Advancement at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. And thinking about the mentors that I've had in the past, I think some of the things that have been most impressionable on me is having a trust relationship and being able to trust that not only are they there to support me, but that also they'll be honest with me about their feedback because it's nice to have a vacuum of, "You're doing a great job," but it's also important to have that critical feedback and knowing that it's coming from a place of wanting growth. So I think those are some of the characteristics of my mentors that I've really appreciated.

Sarah Burns Gilchrist (02:47):

Thanks, Matt, for hosting this. I'm Sarah Gilchrist. I'm an academic librarian at American University. I've been a librarian for about 12 years now, and so I was thinking about the different mentors that I'd had in grad school and in my professional life. And some of the common traits are that they're open to difference, so they're not about bringing their own ideas and making me conform to what they think, but they're really able to see the strengths in individual people and help bring those out and develop those. My mentors have usually been thoughtful and supportive and proactive. So when they see that there's an opportunity, they reach out and let me know, or it's more of a reciprocal relationship in a lot of ways. And I think that as I was thinking about this earlier today, the way that we think about relationships is really interesting as we change and evolve over time.

(03:54):

And so my mentoring relationships with my mentors have gone from being getting advice from one person to developing a deeper relationship that is more professional and personal over time. And so it doesn't always stay the same. It changes a little bit.

Alexis Hart (04:14):

My name is Alexis Hart. I am a professor and currently the chair of the English department, and I am the director of writing at Allegheny College in Northwestern Pennsylvania. I have found that one of the most beneficial actions mentors have taken to develop me in my profession has been making connections to others. So that is something I try to cultivate as a mentor myself. So helping me to, as Sarah was saying, not everyone has clear specialties. So thinking about, yes, this is a way in which I, as a mentor, can help you, but here's someone I can connect you with who can help you in other ways. And that increases the network, or as we'll talk about the constellation of mentoring. So really breaking out of that necessarily one-to-one mentorship as the end all and be all and thinking about creating a greater range of mentors within a constellation as we talk about.

Matt Wittstein (05:34):

So before we get into the weeds of what you studied and what you found, I'd love to just know what made you want to actually study mentorship in higher education in sort of a scholarly academic, intellectual way, as opposed to just doing it and doing the best that you can.

Jennifer Aumiller (05:50):

I think for me, I had been thinking a lot about mentoring relationships because I work predominantly with graduate students and postdoctoral fellows in the biomedical sciences. And so in those relationships, they really have a assigned mentor or someone that they select and they're working very closely within an individual. And I think over the years working, because I've worked with biomedical scientists for the last 23 years, sometimes there were things that were working very well. And then there was other times there was a lot of challenges and trying to figure out how to make a better environment for those graduate students and postdoctoral fellows was something that was really important to me. And even before I joined Elon for the Center for Engaged Learning, I was thinking about mentoring relationships quite a bit and starting to do some research in that area. So it kind of was a really good fit for me to think even more broadly. (06:49):

And yeah.

Sarah Burns Gilchrist (06:52):

So I came to this through, I was working with a lot of undergraduate students at the University of Baltimore, and one of our initiatives was how to increase the number of high impact practices that we had. And I helped redesign a curriculum for our first year students that included more community involvement and community engagement. And so it seemed to me that mentoring was part of that. And what we started talking about in the seminar was whether or not this should be part of the high impact practices that George Kuh put together. Even though my starting point was with undergraduates, now I work with grad students and I'm starting to see the gaps that we have in our community, campus communities and where we're able to ... We don't always have connections between the people that need to be connected. And so I see this now as a way to deepen my engagement and help students find each other, kind of what Alexis was talking about,

and really build community and de-stigmatize this idea of networking and mentorship because a lot of times it has very high stakes and people are anxious about it.

Alexis Hart (08:15):

Like Sarah, I really came to this through first-year students in particular. So I served briefly as director of first-year experience at Allegheny, and I began that work right before the pandemic. And as students, we were already thinking about how to cultivate a sense of belonging for students, how to connect them with resources. We talk about an ecosystem of support on our campus. And then as students came back from the pandemic and had in many ways developed an uneasiness with approaching people that they didn't know or this sense that I have kind of forgotten how to engage in social situations, mentorship for me was something that came to the forefront of my mind. And so when the call came out from Elon for the summer research seminar, I thought I have some practical experience with mentors and mentoring, but I don't have the scholarly foundation and I always learn and better with other people in community.

(09:44):

And so I thought if I have an opportunity to be selected for this summer seminar and engage with people who are probably a lot smarter than me already about this topic, then I will benefit and maybe I can bring something from my perspective as well to contribute.

Matt Wittstein (10:05):

I can't help but laugh that you think that us as a group were somehow smarter than you on this particular topic because I think we all came in feeling a little bit of that imposter syndrome of wanting to learn and grow in our understanding of mentorship. And so I think everybody thought everyone was better than them, but I think when we look back on it, it was like, oh, this was this really special community. So I want to ask you all, what was your research question and how did you all actually come up with it?

Alexis Hart (10:38):

Thinking about how to help students in particular was our focus, how to help them visualize what a breaking out of that dyad of mentorship and thinking about it more broadly, the Elon relationship rich mentoring map and this idea of mentoring constellations that we really hooked into that. And so Team Interstellar was looking at how to help students visualize and understand that there's a continuum of support from supportive relationships to meaningful and to mentoring. And while mentoring may visually be the top, there's real benefit in those other relationships. So we wanted to see how asking students to literally map those relationships, help them to conceive and develop a more rich relationship rich mentoring community.

Jennifer Aumiller (11:56):

In addition to what Alexis just said, the literature had also pointed to that there was not a lot of tools out there to kind of visualize these varied relationships. And so between the supportive, meaningful and mentoring relationships. And so we were able to use that relationship rich mentoring map and actually created it as a tool for students to start thinking about where did they have relationships already. And then also, and maybe I'm getting a little ahead of myself, but also where they could maybe seek out additional relationships when maybe they needed more in different spaces because on the map, not only was it talking about those three levels, but it was also talking about the characteristics of the relationships and the functions of the

relationships. And that could be something about reciprocity or intentionality or trust, identification and durations. There was a lot of other factors.

(13:06):

So it gave an opportunity for students to really reflect on what their current situation was as far as who was supporting them in these various contexts, but then also thinking about where else they could move towards.

Matt Wittstein (13:21):

I think as I think of that genesis as part of this team of Team Interstellar, myself, I also think of how we all had in that first summer, we were all realizing we were all in very different positions and in different universities. We have a mixture of staff, faculty, different STEM, humanities, different types of schools that we were at, that I think we also were thinking about how do we apply this in a more broad context that could take advantage of our different settings. And for me, it was pretty exciting that pretty much across the board, the activity was useful for the students that participated in the research, which was really cool for me. So I want to stick with this question just a little bit and acknowledge that we maybe didn't have the most clear, precise, hypothesis driven research question. And so how can we frame that for our audience of what were we really trying to get at with looking at mapping as an activity as opposed to other methods that folks used?

Sarah Burns Gilchrist (14:37):

I just wanted to say we started out, Team Interstellars started out with six people. And so I remember that first year when we were all meeting together, talking about our different campuses and our different understandings of mentorship, we spent a lot of time kind of thinking about what mentorship was before we decided to delve into this constellation mapping. And so that part of the process was really exciting and also it was difficult to figure out a narrow research question, but I think that what we all ended up agreeing on was that we could help support the research that had already been done on Constellation Mapping and bring in some of the strengths from Gabby's research on mentoring and then develop some further questions. So it was almost an iterative process where we knew that we were going to dig into mentoring a little bit more and then come up with some more questions that we wanted to ask and see if our research into mentoring helped answer those questions.

Alexis Hart (15:48):

So our research question at the end of our first summer, our working research question was, who do students identify as supportive people? What support do they receive from those supportive people and do they describe their supportive relationships as meaningful or mentoring? We also were interested in finding out to what extent students are aware of the concept of mentoring constellations. And we really wanted to identify characteristics that we could share and help inform both the mentees and the mentors to just develop stronger mentorship practices. So that was our goal at the end of our first research summer.

Matt Wittstein (16:43):

Thank you. That's very helpful to have. And I absolutely appreciate how messy that question is. Definitely looking back in hindsight that when I think of mentoring my own research students in exercise science and neuroscience, I always want this like super pointed question, which is exactly the opposite of what we had for our project. So does somebody want to share a little bit about the methodologies that were used to understand the question more clearly? What was the

approach to actually answering what students know about mentoring and how they identify or rather who they identify as supportive people and to what extent they are mentors versus just generally supportive people, what types of support they received and some of those other pieces of that question you asked.

Jennifer Aumiller (17:35):

We had kind of a two-pronged approach for our research methodology. One was creating a survey, which hopefully Matt will talk more about, and that was distributed among all of our campuses to kind of get a sense of who people identified. They got some descriptions of what the different levels of relationships were, and then they did a survey about who they identified at these different levels. And then we then took that survey and selected people at each of our campuses to complete an interview with the map. And during that interview with the map, we created stars or dots that they could place on the map to talk about where they found these people that they had indicated on the survey as far as were they in the supportive, meaningful mentoring, and then also thinking about the functions of those relationships. And then we'd asked some further questions during that, they could add additional people outside of the five people that they could identify on the survey.

(18:50):

And then we also asked them if they found this helpful and if they had any gaps, how would they address those? And so we kind of had this two-pronged approach.

Matt Wittstein (19:02):

And so since you called me out, I'll just share a little more about the survey. We sent the survey really broadly to our institutions, but also it was open publicly and we ended up with around 250, 270, somewhere in there, number of participants. And it was mostly asking just person by person, who are your up to five most important supportive people? And then we asked characteristics of, are they family members? Are they friends? Are they classmates? Are they professors? Are they staff members? What is their sort of functional role? And then we looked at the content on that relationship rich mentoring map, which talked about both function and sort of intensity of relationships and asked them to classify things like reciprocity and trust and how the relationship began. And so we kind of got this relatively large data set of just where they're finding their mentors, what types of supports they're providing, how much time they're spending with them.

(20:05):

And I know for me, that was really informative to see the breadth of spaces, but also to kind of see that our first year students tend to rely more on ... Our first year undergraduate students tend to rely more on family and close friends, whereas our senior undergraduate students might lean a little bit more into professors and our graduate students probably lean more directly to their assigned or identified mentor advisor PI, who that might be. And so we have that large-ish data set that supported that. And really, to me, it was the conversations and the focus groups that opened things up a little bit.

Alexis Hart (20:45):

Again, we were very intentional in not simply doing a talk-only interview to ask them about their supportive people and the kinds of support, whether social, academic, personal, cultural career. These are the areas on the relationship rich mentoring map, but also to ask them to use the map, whether it was a physical map in in- person interviews or a virtual map in Zoom interviews,

because again, we were really interested in helping them to visualize the range of support and the areas in which they might, as Jen mentioned earlier, have those gaps. And to be intentional about thinking about, wow, I realized that I have a lot of academic support and career support in my map, but where I am right now, I don't really have support from a cultural perspective. For example, where on my campus or off my campus, as Sarah was talking about, those community relationships, where might I find that support and how would I go about approaching?

(22:11):

So again, we did interview only the students, the mentees to help them start to think about and develop strategies, but this could be something that mentors also employ to help them think about how might I connect students to some of these areas of support that either I, as a faculty member or staff member don't have the ability to do. And so I think that's one of the things, I know we're going to talk about next steps. That's one of the things I think our group hopes will extend from our research as others think about employing our techniques.

Sarah Burns Gilchrist (22:57):

What you all were talking about is really interesting. And when I was kind of thinking through our process, one of the results that I thought was really deep and meaningful for me was that the process of mapping led to reflection that maybe wouldn't have happened in such a focused way if they hadn't done a mentoring map. And that encourages students to start to think about having conversations and mentoring dialogues with people that are in their family, in their supportive groups and in their academic mentoring groups in a different way. And it starts that process of getting them to think about this relationship building in a deeper, more meaningful way. And the more often that we can step back and say, "Here are the people who are in my community, where are some gaps? Where are some additional people that I can add and have a conversation with?

(24:03):

" That helps us connect with each other and create a deeper community on campus and off campus.

Matt Wittstein (24:11):

So thinking about both process and results a little bit, what were some of the most interesting findings that you think we had in our project and were there any sort of unexpected turns along the way? I know one of my big takeaways was this very clear realization. I don't know if it was a realization or just like was this is ground truth that mentoring relationships change and that there's a time component as well that I hadn't thought about so intentionally prior to us doing this work. And we could see that, especially in the focus groups and especially after the mapping of this idea of that students had control over their mentoring, had some levels of control over their mentoring relationships and opportunities, and that they could be active participants in actually changing them over time. And I think that was one of the big takeaways for me personally.

(25:08):

What did you all think?

Alexis Hart (25:10):

So I think I'd like to share some of the aha moments that the students I was interviewing had. One student had this aha moment that, wow, I as a student am a mentor to other people. And it was so nice to see that they felt empowered by that, that they could be the connector, they could be the

person to provide someone else the social support, for instance, right? Thinking about being a resident advisor and thinking about how do I help some of the residents feel like they're not sitting in their room alone, I can be that person who fills the gap. I think another aha moment for a number of the students I interviewed was the sense that the range is important. Not everyone has to be at the pinnacle of mentorship to provide support. We need meaningful relationships and just those supportive relationships, that grandpa who calls and reminds you that you have grounding in family traditions, that helps you to persist and feel whole just as much as that professor with the PhD who is helping you to complete your comprehensive senior project and get to the next step.

(26:47):

So those were moments during the interviews in which I was engaged with students or I had a student who is part of Narcotics Anonymous and was just talking and that opportunity to help them give them a space where they could do that and trust that I would hold that and respect it, that was an advantage of doing the mapping for just one individual that I think, again, if more people employed this, it would have some real impact, not just on the overall atmosphere, but also on individuals.

Jennifer Aumiller (27:31):

Yeah. I think all of those points as far as the aha moments that Alexa shared, and then also the knowing that people that Matt talked about, that people were changing their relationships over time. Even from the time of the survey to the time that I actually conducted interviews, some people were like, "Oh, yes, at that moment, these were my people, but now they're moving around." Some people took some people completely off that they weren't talking to them anymore, and then they added other new people that they hadn't interacted with at that point. And I think that that is really powerful to know that it's not a forever situation. There's very few people in our lives that are forever. I mean, there are people, but it's okay that these change over time as we also grow as individuals. So I think that was something that really came away from me.

(28:26):

Also, I thought it was really interesting when I was interviewing my people because we do have, especially in the PhD space where people have this very strong dyad where they have this research mentor and I would say that what was interesting is not everybody felt that they were the strongest mentor in their sphere of influence. And so some of them actually had family members that maybe they were interacting with a lot more about many different areas and that maybe was, or significant others that they thought that was even more powerful for them or past mentors that they had that kind of pushed them to that. The other thing I thought was really a big takeaway for me is the power of the mapping. I didn't know when we went in if this was going to be a useful tool for people to actually visualize their map and actually talk through it.

(29:26):

So I think that was really helpful to have people doing those interviews where we were actually talking through it and then they were having aha moments through the talking and through looking at a map and seeing where people were placed and moving people around as they were talking. I think that just showed the power of having it, not just like as a tool like, "Here, go do this," but actually having interaction around the tool that really created a lot more mindfulness about the process. So

Sarah Burns Gilchrist (30:00):

So I didn't get to do actual one-on-one interviews with a lot of students, but I tried this out with some colleagues in a professional setting, and it also made me realize that this doesn't work in every context. And I think that the student mentor student faculty relationship is very different than a peer-to-peer relationship in a collegial situation. But I think it's also important as a professional development exercise for us to stop and think individually about how we are situated within a constellation of mentors and support people. And so I know we're going to talk about next steps, but one of my ongoing questions is how do we translate this for people outside of the student faculty relationship? Because I think that building a strong community is about building strength within each of the individuals in the community. And I know we often talk a lot about the student facing parts of this, but I was also surprised that librarians were not mentioned and also not surprised that librarians were not mentioned because sometimes we are the people that kind of blend into the background.

(31:28):

So there may be even more mentoring and supportive people that weren't listed when we asked them to just put five.

Matt Wittstein (31:39):

I definitely think that listing five was a limitation, but also a feasibility thing that if we let some folks go on and on forever, we just would have an unwieldy data set. But Sarah, that was a great transition. So what do you all think is next in this line of research and how do you want to see this work be used?

Jennifer Aumiller (32:01):

So I think based on what we found in our research, I really would like to see more checkpoints and see how things change over time and gathering data on that just because that was something we even saw in that short period of time. I would love to revisit with some of the people that I interviewed to see where they are now with their maps. And then also getting to Sarah's point, thinking about it used in different populations, I could easily see this being used with a postdoctoral scholars. That would be really important for them to be thinking about it and seeing how that shifted. And then also using it as a professional development tool for faculty. It could get used in that way kind of as a bidirectional tool where not only are they thinking about their own mentoring constellations, but then thinking about how am I supporting my mentees in finding those mentoring constellations?

(33:01):

I think Alexis kind of alluded to this earlier. So I think those are things that really could be utilized. And then hopefully in the more traditional spaces where we really think about that dyad, that this would start breaking up that dyadic thinking about mentoring relationships and really encouraging these multiple constellation of mentoring.

Alexis Hart (33:25):

So I have been thinking about, Matt, you mentioned earlier, we saw differences between at the undergraduate level first year students coming in and then by the time their seniors on their way out, how that conception of their mentoring constellation has shifted. And so that is one of the ways in which I think, again, thinking about having checkpoints, as several of us have said, as those change. So having a student when they arrive at college, do a mentoring map, then do a check-in once they declare their major, doing a check-in when they're getting ready to graduate

and helping them to think about how to cultivate and build those while also being accepting of change and understanding that that is a part of the process and not feeling kind of stuck in, as Jen was saying, that assigned dyadic relationship. So that's how I hope it will find its way into the broader world.

Sarah Burns Gilchrist (34:43):

So I presented our research at a departmental lunch series that we have where we talk about the research that we've been doing. And a lot of people on the American University campus suggested that I pass this along to people in our career center, people who are working with grad students and undergraduate students. And it turns out American University is already looking at how to increase mentoring capabilities and support on our campus. So our research may now help provide another tool in the toolkit or some foundational support for these larger mentoring practices. And so I'm really excited that it can go onto this next stage and maybe transform into something that can be used in our location.

Matt Wittstein (35:38):

Well, I want to thank you all for this wonderful conversation, helping share with the research that we did together. I also want to acknowledge Gabby Plaschova as one of our colleagues that wasn't able to join us on the call today, but this has been a wonderful conversation, and thank you all, and let's keep this work going.

Jennifer Aumiller (35:56):

Thanks, Matt. This was really a wonderful conversation, and it was great to see everybody.

Alexis Hart (36:02):

So I will count each and every one of you in Team Interstellar as a mentor, and I anticipate that you will remain part of my own mentoring consultation. So thank you for your time and expertise, and thanks, Matt, for leading this conversation.

Sarah Burns Gilchrist (36:19):

Yeah, I agree. I think that building relationships, especially across campuses and around the world is really one of the strengths of this program. So thank you, Elon University and Matt and Gabby and Jen and Alexis for all being part of Team Interstellar.

Matt Wittstein (36:53):

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