

## Limed: Teaching with a Twist

### Season 4, Episode 7 – Mentoring Moves

Matt Wittstein (00:11):

You're listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy. What makes a mentoring conversation actually work? Is it the advice, the agenda, the frequency of meetings, or is it something more subtle? In this episode of Limed: Teaching With a Twist, I'm joined by Katia Levintova from the University of Wisconsin Green Bay and Mario Sto. Domingo from the University of Maryland Baltimore County to talk about their multi-institutional research about mentoring moves. Their team set out to identify what successful mentors actually say and do and how students experience those same interactions. Their international collaboration found seven distinct conversational moves that contribute to positive relationships and student growth. If mentoring is one of the most important things we do in higher education, how might becoming more intentional about our moves change the experience for students? I hope you enjoy the episode. I'm Matt Wittstein.

(01:24):

Hi, Katia. Hi, Mario. It is so good to see you both. I'm excited to talk to you today a little bit about mentoring and what your group did over the last few summers with the CEL Research Seminar. To introduce yourselves, for our audience, I would love to know who you are, where you're coming from, what your primary roles are, but I'd also like to know something about one of your best mentors at any stage of your career and development of what made them such a great mentor for you. Katia, why don't you go first?

Katia Levintova (01:55):

Hi, I'm Katia Levintova. I'm professor and chair of Political Science and Global Studies in the Department of Democracy and Justice Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Green Bay. I have been teaching there for almost 20 years. I have mentored students throughout those 20 years. And thinking back on the best mentors that I had, I can single out two, one at my PhD program and one when I was starting at UWGB. Both of them, I think, shared one overarching characteristic. They really took interest in me as a human being, not as a student, not as an employee, and became friends, first professional friends, and then later personal friends. Back to you, Mario.

Mario Sto. Domingo (02:44):

Yes. Thank you, Katia. So I am Mario Sto. Domingo. I am the associate director for evaluation and research of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, where I've been employed for almost 26 years now. Starting off as a research assistant, as a graduate student, I've been involved in the evaluation of the Marhap program since the very beginning with my mentor who has been a role model for me. He is one of my favorite mentors because he's one person who shares his life experience with me. It's not just advising or coaching, but someone who's become a part of my life, someone who knows my family, my children, and someone who shares with me his stories as well. So I get to know what his successes and failures in the past were. And so therefore, we kind of hit it off from the very beginning.

(04:03):

I knew that he's someone that could be trusted with utmost confidence and who has the expertise also to help me in my professional life. He has since retired, but then we are still connected with each other. So he's a lifelong friend, and I really cherish our relationship.

Matt Wittstein (04:27):

I really love how you both described one of those features of mentoring that we've learned is that they're not just one-off relationships, that they're long-lasting. You've talked about how those relationships developed and changed. I really love how you both are just right here thinking and reflecting on that right now. So before we get into learning about your research question and your process and your findings, I'd love to know what made you two decide to apply for and participate in the Center for Engaged Learning Summer Research Seminar about mentoring in higher education.

Katia Levintova (05:00):

So to me, mentoring is probably the most important thing that I do in my job at University of Wisconsin, Green Bay. I just think that education is such a social undertaking and without the relationship that exists between instructors and students, learning and teaching are very transactional and not necessarily very effective. So I was always drawn to these relationships with students that I was able to build, but I wanted to examine what makes more effective, maybe more sincere, more authentic relationships. So when the call came out for this particular seminar cohort, I was just jumping with joy actually, because again, I wanted to examine my own mentoring practices together with other people, but I also wanted to know what actually works best and what students perceive as being the best mentoring practices. So it was just very good timing for me. I was at the stage of my career that I'm not necessarily making new preps, but I can totally deepen and improve my mentoring, but also obviously can share it with others so we all can be better mentors.

Mario Sto. Domingo (06:17):

So in my case, it was my senior director who drew my attention to this opportunity. So as I've mentioned before, we've been involved in preparing students for advanced career in STEM and we've been so much focused on outcomes. We also are actually investigating our processes, our mechanisms, but we have not done a deeper dive into our mentoring practices or the black box between students' entry into the program and the outcome, which is their entry into graduate programs. So this opportunity was like heaven said. I mean, it's rare that we sit down and think about what we do. And this time we were able to articulate and we were able to think for three successive summers, what is it actually that mentoring does and how is a successful mentoring possible? What are the elements of successful mentoring? In my case, I'm very much particularly interested in mentoring STEM students, but our team was able to actually put together our ideas into more coherent general framework for how we see successful mentoring would be.

Matt Wittstein (07:44):

So to orient our audience a little bit to how the summer seminars work, that first summer, we were kind of all thrown into a large group where we're learning some of the basics, exploring what our interests are, exploring what each other's interests are. And then we were broken up into smaller groups. And I'm just curious as your group, the Queen Bees, as you were known as, what was your research question and how did you sort of come up with it as a group?

Katia Levintova (08:15):

I will start by saying that our group, and Mario and I actually consulted with them before our podcast today. So our group was really, really coherent and we worked so well together. We just had those skills and expertise which was completely complimentary and supportive of each other. So the process of getting to our research question, which is, what do successful mentors say and do to promote the sense of belonging and awareness of strengths in students that naturally leads to better campus engagement, the sense of belonging on campus and many other very important outcomes for students beyond just the mastery of content. So we came to this question this first summer through a lot of conversations, but very productive conversations, thinking about what should we examine given our kind of career goals, our places at our universities, our own research interests, our own teaching and mentoring interest.

(09:22):

And our group was just so wonderful. It was very international. We had scholars from Belgium. I'm obviously in international faculty. We had people from research intensive universities, from private teaching focused campuses like Mario and myself are kind of teaching focused and research oriented universities, public universities, private universities. So it was a lovely process of getting to know each other, but in the process, also honing on what is our one common denominator, examining those particular conversational moves, what mentors say and do that promote student success beyond just the mastery of content.

Mario Sto. Domingo (10:09):

I guess I'll just mention the names of the universities represented in our team, which are Elon University, Methodist University, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, where I'm from, University of Wisconsin Green Bay where Katia is from, University of California, Santa Barbara, and University of Bleach in Belgium. So we are really a multidisciplinary, multi-competency team. So as Katia mentioned, we are bringing various skillsets into this team, both quantitative qualitative research experiences and different demographics of our students. So they all came together and we were able to fashion a methodology that would answer the research questions that Katia mentioned. So following our conversations, we decided to design a first qualitative research to collect data from interviews with both mentees and mentors to answer the question, what those conversation moves are and what their outcomes may be.

Matt Wittstein (11:28):

That is a perfect transition because I wanted to ask you, what was your methodology? And I would love more detail of how you actually studied that question. So how did we get to learning what the moves are, but then also you just mentioned how effective were they?

Mario Sto. Domingo (11:47):

I can start with that. So from our general question of what the conversation moves successfully or are effective with students, we decided to do interviews with both mentees and mentors. We actually used the literature first to score what it says about what effective mentoring looks like, particularly for underserved students. And when we say underserved, those are first generation students, those are students from low income groups, those are students from underrepresented minority groups. So we also decided that we will identify what we deem are effective mentors from our old institutions, and then we will identify matches, like the mentor mentee matches. So we first, actually in my case, I first interviewed mentors and then I asked them who they can recommend for this research as interviewees on the mentee side. So we did that. We also

prepared our protocol, the list of questions from the literature, from our own experiences, and we came up with that protocol.

(13:19):

We had the protocol approved by our own institutional review boards, and then we did it. We did set up the interviews, and we can talk later about how many those we got in terms of mentors and mentee payers, and maybe Kathya can continue our methodology story.

Katia Levintova (13:43):

That was actually the most delightful part of our methodology, just talking to our colleagues and hearing their stories and their views on how you build trust. How do you encourage students? How do you make sure that they have a sense of belonging? How do you make people, especially people like first generation students, for example, aware of their own strengths that they have nobody to compare it to in their family and maybe amongst their immediate friends. So as Mario said, we interviewed, I believe, 28 mentors across all our six institutions, and then we interviewed 26 mentees. So my campus, I couldn't match two mentors to two mentees, but by and large, those were the dyadic pairs, the matched pairs that confirmed the story that students actually do understand what mentors say and do in their mentoring conversations. But what was kind of the most interesting thing that emerged from our methodological approach to that is not only what you say, but how you set up your mentoring meetings, where those mentoring meetings take place, what are the effective openers to conversations, kind of the mechanics and logistics of those mentoring meetings are super important as well.

(15:15):

So I don't want to, for us to think about that our methodology was purely about this very, what should be very organic, the conversations themselves. They were also about how you make sure that people are comfortable talking to you. So that to me was super valuable as well.

Matt Wittstein (15:35):

So when you conducted these interviews, you had sort of these pairings. And I just want to be clear that these are, you interviewed the mentors separately from the mentees, so you're getting their individual perspectives and none of that power dynamic shift. I'd love to hear about some of the questions that you actually asked the mentors and the mentees, maybe not the full list, but maybe just a few of the ones to give our audience a sense of what did you actually ask them?

Katia Levintova (16:03):

So I think we started each conversation with the question, how long and what capacity people do mentoring. So that emerged that the mentors that we interviewed on average have mentored for seven and a half years. So they were super experienced, but we asked them the questions, how often do you hold mentoring meetings? What is the modality? Do you follow up with your mentees? Where do you have your mentoring meetings? Where does mentoring, what are the spaces in which mentoring occurs? But then we went into more substantive questions, what do you say and do to promote trust? What do you say and do to make sure that students experience sense of belonging? What do you do to promote their self-awareness of their academic and social skills and things like that? And then we kind of ended up with some demographic questions to help us identify maybe there are some patterns in who does what and when.

(17:07):

But the interviews I think lasted for about an hour in each case, interviews were longer because they could elaborate on mentoring. To me, Marian, you correct me if I'm wrong, the most interesting things came up in kind of the final questions. Tell us a little bit more about why mentoring is important. And then people express just such overwhelming sense of joy, pleasure, rewards that they get from mentoring on the mentor side. They talked about the stories of what attracted them to mentoring. And that to me was the most delightful and invaluable qualitative data that we got.

Mario Sto. Domingo (17:53):

That's correct, Katia. So we made sure to ask our interviewees for stories for instances of all these mentoring conversation moves and the transformations that happen as a result of these moves. So as Katya mentioned, one of our most really probably surprising because we were not expecting this element of joy that actually many of our mentors expressed that they experienced while doing mentoring. I was seeing the impact of mentoring among the other transformations, of course, that happened would be increasing relationship, increasing in campus engagement also, and increasing, of course, the awareness of students' strengths. So I guess we already revealed our findings, but then we can go back and talk about our framework.

Katia Levintova (19:06):

Yes. So the most interesting methodological part, Matt and Mario, was that since we are the multi-institutional international team, we had some interviews in French from the University of Legion in Belgium, and those had to be transcribed. And as you might imagine, some things were lost in translation a little bit from French to English. So that was also super interesting to compare even the language around mentoring between English-speaking American educators and their French speaking counterparts in Belgium.

Matt Wittstein (19:48):

So I want to needle into these results a little bit. I want to know, what did you actually find? And I think what I'm especially interested is in what showed alignment between mentors and mentees? Where was there an agreement of this works versus where were their perceptions maybe not as well aligned, whether they're completely contrasting or not, is a different question, but I'm really curious, where did it like, oh, this totally makes sense and where was there maybe disagreement between the two stakeholders?

Mario Sto. Domingo (20:19):

Okay. I'll talk first about our general findings. So the research reveals that there are seven, there's a presence of seven conversational moves and one general mentoring outcome that factor into the mentoring conversations we examine. So at the most basic level, mentoring conversations are shaped by first conversation techniques, what mentors say, as well as the mentor meeting logistics, which Katia already mentioned that second. So the mentoring meeting logistics that they set up or what they do. So first, what they say, so conversation techniques, and then mentor meeting logistics, what they do. So to create the ideal conditions for conversations to flourish. So several conversation moves revolve around those two tenets or what we call the two engines of mentoring conversations. Some examples of conversation techniques include listening actively and being present, tailoring approaches to each individual, facilitating problem solving and challenging or promoting self-reflection. So that's one.

(21:49):

And then mentoring logistics, examples of mentoring logistics would be providing availability across modalities and time, meeting in neutral spaces, inviting mentees to drive the mentoring conversation. Then the three conversation moves next to those conversation starters would be encouragement, human connection, and navigating higher education and hidden curriculum. So encouragement, of course, obviously pertains to providing reassurance, sympathy, and empathy during difficult times, affirming, celebrating, motivating the mentee, and creating a comfortable atmosphere for conversation to move. So that's encouragement. Then we have human connection. Human connection would be like sharing life experiences and personality or positionality or finding common ground, also creating space for mentee story or personal life or dreams. And then the navigation of higher education and mitigating hidden curriculum. So that would be like a normalizing struggle, help seeking, and teaching college, life, and professional skills. So we have stories or vignettes or anecdotes pertaining to each and every one of these conversation moves. (23:45):

Then the final two conversation moves would be the sense of belonging and the awareness of friends. So sense of belonging would be like repeating explicit messages of belonging. So this is what the mentors say, supporting mentees in finding community, promoting on campus presence and engagement, and connecting students to resources for needs and opportunities to grow. On the other hand, awareness of strengths would involve, for example, reframing weaknesses, articulating students' strengths, and recognizing identities or positionalities as valuable. So instead of taking a deficit based approach, we see that mentoring has to actually be able to reframe this, what the students see as their weaknesses as could actually be a basis for actually surfacing student strengths and using these strengths as their tools for academic success or professional success for that matter.

Matt Wittstein (25:16):

So Katia, I'm really curious if there were spots that students felt one way and mentors felt a different way. So did anything come up?

Katia Levintova (25:26):

So that's a very interesting question. So in no code that we identified, there was like a strong disagreement that let's say mentors report that they promote the sense of belonging and students are saying that they do not hear that message at all. However, there were three particular area of codes which was statistically significant positive correlation between what mentors are saying and what mentees are hearing. So those are conversation techniques, which are those kind of the effective openers, having humor, kind of diffusing the tension, maybe having food in your office, or if students coming with their children, maybe there are some toys for the children to have having kind of, again, a very down to earth demeanor, disarming students with humor, as I said. So that was a very strong sense of agreement that mentors are reporting that and students are confirming that this is effective.

(26:38):

Number two is students' perception of how encouraging a mentor is. So mentors are saying that they definitely are serving as cheerleaders for students. They definitely tell them how to deal with difficult situations and things will get better and maybe giving them strategies how to overcome difficult situations, but also celebrating students' successes together with students. And students overwhelmingly agree that this is what they hear from their most effective mentors. And finally, the third area of the strongest statistically significant agreements is awareness of strengths. So students are appreciative of mentors reframing maybe potential weaknesses into strengths, telling

them that not all strengths are purely academic, that we can have the strength of resilience, or maybe the strength of being a very supportive student or being a leader. So those kind of conversations are very much confirmed as being very effective by the students.

Mario Sto. Domingo (27:46):

Among the conversation moves that we see, there may be not much of alignment. I could see from our data, one would be connecting students to resources, and that's understandable. The mentees, almost no one mentioned that particular move, and that's because probably the mentors are very much conscious of that, that they need to connect the students to resources, that students have that need to be connected, but the mentors themselves may not necessarily see that. In fact, in many of my experiences with myself as a mentor or my colleagues, they do this even without the presence of the students, and then they don't necessarily tell the students that they are connecting them to resources within campus, even outside of campus. So they are like champions or sponsors. They talk about them even without their presence, and that would be really some kind of a step up to just like a traditional advising or mentoring when you promote your student, even outside of their presence.

Katia Levintova (29:22):

If I can add a little bit to maybe put it in a perspective, so Matt, for example, we would have 81% of mentors reporting a particular conversational move and let's say 76% of mentees reporting the same thing. So are they identical? No, but are they in very strong alignment? Absolutely.

Matt Wittstein (29:48):

That makes me feel good because there's oftentimes in mentoring relationships where I think I'm doing the things I'm supposed to, but I just don't know if students are experiencing it. So it makes me feel a little bit better Or that at least you all are finding that students are experiencing it. Whether they tell me that or not is a different thing. So where I want to go next, and just very quickly is based off of your research and experience, what are the particular mentoring conversational moves that you would suggest mentors get better at?

Mario Sto. Domingo (30:25):

There's one particular mentoring move, like mentoring in the moment that I think mentors should be better at because we are busy. We teach one class after the other, and then we attend meetings. And so we almost sometimes don't have time for things that we have not planned for. But sometimes those instances or moments are the most critical for some students who may be needing help even for a short period of time. And it's critical that we know what to say or how to approach students who may be starting to disclose something to us that may be helpful for us to understand them. It could be that we may not have enough time for that moment, but we cannot actually set up something that would somehow start the process of a dialogue or a conversation. So take that opportunity to connect with the students, especially when they're trying to connect with you.

(31:48):

So not to be dismissive, not to make students feel that they're taking time away from you, but really show a concern and authenticity about really wanting to help even if at that moment you don't have enough time or adequate time, but make sure that they feel welcome. Yes, yes, we can definitely talk.

Katia Levintova (32:18):

So to me, I think it's difficult to be prescriptive about particular phrases or conversations in encouraging students or helping them to navigate higher education or make them aware of strengths. But I think this kind of mentoring mechanics and conversational techniques could be very useful. So one conversational move in particular that stood out to me that students really appreciate and good mentors practice is that check in and follow up. So don't assume that just because you dispense some advice and make suggestions that students follow up on this or maybe they need a little bit more encouragement. So don't be afraid to maybe be a little bit more proactive and I don't want to say intrusive, but be the active mentor, just how we promote active listening, right? Mentors shouldn't just assume that, okay, well, here I made the suggestion. I maybe even went with you to the resources that we discussed, that mentors should follow up and provide constant check-in with their mentees.

Mario Sto. Domingo (33:36):

There's one other mentoring move, definitely probably not a conversation, an element of silence. I think mentors should recognize that silence, not saying anything, can be powerful too. It can have a function in mentoring in a mentor-mentor relationship because we've come across students who are very reserved, who don't really talk much, who just prefer quiet, who just prefer to not say anything, but sometimes just your presence matters. So just recognize, just recognize that sometimes students have a need to just be there, so know when you should maintain just this moment of silence, just you are just being there for the student. And it could be that he, they are just waiting for the moment to say something or disclose something. In fact, I have a quote here, the student said in the beginning I was very reserved. I didn't talk much, but towards the end of the year when I was more confident, I told her, the mentor, practically everything that was going on.

(35:19):

It's more of a friendly relationship than anything else. So I think that in the end, if one day I'll be able to be successful or graduate, I'll be her future colleague.

Matt Wittstein (35:34):

That's such a great example. And it kind of pulls us back to something you were describing when you were going through some of the different moves and some of the different characteristics of the mentoring relationships being individualized and tailored to each individual student. And the things both of you said, I heard elements of being there in the moment for whatever that moment might be. Some students are going to need you to be more proactive, and so being willing to be more proactive. Some students are going to benefit from silence, and it always takes me back to that relationship piece is that if you don't know them individually, you can't actually support them individually. So just to wrap up, I want to know where do you see your scholarship? Where do you want to see your scholarship progress from here?

Katia Levintova (36:21):

Well, I'll start really quickly. So obviously we have described those particular conversational moves in one of our contributions to the CEL scholarship series and things like that, but we are also super interested in creating some particular recommendations. So here is, let's say, a scenario, a mentoring scenario, what would be very effective moves that people can practice in a situation that requires mentors attention. So this is one direction in which we are going and how our research is progressing beyond just purely theoretical and kind of interesting findings into what

can we share with people, how they can take our research and be more effective. And then Mario can continue this train of thought. We also engaged in the quantitative part of our research when we go beyond our case studies, if you will, and our qualitative exploration of effective mentoring into examination of survey results where we talk to all students, all underrepresented students, and see how they perceive mentoring and effective mentoring.

Mario Sto. Domingo (37:47):

Yes. Thank you, Katia. So we didn't talk much about this, but we used mixed method in our research. So we use both qualitative, our interviews and quantitative, we administered surveys to hundreds of students across the six universities, and we started actually analyzing our data. And so in the future, we plan to publish our results. We've done, for example, initially a confirmatory factor analysis of what transformations occur during or after the mentoring relationship. And so far we found really very interesting trends that those transformations occur in several layers, at least three layers. One would be the relational layer between the mentor and the mentee, second would be the communal layer, like the engagement and involvement with the campus community. And third is more of a first personal layer of insights about your own strengths to be able to navigate the academic and the professional life or community.

(39:16):

So those are just previous to what we have been starting to find from a larger sample of students who have experienced or not experienced mentoring relationships. So that's for the future of our research endeavors.

Matt Wittstein (39:39):

Mario and Katia, thank you so much. I really appreciated this conversation and talking to you both today. So thank you one more time.

Katia Levintova (39:48):

Thank you, Matt. It has been delightful to reconvene with you as our great colleague in the CEL seminar. And of course, always great to see you, Mario.

Mario Sto. Domingo (40:02):

And thank you, Matt. Of course, Katia. I would also, of course, be delighted to continue this conversation at some point in the future once we have most of our data analyzed and our findings are interpreted. Thank you so much.

Matt Wittstein (40:27):

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