

## Limed: Teaching with a Twist

### Season 4, Episode 9 – Identity and Belonging in Mentoring

Matt Wittstein (00:11):

You're listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy. In higher education, we often think of mentoring as something structured, formal programs, defined roles, clear outcomes. But what actually makes mentoring work? In this episode, I'm joined by Karina Hamamouche, Hannah Bellwoar, Yujie Huang, and Nira Rahman, an international multi-institutional research team that participated in the Center for Engaged Learning Research Seminar on mentoring meaningful learning experiences. Drawing on their three-year study, they explore how identity, reciprocity, and cultural context shape mentoring relationships and students' sense of belonging. Together, we unpack why shared identity matters, but difference can be just as powerful and why mentoring works best as a mutual human-centered process rather than a hierarchy. If you enjoy the podcast, please rate, review, and share it with others. Now onto the episode. I'm Matt Wittstein. Welcome to the podcast, SPARCC. It is so good to see you, Karina, Yujie, Hannah, and Nira.

(01:34):

I'm really excited to have you here today and learn a little bit about what your group researched as part of that Center for Engaged Learning Research Seminar. But to get ourselves started, I want you to introduce yourself, name, where you're from, what your role is, but also I would love for you to share what are some of the most important characteristics of your best mentors that you had. Hannah, why don't you go first?

Hannah Bellwoar (02:01):

Hi, I'm Hannah Bellwoar. I'm really excited to be here. I'm a professor of English. I'm also the director of writing and co-director of the Writing and Speech Center at Juniata College, which is a small liberal arts college in central Pennsylvania. I've been teaching and mentoring research at Juniata for about 15 years now. Characteristics of mentors of my best mentors. One of my mentors as I was an undergraduate student who is helping me find my field of writing studies. When I was working with him at the Writing Center as an undergraduate student, it was a place where I really felt like my voice and ideas mattered and were valued for the first time in my life and that really got me into my field and really made me passionate about mentoring.

Karina Hamamouche (02:58):

Hi, everyone. My name is Karina Hamamouche and I am an associate professor of psychology at Butler University, which is in Indianapolis, Indiana. And when I think about my best mentors, they're the relationships that really evolved very naturally and organically. They're not necessarily the people that I was assigned as a mentor, like an academic advisor for example, but they're people that just sort of sought me out, saw something in me that they could cultivate. And they're also the relationships that I felt like I really felt a good sense of belonging in.

Yujie Huang (03:37):

Good morning, everyone. I'm very excited to be here. My name is Yujie Huang. I am the Associate Director for Assessment at Oak Dominion University, which is a public research university in Norfolk, Virginia. I will say the best mentor I had was my chemistry teacher back in high school and three characteristics that really make him a really good mentor where he was really patient. So whenever I asked the question, he always took his time to explain the concept to make sure I understand everything. And he was also very caring. He genuinely cared about each student,

cared how we were doing in his class, in his chemistry class. And other than that, he also cared us how we were doing other subject areas as well. The last thing is he was really having confidence in each one of us. He believed that every student has potential. For some of the students, we were lagging behind in his chemistry class, but he always believed, I would say, our potentials.

(04:52):

And he always encouraged us study hard and ask questions and so we can make improvement. So until right now it has been, I would say over 20 years whenever I think of a great mentor and he's the person that popped up in my mind, I really made a huge impact on me as well.

Matt Wittstein (05:13):

And this is Nira Rahman.

Nira Rahman (05:15):

Hi, I'm from Australia. I'm from University of Melbourne. I am an academic there at faculty of arts lecture and curriculum designing. I teach identity and belonging as a subject. In terms of mentoring, I would say I've been very lucky in my life to have been mentored by so many people at different stages of life and particularly very strong women as role model. And interestingly, I started learning music before even going to school. So as I started learning Indian classical music that had a very different teaching style and now I know what pedagogy is and everything, but as a three-year-old, I did have no idea about. But when I look back and I compare that I had some fantastic mentor in the music learning space, which is very much authoritarian teaching and learning space. Then the school was very independent Western kind of learning. And that taught me that there is no one way of mentoring and there is no one way of teaching and learning.

(06:43):

So it can happen in various different ways. And relationship building is very important for me in terms of mentoring and trust is one of the core value. I wouldn't say one name because there have been so many people I would say that I was mentored and I could look up to.

Matt Wittstein (07:13):

Nira, I think that's really salient because we talked a lot about in our research groups about constellations of mentors. And so I think while I asked you to kind of single into a couple, I really liked that you pushed back and said, oh, there's lots of them. Before we get into learning more about your research project, I would love to know what attracted you to the CEL Research Seminar and so why did you decide to actually study mentorship as a scholarly field?

Nira Rahman (07:45):

I would say that I have been working in the staff student partnership and co-creation for last, I would say eight years or so. So working in that field, I would realize that is what the co-creation staff student partnership gives a different edge of mentorship or different perspective of mentorship. And I would like to connect with people about that in terms of bringing the partnership pedagogy in the mentoring space and how it can be defined and described in different ways. And though we think that we do things in university in one way, but in terms of the diversity, which is I'm always very interested about that how even quote unquote in the Western setting, the teaching and learning can be very, very diverse. So I'm in Australia, Melbourne University is a huge research focused university, having more than 50,000 students, whereas more than 20,000 student is international student and comparing to other universities like the Juniata or Karina, your one, we kept talking about how our institutions are different.

(09:16):

So I was really interested to know about how as individuals we act and navigate in the mentoring space as mentor and at the same time as mentee. So when I applied for the Center of Engaged Learning program, I wanted to study mentorship, but I wanted to be as well sort of mentee at the same time and mentee by my colleagues and others.

(09:54):

I wanted to learn more and I wanted to know more about it. And as I said, that relationship building is very important for me. So I wanted to bring that because in academia, I feel that we really work in silos, very individual. Sometimes it's very lonely. And when I applied for it in 2023, I felt that I wanted to create my comradery in that sense. So that was one of the reasons.

Karina Hamamouche (10:27):

So my reasoning was kind of different than Nira's. I primarily am researching child development. So my area in psychology is developmental and I study things like how children learn to count or tell time. And so I had always been sort of interested in the scholarship of teaching and learning. I had read articles and been really interested in getting into that area, but I didn't really know how to start. And so when I saw this call for the seminar, I thought, oh, this would be a really great way to get into a new area of research. At Butler, we're a smaller liberal arts school and so mentoring is really important, whether that's peer mentoring or faculty research mentoring. And so when I saw that the opportunity was related to meaningful mentorship, I thought this is the right time and the right subject for me to get my feet wet and try something new.

(11:23):

And like Nira said, it was really cool to see that the seminar attracts international participation. And so I was really excited to get to know people outside of my field, outside of my university and form some new research collaborations.

Yujie Huang (11:40):

I had great mentors and so they made a huge impact on myself. So when I saw this opportunity from Elon, the subjects about the mentoring from the personal experience that definitely draw on my attention. So I wanted to learn more about this topic and looking forward to collaborating with other researchers who also share the same interest in this mentoring topic as well. Additionally, I was international student, I came to the US for my master's and doctorate degree. So I did have, I would say, the different mentoring experience compared to my mentoring experience back to my home country. So that's another reason I wanted to learn more say across different cultural contexts, what are some characteristics that define a good mentor, what we can do as mentors to continue to support mentees so we can help them to grow professionally and academically. So I think that's one of the reasons that I was so excited when I saw this opportunity popped up.

Hannah Bellwoar (12:44):

I think my experience was kind of similar to Nira's. I was already doing research related to mentoring probably for about the same amount of time, about the last eight years. And I had learned about the Center for Engaged Learning by collaborating with Jessie Moore actually on some work related to mentoring undergraduate research and writing studies. And so I was really excited about the opportunity to be able to work with a diverse group at different kinds of institutions in different countries and to think about mentoring from this sort of broader perspective and what my own personal experience as well as my own research, how that could be a part of it as well as how I could learn more and expand more by learning from others. So I was really excited for the opportunity when this topic arose.

Matt Wittstein (13:48):

Again, I like the diversity of responses here that y'all had your own reasons and hopefully you felt like you got what you wanted out of the research seminar. I know that I did. So let's get on to learning a little bit about your research project and specifically what was your actual research question and how did you all generate that? I know a lot of the groups happened in organic ways, had a very specific question coming in. How did you guys come up with your question and what was that final research question?

Karina Hamamouche (14:19):

I feel like when we first started talking, there were three areas of interest that we all had. We were all really interested in the systemic inequities that impacted mentoring relationships. We were curious about the role of identity in mentoring relationships and also about how mentoring could cultivate a sense of belonging and whether it cultivated a sense of belonging. So somehow we came up with those three main topics and then we kind of went from there

Yujie Huang (14:51):

And I'll also add when we were exploring the research question and I would say the cultural aspects also played a role as well because given that some of us had that international background coming here as a student and now served as mentor, we do wanted to explore how the cultural nuances also impact those mentoring relationships as well. So that's another aspect way I would say that was part of our discussion for our research question.

Hannah Bellwoar (15:24):

I think too, we were really interested in research that could make a difference and transform experiences in higher education for mentors and mentees through mentoring relationships. So I think we focused on those three kind of ideas about systemic inequity, identity and sense of belonging out of a desire to produce research that could somehow be transformative.

Nira Rahman (15:51):

Coming to a question was not an easy task because Karina is still laughing about it because there were ups and downs and things like that, but that actually was a reminder for all of us again that we had that similar interest and we wanted to focus on those three issues which we already mentioned, but then again, how we will reach to that point was at the starting point of lot of discussion.

Karina Hamamouche (16:32):

So in year one, we settled on a research question that was how does reflecting on intersectional identity and mentoring informed by a partnership framework influence mentors and mentees sense of belonging. And so underneath that, we were really interested in what aspects of identity are most important to mentors and mentees and how do these aspects then impact their sense of belonging

Matt Wittstein (16:57):

And so that was at the end of year one. Did it transform by the time you got to the end of year three or were you able to stick with that general question?

Hannah Bellwoar (17:07):

I think the question was kind of broad. So we did a little bit of narrowing. We were initially very interested in intersectional identity and we built that into our methodology, but because intersectional identity is very complex, it's about lots of different identities and the way they

intersect in somebody's experience. We had a hard time bringing that out of the research and so we ended up narrowing on identity more broadly.

Matt Wittstein (17:41):

Well, that is a great segue because my next question is, what was your methodology? What did you actually do to understand this a little bit more deeply? And I'm really curious, how did you try to incorporate an intersectional identity into that methodology intentionally?

Hannah Bellwoar (17:58):

So our primary methodology was to do focus groups and each of us did focus groups with mentees. So in those focus groups, one of the first things we did was give participants the wheel of power and privilege that was originally developed by Sylvia Duckworth and others. It's been adapted many times and we used an adapted version as well. And we had participants identify three aspects of identity as well as identifying a mentor and a mentoring relationship that they wanted to focus on and then talk about how sense of belonging was cultivated for participants within that relationship based on the identity categories that were most important to them.

Nira Rahman (18:53):

We also use the partnership principles as our kind of lens to see how the respect, reciprocity and responsibility, shared responsibility impacts the mentoring relationship. So the identity in one hand and then the partnership principles coined by Kochseith, Boville and Felton.

Yujie Huang (19:27):

And I also remember that at the early stage of our research process, we also did a survey. So we had the questions asking about, I would say the different dynamics of the partnership and also the using the scale from sense of belonging, trying to understand what is those relationship or what is a potential correlation between those different aspects as well. And I would say our plan at that time was using the survey also to inform our focus group questions as well so we can ask a more deeper question based on the survey results like that.

Karina Hamamouche (20:06):

The nice thing about the survey was that we could ask people questions about a lot of different identity markers, whereas in the focus groups, we had them pick the three most important and then we were able to see whether or not there were any consistencies in which identity markers seemed to be coming up a lot in mentoring relationships and then we could ask people about a lot of them in the survey. So I think that that was helpful to get a bit broader perspective.

Matt Wittstein (20:33):

So drum roll, please, what did you find?

Karina Hamamouche (20:39):

Well, I can talk about the survey results even though that was sort of the secondary piece of it. With the survey, we did try to recruit both mentors and mentees. We ended up with a lot more mentees filling out the survey than mentors. And I will say that our sample size is relatively small, so we only had 17 mentors participate and we had 47 mentees. But when we looked at how similar mentees and mentors reported being to each other, mentees reported being most similar to their mentor in terms of race, which was one of the identity markers we had identified. But interestingly, mentors reported being most similar to their mentees in terms of sexual orientation. So there was some difference there in how mentors and mentees were perceiving the most similar identity markers for them. When we asked about whether or not these identity markers are being similar in terms of identity was actually important or which of these were most important, mentees

felt that gender was the most important similarity, whereas mentors reported that having similarities in physical, emotional, and developmental abilities was the most important.

(21:58):

We also, as Nira pointed out, asked about respect, reciprocity, and responsibility and mentees reported that respect was the most important in the relationship, whereas mentors reported responsibility. And so we did see that there was somewhat of a disconnect between mentors and mentees in terms of what features they thought were the most important, which I don't think is necessarily a bad thing. A lot of times we are trying to match mentors and mentees on identity markers and this suggests that maybe that's not as important as we thought it was.

Hannah Bellwoar (22:38):

I think we had some similarities come out of our focus groups that really stood out to me. I think going into the research, we suspected that similarities and identity would be important to participants, but actually we did learn that identity is really important in mentoring relationships, but it's not always because of similarities. The participants we had in our research groups really across the board were talking about either strategically selecting mentors that had differences in identity or also just different kinds of ways that mentees were building relationships with mentors across difference. So there's a lot of intentionality within that mentees really desiring some difference in ways that could help them develop areas that they felt like were less developed or they were interested in. For example, across age, there were often mentees seeking out somebody who was older than them to mentor them or differences across gender and things like that.

Nira Rahman (23:57):

I will focus on in terms of what Hannah said, that the focus groups talk a lot about the aspect of reciprocity. It came really significantly and what really stood out in there that how mentees consistently described mentorship as a space where reciprocity was considered essential conditions to grow and mentorship was not perceived as a top-down relationship. Instead, it was experienced as a shared journey. And one comment really stood out how one of the participants described mentoring should be "happened with them, not to them". So there was a real sense that the relationship worked best when it was a two-way street when they were not just receiving advice or being evaluated, but when they could also contribute, share, reflect, and even challenge. In relation to this, the idea of mutual respect came up again and again, especially in the way students describe psychological safety. They felt they could be vulnerable, share uncertainties and even admit when they were unsure of what they needed because the relationship wasn't hierarchical.

(25:35):

It was relational, it was dialogic and this sense of balance created a space where trust could begin to grow. And one of the comments stayed with me that is quote unquote encouraged to courage, that's reciprocity. So that is really, really important. And another thing came up very briefly that reciprocity is directly connected to agency and this brings us to the second kind of finding in terms of agency, which was deeply intertwined with trust and vulnerability.

Matt Wittstein (26:12):

I really like that quote that you shared that mentoring should happen with them, not to them. I find it a little curious that it seems like on prompt they realized reciprocity was an important feature, whereas in our research, that wasn't necessarily something that our participants had on their four minds, but when prompted about reciprocity as a characteristic, they sort of realized that, oh yeah, that would be really good. So we're seeing it at different developmental stages in

different research contexts. I think that's really cool. I've asked all of the groups this, but were there any unexpected turns that you all had during the process or was everything just perfectly smooth sailing?

Yujie Huang (27:00):

I think along the process we had a lot of ambitious goals and because we're so passionate about this topic, we wanted to explore different aspects of it. And so at one point we were going, I would say looking too much, but fortunately we had those great discussions really narrowed down to focus our topic and then to move forward with that. But that was an interesting, I would say, experience as well.

Nira Rahman (27:32):

And I would say that even negotiating within us and understanding each of us and having passion is good, but when you have passionate bunch of people all bring their interest, we just did not bring our physically we represent there. We brought our soul into it. So the negotiation I would say particularly taught me really or made me think really deep that how in any partnership or even mentoring relationship we really need to negotiate and I'm going back again to that point of relationship building and bringing trust and knowing that we have each other's, it's easy to say, but really, really creating the safe space within us. It's a good lesson I would say we all learned in different ways and our group is really interesting in a way because we were different time zones, different countries because Yugi, Karina and Hannah, you guys are from the US, but I was from Australia.

(29:01):

We had Sue who was from South Africa initially we had a participant, Julie, she was from Canada. So different time zones, different so negotiation is not just the passion point negotiation, it's just the logistic negotiation as well. So these are the good learning curve, I would say. And when we talk about the data and bringing agency and reciprocity in terms of the mentoring relationship and the data, I would say we had to do that partnership principles, bring that along to build our relationship as well.

Hannah Bellwoar (29:45):

Kind of going along with that, I think one of the things that we found in the research is that mentees really value when their mentors are building relationships with them outside of the formal settings. And I think we really found that with our group as well, it was important for us to build relationships when we were all sitting around the table talking about our research, but also to do it outside of those spaces. So when we would go out to eat, sitting with each other, sitting with different groups, getting to know each other, learning about each other's families and each other's lives and it's about more than what we do but about who we are. And so our identities are such an important part of the research as well.

Karina Hamamouche (30:32):

I love that, Hannah. I was thinking about that too and how many of us mentioned at the beginning of the podcast that we were really drawn to this program because it was an opportunity to meet new people, get out of our silos, try something new. And I think that that was both a wonderful part of the program and also at times a challenge. It took us some time to get to know what are people's expertise, what are each of us bringing to the table? And we eventually, I think, really did draw on each person's background, but I thought that was a really powerful part of the seminar.

Yujie Huang (31:10):

I will also add that we were studying about the mentoring and as part of this research group in a way we were also mentoring each other. We were doing the practices that reflect those good practice about the mentor relationship. Like Hannah mentions that we share our vulnerabilities, we shared our common interests trying to find that connection with each other so we can build our relationship not only from this, I would say as part of the program, but also looking forward to building that relationship the long-term as well. So we were in the mentoring, I would say, the environments that the bubble as well.

Matt Wittstein (31:51):

So I want to go back to something that Hannah said earlier of that one of the goals was for this to have transformational characteristics to it. And so I want to ask each of you, if you could boil it down to just one or maybe two transformational practices, what would be the outcomes? What would be the translational pieces, the transformational pieces of your research that you hope universities and faculty and Centers for Teaching and Learning and all of these spaces would take into account as they plan their sort of mentoring programs, their mentoring pedagogies and whatnot?

Nira Rahman (32:33):

I would say that we wanted to bring, as Hannah said, and I also kept mentioning that relationship building. So in terms of mentoring relationship, we wanted to focus that it's a human exchange. So we are actually bringing peace of us in there. So we are bringing who we are, what are our lenses and how are we seen and at the same time, how do I belong there? So these kind of aspects when we come to any mentoring relationship, this is something I would love for the universities to think that mentoring, peer mentoring or any other mentoring program is not just the tick in the box, rather it's a human exchange and we all need to bring ourselves and identity is a part of that. We do bring different parts of our identities and in the conversations we might decide that which facade of my identity will be at the forefront and which will be go back.

(33:44):

So things like that. So I would say the concept of who am I and what are my lenses? So the identity and positionality in the mentoring relationship building, I would say focusing on that rather than just sort of it's a tick in the box program.

Karina Hamamouche (34:05):

Something that I'm trying to implement right now, I teach a finding success in psychology program at Butler and it's for our first year students in our major and we've recently incorporated peer mentors into the class. And historically I've had the mentors sort of introduce themselves and ask the students to try to pick a mentor that maybe has some similarities to them, whether that's an organization they're involved in or a career goal or something like that. And after doing this research, I'm kind of veering away from that and thinking about intentionally picking mentors and mentees that have differences in their identities since that was something that came up so prominently in the focus groups.

Yujie Huang (34:51):

And I will say for a mentoring relationship to be truly transformative and it has to be genuine and authentic. And back to Nira's point, it's not like a checkoff the box type of thing. It's a human approach when mentors really care about their mentees, mentees can feel it. So it's really great to see that universities have different mentoring programs, but we really have to focus on the authenticity and the genuine aspect of it, not like say, "Hey, let's do some performative mentoring because mentees can feel whether that care that trust is genuine or not.

Hannah Bellwoar (35:36):

I think we already talked a little bit about reciprocity and mutually beneficial relationships in mentoring. I think I've also been teaching a peer mentoring class this past semester for the first time to students who are hoping to become tutors and writing and speech at Juniata. And so I've been thinking a lot about what does it mean to be mutually beneficial? So I think that mentors have to have intentional practices that show how they are benefiting from the mentoring relationship so that mentees can understand that because that's not something they're going to necessarily see going into it since these relationships are often hierarchical, but we would like to transform them to be not hierarchical. And so that has been sort of the focus I think from the beginning for us.

Matt Wittstein (36:39):

So where do you each hope that mentoring scholarship will go next?

Nira Rahman (36:44):

I remember still the first day in 2023, Yujie, you and I talked about the cultural lens and the cultural capital because we focused on identity and identity is not something without the language and culture. And so I would really love to explore the cultural nuances and cultural capital mentors and mentees bring in the relationship and how that lens actually influence or impact how they translate the different values of that relationship building aspect. So for an example, when we talk about respect, the way some of us understand the respect because of the cultural connotation, it might be very different from other cultural in other cultural contexts. I'm just using one example. So I would really love to explore that. And Yujie, I still remember those discussion, so would love to do that work.

Yujie Huang (37:53):

Yes, I remember that we were talking about cross-cultural mentoring. So I feel like that the culture definitely plays important part, especially in those cross-cultural mentoring on the context. So really looking forward to exploring more how culture impacts those communication and misunderstanding during the mentoring relationship building process, what are some common challenges and how can we continue to promote those cross-cultural mentoring effectively so we can, I would say benefits, especially international students and or students and mentors, they're coming from different cultural background to make that relationship more meaningful, non-lasting and impactful. So yes, in nutshell, cross-cultural mentoring is still another, I would say, big interest for me. Yeah.

Hannah Bellwoar (38:50):

I really hope that mentoring can continue to transform experiences for everyone in higher education. And I think there's just so much more for us to learn, but I think with that focus of things being mutually beneficial, of reciprocity, of really thinking about the practices that are impactful and also not to, even though it's complex not to discard intersectional identity for our lives, they're complex. Our interactions are complex. And so continuing to find ways to think about and study and learn about how those complexities make us better, make us more understanding, make us more open to change I think that's really important.

Karina Hamamouche (39:46):

I think that one of the limitations with the survey data we collected was that we weren't necessarily talking to mentor and mentee pairs. They were just students who reported being a mentor or a mentee in some capacity. And I think really diving into the immediate relationships that people have, whether that's the peer mentors in my class and their actual mentees in class to

really see if our results hold up or if not. So I'd love to sort of see mentoring research go in that direction too.

Matt Wittstein (40:20):

Well, Nira, Yujie, Hannah, Karina, I have loved this conversation. Thank you so much for sharing it with us.

Nira Rahman (40:27):

Thank you. Thank you for having us, Yah.

Karina Hamamouche (40:29):

It was so good to see everyone. Thank you.

Yujie Huang (40:32):

Thank you. Thank you for having us.

Matt Wittstein (40:41):

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](http://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.