
9-15-2014

From Learning Comes Meaning: Informal Comentorship and the Second-Career Academic in Education

Joe Barrett

Brock University, jbarrett@brocku.ca

Hilary Brown

Brock University, hbrown@brocku.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Barrett, J., & Brown, H. (2014). From Learning Comes Meaning: Informal Comentorship and the Second-Career Academic in Education. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(37), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2014.1009>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



THE QUALITATIVE REPORT
DISCOVER ONE OF OUR VIRTUAL
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WORKSHOPS
WITH INDUSTRY EXPERTS.

JOIN US ONLINE. LIMITED SPOTS AVAILABLE. BOOK YOURS NOW!

TQR
THE QUALITATIVE REPORT
WHERE THE WORLD COMES TO LEARN
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

From Learning Comes Meaning: Informal Comentorship and the Second-Career Academic in Education

Abstract

Informal mentoring relationships develop out of mutual identification and the fulfillment of career needs. As new faculty, we struggled to balance and decipher all the various facets inherent in the research, service, and teaching responsibilities in our new roles. This paper chronicles an informal comentorship collaboration we struck up to support our efforts as second-career academics in the field of education, seeking to navigate our way through institutional resocialization at a mid-sized Canadian university. Using a collaborative autoethnographic approach, we collected data comprising handwritten notes, tape-recorded conversations, e-mail reflections, and metareflections crafted after scheduled meetings over the course of a single academic school year. We sought to link theory with practice while using our own stories, narratives, and lived experiences as a basis for understanding our respective journeys toward social health and well-being in the academy, as well as our proficiency and competence as new scholars. From our analysis, we were able to interpret more clearly our roles, responsibilities, and needs, as well as institutional and departmental culture and norms. We offer practical implications and five lessons we have learned regarding the use of informal comentorships as an approach to managing the institutional resocialization of second-career academics.

Keywords

Informal, comentorship, institutional resocialization, second career academics, education, collaborative autoethnography

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).



From Leaning Comes Meaning: Informal Comentorship and the Second-Career Academic in Education

Joe Barrett

Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

Hilary Brown

Brock University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Informal mentoring relationships develop out of mutual identification and the fulfillment of career needs. As new faculty, we struggled to balance and decipher all the various facets inherent in the research, service, and teaching responsibilities in our new roles. This paper chronicles an informal comentorship collaboration we struck up to support our efforts as second-career academics in the field of education, seeking to navigate our way through institutional resocialization at a mid-sized Canadian university. Using a collaborative autoethnographic approach, we collected data comprising handwritten notes, tape-recorded conversations, e-mail reflections, and metareflections crafted after scheduled meetings over the course of a single academic school year. We sought to link theory with practice while using our own stories, narratives, and lived experiences as a basis for understanding our respective journeys toward social health and well-being in the academy, as well as our proficiency and competence as new scholars. From our analysis, we were able to interpret more clearly our roles, responsibilities, and needs, as well as institutional and departmental culture and norms. We offer practical implications and five lessons we have learned regarding the use of informal comentorships as an approach to managing the institutional resocialization of second-career academics. Keywords: Informal, comentorship, institutional resocialization, second career academics, education, collaborative autoethnography

This paper outlines the challenges faced by two second-career academics in the field of education journeying through the process of institutional resocialization as new, tenure-track faculty members. Specifically, it examines how we, as new faculty, used a dyadic, informal mentoring partnership as a strategy for success and affirmation in managing our resocialization in our newly acquired roles in the academy. We define second-career academics in education as teachers, education consultants, or education administrators who have moved from a career in K-12 public or private education to a school, faculty, or department of education at a college or university as a tenure-track faculty member. While we are writing from our experiences coming out of K-12 education, much of what we share in this paper could apply to second career academics across a variety of disciplines.

In the course of the paper we use autoethnographic dialogues to distill nodal moments from our collaborative relationship. Our seminal moments provide a context for how our collaborative relationship evolved, as well as insight into what we learned from each other, our shared and disparate struggles, and our emergent arrangement of an informal comentorship. We hope that our autoethnographic examination may add to the scant available literature examining the resocialization of second-career academics in the field of education (Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill, & Pitts Bannister, 2009; Kinsey et al., 2006; LaRocco & Bruns,

2006) and provide insight into the experiences and growth of two such tenure-track academics engaged in an informal comentorship. Through mutually sharing our autobiographical stories, we connected the personal to the cultural, and in doing so practically invited an autoethnographic approach to inform our study method; this in turn provided us a substantive method to better understand our position within the academy and make sense of our new roles in our second careers as academics.

Background

Both of us were hired initially as long-term appointees and subsequently into our present tenure-track positions with our terminal degrees in progress. We both completed our doctorates while working full-time at the university, while earlier we had both worked at the same district school board. We also shared a genuine affinity for and love of teaching. In addition to traveling similar career paths, we both came from backgrounds where an overall sense of well-being had been our life-long goal. In addition, we realized that we had common epiphanies or markers in our lives that shaped how we approached both scholarship and mentorship as teacher educators. In short, our core values, beliefs, and concerns were in alignment. In the absence of any formal orientation or mentoring program in our new home in the university, these similarities drew us together, thus providing a foundation for what would become a fruitful, informal comentorship.

Theory Guiding Practice

In the course of developing our mentoring partnership, and as part of our preparation for our informal meetings, we undertook a review of the literature based on our own practices and early experiences in the academy. Specifically, we examined (a) autoethnography as a means to examine our coconstructed experiences in the academy, (b) mentoring in higher education, and (c) the resocialization of second-career academics. In doing so, we were seeking to provide a contextual understanding of how we, as pretenured second-career academics in education, could manage our own resocialization using an informal comentorship.

Autoethnography

The term *auto* is commonly used in the academy when referencing publications in which the author presents critical reflections and interpretations of personal experience; ethnography, on the other hand, involves a “qualitative approach to studying the rules, norms, and acts of resistance associated with cultural groups” (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012, p. 209). Ellis and Bochner (2000) defined autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). These autobiographies further “self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation” (p. 742). Autoethnography, then, is a research approach that privileges the individual; it is

a form of critical self-study in which the researcher takes an active, scientific and systematic view of personal experience in relation to cultural groups identified by the research as similar to the *self* (i.e., us) or as *others* who differ from the self (i.e., them). (Hughes et al., 2012, p. 209)

Autoethnography has also been described as “a self-narrative that critiques the situations of self with others in social contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 710). As our informal comentorship developed, we found ourselves applying autoethnography as a way to examine our construction of our professorial roles and responsibilities in the academy.

Mentorship

Upon entering the academy, neither of us was offered either traditional mentorship, where a more experienced person helps one less experienced (Murray, 1991), or mentorship as a dyadic relationship, where someone more experienced takes on a protégé and furthers his or her professional and personal development (Torres-Guzman & Goodwin, 1995). Yet our exploration of the literature on mentorship in higher education affirmed the important role mentors can play in the success and trajectory of pretenured faculty (Driscoll et al., 2008; Greene et al., 2009; McGuire & Reger, 2003). Mullen and Forbes (2000) highlighted the importance of senior faculty or tenured mentors in helping junior, pretenured faculty navigate their way through new and unfamiliar tasks and responsibilities. In the absence of a more formal mentorship arrangement, we thus turned to more egalitarian examples of faculty mentorship, namely, informal arrangements. Informal mentoring partnerships develop on the basis of perceived competence and interpersonal comfort (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997). Members select partners whose beliefs and values are in alignment, which in turn may serve to underpin an enjoyable working relationship. Our partnership followed this pattern. In addition, our form of dialogue and collaboration were comfortably borne out of professional interplay that at times closely resembled reciprocal mentoring (Henry, Stockdale, Hall, & Deniston, 1994). Thus, our partnership evolved organically out of our mutual pursuit of the skills we needed to successfully navigate our resocialization as second-career academics within education.

Resocialization of Second-Career Academics

Individually, we had been exploring the literature for validation and nonjudgmental affirmation of what we were experiencing as former educational professionals now in second careers in higher education. Yet what we found both in the literature and at our institution was a paucity of information on the plight of second-career academics within education, as well as limited formal institutional support (LaRocco & Bruns, 2006). Specifically, little is known about the challenges and the resocialization that new professors must undergo as they embark on a journey of unlearning old norms, roles, and values that as educational practitioners in the K-12 system were critically important, while learning new ones essential for their new role in the academy.

For instance, as educators in K-12 public or private school systems, our time was dictated for us. We were bound to a rigid school structure that allocated preparatory time, defined the day’s start and finish times, and predetermined instructional time. Additionally, time for remediation or extending learning was limited. In contrast, evidence suggests that education professionals having to resocialize in second careers in academia struggle with their new-found autonomy, management of their time, and the many unexpected facets of their workload (Badali, 2004; Ciuffetilli-Parker & McQuirter-Scott, 2010). Researchers who have examined the transition of such faculty have focused mainly on exploring their perceptions (Kinsey et al., 2006; LaRocco & Bruns, 2006). LaRocco and Bruns (2006) found that second-career academics struggled to find balance while vacillating between their responsibilities as teachers and researchers. Cumbie, Weinert, Luparell, Conley, and Smith (2005) noted that for new academics, “the road to scholarship can be filled with many obstacles,

among them time constraints, teaching and meeting demands, student needs, office interruptions, and lack of collegueship” (p . 289). In the absence of a supportive relationship or institution, these struggles and challenges can both overwhelm and undermine the forward momentum necessary for growth and demonstration of competence and excellence in teaching, research, and service—areas of responsibility and essential components in the tenure process for all academics (Badali, 2004).

Evidence suggests that new education faculty coming from the K-12 system may struggle to build a set of research skills and a research agenda that reflects the bridging of theory and practice—a most intimidating challenge in the resocialization process (Kinsey et al., 2006). They may tend to lean on their area of strength, in this case expertise in teaching, and invest a disproportionate amount of time in this comfortable activity, effectively crowding out time for developing research skills and engaging in scholarly writing (Driscoll et al., 2009). Second-career academics are often left to their own devices in managing and establishing their own academic routines under novel autonomous structures (Fogg, 2002), while attempting to fulfill their defined responsibilities.

Method

“Autoethnographers use their personal experiences as primary material (data) for social investigation” (Chang, 2013, p. 108). Our collaborative autoethnographic examination of our resocialization as second-career academics focused on our use of an informal comentorship as a way to address our struggles in resocializing as new faculty. It was completed with full collaboration meaning that we worked through each phase of the process together from “beginning (data collection) to the end (writing)” (Chang, p.111). Using the writing and sharing of our personal stories and experiences as primary data, we found mental images from our past being brought to life, unveiling the complexity of the many variables inherent in our new roles in higher education and showing how our past roles as teachers or administrators influenced the tensions in our current roles. Furthermore, we could complete this research only by exposing our vulnerable selves, our emotions, body, and spirit, as well as telling evocative stories that created the effect of reality (Reed-Danahay, 1997), while seeking fusion between our past and present. The purpose of autoethnography is not only to tell personal stories but rather “it intends to expand the understanding of social realities through the lens of the researcher’s personal experiences” (Chang, p. 108). Given our own dislocation as academics who had left a “home” (teaching or administrative positions in K-12 education), collaborative autoethnography appeared both a natural method for searching for the personal, the origins of the trajectory we now found ourselves in, and the cultural, the situated institutional influences affecting our course as second-career academics (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012; Reed-Danahay, 1997). In a period where we were both searching for community and comfort in social interactions in the academy, collaborative autoethnography provided us with a transforming process; a mechanism that allowed us, as scholars, to build community, advance our own scholarship, and become empowered in our own institutional context (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012). Further, its use provided us with the occasion to interrogate and reconcile our pasts within the present and explore our collective and individual experiences within our new social context in higher education in a way that we felt we could not capably achieve in isolation (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012).

Data Collection

Our informal comentorship grew out of an initial get-together in the spring of 2011. We had agreed to meet in order to discuss how we could support each other’s scholarly efforts

and transition to the academy. We shared stories and experiences. We questioned, listened, puzzled, and mused over our early challenges and feelings of inadequacy and isolation. Separately, we had also each identified with the work of Kinsey and colleagues (2006), who detailed the experiences of tenure-track faculty who had moved from the realm of public education to careers in education academia. Participants in their study were asked to address their struggles, feelings, and changes associated with becoming professors through narratives, analysis of which revealed four categories of struggle: with the role, with the self, with the culture, and future struggles (Kinsey et al., 2006). In our first meeting, the use of Kinsey and colleagues' (2006) categories of struggle served as guideposts for thinking about our own struggles as second career academics in education. Moreover, we both found that by orienting our initial conversations around Kinsey and colleagues' (2006) categories of struggle, we were: (a) thinking and speaking more deeply about our own challenges as second career education academics in education, and (b) making good use of the limited time we had together. At the conclusion of our first meeting, we chose to adopt these categories of struggle as a way of framing our discussions and subsequent data analysis for each of our informal gatherings. We immediately set up our next four meetings, each framed around a particular category of struggle: with the role, with the self, with the culture, and future struggles (Kinsey et al., 2006).

Margaret then wrote up her initial reflections on the discussion and sent them to John, who in turn compiled his own reflections on both the discussion and Margaret's thoughts. The next four sessions followed a similar sequence, each framed around the juxtaposition of our own experiences with one of the categories of struggle. During each encounter, our discussion would organically unfold and flow around our common concerns, issues, and the obstacles we faced in our daily work, while simultaneously celebrating our individual successes without envy or resentment. Each get-together ended with a discussion of how we did not want to "play the game," but rather wanted to learn how we could assert our authenticity and search for meaning throughout our experience of resocialization.

The pattern took shape in the form of systematically collecting our handwritten notes and tape-recorded conversations, as well as our reflections on our discussions using e-mail summaries that culminated with metareflections on each other's initial reflections. Unbeknownst to us at the time, we were in the beginning stages of developing an informal comentorship. The seed was taking root. Through open dialogue we were building a relationship while acting as informal comentors. When we first began meeting, we had no idea how our collaboration would evolve. But once established, we maintained a level of informality that allowed every new idea to emerge and be considered. Five months into our informal comentorship, we began our formal analysis and writing plan.

Data Analysis

We chose to interpret our shared and individual experiences, handwritten notes, tape-recorded conversations, reflections, and metareflections through the lens of the four categories of struggle, both of us viewing the evidence as a catalyst for exploration at a time when we both felt vulnerable and alone. We examined our insights and feelings as an ongoing interpretive task. Throughout our autoethnographic research, we paid careful attention to ensure that our analyses were conducted with care and accuracy. The accuracy of our insights and feelings pertained to our present experiences as second-career academics in relation to what we knew of our past as teachers or administrators. Every story had a future embedded in it. Whether the past in fact happened exactly as we remembered it was not as important as what we wanted to understand and communicate in the present. Therefore, by accuracy we mean not that we were seeking to generalize knowledge, but rather that we were seeking other kinds of knowledge—embodied, local, resonant, heuristic, insightful, aesthetic, and so forth—

that could provide a “performance of meaning” for us. Our story was a “site of possibility” (Luce-Kapler, 2004, p. 88). Or as Richardson (2000) noted, “There is no such thing as ‘getting it right,’ only ‘getting it’ differently contoured and nuanced” (pp. 930–931).

In addition, the stories we shared with each other often included other people. Writing about others brought with it an inherent ethical responsibility that was also personal. When sharing these encounters, we agreed to operate under an ethic of care; like a medical doctor, we sought to do no harm (Denzin, 2003). Because of the intrinsic nature of our autoethnographic approach, we also recognized that the curiosities and special interest in our stories must not deter us from methodically collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data that informed our understanding of our professional journey from the world of K-12 education to that of higher education.

Through our interpretations, we sought to understand the role, if any that our informal comentorship played in addressing the struggles associated with the institutional resocialization of second-career academics coming from careers in K-12 education. We also aspired to provide lessons based on our own experiences that we could offer other educational professionals new to second careers in higher education.

Findings

Here we have chosen to present our findings in a “show and tell” fashion as a way of “balancing the expression (showing) with explanation (telling)” (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 32) - using Kinsey et al.’s (2006) categories of struggle—with the culture, with the role, with the self, and future struggles—to do the telling. We chose to use the back and forth of showing and telling in order to illuminate the theory that underscores our practice. In using Kinsey’s four categories, we recognize some overlap between them. For example, when discussing institutional culture, it may be noticed that we are also struggling with aspects of the self and the role; no one category remains isolated.

Struggle With Culture: Exposing Vulnerabilities

(John opens the door, poking his head into the glass-paneled room where Margaret’s attention is focused on a single file folder. A stack of folders sits just to her left.)

JOHN: What are you doing in here?

MARGARET: I’m reviewing PhD applications.

JOHN: I always wondered who used these rooms. How’s everything else going?

MARGARET: Not so good. I feel overwhelmed. I’m questioning whether I made the right decision to take this job. I feel like I should have continued teaching eighth grade.

(John listens attentively.)

MARGARET: I have talked to various colleagues about my challenges and lack of direction in my new role as an academic, but no one seems to care. Some colleagues simply listen and nod. Some say, “Yeah, I had the same experience when I started out,” and that’s it. They don’t offer any constructive assistance. Part of my frustration is that there is no mutual time in the day to commune with people. When we worked in a school we had the staffroom where we could gather each day and talk to our colleagues, vent our frustrations, and, most importantly, ask for help. Here, it appears as though we are meant to work in isolation. There is no common time or place to meet. I don’t know

who to talk to regarding my research agenda or how much service I should be doing. I guess I'm just feeling overwhelmed.

JOHN (*internal voice saying "I'm feeling the same way"*): Just hang in there, things will get better.

Margaret did not feel supported during her early years, but in fact found herself marginalized in her new position. Feeling dislocated, she was finding it difficult to resocialize as a second-career academic after a successful career as a K-12 teacher. At the same time, she was having difficulty incorporating her holistic philosophy into a culture characterized by competition and individualism (Tynan & Garbett, 2007). For these reasons, her first few years as an academic were challenging, forcing her to question her change in career. John, on the other hand, was choosing not to confide in anyone about his personal struggle as a new tenure-track professor after years of teaching in K-12, even though he, too, found it a challenge to decipher and balance all the various facets inherent in his new role. Instead, he internalized his doubts and concerns, continuing to quietly collect bits of information along the way that might help him further interpret his role and responsibilities, as well as institutional and departmental culture and norms. Until connecting with Margaret, he did not realize he was struggling in similar ways. As in many comprehensive institutions, what was missing for both of us was a defined, faculty-supported mentorship model or initiative designed to help guide us through our resocialization as second-career academics (Nemiro et al., 2011).

In our brief interactions, whether in large- and small-group department meetings, faculty-wide gatherings, or informal interactions such as described above, we would make a point of checking in with each other to offer support or to affirm and validate the anxieties, insecurities, or concerns that one or both of us were experiencing. Over time a collaborative comentorship organically evolved between us just when we both needed someone to guide us in adjusting to an institution and culture that required us to balance teaching, scholarship, and service—something foreign to both of us in our previous careers. Our meetings were invaluable; they also allowed us time to continue to build our relationship. This was key to our success, as we realized that the relationship was beginning to sustain our well-being as we moved through the tenure and promotion process.

Struggle with the Role: Sacred Time for Personal Writing

(Picking up a pad of paper outlining his research program for the next 2 years, John ceremoniously flips through the pages showing his handwritten goals and projected timelines that he had carefully crafted the previous August. He begins reciting each one.)

JOHN: Reflective journaling paper: September through October—data analysis complete, literature review crafted . . . sitting and waiting for my attention and time. Analogy learning paper: November through December—final revisions to the draft document once again . . . waiting for that sacred time and attention. I missed every one of my markers for the fall term. (*Shaking the pad of paper in his hands.*) This is what I thought I could and would accomplish. I had no idea how difficult it would be finding time to write.

MARGARET: Funny, I use the same strategy. My pad of paper is sitting right beside my computer, too. I don't have quite as many papers on the go as you do, but I am managing to stick to my objectives thus far . . . well, except for that one paper that has been rejected three times . . . (*Margaret's voice trails off.*)

JOHN: There are so many consistent and inconsistent aspects of this position that are absolutely wonderful but at the same time encroach on our efforts to be effective. When I look at

your schedule or mine, it's like I'm looking at doll filled with tiny pins all over its body . . . it's like death by a million pin pricks!

(They both laugh.)

MARGARET: You're right. It is not the monthly preplanned meetings or teaching time that disrupts our schedules, since they are scheduled months in advance for the upcoming academic year. It's all the little things that come up that always seem to be last minute: writing reference letters, meeting with students, joining ad hoc committees, supervising independent studies, plus review work, consultations, this new internship opportunity for students. Everybody wants a piece of us. . . . What are you going to do?

JOHN: I had plans for dedicated research and writing time—what I thought would help me fulfill my research agenda—but I didn't understand the complexity of the time commitment associated with it. I've come to realize I can do only one or two things at once. See the pile over there? *(Margaret nods.)* It's my analogy learning data. I am absolutely passionate about the project and the outcomes, but I have allowed all these other commitments to eat into what should be sacred time. . . . Watch this!

(John immediately searches for a YouTube video and presses play. They watch how Billy Chapel [Kevin Costner] focuses when pitching a baseball. Despite being in the middle of Yankee Stadium and surrounded by catcalls, Chapel is able to "clear the mechanism" [as he calls it], removing all external noise and focusing solely on the pitch. He throws a strike.)

MARGARET: What movie is that from?

JOHN: *For the Love of the Game*. Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to adopt Chapel's method. I'm going to restructure and reorganize how I block out my schedule to create the space I need for my research program. I'm going to "clear the mechanism" and create sacred writing or research time in my schedule. I would never compromise my efforts and time in the classroom, and what I'm realizing is that I should be doing the same with my research program.

MARGARET: Good for you, John!

As illustrated by this exchange, we were being forced to pay closer attention to the struggle to find balance in our roles as we wrestled with the challenge of moving to a new orientation as both teachers and researchers. Our challenge highlights the necessity for teachers who are becoming researchers to undergo resocialization, whether formal or informal, when transitioning into a second career in academia, in order to unlearn old norms, roles, and values. In the absence of formal mentorship, John needed to discover through experience how much time he needed to accomplish his research projects before he could restructure his habits and create the sacred space needed to learn the new norms, roles, and values essential to becoming a successful academic. Margaret, on the other hand, had scheduled in writing times throughout the week and was maintaining her writing routine. At this point in our informal comentorship, Margaret appeared to be more effectively balancing her role as a second-career academic.

Struggle with the Self: Personal Accountability

(John enters Margaret's office, and before even removing his coat he is on a rant!)

JOHN: Do you know that I have cancelled our scheduled meetings at least six times!

MARGARET: That many?

JOHN: Yes, I counted them, and they were all to meet with students or attend to a service responsibility or an impromptu meeting. What I have begun realizing is that I have situated my priorities around supervising students and my service work and not the writing and research time that I'd carved out in my schedule.

MARGARET: Tell me, have you ever collaborated with anyone on a paper before?

JOHN: Yes, but we had a very different process. After collecting the data and doing the analysis, we independently wrote and then passed drafts back and forth by e-mail. We continued this process of independent drafting and revision until we felt we were ready for submission. We never met face-to-face, nor did we write collaboratively.

MARGARET: Hmm . . . so perhaps the way we have structured *our* writing process, where we prearrange our meeting times where we meet face-to-face, is causing you to reflect on how committed you are to our collaborative mentorship?

JOHN: I'm committed to our writing, I really am, but I think that going through this process and reflecting on it as I go, along with our ongoing dialogue and e-mail exchanges, is causing me to become more accountable to myself and more aware of how I'm structuring my time. What I've realized is that I've placed my own scholarly writing and research on a backburner to my other teaching and service responsibilities. I'm feeling the imbalance in how I'm approaching the position.

MARGARET: What are you going to do about that?

This dialogue highlights the need for second-career academics to become more aware of, and hence more accountable to, their autonomous role as academics. Moreover, it suggests that new professors coming to higher education from K-12 may not be prepared for the tremendous ontological and epistemological changes associated with the transition. John struggled to balance the various responsibilities inherent in his new role, and in particular with keeping to prescheduled meeting times. He rescheduled meetings six times, pushing back meeting dates to accommodate student needs. What became clear to John was that teaching and supervising students was pre-empting the time he had consciously committed to writing.

Future Struggles: A Supportive Relationship Emerges

(Margaret's office. Their fourth meeting. John arrives with two coffees in hand.)

JOHN: Decaf, right? I hope you don't mind, but there are two milks and half a sweetener in your coffee. That okay?

MARGARET: It will be a nice treat, thanks! *(Margaret takes a sip.)* That's good.

(John settles into the corner seat and, moving the portable table, starts taking out his laptop.)

JOHN: Have I got a story to tell you . . . *(John continues to share his story from the past week.)*

MARGARET *(listening and nodding, trying hard not to interrupt him with a similar story of her own)*: This is more than just writing a paper, don't you think?

JOHN: What do you mean?

MARGARET: Well, it seems to me that each time we meet, before we get down to work discussing and writing, we vent. We spend the first 15 to 20 minutes sharing the trials and tribulations of our week, specifically events that interfere with our writing time. For instance, we would not have made time to meet today if not for this collaborative writing project, right? It is during this prearranged mutual meeting time we have carved out of our busy schedules where we have secured a time when we can talk to each other in a safe, confidential space, where open dialogue is encouraged to emerge, and where

listening to each other's stories validates our lived experiences by bearing witness to the other. I believe that we are providing each other with support beyond the written word and the whole notion of publish or perish.

JOHN: You're right. I believe we are really focused on our present-day efforts and the experiences we are learning from. I left our last meeting wrestling with our journey toward tenure and the idea of "learning to play the game" and what that means. I find that at least for us, this part of our academic journey could be defined as scholarship through collaboration and, more specifically, how we are choosing to explore this part of our journey through collaboration and mutual mentoring as scholarship. This is how we are playing the game. I am finding it really helpful.

MARGARET: Me, too!

This conversation highlights two important points. First, positive outcomes, such as improved social health and well-being, can be a by-product of forging an informal comentorship, one where the relationship is not forced but rather is mutually developed and nurtured and becomes necessary for future success and well-being in the academy. We were not alone in our struggles. Second, our comentorship was also helping us deal with the future and the overwhelming pressures of working toward promotion and tenure in the company of a nurturing colleague who truly understood what the other was going through. It helped us envision a future for ourselves within the academy. Our emerging and developing relationship as collaborative mentors provided a safe space for us to share with and support each other as we worked through these challenges.

Discussion

According to Austin and Baldwin (1992), "Collaboration is a cooperative endeavor that involves common goals, coordinated effort, and outcomes or products for which the collaborators share responsibility and credit" (p. 2). Our emergent collaborative relationship, or informal comentorship, embodied this definition through our mutual commitment toward navigating through our collaborative autoethnographic exploration of our journey as second-career academics in the field of education. Moreover, we contend that our collaborative autoethnography, grounded upon our interactions produced "a richer perspective than that emanating from a solo researcher autoethnography—one researcher's story stirred another researcher's memory; one's probing question unsettled another's assumptions; one's actions demanded another's reaction" (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). At the same time, using Kinsey et al.'s (2006) four categories of struggle—with the role, the self, the culture, and future struggles—helped us frame our meetings, which in turn enhanced our ability to become productive and effective faculty members. After each passing visit, meeting, or encounter, our fledgling collaborative mentorship was developing into a democratic relationship formed between peers in a quest to develop insights and common understandings (Kochan & Trimble, 2000). We were fortunate to find each other, for, as Jipson and Paley (2000) so aptly stated in their study on collaboration as comentoring, "No one gets there alone" (p. 38).

This article has endeavored to shed light on a successfully established, informal, collaborative mentoring arrangement between two tenure-track faculty members. Our autoethnographic accounts and collaborative arrangement uncovered a series of predictors and themes for success that helped us better understand our place and role in the institution as second-career academics. Collaboration among faculty often raises issues of power, influence, professional identity, and integrity (Austin & Baldwin, 1992). As in our case, we argue that these issues are amplified for the second-career academic. We both struggled to find ways to manage these issues and fit into an insular and narrow culture that is slowly transitioning into

one that actively honors and supports its members and the relationship between faculty lives and scholarly careers (Driscoll et al., 2009; Erickson, Hensley, & Kinsey, 2010). As junior faculty coming from previous successful careers in education, we were keenly aware of these matters, and we were challenged to navigate, on our own, the tenure-track process as part of our institutional resocialization.

In Margaret, I found a colleague who offered a nonjudgmental ear to listen, her own strategies and structures to manage the transition, and an individual keen on sharing her passion for methodologies and research interests beyond my own scope of interests and expertise. In our dialogues, she would question and challenge my insights, ideas, and assumptions and do so in a manner that was respectful and safe. It continues to be clear to me, through our collaborative sessions that the idea of a safe and nonjudgmental working environment was and remains important to me. These aspects of our collaborative arrangement were clearly predictors of success as I became a more socially healthy and productive academic scholar. Like many new scholars, I struggled with the idea of belonging and avoided expressing my fears and insecurities, and consequently felt a level of isolation that I had not experienced in the K-12 public education system as an expert and leader in my field (Ciuffetelli-Parker & McQuirter-Scott, 2010). Leaving our collaborative sessions, I would find myself wrapped up in my own thoughts and practices, reflecting on our dialogue as well as my emerging understandings of the institution and my roles as teacher, researcher, and service provider. I came to understand the importance of what I termed *sacred writing time*. In my previous career as a teacher and administrator, my time was never my own, and I enjoyed being a resource and support to my colleagues, teachers, parents, and students. In my new role as a scholar, I came to realize, only after many failed meeting attempts and rescheduled collaborative sessions, that I was sacrificing the sacred time necessary to develop, explore, research, and write—key aspects of my scholarly responsibilities that not only are necessary for promotion and tenure but, more importantly, inform my own scholarly teaching.

In John, I found an empathetic colleague who not only listened initially to my story of desolation, but also took it upon himself to take action and assist me through my transition from teacher to scholar when other colleagues did not seem to care. In the past, I had been the type of person to go it alone and stay clear of any sort of collaboration, but through our connection and successful partnership, John helped me begin to have confidence in people. I now enjoy the collaborative process and have experienced the positive outcomes of engaging in such a practice. John lives his values and beliefs. He said, “Let’s write about our experience . . . we have something to share,” and he followed through with that pledge. In essence, he has reaffirmed my faith in humanity. With his wry sense of humor surfacing often throughout our collaborative sessions, I found myself invigorated and thoroughly engaged in our working meetings. I was “in the flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). It did not feel like work. In the midst of our writing sessions, John would bring me back to the literature to ensure that our writing was scholarly and framed around existing theories. He kept me grounded. In our discussions, he too would query and challenge my insights, thoughts, and beliefs both respectfully and safely. I never felt judged but rather respected for my views. Empathy, commitment, knowledge, nonjudgment, respect, humor, and follow-through are personal predictors of success for me and have helped me develop into a better adjusted and productive scholar. John reaffirmed for me the importance and value of teaching. In John, I found a kindred spirit who is as passionate about teaching as about transitioning into a scholar as I am. I am fortunate that I found a colleague alongside whom I could build a community beyond our present partnership, since, as mentioned earlier, our collaboration has grown into more than just writing about our early journey in academia. Even though as individuals we have learned vastly different lessons, it does not take away from how we have both grown from teachers into researcher-teachers throughout this process.

Lessons Learned

From our informal comentorship, we learned the following five lessons in using such informal partnerships as a way for second-career academics to manage institutional resocialization:

1. That in the absence of formal mentoring for second-career academics, an informal mentoring partnership may assist new faculty in becoming better adjusted socially and institutionally and more productive in their scholarship;
2. That sharing developing academic knowledge and expertise supports both academic growth and institutional resocialization;
3. That an informal comentorship can foster feelings of safety, respect, and support, key factors that may positively influence resocialization;
4. That informal comentoring partnerships can encourage second-career academics to reflect continually on their emerging roles as teachers, researchers, and service providers, and are a useful tool for assuming responsibility for one's own learning and aligning behavior with expected practice;
5. That the learning and benefits derived from an informal comentorship can be as unique as the individuals involved in the relationship.

Practical Implications

Our collaborative autoethnographic practice grew roots out of our similar professional experiences with resocialization as second career academics. We were both struggling in isolation with our new place in the academy and we were both challenged by socially constructed and imposed academic identities. We both, intrinsically, were best served by exploring our journey together and subsequently writing about our journey together. Our co-interrogation of our professional challenges flowed naturally from our shared experiences and our need to better understand our own position and experiences. Our use of collaborative autoethnography helped us confront and make sense of our role, our growth, and the significance of the challenge we faced through our institutional resocialization as second career academics in education.

Second career academics in education may enter into the academy with low levels of reflexivity—greatly influenced by the institutional culture and the perceived associated norms and practices. Rather than succumbing to the pressures associated with institutional resocialization, we would encourage new faculty to be responsive and aware of the challenges they face as second career academics and seek out informal partnerships and collaborative relationships where possible.

Others, too, may find collaborative autoethnography's mix of scientific inquiry and self-exploration in the presence of others a useful methodological approach to tackle both personal and professional challenges (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Storied experiences shared out of collaborative autoethnographic practices may help second career academics in education develop nuanced methodological expertise, advance emerging scholarly agendas while supporting their efforts to make sense of the complications and challenges inherent in the institutional resocialization process.

Just as we were inspired by the collaborative work of Jipson and Paley (2000), LaRocco and Bruns (2006), Kochan and Trimble (2000), Ciuffetelli-Parker and McQuirter-Scott (2010),

and Griffin and Beatty (2010), all of whom have written about their successful relationships as collaborative mentors, we hope that this article will also serve as an example of a successful, informally struck, collaborative arrangement of co-mentoring for tenure-track, second-career academics in education. In our move to the institution, we found no formal mentorship arrangements in place to support our transition. But despite this, we were able to forge a relationship and a collaborative autoethnographic practice that has helped us acquire the professional and personal skills necessary to succeed in resocializing (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012; Kochan & Trimble, 2000). This is just the beginning of our collaboration. It is our sincere hope that others will make sense of our experiences as new faculty members and find significance in our journey as they interrogate their own—with the help of others.

References

- Allen, T. D., Poteet, M. L., & Burroughs, S. M. (1997). The mentor's perspective: A qualitative inquiry and future research agenda. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 51*, 70–89.
- Austin, A. E., & Baldwin, R. G. (1992). *Faculty collaboration: Enhancing the quality of scholarship and teaching* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports). Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED347928)
- Badali, S. (2004). Exploring tensions in the lives of professors of teacher education: A Canadian context. *Journal of Teaching and Learning, 3*, 1–29.
- Chang, H. (2013). Individual and collaborative autoethnography as method: A social scientist's perspective. In S. Holman-Jones, E. A. Adams & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of autoethnography* (pp. 107-122). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F. W., & Hernandez, K.-A.C. (2012). *Collaborative autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Ciuffetelli-Parker, D., & McQuirter-Scott, R. (2010). From mentorship to tenureship: A storied inquiry of two academic careers in education. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 18*, 405-425.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding flow: The psychology of engagement with everyday life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Cumbie, S., Weinert, C., Luparell, S., Conley, V., & Smith, J. (2005). Developing a scholarship community. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 37*, 289–293.
- Denzin, N. K. (2003). *Performance ethnography: Critical pedagogy and the politics of culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Driscoll, L. G., Parkes, K. A., Tilley-Lubbs, G. A., Brill, J. M., & Pitts Bannister, V. R. (2009). Navigating the lonely sea: Peer mentoring and collaboration among aspiring women scholars. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 17*, 5–21.
- Duncan, M. (2004). Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 3*(4), 1–14.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity. In N. K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 733–761). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Erickson, D., Hensley, P., & Kinsey, G. (2010). Lessons learned: Transitioning from K-12 to the professoriate. *Education Leadership Review, 11*, 33–40.
- Fogg, P. (2002). Moving to a different world. *Chronicle of Higher Education, 48*, 10–12.
- Greene, H. C., O'Connor, K. A., Good, A. J., Ledford, C. C., Peel, B. B., & Zhang, G. (2008). Building a support system toward tenure: Challenges and needs of tenure-track faculty in colleges of education. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 16*, 429–447.

- Griffin, S. M., & Beatty, R. J. (2010). Storying the terroir of collaborative writing: Like wine and food, a unique pairing of mentoring minds. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 18, 177-197.
- Henry, J. S., Stockdale, M. S., Hall, M., & Deniston, W. (1994). A formal mentoring program for junior female faculty: Description and evaluation. *Initiatives*, 56(2), 37-45.
- Hughes, S., Pennington, J. L., & Makris, S. (2012). Translating autoethnography across the AERA standards: Toward understanding autoethnographic scholarship as empirical research. *Educational Researcher*, 41(6), 209-219.
- Jipson, J., & Paley, N. (2000). Because no one gets there alone: Collaboration as co-mentoring. *Theory Into Practice*, 39(1), 36-42.
- Kinsey, G., Coleman, J. C., Christie, E., Culver, M., Erickson, D., Hunt, J., . . . Tareilo, J. (2006). The transition from practitioner to professor: The struggle of new faculty to find their place in the world of academia. *Education Leadership Review*, 8, 65-76.
- Kochan, F. K., & Trimble, S. B. (2000). From mentoring to co-mentoring: Establishing collaborative relationships. *Theory Into Practice*, 39(1), 20-28.
- LaRocco, D. J., & Bruns, D. A. (2006). Practitioner to professor: An examination of second career academics' entry into academia. *Education*, 126, 626-639.
- Luce-Kapler, R. (2004). *Writing with, through, and beyond the text: An ecology of language*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- McGuire, G. M., & Reger, J. (2003). Feminist co-mentoring: A model for academic professional development. *NWSA Journal*, 15, 54-72.
- Mullen, C. A. (2000). Constructing co-mentoring partnerships: Walkways we must travel. *Theory Into Practice*, 39(1), 4-11.
- Mullen, C. A., & Forbes, S. A. (2000). Untenured faculty: Issues of transition, adjustment, and mentorship. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnerships in Learning*, 8(1), 31-46.
- Murray, M. (1991). *Beyond the myths and the magic of mentoring: How to facilitate an effective mentoring program*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nall, C., Gustavson, A., & Joyner, J. Y. (2010). Surviving the tenure process: A model for collaborative research. *Endnotes: The Journal of the New Members Round Table*, 1(1), 1-8.
- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. (2006). *Professional standards for the accreditation of schools, colleges, and departments of education*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://www.ncate.org/documents/standards/unit_stnds_2006.pdf
- Nemiro, J., Hacker, B., Tucker, S., Lucero Ferrel, M., Prall, D., & Dejonghe, E. (2011). Evolution of a faculty mentorship program for STEM women. *International Journal of Gender, Science, and Technology*, 3(3), 643-658.
- Norris, J., & Sawyer, R. D. (2012). Toward a dialogic methodology. In J. Norris, D. S. Sawyer & D. Lund (Eds.), *Duoethnography: Dialogic methods for social, health, and educational research*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Ngunjiri, F.W., Hernandez, K-A.C., Chang, H. (2010). Living autoethnography: Connecting life and research. *Journal of Research Practice*, 6, E1.
- Ontario College of Teachers. (2011). *Accreditation reviews*. Retrieved from http://www.oct.ca/teacher_education/accreditation/reviews.aspx?lang=en-CA
- Reed-Danahay, D. (1997). Leaving home: Schooling stories and the ethnography of autoethnography in rural France. In D. Reed-Danahay (Ed.), *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social* (pp. 123-143). Oxford, UK: Berg.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing as a method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 923-944). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Spry, T. (2001). Performing autoethnography: An embodied methodological praxis.

Qualitative Inquiry, 7(6), 706–732.

Tierney, W. G. (1997). Organizational socialization in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 68, 1–16.

Torres-Guzman, M. E., & Goodwin, A. L. (1995). Urban bilingual teachers and mentoring for the future. *Education & Urban Society*, 28(1), 48–66.

Tynan, B., & Garbett, D. (2007). Negotiating the university research culture: Collaborative voices of new academics. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 26(4), 411–424.

Author Note

Joe Barrett, EdD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. Correspondence for this manuscript should be addressed to Joe Barrett, EdD at the following: Assistant Professor, Department of Teacher Education, Brock University, 500 Glenridge Avenue, St. Catharines, ON, L2S 3A1; Phone: 905-688-5550 ext. 5986; E-mail: jbarrett@brocku.ca

Hilary Brown, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Brock University Hamilton Campus in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Hilary Brown can be contacted at the following: Associate Professor, Department of Teacher Education, Brock University, Hamilton Campus, 1842 King St. East, Hamilton, ON, L8K 1V7; Phone: 905-547-3555 ext. 3636; E-mail: hbrown@brocku.ca

Copyright 2014: Joe Barrett, Hilary Brown, and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Barrett, J., & Brown, H. (2014). From leaning comes meaning: Informal comentorship and the second-career academic in education. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(73), 1-15. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/barrett73.pdf>
