

ACADEMIA

Have Mentors Fallen by the Wayside?

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The role of mentors is waning: young Polish scientists, efficient at winning their own grants and proficient at English, are growing increasingly independent.

To be a “mentor” for others, one has to have skills, knowledge, talents that excel over others’ in some field. The status is more formalized in some fields, such as sports or craftsmanship, more informal in others. In either case, however, to be a mentor someone must be an authority figure of some sort, considered worthy of emulation.

The prominent Polish sociologist Jan Szczepański distinguished between five different types of authority, and his classification largely remains pertinent today. I consider three of them to be most important. In the first case, someone may become recognized as an authority figure by right of outstanding scientific achievements, for having posited new theories or developed new conceptual systems. The second type involves authority attained by creating a major school of thought, by gathering and educating outstanding students. Here, the “Lwów–Warsaw school” (of logic, philosophy, and psychology) founded by the philosopher Kazimierz Twardowski prior to WWI serves as the classic case in Polish history, with very long-lasting influence. One of Twardowski’s students was Mieczysław Kreutz, who was my own thesis advisor. The third type involves moral authority, manifesting itself in the observance of ethical standards and norms.

The “mentor–student” (so as not to say: “master–apprentice”) relationship turns up everywhere there is discussion of educating others. As the Polish philosopher Władysław Stróżewski has stressed: “It is students who make a mentor. [...] A mentor is someone who really has served as an authority for us, who has taught us a great deal.”

It is no surprise that Polish scholars in the humanities and social sciences invoke the model of Kazimierz Twardowski in their discussions of the role of mentors in university education. He not only voiced concrete views on the issue, he also showed how they could be implemented in practice. Under this classic model, collaborating closely with a professor who deservedly commands authority and respect, in a way that initiates the student into the tools and tricks of the scholarly trade, helps to build a “mentor–student” relationship that gives the student a chance to spend a long time closely observing the mentor’s intellectual potential, personality traits, and means of behavior. By assimilating these traits and coming to identify with them after

long years of such collaboration, the student may eventually become a mentor himself or herself, sometimes even surpassing and outshining their own teacher.

However, this classic “mentor–student” model is certainly falling by the wayside in the modern setting of Polish higher education. First of all, university education has become a mass enterprise, with contacts between teachers and students largely taking place via e-mail, teaching methods increasingly switching to e-learning, and final examinations growing restricted to easy-to-grade written tests. Sometimes students may receive grades in their transcripts from a famous professor whom they have never actually seen. What is more, I am sad to say that many higher-education schools in Poland, mainly private ones, are heavily undersupplied with lecturers who even remotely deserve to be considered authorities in their fields, and so might serve as true mentors. I unfortunately even know of certain cases in which PhD theses were never actually read by the student’s advisor.

Another factor lies in the kind of funding policy that has been in effect for years now, whereby projects and grants are selected for funding through competitive procedures. It is hard not to agree that this makes sense, but it also means that the traditional role of mentors in helping students navigate the world of science is further declining: young Polish scientists, efficient at winning their own grants and proficient at English, are growing increasingly independent. However, certain programs do still support “mentor–student” relations; these include the Foundation for Polish Science’s “Mistrz” program and the Ministry of Science’s “Maestro” program.

And so, on the one hand the old-style mentor is becoming a thing of the past, while on the other new mechanisms are emerging to allow new mentors to pull together new teams which they lead by the strength of their authority, thereby propelling science forward. It is not by chance that as many as 17 professors from Max Planck institutes have won Nobel Prizes: the Max Planck society first looks for an outstanding authority figure, then works hard to build an appropriate institute for that person to lead. ■

Based on part of a speech Prof. Strelau gave when receiving an honorary doctorate degree from SWPS University of Humanities and Social Sciences, Warsaw.