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Office Talks: Connection & Discourse in Peer Mentoring of Postsecondary Educators

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ABSTRACT

By encouraging the development of a community of practice, peer mentoring can be a high impact component of a teaching professional development program. However, in implementing our program for novice instructors in the mathematical sciences, we found that pairing up peers and encouraging regular meetings was insufficient to create this desired connection. This article describes our solution, a just-in-time conversation tool called *Office Talks*, and the impact it had in creating rich mentor-mentee relationships. We provide steps to help others in designing office talks that fit the unique needs of their peer-mentoring program.

KEYWORDS

Peer mentoring; graduate teaching assistants; professional development

Mentoring has long been a promising strategy in teacher professional development for faculty and graduate teaching assistants; with *systematic* mentoring (regular planned time) typically having greater benefit than *spontaneous* mentoring (only when a mentee faces a challenge and reaches out to their mentor) (Boyle and Boice 1998). Peer mentoring is recommended for first time instructors (Parker et al. 2015) as well as highly experienced faculty (Huston and Weaver 2008). Additionally, peer mentoring has proven helpful for women in establishing rich social and professional connections during graduate school (Crisp and Cruz 2009) and as faculty members (Fleming et al. 2015).

Our peer-mentoring program is for graduate students serving as first time instructors of record in the mathematical and statistical sciences (see Manzanares et al. 2024 for full details). In brief, mentees participate in a semester-long teaching seminar which focuses on just-in-time supports for their pedagogy. After at least two semesters of teaching experience, previous mentees are invited to serve as mentors to coach current mentees. However, in early iterations of the program, we discovered that creating *systematic* mentor-mentee pairs was not sufficient to foster the vital connection. In this article, we describe one aspect of our solution: a conversation tool, called *Office Talks*. The goal was to improve the overall mentoring relationships as well as the quality of the teaching discussions. In conjunction with this tool,

mentors received training on the role of a mentor, setting goals, and conducting formal classroom observations; and were introduced to conversational tools designed to support effective communication and building relationships. We highlight the impact of this change with reflection data from participants.

Identifying disengagement

Two major objectives of the mentoring program were to encourage mentors and mentees to build a relationship of trust and be reflective in their discourse around teaching and learning. In the first year of our program, mentors questioned how to best cultivate a good working relationship with their mentee. Mentors found their bi-monthly meetings sometimes felt unproductive. They noticed that their mentees reported they had no questions or concerns about their own teaching practices, how these practices were or were not working for their students, and mentees were reluctant to bring up questions about teaching and learning on their own. Additionally, mentors were unsure how to provoke and engage their mentees in questions about these topics.

Office Talks: a curricular solution

The *Office Talk* is a tool first developed and implemented in the second year of our program. We aimed to support mentors fostering a good working

relationship with their mentees and to provide a just-in-time set of conversation prompts to complement and deepen the discussions happening in other components of the pedagogical training program. For each bi-monthly meeting, mentors are provided an *Office Talk* script; see [Figures 1](#) and [2](#). Each script offers an overview of topics recently introduced to the novice instructor and includes questions for mentees/mentors discussion. The goal is to ensure mentors are aware of the topics their mentees are learning about so they can engage with them. Importantly, we encourage mentees to ask questions of their mentors to support a mutually beneficial relationship between the pairs. There is no requirement to cover all topics or questions, but rather use it as a guide to promote deeper discussion about teaching and learning. Through an ongoing feedback process with our mentors, we developed a complete set of 8 monthly *Office Talks* covering the following themes: Getting Started

& Introductions; Early Reflections; Teaching Observation & Feedback; Equity (DEI); Revisiting Goals & Looking Ahead; Classroom Culture; Active Learning; and Year in Review.

Celebrating (re)engagement

Mentors and mentees reflected regularly on their experiences in the program. To assess the efficacy of this intervention, we conducted a thematic analysis of the Fall 2021 written reflections on the prompt “Describe your relationship with your mentor? Have your meetings led to any positive changes in practice or mindset? Is there anything about your relationship or interactions you would like to change?” Results appear in [Tables 1](#) and [2](#).

Please note, because our data collection instrument was an open-ended reflection prompt, a lack of participants reporting a deeper relationship or mutual

Office Talk #1

Getting Started

In the first few weeks of the semester, spend some time getting to know your mentee.

- Share with each other your teaching experiences such as courses taught, how long you've been teaching, your general (and maybe first-take for your mentee) teaching philosophies, etc.
- Be sure to talk about your lives outside of school as well, including your personal interests and hobbies, family life, etc.
- Lastly make sure to set some short-term goals with your mentee. (e.g., What do they see as the most pressing area to work on with regard to their teaching?)

Mentor Questions

1. What classroom culture/norms do you hope to establish in your classroom this semester? Do you have any ideas of how you might accomplish them?
2. What is your perspective on implementing active learning strategies in your classroom (remote, F2F, or online)?
3. What has your experience been with group work or cooperative learning? (As a student or teacher)
4. What have you noticed about your questioning style as a teacher?

Mentee Questions

1. What is your ideal classroom culture? How do you work to establish that culture in different classes? How have you done it in classes like mine (the mentee)?
2. Have you ever implemented active learning strategies or group work into your classroom (remote, F2F, or online)? Why or why not?
3. What kinds of questions have you used to further promote learning in your classroom?

Figure 1. Office Talk 1: cultivating relationships.

Office Talk #6

Classroom Culture

At this time in the semester, you may have already performed your first observation of your mentee. In this Office Talk, the conversations should focus on the observation especially in the context of classroom culture and what you observed in that specific realm. Be prepared to share your own successes and failures with classroom culture, and tips/tricks you have for difficult situations (e.g., chatting/disruptive students, lack of energy in the students, disgruntled students, etc.)

Questions for Mentees

1. How would you characterize your classroom's culture at this point in the semester?
2. What do you see as barriers to achieving a classroom culture you want to see? What is working or helping you accomplish norms/classroom culture you want to see?
3. What do you think could improve going forward in your classroom?

Questions for Mentors

1. What is your ideal classroom culture?
2. What have you done as an instructor to achieve that classroom culture? What tips/tricks do you have for your mentee, especially in light of what they have just shared with you?
3. What challenges or shortcomings have you experienced with classroom culture? What did you do to get it back on track?

Figure 2. Office Talk 6: classroom culture.

Note. All of our office talks are freely available upon request; please email us.

Table 1. Percentage reporting a positive relationship with peer and reporting a relationship deeper than mentoring on teaching.

	Positive reports (Mentor)	Positive reports (Mentee)	Deeper relationship (mentors and mentees)
Site A - Large R1 Southeastern Rural	100% (n=13)	100% (14)	41%
Site B - Medium R1 Midsouth Urban	86% (7)	100% (3)	50%
Site C - Large R1 Midwestern Urban	100% (5)	100% (5)	40%

Table 2. Percentage of mentors reporting mutual benefit and mentees reporting mentoring is helpful.

Mutually beneficial relationship	Mentor
Site A - Large R1 Southeastern Rural	62%
Site B - Medium R1 Midsouth Urban	0%
Site C - Large R1 Midwestern Urban	60%
Mentoring is helpful	Mentee
Site A - Large R1 Southeastern Rural	79%
Site B - Medium R1 Midsouth Urban	67%
Site C - Large R1 Midwestern Urban	80%

benefit does not mean that it did not occur. Below we include samples of reflections concerning the mentor-mentee relationship to illustrate themes described in the tables:

My relationship with my mentor has been lovely. We have met several times throughout the semester and each time I have left feeling fulfilled in the sense that

I have someone who listens to me and has my back.
– mentee, site A, theme: positive report

My relationship with my mentee has been very informal, enriching, and enjoyable. We're able to talk about our lives and develop a relationship beyond just our teaching conversations. – mentor, site A, theme: deeper relationship

My relationship with my mentee is awesome. I feel like we are a dynamic College Algebra duo. Our meetings have been really helpful in exploring ideas to get our classes to have more active learning and we both feel comfortable trying new things, especially after running ideas by one another. – mentor, site C, theme: mutually beneficial relationship

My mentor has been incredibly kind and helpful. We relate very strongly as people, and she provides good perspective and insight into teaching. She has helped me with some specific teaching tactics that I wouldn't have otherwise learned. – mentee, site C, theme: mentoring is helpful

Conclusion

Our *Office Talks* are purposefully constructed so that both the mentor and the mentee have questions to ask one another; The *Office Talks* promote a conversation, rather than a lecture. This structure may contribute to the reports of a mutually beneficial relationship or a deeper relationship amongst our participants. In our program, we onboarded mentors by introducing *Office*

Talks as a guide to the conversation for when there is a lull and as a reminder of the discussions happening in other components of the program. *Office Talk 1* (Figure 1) should be primarily for relationship building and getting to know one another. To guide you in developing just-in-time supports for your mentoring program, we suggest the following:

1. Identify the objectives of your mentoring program and topics around teaching and learning that you would like covered.
2. Map out the timeline of the experiences of the program. Determine what is “just-in-time” for conversation about each topic, should it be before or after a particular program component?
3. Once the topics are selected and binned, provide a brief summary of recent training to support the mentors in meeting the objectives of the program. Then develop questions for both the mentors and mentees that support discourse on the topics and relationship building.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Human subjects research compliance

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