

Peer Mentoring: Key to New Music Teacher Educator Success

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Abstract

Research and practice in mentoring preservice music teachers and music teachers during their induction years has flourished in the past 10 years. Mentoring is also essential to the success of new music teacher educators; however, there is little extant research on mentoring of “preservice” and early career music teacher educators. Though not new members of the profession, new music teacher educators often face challenges similar to those of first-year music teachers. Mentoring can take many forms for new music teacher educators, one of which is peer mentoring. Peer mentoring can serve as an effective means to help new music teacher educators both cope with and succeed in their new professional environment. This article documents our peer-mentoring relationship from its genesis in doctoral studies through its evolution as we, two assistant professors, begin our careers as tenure-track faculty at two major research institutions.

Keywords

peer mentoring, music teacher educator

Mentoring goes far beyond the instinctual, habitual, repetitive, reinforcement, or pedagogical steps that comprise training. It is the sum of all of these steps. A high-order communication and learning process, mentoring is built on the analysis of professional-environment experiences, a learning cycle that includes observing, analyzing, and comparing known experiences and situations and applying them in new situations.

—Conway (2003, p. vii)

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In the past 10 years, Conway and others have greatly advanced research and practice in mentoring preservice music teachers and music teachers during their induction years. Music educators recognize the importance of mentoring the newest members of the profession. Mentoring is also essential to the success of new music teacher educators. Though not new members of the profession, new music teacher educators face challenges that often parallel those of first-year music teachers. Mentoring can take many forms for new music teacher educators, one of which is peer mentoring. Peer mentoring can serve as an effective means to help new music teacher educators both cope with and succeed in their new professional environment.

Although there is little extant research on mentoring of “preservice” and early career music teacher educators, these members of the profession have garnered some attention through the Preparing Future Music Teacher Educators and Supporting Current Music Teacher Educators Area of Strategic Planning and Action (ASPA), which was formed at the Society for Music Teacher Education Symposium in 2005 (Rutkowski, Hewitt, Taggart, & Weaver, 2007; The Society for Music Teacher Education, n.d.; Taggart, Robinson, Koops, Kruse, & Draves, 2009). Several recent studies have defined forms of mentoring and examined the benefits of mentoring and peer mentoring of graduate students and early career professors in fields outside of music education (Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill, & Pitts Bannister, 2009; Koro-Ljungberg & Hayes, 2006; Maher, Lindsay, Peel, & Twomey, 2006; McCormack & West, 2006; Moss, Teshima, & Leszcz, 2008; Mullen, 2005; Mullen & Forbes, 2000). Mullen (2005) identified two approaches to mentoring: technical and alternative. Technical mentoring is the act of “hierarchically transmitting authoritative knowledge” (Mullen, 2005, p. 8) between individuals or within a group. Alternative mentoring is a contemporary concept and includes several models of mentoring relationships such as peer mentoring (Mullen, 2005). Unlike technical mentoring, alternative mentoring is non-hierarchical and centers on best practices that may vary from one context to another. Alternative mentoring practices seek to meet the needs of the group or individuals involved. Nonhierarchical mentoring relationships alleviate typical problems of technical mentoring such as isolation and professional self-doubt (Driscoll et al., 2009; Mullen, 2005), and allow for a free exchange of ideas among members (Maher et al., 2006; McCormack & West, 2006).

Comentoring is an alternative mentoring concept in which mutual and reciprocal learning takes place (Mullen, 2005). In a comentoring relationship, each participant embodies both teaching and learning roles. One of the most common types of comentoring is known as peer coaching or peer mentoring (Mullen, 2005). In a peer-mentoring relationship, two individuals or a group engage in a “mutual, nonevaluative relationship” (Mullen, 2005, p. 74). Within a peer-mentoring relationship, everyone acts as both mentor and mentee and all participants share a similar status (McCormack & West, 2006; Mullen, 2005).

Some researchers have examined mentoring processes among faculty in higher education, though less so than among teachers in K–12 settings (Mullen, 2005). In recent years, researchers have examined alternative mentoring practices such as peer

and group mentoring among early career faculty (Driscoll et al., 2009; Maher et al., 2006; McCormack & West, 2006; Moss et al., 2008; Mullen & Forbes, 2000). Within alternative mentoring literature, focus has centered particularly on mentoring women doctoral students and faculty in higher education (Driscoll et al., 2009; Koro-Ljungberg & Hayes, 2006; McCormack & West, 2006).

Mullen and Forbes (2000) examined the mentoring needs of untenured faculty in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Respondents answered questions exploring their personal and cultural adjustment to academic life. The untenured faculty described colleagues from graduate school, including peers and dissertation committee members, as their core group of mentors. They used electronic mail and video and phone conferencing to keep in touch with this core group. The participants had also found ways to mentor themselves not only with previously established colleagues but also by forging informal peer-mentoring relationships with persons at their institution who shared similar research interests. However, the primary mentoring group remained those colleagues and friends made while in graduate school.

Research has revealed benefits, both career and intellectual, of peer mentoring (Maher et al., 2006; Moss et al., 2008). Peer group mentoring of junior faculty in an academic psychiatry program resulted in new knowledge and skills gained through interaction with one another (Moss et al., 2008). The nonhierarchical setting allowed for space in which members felt safe to think and reflect on their practices. Members of the group felt support from one another and identified reduced isolation and a legitimization of their concerns by others as benefits of the experience (Moss et al., 2008). Maher et al. (2006) explained that a peer-mentoring group of women in a humanities faculty helped shape and strengthen individuals' writing through informal deadlines and interdisciplinary feedback.

Five women in a college of education cross-disciplinary peer-mentoring group for pretenured faculty experienced meaningful growth and transformation over the course of their year together (Driscoll et al., 2009). As their group formed, they began by engaging in activities that were peer-review in nature—reading and commenting on one another's writings—and moved to more personal activities of collegiality and support. Throughout this evolution, they developed a deeper understanding of (a) themselves as scholars, (b) their peers and their peers' role in their development as scholars, and (c) the academic environment and their role in it.

As the women began understanding themselves as scholars, they recognized the importance of similar life circumstances and experiences, shared experiences of isolation and confusion, and an unsettled identity as integral to their transformational experience within the peer-mentoring group (Driscoll et al., 2009). The peer-mentoring group provided a safe space where they could trust one another and was marked by encouragement and support. Meetings of the group provided a "sacred" (p. 14) time for scholarship and incorporated a level of accountability into their work. Peer mentoring encouraged them to conduct scholarship and research. The members of the peer-mentoring group described movement from "vulnerability and loss of identity" to the "reemergence and reclaiming of our self-identities as aspiring scholars" (p. 17). They

suggested that peer-mentoring efforts may be influential in helping women to understand themselves, their peers, and their combined role in the academic environment.

Peer mentoring seems to be particularly helpful to junior faculty members (Driscoll et al., 2009; McCormack & West, 2006; Moss et al., 2008; Mullen & Forbes, 2000). Research has emphasized the importance of peer mentoring to women junior faculty as they navigate their way in their new communities of practice in academia (Driscoll et al., 2009; McCormack & West, 2006; Wenger, 2000). Collegiality and reciprocity marked these peer-mentoring relationships as junior faculty worked toward engagement in their new positions (Mullen & Forbes, 2000; Wenger, 2000). Accountability, improved writing and scholarship, gaining new knowledge and skills, and support from one another in both personal and professional experiences and activities were cited as benefits of peer-mentoring relationships (Driscoll et al., 2009; Maher et al., 2006; McCormack & West, 2006; Moss et al., 2008).

This article documents a peer-mentoring relationship from its genesis in doctoral studies through its evolution as we, two assistant professors of music education, began our careers as tenure-track faculty at two major research institutions. As Conway (2003) described, we have together analyzed our professional environments and applied our learning from our past situations as music teachers and doctoral students to our new situations as faculty members. Our peer-mentoring relationship has served both of us as we have developed and disseminated research, shared and improved teaching practices with undergraduate and graduate students, and celebrated accomplishments. For us, peer mentoring functions not only as a means of survival in a publish-or-perish environment and recognition of common experiences and struggles as new tenure-track faculty members; it also serves as a training ground for developing mentoring skills and practices that may be transferred to mentoring of graduate and undergraduate students. In this article, we specify the conditions in our doctoral program that enabled the development of this relationship during graduate school, describe the activities we have engaged in during the past 4 years of peer mentoring, explain the reasons for continuing the relationship as new faculty members, discuss the ways in which peer mentoring has influenced our research and teaching practices, and offer suggestions for current programs and individuals interested in facilitating peer mentoring among undergraduate and graduate students, beginning teachers, and junior faculty members.

The Weekly Walk-and-Talk: Laying the Foundation

Our first meeting occurred when I (Tami) visited our doctoral institution while considering graduate studies. During that initial visit, one of the professors arranged a meeting so that I could ask Lisa questions and learn more about the doctoral program from a potential peer. This initial meeting proved to be the beginning of our relationship. Once I decided to pursue my graduate studies at that institution, Lisa was one of the first people to contact me. When I began coursework in Fall 2005, Lisa was in her third and final year of doctoral studies, having already completed coursework and data

collection for her dissertation. She was teaching an undergraduate music education course, analyzing data and writing her document, and preparing for the job search. I had just begun my first semester of doctoral studies, served as a teaching assistant for two courses, and was taking a full load of classes. Though in different stages of our doctoral program, we shared similar life circumstances. Both of us are married, both of us left beloved public school teaching positions after several years, and we often found ourselves struggling to adjust to that change as we forged new identities. These similarities facilitated the evolution of our peer-mentoring relationship and our friendship.

Though we did not have classes together, we interacted regularly in other ways. Some of these interactions took place during structured parts of our doctoral program, some resulted from expectations of our professors (both implicit and explicit), and others were our choice. A central feature of our doctoral program was a monthly doctoral seminar, where all of the faculty and students in the program met to share research, practice conference presentations, and offer and receive feedback. When not focused on these activities, topics of discussion included interviewing and landing the first job, responding to reviewers, and celebrating accomplishments. Both faculty and students contributed to the doctoral seminar as teachers and as learners, and faculty submitted research and presentations for review and feedback as often as students. This modeling of collaborative practices and lack of hierarchy proved powerful in shaping our interactions, as well as providing a model for us to follow as we began our peer-mentoring relationship.

The professors in our graduate program held explicit expectations that veteran doctoral students mentor new doctoral students. Usually the chair of the department initiated this relationship by asking a veteran to mentor an incoming doctoral student. Faculty implicitly shared expectations for doctoral student interactions by modeling their own collegial relationships. Their interactions with one another were characterized by genuine respect and valuing of one another's experience and expertise. Faculty would work on research and presentations together and often co-chair graduate committees. They could be seen sitting in each other's offices engaged in serious, and often more lighthearted, discussion. They viewed one another's successes as collective success. These attitudes and dispositions carried into their interactions with the doctoral students and thus influenced our interactions with each other. Doctoral student culture at our institution was marked by a lack of competition, an emphasis on collegiality and collaboration, and a sincere and genuine excitement over all of our accomplishments. It was in this environment that our peer-mentoring relationship took root.

During our year together in graduate school, our peer-mentoring activities mainly occurred during what we called the "weekly walk-and-talk." Each week we set aside approximately an hour, though it sometimes went longer, when we went for a walk around town and sought one another's advice, ideas, and comfort. Topics of discussion included graduate program of study, comprehensive exam preparation, dissertation ideas, the job search, and handling difficult situations in our teaching and scholarship. During the weekly walk-and-talk, our friendship grew alongside our peer-mentoring

relationship, and talk often turned to the personal and professional struggles we faced transitioning from full-time teacher, to full-time student, and soon-to-be full-time professor. We also encouraged one another to maintain healthy relationships with others in our lives in an attempt to strike an appropriate life–work balance.

“Are We Having Fun Yet?”: Continuing the Relationship as New Faculty Members

We did not make a conscious decision to prioritize the continued peer-mentoring relationship; rather, it was apparent to each of us that the peer mentoring was crucial, beneficial, and enjoyable as we began our careers. Working from a shared background, having a peer mentor in addition to senior faculty mentors, and knowing that each of us was not alone in our experiences as new faculty members contributed to the flourishing of this peer mentoring in recent years.

I (Lisa) began my tenure-track position in January, 2007 while Tami was completing her comprehensive exams and coursework; her tenure-track position began in August, 2008. This off-set timing was beneficial to our relationship in that I was able to share my advice and experiences in later parts of the program and job search with her. She, in turn, provided support in the early months of my new position with pep talks, review of materials, and connection to new ideas and strategies in qualitative research. Because we already had a shared history and academic background, continuing the relationship has been a great support to both of us in the early years of our university careers.

A key aspect of this mentoring relationship is the balance that comes with a peer relationship. It is comforting to remember that we are in similar positions as we teach graduate courses for the first time or encounter graduate advising issues. I have found it easier to ask questions of Tami as a peer than of more senior mentors. It is also helpful to read and hear a peer’s work, so we both remember that we do not need to be writing and presenting at the level of our graduate advisors and departmental colleagues, who are associate and full professors. We respond to one another’s work quickly, often within 24 hours, a turnaround we do not ask or expect of other mentors. Finally, knowing that my peer is finding a new university position challenging at times, just as I am finding it, is reassuring.

Another reason continuing our peer-mentoring relationship has been important to both of us is the “only” status each of us held in our departments. During our first 2 years we were each the only junior faculty member in our departments, the only faculty member chronologically close to our graduate school experiences, and the only primarily qualitative researchers with ethnographic experiences in our departments. Having a peer with whom to process new experiences in these areas has been essential. Phone calls and emails discussing possible qualitative research projects, data analysis procedures, and publication protocols rank highly among the benefits of our relationship.

While prizing the peer-mentoring relationship we have cultivated, we also recognize the usefulness of multiple mentors. Having multiple mentors provides various lenses on teaching, research, and service issues as well as a diverse support network. We have mentors within our departments as well as our advisors and other professors from graduate school. I have also found senior mentors and peer mentors at my institution in departments outside of music education, both in the areas of teaching and research as well as life–work balance issues.

“A Peer-Mentoring WAHOO to You”: Peer-Mentoring Activities as Faculty Members

Over the past 4 years, phone, email, and video communication have been invaluable tools in our peer-mentoring relationship. Using all of these technologies, we have been able to continue the same type of discussions that began in our weekly walk-and-talks as doctoral students. As we have become full-time, tenure-track professors, the focus of our activities has shifted. We spend significant time with one another on scholarship review, sharing teaching strategies, and celebrating successes.

We have also introduced more formal activities into our relationship. We review one another’s institutional review board applications, abstracts for conferences and presentations, and journal articles to be submitted for publication. Consulting one another in the beginning, middle, and end stages of research has become a substantial part of our interactions. We act as a sounding board for research ideas, problem-solver in the face of research challenges, and peer reviewer. Each of us has become a central person to consult for writing advice and editing for the other.

During the third year of our peer-mentoring relationship, Lisa began engaging in research retreats. She would designate a day of the week, often a Friday or Monday, to commit exclusively to research and writing. Lisa began sending me (Tami) goals for her research retreats, and I served as the cheering committee for the day, particularly when I received her report about her accomplishments at the end of a retreat. As I struggled to carve out time for scholarship in my first year as an assistant professor, the idea of a research retreat became attractive and necessary. Though we never coordinated our research retreats on the same day, we both managed to schedule several research retreats that year.

Research retreats led organically into Monday reports. Toward the end of the third year, we began sending a list of goals to each other via email every Monday. Our lists included scholarship, teaching, service, and life–work balance goals. Each Monday we report on progress from the week before and set our goals for the upcoming week. This activity cultivates organization, balance, and accountability in our work. When we are unable to fully meet our goals for the week, we offer a reflective explanation, and the other provides encouragement, support, suggestions, and assurance. Through this practice we are serving as “writing sponsors” for one another (Gray, 2005). Our weekly planning has also resulted in long-term goal planning. During the past summer, we each

developed a summer weekly writing and research schedule along with a long-term research trajectory that we shared and sought feedback from one another.

Monday reports have become an integral part of our peer-mentoring relationship and often lead to lengthy emails, phone calls, and video chats. While we enjoy unplanned phone calls with one another, we frequently schedule appointments for a phone or video conference concerning specific peer-mentoring issues as we would any other meeting. Though we live in different parts of the country, we make our peer-mentoring relationship a priority. We also look for opportunities to bring us together in person, such as traveling to conferences together and doing joint presentations, of which this paper is a product. Perhaps most important, we celebrate each other's accomplishments. Any success, large or small, results in celebration. From having an article accepted for publication to making our voice heard in a high-stakes meeting, we cheer for each other as we take both tentative and bold steps in our journey as new tenure-track faculty.

Growing as Teacher-Scholars: Influences on Research and Teaching Practices

Continuing to work with one another in a peer-mentoring relationship has influenced our research and teaching practices through developing scholarly critique, advising, and teaching skills. It has also served as motivation to stay on target with our research agendas through the accountability that comes with weekly check-ins. Additionally, working together has expanded our understanding of current research in music education.

Engaging in peer mentoring has been excellent practice for developing our advising skills with graduate students. As we have commented on or worked through long-term planning with one another, given feedback on various types of writing, and engaged in professional encouragement, we have worked on developing skills that can transfer to advising graduate students. For instance, critiquing Tami's research proposals and conference session proposals has helped me (Lisa) develop higher level analysis and response skills that I can then apply to reviewing work by graduate students. Having the opportunity to review the increasingly sophisticated work of an early-career professor challenges me to think deeply and respond to both strengths and potential areas for improvement.

A second area in which the peer-mentoring relationship has influenced teaching is the sharing of teaching materials, resources, and strategies. In doing this we are expanding our repertoire, particularly for graduate teaching. Through syllabi draft workshoping and exchange of lesson plans, techniques, and scenarios, we are spurring one another on to develop teaching strategies that both support our graduate students' growth as scholars and fit with our own teaching philosophies.

The accountability that comes in knowing that each of us will email the other each Monday with a report on the previous week's goals and a statement of the coming week's goals is an enormous motivation for us. This accountability has helped us maintain our research agendas, certainly one of the most important feats for an early-career

professor. Knowing each of us is accountable to another person has been the structure we needed to work research into our weeks, set goals, meet goals, and explain what happened if and when we have not met the goals. A great deal of encouragement and reassurance, not judgment, is wrapped up in the response emails.

A fourth area in which our peer work has supported continued scholarly growth is the development, for each of us, of an additional research emphasis. As I (Lisa) continue to read Tami's research proposals and articles, I am becoming aware of the research literature and trends on music teacher socialization; similarly, she is delving into the early childhood music research as she follows my work. This has helped broaden our awareness and understanding of a research area outside of our own expertise, beneficial in itself as well as in the possible assistance we will be able to provide to graduate students interested in one another's areas.

Our experience reflects those described in peer-mentoring research. Similar to the untenured faculty participants in Mullen and Forbes (2000), as colleagues from graduate school we remain one another's closest mentor. We often find it easier to talk with each other about our work, rather than our more senior colleagues (Driscoll et al., 2009; McCormack & West, 2006; Moss et al., 2008; Mullen & Forbes, 2000). Through our peer-mentoring relationship we have profited from the development of new skills, expansion of knowledge in our field, and a measure of accountability for our research, all benefits which were described by participants in the research literature (Driscoll et al., 2009; McCormack & West, 2006; Moss et al., 2008).

As Mullen (2005) stated, we are engaged in *co-mentoring* in which individuals occupy both teaching and learning roles. Our peer mentoring can be best described as a "mutual, nonevaluative relationship" (Mullen, 2005, p. 74) as we both act as mentor and mentee. Our shared background and similar experiences helped our relationship to flourish, and therefore ease our transition from graduate students to assistant professors as we rely on one another for encouragement and reassurance (Driscoll et al., 2009; Mullen & Forbes, 2000).

Passing the Torch: Suggestions for Supporting and Developing Peer Mentoring

Our peer-mentoring relationship has indeed been key to success in the first few years of our tenure-track positions. We encourage graduate students and junior faculty, as well as undergraduate students and beginning teachers, to seek out peer mentors and prioritize developing peer-mentoring relationships. There are several areas in which senior faculty can provide support for peer mentoring, described below.

Graduate students can prioritize traveling together to national conferences, funded either through departmental support or institutional support for graduate students presenting research. Several national conferences also include support for graduate students presenting research. Travel to conferences enables students to deepen relationships both with peers at their own institutions and peers at other institutions. A second area for fostering peer mentoring occurs in graduate coursework when students are assigned to complete peer review of projects and papers. This serves to increase competency of

future music teacher educators to give constructive feedback on graduate work as well as promoting interpersonal interactions among graduate students. On a program level, organizing a doctoral colloquium or seminar with graduate students and faculty that focuses on sharing of research in written and spoken forms, both by students and faculty, will facilitate mentoring relationships and hone scholarly skills.

Senior faculty can assist both junior faculty and graduate students by modeling supportive practices, such as collaborative research and presentations and requesting and responding to feedback on scholarly work. It is helpful, too, to hear senior faculty talk openly with junior faculty members and graduate students about their research and teaching, including challenges and approaches to overcoming the challenges. Issues unique to music education, including recruiting music education majors and interfacing with K–12 music educators, may also be important topics to address in seminars. Finally, senior faculty can encourage junior faculty members to connect with one another. Although there may not be two junior music education faculty in a department, there may be an art education or other junior faculty with similar research interests or methodology.

The approach of peer mentoring could also extend to undergraduate students and beginning teachers. For instance, within CMENC chapters, students could be paired to serve as mentors during their undergraduate careers. Peer teaching and offering peer feedback in music education methods classes could also develop peer-mentoring skills. Peer mentoring could be included in the student teacher seminar; student teachers could respond to one another's reflections during the semester and observe one another in their teaching sites. This emphasis during the undergraduate years could move forward as beginning teachers maintain contact with peers from their undergraduate studies as well as seek out peers within their school or school district, in addition to other mentoring programs available.

As evidenced in our story, peer mentoring can be a powerful tool for the new music teacher educator. We plan to continue this mentoring as we advance in our careers as well as support peer relationships among our doctoral students. From walk-and-talks to video conferences to last-minute review of grant proposals, we are each grateful for the support we have found in our peer-mentoring relationship.

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