

MC Forward Podcast
Season 3, Episode 12
Elizabeth Schlackman
Transcript

[Music]

Mike

Welcome to this episode of MC Forward, a podcast that focuses on Montgomery College individuals who are leading from where they are. I'm your host Dr. Michael Mills. Joining me today is Elizabeth Schlackman, Librarian for Health Sciences, Communications, and Special Programs. Elizabeth, thanks for joining me. I appreciate it.

Elizabeth

It's my pleasure, Mike. Thanks for having me.

Mike

So, you had reached out to me to be part of this podcast and you wanted to talk about mentoring and I want to dive into that because I know that you've done some mentoring, but you've also been mentored. What does that look like from a leadership standpoint? Talk a little bit about your experience in being a mentee, and why that's important?

Elizabeth

Sure. So, it started formally when I was a new librarian back in England. Mike knows this. I'm a Marylander born and raised, but I married an Englishman, so I lived in England for just over 10 years and I trained as a librarian there. I got my Master's degree and worked in a number of different libraries before we moved back to America about eight years ago, seven, eight years ago. So, in England, to be a professional librarian, you have to charter, which is a lot of different professions in England, in the UK, have this chartering scheme as they called, a plan, where you show that you have engaged with the defined aspects of what being a professional means. So, they have chartered accountants and chartered mathematicians and chartered geographers and things like that. So, to be a chartered librarian, you do a reflective portfolio where you engage with the defined aspects of what it means to be a professional librarian, and an integral part of that process then defined by our professional body is that you have a mentor and you meet with them throughout their chartering process where you're doing activities for professional development, and the mentor guides you in reflective practice. So, reflective practice is a huge component of my leadership I think. Um, so, my mentor then was a colleague in the big university library I was working at, a great Scottish guy called Gordon. He used to say things to me like, oh, hi. And I loved his accent. But, you know, we would talk through instances of professional practice like what does it mean to be a librarian in both very theoretical terms but also in very practical terms like at the job that I was doing at the time and how was I applying the professional standards and practices to my job. So, I went through that and that was a great experience. And then,

another aspect of that job was actually to get a qualification in teaching and learning in higher education. So, that's, again, a national program in England for people like librarians or lab techs, things like that, who work in universities, who do a small amount of teaching to get like a small teaching, like a cut down teaching qualification rather than like a major because for example like in my role as a librarian I never grade papers. I never set tests so it's never... it's not really necessary for me to know the ins and out of the pedagogy of that kind of thing. But there's other aspects of pedagogy that it's very important for me to be aware of. So, in the process of doing that, which was training and developing another reflective portfolio, yes, that word comes up a lot in my professional practice, I had another mentor, a teaching mentor this time, and that was very much more practical based of like looking at both supporting me and becoming a better teacher but also looking at the standards from the professional body that we were working with. So, that's been two experiences of very formal mentoring that I've done. And then, I think that I'm just someone who really likes mentors, and I want to go find mentors all the time partially I think that isn't just an acknowledgment of the fact that like I don't know everything and I... there's no way that I could learn it all by myself. So, I'm always looking out for people who are doing things really well and I want to learn from them.

Mike

So, let me touch on that for a minute because there are a lot of people who are listening who would like to have a mentor but don't know how to go about asking someone or finding someone. What suggestions do you have?

Elizabeth

I think that... I mean, one, getting involved in a formal program takes a lot of the stress and anxiety out of asking someone to be your mentor. I can touch on this later but the mentoring that I've done to other librarians is through, um, is librarians who are becoming... who want to become better teachers. I mentored librarians who were interested... who wanted to work through becoming better teachers. There's always that, and then, I think that the other thing about finding a mentor is that it's a very nuanced thing, like you don't want to ever take up somebody's time in a way that's like you don't want to be an emotional leech to them. And you have to acknowledge that, as the mentee, is that the mentor can't be everything to you. And sometimes it's just a matter of saying, okay, that person is really good at, I don't know, so go back to teaching, like some aspect of teaching, like they're really good at designing interactive activities that are quick and short. And so, going to them with some like defined characteristics, like defined questions, sorry not characteristics, is really useful. I think it's also just keeping your head on the swivel and see who's willing to talk about their practice, like who's already reflective and want to be advising, though, if forgive me for putting on my cynical hat, also be aware of blowhards. There are a lot of people who will want to give you advice that's bad advice. And a lot of people are not very self-aware about giving advice that's actually just a really human thing to do when we give advice, we're telling people what we've done and what we've said and what we've experienced, and that's the

most that a person can ever do to give advice. But some people are very so unself-aware about their advice. They think that they're, you know, speaking down from God when really it's just... like Mike, you're, I know you have children, and there's so many people who give you such bad parenting advice because it worked for them and their family and their kids, but they tell it to you like, oh, you've got to do, blah, and you're like, what?

Mike

In my experience as a mentor, I've offered advice when it's been asked. But, in most cases, it's listening and talking through the problem that a person has experienced. And in many cases, that individual comes to his or her own conclusion, and they come into the conversation knowing what they should do but wanting reaffirmation that their decision is the right one.

Elizabeth

Exactly. Exactly. Um, I feel like a good mentor is someone who doesn't tell you what to do. They ask you what do you think about that? What have you observed? Which, sometimes you're like, I don't want that. [Laughs]

Mike

Well, because you want something. You want to be told what to do, right?

Elizabeth

But that's not professional growth and it's not personal growth. And yeah good mentors want you to develop professionally and personally.

Mike

You know, I think as a mentor, for me, it's just having that person come to self-realization that you can come to me to talk to me, but I'm not going to tell you what you should do because what I tell you to do may work for me but it may not be in your comfort level.

Elizabeth

I think mentoring is a special relationship and it's something that both parties need to be aware of what mentoring is and what mentoring isn't.

Mike

Is mentoring the same as coaching?

Elizabeth

See, I was not a sport kid, Mike, so... [Laughs] I've never been coached in my life in a sport context, so I have no idea. I laugh because like I don't know what coaching means. Sort of. I've tried to learn what coaching means, but I've never been able to like conceptualize it. What does coaching mean to you?

Mike

Well, to me it means having the coach provide you with instruction. Provide you with mechanisms to be successful. I don't necessarily see that as mentoring. I think they're completely different, but if we look at it from a basketball standpoint, the coach instructs the players on what plays to run, how to run them, how to do X. Um, good mentor, in my opinion, doesn't do that. That person may listen and provide options, but the person being mentored has to come to that conclusion as to what works best.

Elizabeth

Yeah. Yeah. Because no change is ever effective if it's not internalized. If you can't make that meaning for your own self. Um, so, yeah.

Mike

Have you ever had bad mentors?

Elizabeth

I have shucked them quickly from my life, Mike. [Laughs]

Mike

[Laughs] And I suspect, Elizabeth, knowing you the way I know you that you do that very quickly and unapologetically.

Elizabeth

Yep. I like Ariana Grande's saying: Thank you. Next. Thank you. Next. Not interested in your bad advice. Um, yeah. I don't even think... I couldn't even point to some examples because I just, like... I don't have time, like nobody's got time for that like.

Mike

And you had mentioned having multiple mentors. You can have them... you can have multiple mentors at the same time.

Elizabeth

Oh, gosh, yeah. Right. Because I think that it... So, to go back to like mentoring and business specially the formal mentoring that I've had, was through a process of reflective practice. And it was all about professional development. And so when you're develop, when you're using the tool of reflective practice, what other things you're doing is you're identifying your own gaps in your knowledge, your skills. And so, that's the most targeted way to use mentoring, I think, is to find like, okay, I need to develop this or I need to develop that, or I need advice about how to develop this. Um, and so, you know, you have that mentor who's, um, you just go to some, you know, one specific thing. So, like I have a really, but I also look for like friends who can be mentors to me. So, like, I have this... one of my best friends is a neighbor of mine and she's a great gardener. And then, she's in her, the later stages of life, shall we say, and so, um, we love

each other, but also like I go to her with all my gardening questions. I'm like, what do I do? Like, I've got this, and she's a great mentor because she says, well, what do you think? What do you think about the space? What do you think about the soil moisture? What do you think about...? And I'm like, no, I want you to tell me what to do, and she's like, I can't tell you what to do. Um, sorry. She's from the south, so I'm kind of mimicking her accent.

Mike

So, switching gears a little bit. You've also been or currently are a mentor. Talk a little bit about that. What leadership traits have you employed in being a mentor.

Elizabeth

I'm sadly not mentoring anyone right now, but the last time was in 2019-2020, and with those dates, you'll understand why it hasn't happened since. I was mentoring two librarians who were sort of new to teaching and that was in this country in America and it was through one of our professional bodies in America, the Association of College and Research Libraries. They were two librarians who were sort of new to the, uh, being librarians. They were in professional roles, and they wanted to be better at teaching. And so, I actually had two at once, which was really fun and interesting and very, uh, challenging in the best sense because they both needed different things and had different strengths and different experiences. So, I couldn't just say the same thing to both and that was really fun. I think one of the interesting things about mentoring, and I actually went around the same time I was doing that, I went to a training session that Angela Dawson lead, who's a College employee, led for employees who are interested in becoming mentors to students. And she talked about the fact that for many mentors feel like they get more out of the relationship than the mentee does. And I love being a mentor because they asked me questions and I tell them about what I done in these scenarios like always a big one. For example, classroom discipline for a teaching librarian because it's such a fraught experience. We have no power in that space. We have very little power in that space. So, it's a huge dynamics question about negotiating the dynamics there. But at the same time, like the classroom dynamics is a really good example, like I will bring certain characteristics and skills and attitudes towards classroom management but different people with different personalities and different experiences, and men versus women, and different, races and social classes will bring other characteristics to that. I can tell them what I did but it's also saying, okay, what would you do and like getting them to think through scenarios and things like that. Um, I loved it. Then, the pandemic came and I haven't actually been in touch with them much because our lives got tossed and turned, but I'm always looking for more mentoring opportunities. So, if anybody wants a mentor, I don't know, not advertising, I'm not really advertising myself, am I? [Laughs] I've got too much to do. No.

Mike

So, I've been mentoring someone for, gosh, maybe four years, someone at the College who started in one of our cohort programs. It was either Developing a Skillful Supervisor

or MC Management. And to your point about the mentor getting as much out of it if not more than the mentee. I have shared with this person that every time we meet, and we meet monthly. I get more out of that conversation than I could possibly give. Now, the individual would, I think, say otherwise, but I come away from those conversations with just a rejuvenation, if you will. And it's refreshing for me to be on that end.

Elizabeth

You've actually just reminded me of something. The reason that I sought out that opportunity to be mentor was because I just come through a lot of change in my job and my personal life, and I was not excited about teaching anymore, but that's the key part of my job. And so, I was looking at myself and interrogating my feelings and I was like, well, what are you going to do to be reinvigorated? And I went back and I saw the mentoring opportunity and I thought that will reinvigorate me if nothing else, or make it clear that I need to get another job. But it did. It did make me... it did reinvigorate me, and that's why I love mentoring and I love recommending that people become mentors because it just... it helps you see your work and your practice in a whole new way, and it helps you get that outside perspective about it because you have to talk about it to somebody else. And it all goes back to this reflective practice that I keep talking about like you got to keep thinking about why you're doing the thing you're doing and how do you improve it. And yeah.

Mike

In your experience, which has been harder, being a mentor or a mentee?

Elizabeth

Oh, it was harder to be a mentee.

Mike

Why?

Elizabeth

You got to do so much work. Makes me sound work shy, doesn't it? The mentee is going through, um, you know, profound change. When you're learning something, you know this, you're a learning professional as well. Um, learning is transformative, and it... anytime you, you know, this is going back to some deep pedagogy, anytime you learn something, it dramatically affects the way... and when it doesn't dramatically, if it shifts the kaleidoscope of your mind because you have this new piece of knowledge and this new perspective or whatever you've learned, and people think, oh, well, that's only for learning big things. That's learning for little things. Like, if you suddenly learned what a screwdriver did, like imagine what your life would be like if you didn't know what a screwdriver did. And then, suddenly, you knew what a screwdriver did, it would blow your mind. It would automatically change the way you viewed all problems in your life. And so, when... what was my point here? I got excited about that metaphor. Uh, yeah, so, when the mentee is going through a profound developmental development, right?

Because they're shifting what they know and they're figuring out how to apply new knowledge to their practices, whatever that practice is, and that's hard work. I wish more people would do the hard work to shift their minds.

Mike,

Well, and fortunately, at the College, we have a lot of opportunities for faculty, staff, and administrators to engage in being both a mentor and a mentee. And I would encourage folks who are listening to take advantage of those opportunities.

Elizabeth

Yeah.

Mike

Elizabeth, this has been fun it. Time's gone by way too fast. I love your excitement over this, and thanks for wrapping up season three for me.

Elizabeth

Oh, how exciting. Thanks for the opportunity to talk about this, Mike. As you can tell, I love it.

Mike

This puts a bell when season three of MC forward we'll return in the spring with more guests talking about leading from where they are. If you know someone who you think would be a great fit for this podcast, have them reach out to me at michael.mills@montgomerycollege.edu. Meanwhile, keep moving MC Forward.

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