

Responsive Mentorship

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Numerous colleges and universities proclaim diversity as a value — in the student body, the faculty, and the staff. A search through the past year of *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* website confirmed this statement: it yielded 418 articles, including such titles as “Doctoral Diversity in the Humanities Won’t Be Achieved by Chance” in the 2010 special report “Diversity in Academe.”¹ Opportunity programs for underrepresented students are at the forefront of efforts to diversify the academy; these might emphasize access to college, support services while in college, or research experience that provides a preview of graduate education. All such initiatives aim to overcome years of exclusionary practices in higher education. Some faculty members consider only the social and political dimensions of diversity efforts, thinking they are just a matter of skin color, or socioeconomic status. But far more significant is the academic dimension. Once included in our scholarly conversations, diverse students will help reinvigorate the academy, expanding the circles of our collective knowledge. To be truly free, academic inquiry depends on intellectual plurality, and this in turn depends on the inclusion of those who have been left outside the gates of the ivory tower.

Despite decades of effort, the diversification of higher education has been slow, even if there have been some improvements. One reason for this slowness is a conception of mentoring that is not up to the task of ushering outsiders into the academy. Mentoring is a service commonly provided by opportunity programs, but mentors who expect only to socialize their protégés into the existing norms of their discipline, who do not question their field’s body of knowledge or research protocols, are not helping to broaden the academy. Mentoring outsiders calls for an open, responsive approach to students — one that welcomes not only their bodies and social experience, but also the knowledge they bring and the questions they wish to research. Consider this intellectual tug-of-war described by a Chicana graduate student and Ford Foundation Fellow. Her advisor asked her to

justify ... wanting to look at Chicanos exclusively. He kept pushing me to include a white comparison group. When I suggested as a compromise a Black comparison group he said, “What good would that do?” I ... gathered up all the research I could find where a White sample was studied without a minority comparison group. I then told him “How should we justify these studies? These are classic studies in the field.” He became really annoyed with me. We finally came to some agreement, but I’ve always felt that he never really viewed my work as significant as some of my other graduate colleagues.²

This woman was actively discouraged from pursuing research that would bring a new perspective to her field. Perhaps her advisor thought he was being a good mentor, teaching appropriate research protocols; certainly, in order to complete graduate school, she would need to learn these. I argue, however, that if mentors do not learn to self-consciously oppose existing academic rules from time to time, they run the risk of either pushing outsider protégés away from the academy, or merely bringing them into the fold, where there is less possibility for entertaining new ideas.

Traditional mentoring models emphasize socializing protégés into disciplinary norms and procedures. They assume we can know both the students we mentor and the path they should take into the academy.³ Such models are designed to initiate students into what Alphonso Lingis calls the “rational community.”⁴ I argue that mentoring students from previously excluded groups would require a new type of mentoring — mentoring for a community of strangers.⁵ Although it is possible to usher outsiders into the academic community, doing so is not without cost, and it is not easily accomplished. Students and mentors alike put themselves at risk when they step outside the boundaries circumscribed by their disciplines and institutions. Lingis would tell us that they are disrupting the rational community, a community with which every academic is familiar.

THE RATIONAL COMMUNITY

Lingis opens *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* by noting that “Community is usually conceived as constituted by a number of individuals having something in common — a common language, a common conceptual framework — and building something in common: a nation, a polis, an institution” (*CHN*, ix). The rational community is his term for the community formed by a common discourse. I wish to be clear that in this context, “rational” is not implied in the common understanding of the word. There are actually many rational communities, and they are insular, closed systems: a rational community can end only in reproducing itself. It separates the world into us and them; those who do not accept, or who fall outside of its discourse in any way, are outsiders. Those who are “inside” cannot easily see that their community excludes and leaves many others on the “outside.” They are unaware of how their norms are not universal, not independent of culture. The rational community closely aligns with our idea of the academic community: there are discursive rules governing who is taken seriously, who is listened to, and those who are within the community often have difficulty seeing how it excludes many people. Indeed, Lingis’s description of membership in the rational community brings to mind the Eurocentric scientist who believes in his rationality and objectivity. His individual insights

are formulated in universal categories, such that they are detached from the here-now index of the one who first formulated them. Discourse sets out to supply a reason ... an empirical law ... from which the observations and practices could be deduced. Establishing the empirical laws and practical principles distributes the insights of individuals to all.... The common discourse is not simply an accumulation of information and beliefs ... but a rational system in which, ideally, everything that is said implicates the laws and theories of rational discourse. Then, when any rational agent speaks, he speaks as a representative of the common discourse. (*CHN*, 109–10)

In the rational community of our academic disciplines, we utter words that can be spoken by any other interchangeable representative of its discourse. Lingis mentions doctors and veterinarians whom we expect to speak “according to the rules ... of the rational discourse of the community of which they are representatives.”⁶ The corollary to this is that the validity of an outsider’s observation is contested because it does not arise from within the system of rational discourse. Certainly, the Chicana graduate student confronted the rational discourse of mainstream academic sociology. Her professor responded negatively when she asked to violate her discipline’s

rational community: he acted as would any member of his particular rational community, firmly emphasizing its boundaries and the discourses it finds acceptable and worthy of study. Mentors who do not question the ways in which their “rational” knowledge is situated in their academic history or their ethnicity, gender, and class will have similar troubled relationships with outsider protégés who wish to bring new perspectives to their work.

I agree with Biesta that rational communities serve an important purpose.⁷ Where would we be, for instance, without the rational community of medicine? But there is a dark side. Ever so carefully, the academic rational community has built its discourses over time for their “consistency and coherence;” in so doing, it has created in-groups and out-groups (*CHN*, 110). Outsiders’ knowledge is marginalized and dismissed, and the possibilities available to them are foreclosed. To use the apt phrase of Dolores Delgado Bernal and Octavio Villalpando, the academy, on the whole, creates and reinscribes an “apartheid of knowledge” with its Eurocentric systems of rational discourse.⁸ In a description that may seem jarring due to its juxtaposition of race and knowledge, they portray this phenomenon as

the separation of knowledges that occurs in the American higher education context. [The separation is] ... sustained by an epistemological racism that limits the range of possible epistemologies considered legitimate.... Too frequently, an epistemology based on the social history and culture of the dominant race has produced scholarship which portrays people of color as deficient and judges the scholarship produced by scholars of color as biased and nonrigorous.⁹

The Eurocentric academy is a manifestation of Lingis’s rational community, and its physical, social, and intellectual exclusion of outsiders has resulted in a higher education system that draws clear boundaries between those who are inside and outside its rational community. As a result, when underrepresented students enter the university, they face discursive and epistemological challenges. Mentors are in a position to name these for their protégés; to the best of their abilities, they can work to overcome them.

What type of mentorship will best serve the student who has come from outside the common discourses of an intellectual history built on racial and class-based exclusions that delegitimize the knowledge she brings with her and the questions she asks? If the only purpose of mentoring were to perpetuate the academic status quo, it could be achieved with traditional models of grooming mentorship in which rules reinforce the technologies and discourses the rational community both creates and is sustained by. This is precisely what happened to the Chicana who wished to pursue research questions arising from her outsider status. Her advisor would have preferred to exclude her knowledge, would have preferred her to be more “objective” — that is, less connected to her work. He attempted to control her scholarship so that it would conform to the accepted norms and common work of the rational community of sociologists. As Lingis notes, “The community that produces something in common, that establishes truth and now establishes a technological universe of simulacra, excludes the [other] — excludes their utterances and their bodies” (*CHN*, 13).

Mentoring within the rational community requires mentors to act as representatives of their disciplines; we may speak only as representatives of a community that has excluded our students. The mentor's purpose is narrow: academic "success" according to existing disciplinary rules and norms. Further, rational mentoring asks only that protégés acquire the knowledge, skills, and norms their mentor transmits to them, ignoring the knowledge they bring. Additionally, rational mentorship requires an outsider to leave a large part of herself at the door before she enters the academic house, because "in the measure that statements are established as true, [every discourse] designates outsiders as not making sense, as mystified, mad, or brutish, and it delivers them over to violence" (*CHN*, 135). The potential violence in mentorship is intersubjective in nature. Rational mentors run the risk of enacting (or delivering students over to) social and academic violence such as that experienced by the Chicana who insisted on bringing her outsider status and knowledge into the rational community. Years later she still felt the effects. For underrepresented students, the "opportunity" to join a rational community that has excluded them and delegitimized their knowledge is a paltry offering if they are not also given the opportunity to transform the academy itself. Neither is the academy served by rejecting their contested knowledge. However, if mentors take the risk to truly respond to students, they may be rewarded by richer relationships with them; they might disrupt the rational community and enter the community of strangers.

THE COMMUNITY OF STRANGERS

Within and underneath the rational community, there exists the possibility for a second community in which we recognize that we are mysteries to one another. Put another way, the members of this community are all strangers (*BL*). Who, then, inhabits the community of strangers? Who is a member of this community that is not founded on common goals, language, or heritage? Individual, autonomous, rational sovereign subjects inhabit our usual notion of community — a philosophical legacy of the Enlightenment. And these Enlightenment notions of the rational, sovereign subject permeate modern education, which concerns itself with the development of subjectivity and agency (*BL*). This subject already exists independently of others; its essence merely waits to be revealed or to reach its potential. It is precisely this sovereign subject who is a member of the rational community. The traditional, rational mentor who sees mentorship as a way to help students reach their full potential within their discipline's rational community subscribes to this idea of subjectivity. But there is another way to relate to students, founded on an alternative view of subjectivity.

The writings of Emmanuel Levinas are essential to understanding a postmodern community of strangers based on otherness, mystery, and alterity; his work requires a bit more explication to draw this community's contours. Central to Levinas' oeuvre is the metaphor of the face: "the face is a meaning all by itself. You are you."¹⁰ When we are in the presence of the face, we are called into relationship with and become responsible to the other. And yet, "the Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign."¹¹ It is the very otherness — the strangeness — of the other that calls us to relationship. Levinas would say that the relationship must be ethical,

because the unknowable, unique other also calls us to responsibility. This is not responsibility in the common, modernist sense of an object that we can choose to take up or to shirk; such an understanding would “assume that we are subjects, autonomous, sovereign subjects, before we become responsible” (*BL*, 148). Levinasian responsibility is not a choice; rather, it precedes us, and is our own path to becoming subjects, to the constitution of our own unique, singular being.

The Levinasian subject is constituted through its responsible response to the other; it does not exist prior to this event. Subjecthood is thus born out of relationship; it comes forth in and through the moment of relating. Borrowing from Jean Luc Nancy, Biesta calls this event the *coming into presence* of the subject (*BL*, 43). It is a unique and singular event. Further, “[t]o come into presence — and this is a crucial step in [Biesta’s] argument — thus implies coming into a world populated by [others], a world of plurality and difference.... Coming into presence is, therefore, a presentation to others who are not like us” (*BL*, 49). In the most profound way, we need others to come into presence, to be recognized in this understanding of subjectivity. The Levinasian subject is also unique because its response to the other is irreplaceable. It is a form of subjectivity that aligns with the community of strangers for just this reason: to come into presence demands my unique response. In the rational community, by contrast, my response can be given by any other member of the rational community; we are interchangeable.

It is with this sense of uniqueness that I use the words *other* and *stranger*, but they also carry connotations of Zygmunt Bauman’s definition of the stranger as one who does not “fit the cognitive, moral, or aesthetic map of the world” (quoted in *BL*, 58). Protégés from outside the rational community of the academy would certainly fit Bauman’s definition if seen from a position within it. But if mentors wish to disrupt the rational community, a more egalitarian stance is required: they must recognize that they, too, are strangers to their students. Accepting that we are mysteries to one another (whether or not the protégé recognizes and acts on this fact), we may seek access to the community of strangers. Lingis also refers to it as the community of those who have nothing in common or the *other* community. Here, the rational community can be disrupted; here, we meet our students in exchanges that require us to use our own unique voice so that we might respond to them outside the strictures of our academic discourses.

Lingis tells us the other community is a “shadow” community, the “double” of the rational community. It is always present as a possibility, waiting for the rational community to be disrupted so that it can come into being.

This *other community* forms not in a work, but in the interruption of work and enterprises. It is not realized in having or in producing something in common but in exposing oneself to the one with whom one has nothing in common.... The other community forms when one recognizes, in the face of the other, an imperative. An imperative that not only contests the common discourse and community from which he or she is excluded, but everything one has or sets out to build in common with him or her. (*CHN*, 10–11)

When we recognize and respond to the imperative of a protégé, we disrupt the rational community and we accept a Levinasian subjectivity based on responsibility

to the other. Biesta writes: “It is in and through the ways in which we respond to the other, to the otherness of the other, to what is strange and different to us — and to respond means to be responsive and take responsibility — that we come into the world as unique, singular beings” (*BL*, 69). Our own ability to become singular beings depends on whether or not we choose to enter the community of strangers; otherwise we remain interchangeable subjects of the rational community.

This is not to say that the rational community can be completely eschewed. It is not as if there are

two options we can choose from. There is no way to deny the importance of the rational community — or rational communities — since they make certain ways of speaking and doing possible.... [However] the other community [of strangers] ... lives “inside” the rational community as a constant possibility and comes into presence as soon as one responds to the other, to the otherness of the other, to what is strange in relation to the discourse and logic of the rational community. (*BL*, 66)

Here then, is a way to grapple with the difficult terrain of mentoring outsiders. We strive to hold students’ otherness and mystery in the foreground so that we might recognize the imperative to respond to them; only then can we enter the community of strangers where we each come into presence as unique, singular beings and disrupt the rational community. Yet, we simultaneously follow and explicitly teach the prescriptions and dominant discourses of the rational community. Perhaps we can imagine mentoring outsiders as an attempt to allow the community of strangers to interrupt — and eventually reconstitute — the rational community within which it is embedded. We can question our approach to teaching — opening our eyes to new perspectives and our ears to new voices. But we need to go farther still: to nurture the community of strangers by listening.

Mentors who accept the “elected obligation”¹² to respond to the imperative presented by their students must first learn to listen, and I consider listening an ability to “receive a world we cannot share.”¹³ No matter how close our own background might be to our protégé’s, there are always aspects of a student’s world we do not, and cannot, know. We may feel a great kinship with her, but difference is always present, whether we attend to it or not. In listening, we attend to “the Other, or, more appropriately, the otherness of the Other”¹⁴ and allow her embodied, situated presence to speak; we learn from the other — the stranger, the outsider — rather than about her.¹⁵ We hold ourselves open to her alterity, and allow ourselves to be changed: “it is not so much that the listener is selfless, but that the listener’s response, her attentiveness, must incorporate the conditions of her own self-questioning.”¹⁶ The dual quality of listening to otherness bears emphasis: listening requires an “inquiry stance” toward our students, but it is also reflexive because we question our own social and academic positions.¹⁷ Socially, we seek more equitable, reciprocal relationships with students. Although we remain aware of the inherent imbalance of power in the teaching relationship, we work against it by allowing students to change us. Academically, we do not cleave to disciplinary expectations, but follow students into new paths of inquiry, even while teaching the planned and accepted curriculum.

ENTERING CONVERSATION

Close and attentive listening is the first step we take into the other community, but the other demands a response. And, to disrupt the rational community, the response must show that we have received “what we cannot share,” that we recognize and respond to the imperative of the other.¹⁸ Dialogue, then, is the gateway to the other community, where we might speak to the stranger in a meaningful way. “To enter into conversation with another is to lay down one’s arms and one’s defenses; to throw open the gates of one’s own positions; to expose oneself to the other, the outsider; and to lay oneself open to surprises, contestation, and inculcation” (*CHN*, 87). We can lay ourselves open to surprises and contestation through conversation with our students; Lingis would tell us these encounters expose us to the other with whom we have nothing in common. In conversation, we might bring the other community into being, even though our work is embedded within the rational community.

There are two ways to begin a conversation according to Lingis. The first belongs to members of the rational community, for in this type of communication we are interchangeable with any other community member. It is the type of conversation a rational mentor might have with a protégé — one psychology professor might be substituted with another and either would offer similar words. In this form of speech “one depersonalizes one’s visions and insights, formulates them in the terms of the common rational discourse, and speaks as a representative, a spokesperson, equivalent and interchangeable with others.... The other entry into communication is that in which you find it is you, you saying something, that is essential” (*CHN*, 116). As Biesta describes it:

when I expose myself to the stranger, when I want to speak in the community of those who have nothing in common, then I have to find my own voice, then it is *me* who has to speak — and no one else can do this for me. It is ... this very way of speaking that constitutes me as a unique individual, as *me*, and no one else. (*BL*, 64)

This is a risky space. Rational mentors begin with a preconceived notion of the individual who is being mentored, both who she is now, and who she is to become by being mentored. Their conversations focus on helping students become a particular picture of the rational subject; their speech cannot respond to the otherness of the outsider. But we cannot know whom it is we are responsible for before we enter the community of strangers and respond to the call of their otherness. We cannot follow a technological, rule-based approach to mentoring, simply applying techniques and methods from a mentoring manual. As Biesta reminds us, “[t]he responsibility of the educator is a responsibility for what is to come, without knowledge of what is to come” (*BL*, 148). The other precedes me; to respond to the other’s uniqueness is not an act of recognition that merely brings the other into existence as the object of my subjectivity. Further, we cannot know how we might be changed in the encounter. We cannot know what is to come for either party, and rules will be little comfort.

In risky conversations with protégés, a mentor must give her unique response to the question of the other.

What is it that we can say when we speak for ourselves, outside of the confines of the rational community? What language can we use? I want to suggest that the language that we use in such encounters should not be understood as language in the sense of a set of words or utterances. What matters is not the content of what we say, but what is *done*. And what is done, what needs to be done, and what only I can do, is to respond to the stranger, to be *responsive* and *responsible* to what the stranger asks from me. (*BL*, 64)

This also means we must set aside the voice we use in the rational community and find another. We can begin by listening to the context of our students' lives, to their silences, and to institutional silencing.¹⁹ Then, we may ask questions — what do *you* think (*BL*, 28)? — genuinely listen to the responses, and adapt our practices to what we learn.²⁰ Mentors who do not care to hear their students' answers do not challenge their own ignorance; they do not listen to receive a world they cannot share. But neither are the answers students give to be taken as mere intellectual exercises; we must allow our students to touch us, to change us. We must let go of the rational community, and open ourselves to contestation. And then we take the risk of responding, opening our mentorship to what we learned by listening — learning *from* our students, not *about* them, allowing ourselves to be changed by our relationships with them.²¹ This is the promise of mentorship in the other community — students receive respect and support for their ideas to blossom, mentors are personally and professionally challenged and renewed, and the academy opens space for those it has previously excluded.

1. Paula M. Krebs, "Doctoral Diversity in Humanities Won't Be Achieved by Chance," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 19, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/Doctoral-Diversity-in-the/124443/>.

2. Daniel G. Solórzano, "Critical Race Theory, Race and Gender Microaggressions, and the Experience of Chicana and Chicano Scholars," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 11, no. 1 (1998): 121–36.

3. W. Brad Johnson, *On Being a Mentor: A Guide for Higher Education Faculty* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

4. Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). This work will be cited as *CHN* in the text for all subsequent references.

5. Gert Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder, Co.: Paradigm Publishers, 2006). This work will be cited as *BL* in the text for all subsequent references.

6. Gert Biesta, "The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common: Education and the Language of Responsibility," *Interchange* 35, no. 3 (2004): 307–24.

7. *Ibid.*, 319.

8. Dolores Delgado Bernal and Octavio Villalpando, "An Apartheid of Knowledge in the Academy: The Struggle Over 'Legitimate' Knowledge for Faculty of Color," *Equity and Excellence in Education* 35, no. 2 (2002): 169–80.

9. *Ibid.*, 169.

10. Emmanuel Levinas and Philippe Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations With Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 86.

11. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, vol. 24, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194.

12. Clarence W. Joldersma, "Pedagogy of the Other: A Levinasian Approach to the Teacher–Student Relationship," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urban, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 181–88.

13. Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 128.
14. Ibid., 130.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 132.
17. Katherine Schultz, *Listening: A Framework for Teaching across Differences* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).
18. Todd, *Learning*.
19. Schultz, *Listening*.
20. Ibid.
21. Todd, *Learning*.