

Being the Question-Asker and the Answer-Giver: Cyclical Mentorship in Arts and Cultural Education

Presented by Jordan Campbell, Director of Research & Content, Creative Generation

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Hello, everyone. As Jeff said, my name is Jordan Campbell, I am the Director of Research and Content at Creative Generation. And I'm also an actor and a teaching artist currently in Philadelphia, working on some things related to the election. So that's exciting. But normally I reside and work in Washington, DC. And I'm really excited to be here with all of you today.

I'm a recent graduate of Harvard University's Arts in Education Program at the Education School. And I am excited to be here, because we're going to be talking about a concept that I've been working on for a few years now, both at Americans for the Arts, with Jeff, and then I continue to think about this today. And I've really been diving into this research as of late, and that is the concept of cyclical mentorship. So what is that? We will talk about that in just a minute.

So I think first, it's important to say that the role of mentorship has long been a part of the discussion in the arts, culture, and education fields. One of the facets of arts and cultural education is that we focus on opportunities for youth and creative development that honors individuals' innate, artistic and intrinsic worth, right, we all work in that space. And a lot of gatherings and initiatives recently have asked questions related to how our field can change the approach to mentorship to better reflect that value. And so what are some of the questions that we're asking here about mentorship?

First, what is being done to break down the hierarchical structures of mentorship that limit both personal and institutional growth? And so in this research, I have sought to answer that question by really interrogating the role of mentorship itself, in arts and cultural education. And to actually offer some critiques on different models, one of those being the reverse mentorship model. So we'll talk about that in a moment as well. And then also, I wanted to end with a solution, right, we don't want to just end with the problem but with a solution. So building on this concept, by offering some solutions and some guiding principles that we

should look toward as a field. And so a lot of that stems from focusing on intergenerational dialogue, as a method for information, sharing, and honoring that wisdom that people bring to the table.

So throughout my various experiences in the field, whether it was as a teaching artist, in the classroom, an intern at a nonprofit, or government agency, or as an educational researcher, you know, we've all wearing different hats, I'm sure many of you do that as well. I've often heard the phrase, and you can let me know if you've heard this as well, "I learned more from my students than they could ever have learned from me." I've learned more from my students than - I probably said that myself, and maybe you have also. So actually, what I would love to do right now in the chat, is take a moment and in a few words, if you could describe an experience for you, take a second to think about a moment in your career. Maybe it was a teaching artist, or a thought partner, or even in your current role, where you were substantially influenced professionally or personally or even artistically by someone who was considered your junior or possibly a student. Someone who wouldn't typically be perceived as a mentor in the most commonly known sense. So think on that for a second and share a few words in the chat of an experience or whatever you would feel comfortable sharing about a mentor for you that wasn't considered a mentor, possibly.

Great. Yes. So Elizabeth shared a lesson that she learned from this person who was a mentor. Jeff says he's constantly learning from peers, and collaborators, especially in their area of expertise... different opinions than my own... life experiences to color the methodology of teaching someone. Great, these are wonderful responses. So I will let you read and mull over those. Thank you for sharing everyone who shared if you haven't shared yet please feel free to do so. Thank you. Yes, the stories are coming in. Great.

So we've all had similar experiences in this in different ways. So as a developing professional, my fair share of internships expose me to the concept of mentorship in practice. I've been in roles where my insights were valued and acted upon by supervisors and executives. I've conversely been in environments where the person with the senior-most title always had the final say, and I'm sure we've all been in those experiences. Well, no matter if there were great ideas on the table, some leaders choose to have the final say right in those situations so. But no matter my role, I have been inspired by my students and colleagues, regardless of their structural position within the organizations where we worked. And as someone who's oscillated between the role of artist, educator, researcher, I have traversed up and down that power scale, experiencing firsthand the phenomena of power and status as social constructs. But to me, mentors were everywhere. And everyone has valuable life experiences, as someone said in the chat, and we all have the knowledge to share regardless of our position or title.

And so after further investigation, it seemed that I was not the only person who was kind of intrigued by this web of inspiration. So going back in time and a session held at the

2017 Americans for the Arts Annual Conference, the topic of cyclical mentorship was proposed for consideration in a session discussing the future of arts education leadership. And so what hat is cyclical mentorship, exactly, we will get there, I promise, we're almost to the definition. But this concept engages the broader methods of intergenerational dialogue and artistic skill development to engage each other in shared learning. And as a long term strategy, I hope that it will expand the leadership pipeline to underrepresented groups in our field.

So the idea of mentorship, you know, has been studied across several fields yielding positive outcomes through a democratic process where thoughts, reflections, and knowledge are made deeper. It's important to note that it's different than it is different than supervision, right? Mentorship relies on voluntariness, which allows for reflection and analyzing discussion. And so at its inception, in a deliberate departure from the term apprenticeship, the mentor relationship came to be defined as the relations between newcomers and old-timers, that is a direct quote, the relation between newcomers and old-timers. I didn't make that up.

So, this widely accepted and celebrated convention of mentorship has been passed down through generations. And it kind of happens in a linear fashion with a knowing experienced professional handing down information to a protege or mentee in a non-evaluative relationship - that is not meant to be evaluated in the sense that professional role might be, but that often includes professional goals. So in the arts and cultural sector, mentorship is highly valued and it stems from the cultural continuity of societies that passed on art forms from generation to generation. And this tradition was inculcated into the professionalized field of art and culture, through apprenticeships and internships. So while these one on one relationships are often helpful, they are lopsided, because instead of recognizing and incorporating individual wisdom, we run the risk of overemphasizing top-down information sharing. And that, as we know can enable ageism and something called adultism, where we value adult perspectives over young people or emerging leaders.

So in the standard mentorship model, while it has laid the groundwork for useful workplace connectivity and professional development, it is not sufficient especially in our field of arts and cultural education. It's really essential for us to move past this oversimplified thinking of knowledge as a transfer from elders to youth, right.

So prior to our study, there had been considerable scholarship pertaining to this conventional dichotomy of mentorship of course, but there was also some scholarship on reversing roles of mentors in various professional sectors, and in this existing research, these intentionally designed programs allowed for emerging talent to mentor veteran staff members in areas of innovation, which interrogated the systems in place, and kind of created new ways of thinking.

And so researchers found that this mutual support also creates a positive feedback loop and can act as this bridge across generational leadership differences. So now this is referred to

as reverse mentoring or reverse mentorship is what it is referred to in the business field. And while these knowledge-sharing initiatives were effective, to facilitating this cross-generational relationship, its primary goal, unfortunately, was to enhance digital productivity in the workplace and reduce social isolationism for older employees. So the young kids were teaching the older folks how to work computers essentially is what it was designed to do. It was designed to be a cost-effective, professional development tool for the business sector.

So really, no research has been explicit in mentioning this idea of cyclical mentorship. So that leads us to cyclical mentorship, what it is! For the arts education space, this manifests as a cycle, with young people receiving mentorship from adult arts educators, of course, but then we also allow the information and ideas to flow in various directions, and emerging leaders in the field are mentored by veterans and mid-career leaders. And the youth are also mentors to them in the programs where they serve. Veteran leaders are meant are mentored by emerging leaders and mid-career professionals and the youth and the same for mid-career leaders.

So this theory takes reverse mentorship a step further by breaking down those walls of the standard leadership paradigm into these three leadership groups. Establishing kind of what we're calling emerging, veteran, and mid-career. Or we also call veterans "elders" in the field. And recognizing that inspiration can flow also from the students we directly serve, or even our organizations' interns, as we often use them as propping up our work, but not always honoring their wisdom and ideas.

So, as well as any of the three institutional groups, this cycle and it can go in any direction is cyclical mentorship, it's a term for something I think we have all experienced empirically. But what we wanted to do is find if there were benefits to making it really intentional and naming what we observed to be an effective method for personal and professional growth and reflection.

So our team conducted a series of case studies around the idea of cyclical mentorship in arts education leadership. These case studies at Americans for the Arts were conducted in the community-based, participatory research method, relying on verbal interviews for qualitative data on the experiences of emerging and veteran arts leaders. And so we look to extant studies that bridge the gap between research and practice, such as intergenerational dialogue with indigenous Alaskan communities, regarding their health and wellness, and how that information was passed on or passed across the community. And so, by providing an arena for intergenerational sharing, this format encourages cross-age connection and the transmission of cultural knowledge. That's an important point, the cultural knowledge and understanding and also the higher education and nonprofit sectors have led similar strategic investments in capacity building, and this intergenerational dialogue.

So in our project, we paired a diverse cross-section of arts education leaders in the United States, from others that were across the nation. And these pairs were not random. We were very intentional about matching individuals who were at distinctly different points in their careers. And we also wanted to create dynamic sets of leaders with regard to geographic location, cultural background, and also their artistic or professional niche area. And so we asked them a range of questions and dialogue with each other around their experiences with leadership development in the field specifically. So what did we find: our findings in one sense, were not surprising. These leaders across the board when speaking about the leadership pipeline, all spoke about the persistent systemic barriers facing emerging leaders in our field and marginalized groups finding their way into arts education, leadership roles. Keep in mind, we released this research in 2017, long before this summer and the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and around the world. And so these answers, even still, we're just as fervent as if we recorded these interviews yesterday. And so this was an overarching theme. And leaders were very transparent throughout that we have to be intentional as a field, about changing these hiring practices, but also how we think about leadership in the field. And I think we've seen a lot more movement in this area in the last few months. And I think we also identified some other really important trends in the interviews.

Participants mentioned that leaders should remain inquiry-based, and they should be focused on relationship building and should make themselves quote, unquote, be the student when it comes to learning from colleagues across the scope of experience level. Another insight that was really important that we drew from these interviews was that arts education leaders should be thinking of themselves as leaders in the larger field of education, not just in our specialized areas. So all of those were great findings. And I think a lot of them told us what we already knew to be true in the field. However, the greatest takeaway that I had from this experience, and the one that I want to share with all of you today, was the actual phenomenon of the interview themselves.

The dialogue between leaders who have quite different experiences in the field, but are both sharing advice and wisdom with one another, was really profound. Hearing veteran leaders say, "I hadn't thought of it that way," or experiencing their aha moment when a young and emerging leader shared thoughts on systemic issues in the field, or even when leaders agreed on a topic, but shared entirely different points of view as to why they came to the same conclusion or how they got there. The intergenerational dialogue is the element that I hope the field can take away from this experience. And this idea of cyclical mentorship, even when the veteran leaders imparted wisdom to their younger counterparts, which we typically imagine when thinking of mentorship, the top-down model? It was framed as a dialogue, rather than someone talking down to an employee with less authority. It was a demonstration of lateral thinking, and an amplified the experiences of those who have been around the block, as we say, but also allowed the space for that creative ingenuity and forward-thinking of emerging leaders to rise to the surface. So creating that intentional space was really crucial to this work.

So what started as a conversation about leadership, and cyclical mentorship in the field actually turned into a living experiment of our theory of cyclical mentorship. So that was really exciting as a researcher for the act itself to become a test in cyclical mentorship. So not only did these participants provide useful insights, for those of us seeking nuggets of inspiration, I think, and certainly hope, it actually influenced these organizational leaders to think differently about their own work and how they seek guidance and mentorship. And the best part is, this is absolutely replicable within organizations within specializations within our field and the broader arts space.

So this concept of cyclical mentorship brings up exceptional questions around equity, agency, the metrics by which we quantify knowledge in the field, and it's clear that leaders need to adjust their evaluations of what constitutes as useful for a mentor. We need to expand our definition past the construct of age as the sole indicator of inherent know-how, right, in a content area. Age should not be the only thing that dictates someone knowing something or having wisdom in a certain area. And similarly, it's imperative that the strict dichotomy of mentor and mentee be challenged at the institutional level.

The cyclical mentorship model is intergenerational at its core. And it breaks that standard dichotomy and the reliance on select factors that limit that flow of information. Because power within organizations typically exist from the top down. The onus is on organizations and their leaders to intentionally break down that existing definition and be very intentional about creating a new definition or expanding that definition to include wisdom and unique insights. Because the traditional model of mentorship is embedded in our societal norms, we are currently unable to fully execute that paradigm shift for young people to contribute the full breadth of wisdom. In the co-learning environment, these shifts are going to require intentional rethinking of terminology, substantive acknowledgments from organizational leaders, that adultism is present, and it's going to take that recognition that these should be combated and changed. And so by including youth as mentors, and teaching artists and administrators, we are acknowledging their agency within the organization and allow for youth voice -- that's an important point as well, the youth voice should guide programming and governance. There are many programs that do that. It's not fully embedded across the field, though, and that's what we hope to aim for.

So during a professional learning session of the Leadership Network for Arts Education and Special Needs, convened by the Berkeley Institute for Arts Education and Special Needs, a participant was grappling with this concept of cyclical mentorship and framed it in really great terms that I think might be helpful for folks if you're struggling about what this means in practice. And it really resonated with me, she said, "So essentially, we need to expand our idea of mentoring and give everyone a chance to be the question asked as well as the answerer, is that right?" And that was absolutely right. That was a better definition than I ever could have given cyclical mentorship.

So, in order to explode these norms, and redefine commonly used terms around leadership development, a high dose of boldness is required from our existing leaders who seek to kind of disrupt this type of change in our field. Each organization and leader needs to gauge their unique circumstances and in their spaces, and which areas need greater pushes in the following shifts. These are some foundational shifts that across the research kind of floated to the top as really what needs to happen next for this cyclical mentorship concept to come to life.

First, we need to hold space for authentic intergenerational conversations - easier said than done, right? Much like the recorded interviews I was speaking about, be intentional about providing the space and committing resources - time, funding, carving out those moments on the calendar, we're all busy - but making sure those things happen is how that authentic dialogue can happen and can break down the barriers to equitable leadership development in the field.

Second, we really need to change the structure of, as I said, who gets to ask the questions and who gets to answer the questions. That burden lies heavily upon upper management to increase agency for those who are younger but might have a novel understanding on a particular issue to share with higher-ups. It's a responsibility of all leadership roles to be mindful about how questions are asked, and who has the final say. And so in this vein, it's essential that the roles of question asker and answer giver are not always based on institutional experience. That's key.

Third, we have to promote intergenerational relationships as meaningful methods of capacity building, and as the norm for mutual knowledge sharing. So not only should organizations encourage an intergenerational flow of inspiration, they should take an active role in normalizing that cyclical mentorship as the preferred method for mutual knowledge sharing.

Next, it's so important that we include autonomous youth voice, as I mentioned earlier, in the governance structures embedding them in our implementation and design and reflection. Many organizations already do this at some point in their program design, but often failed to really deeply embed the youth perspective in meaningful ways - where the power really sits - across all aspects of their initiatives. And so I think to avoid tokenism is important here; organizations should strive to allow youth to vote and have a say in those structures that really make the decision in all stages.

And lastly, is to interrogate organizational structures - institutional practices, hiring procedures - that limit experience in quotes to your title or your seniority, or both of those. And this process is probably the most difficult of all. It requires learning to hold themselves accountable by conducting a deep investigation into their internal practices to weed out any

policies that contribute to ageism, top-down supervision structures masquerading as mentorship, or tokenism of youth voice and really embedding that into their practices.

So while the shift in thinking cannot be achieved in a short time, we know that that's true - there's a lot of radical things I'm presenting here to interrogate within organizations and within structures. It cannot be achieved overnight, but the benefits to the field are going to be vast and long-lasting if achieved. And these guidelines ask organizations in the field to take the bold steps toward walking the talk because I'd like to say we need to walk the talk of arts and cultural education.

And I think by expanding our definition of mentorship to include the cycle of knowledge sharing through this intergenerational dialogue, I think we're able to lift up the creative wisdom and the unique ideas of all voices from across the sector, while still honoring individuality and innovation.