

# **ADVANCING THE CULTURE OF MENTORING IN OUR PROFESSION**

**ABSTRACT:** Mentoring strengthens pedagogic practice through open communication and continued learning. The American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS) offers models for incorporating mutually beneficial mentoring relationships into vital aspects of our profession, informed in part by principles of Self-Determination Theory.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is the result of extensive collaborative scholarship and discussion by the American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS). Not only have we acknowledged and analyzed the mentoring we have received, we have also noted the lack of mentoring in many areas of our profession. Our position is that there is a need to support and guide teachers of singing at all levels of professional activity and that, as professionals, we should be willing to mentor one another. Our goal is to bring a culture of collaborative knowledge sharing to the voice teaching profession as a whole, in every community of teachers, including university full-time and adjunct faculty, community music school voice instructors, independent studio teachers, private teachers affiliated with K-12 education, and voice faculty in summer festival or study programs. We want to encourage a willingness to enlist help from each other and to create an environment in which such guidance is comfortably sought.

Broadly defined, a mentor is an experienced and trusted advisor. In this paper, we are addressing teacher-to-teacher mentoring and mentoring among others in our profession, not teacher-student mentoring. For example, speech and hearing professionals might advise a singing teacher on managing voice students with pathologies. While mentoring covers a large range of activities and focus areas, we distinguish mentoring from training. Simply stated, training implies a commercial or curricular structure, whereas mentoring centers on relationship. Therefore, we will not include school- or program-based teacher training for certification.

This paper will cover basic tenets and principles of mentoring and aspects of a culture of sharing. More specific ideas for initial steps will follow, along with descriptions of several current models of mentoring. Finally, AATS will outline roles our organization can play to support the teaching profession globally.

## TENETS AND PRINCIPLES

**A. A teacher is always a student.** Voice teachers are continually informed throughout their careers by other teachers, their own field research, published research, and their students.

**B. No teacher has all the answers; no teacher *must* have all the answers.**

Teachers can avoid the dilemma of feeling the need to answer every question a student asks by clearly stating what they do know and offering what they believe is helpful for the student. They should also acknowledge when they do not have an answer and assure the student that they will seek information from a colleague or from current research.

**C. Mentoring is relationship-based.** Both limited and long-term relationships are desirable. Thus, mentoring fosters mutual trust and interdependency. It benefits both students and the art of pedagogy.

**D. A mentor is a conduit rather than the sole possessor of information and technique.** In other words, “I am not teaching you to be me, rather a better ‘you’.”

**E. Mentoring supports basic psychological benefits of autonomy, competence, and relatedness,** formalized as Self-Determination Theory by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. For the past forty years, these University of Rochester professors have been at the forefront of research on human motivation. Self-Determination Theory, an empirically-based meta-theory of motivation, states that individuals are most productive when their basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are met. Evidence from healthcare, business, and education shows that teachers, supervisors, and settings that address these basic psychological needs promote workplace satisfaction, persistence, and productivity. More information is available at [www.selfdeterminationtheory.org](http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org).

**F. Mentors are aware of the phases of acquiring, testing, refining, and responsibly sharing knowledge.** When we acquire new knowledge, many of us are immediately inspired to teach what we have learned. However, with time and experience, we humbly realize the extent of our tested and refined knowledge and are more mindful about the ways we share it.

From these principles, the attributes of an ideal mentor become clear. They include being open-minded and openhearted; learning from everyone, even when we may think we know it all; and stimulating motivation and responsibility in others. Optimally, a mentor incorporates an attitude of learning over one's entire lifetime, openness to a two-way stream of communication, as well as humility and gratitude for mentoring received. A mentor recognizes that vulnerability, fear, and discomfort are part of the process; therefore, dealing with defensiveness in ourselves and in others is to be expected. A mentor functions best as a conduit rather than the owner of information and technique, and understands how to support others' autonomy and competence in relationships.

### **A CULTURE OF SHARING**

In the endeavor to set up situations where mentoring works well, the first hurdle is often overcoming the culture of exclusivity. Some voice teachers adhere to the concept that they have all the information a student needs and are averse to any form of shared instruction. Such an attitude of possessiveness is not reflected in other fields of one-to-one clinical expertise. Medical professionals, for instance, routinely share information and seek input from their colleagues, both within and across disciplines. In the voice studio, this sharing could start by inviting input from a colleague who observes the teacher giving a voice lesson. It could be a reciprocal learning situation in which two teachers take a voice lesson from each other to learn something new. There are now many ways to become "mentorable" by seeking information from others in the field both online and in person. Thinking of a mentor as a consultant may avoid the possible stigma of an unequal power-based partnership.

The mutual benefits of mentoring include increased flexibility of pedagogic approach, resilience, collaborative strength from supportive colleagues, and the joys of shared learning. Voice students may feel relief from a one-size-fits-all teaching style, and may find benefits of working over a longer span of their training with a teacher who continues to grow from mentoring experiences. In addition, teachers may expand their student clientele by acquiring broader skills from their mentors.

Mentoring can support a teacher's core values and career goals above and beyond promotion or improved performance. While a sponsor might increase visibility, and mobilize contacts on behalf of a colleague, such a relationship is generally hierarchical and short-term. A coach would focus on improving specific tasks, such as mastering foreign language diction, or could remediate aspects of performance-related issues, in particular those with pressing immediacy. A mentor could encompass both immediate and longer-term issues with a holistic view of the mentee's professional and personal growth. Such relationships focus on both objective and subjective career success, often over an extended timeframe. Only rarely is a mentor a direct superior within an organization. Domains of mentoring can be either content- or process-driven. Content would encompass basic vocal and pedagogic technique, research questions, writing, and clinical guidance, while process would include strategies for advancement, career choices, promotion, and balancing responsibilities.

A number of issues require careful consideration when envisioning a change of culture around mentorship and collaboration. First, support for national singing teacher organizations is needed to encourage all teachers to belong and to access the creative and pedagogic scholarship in publications such as the *Journal of Singing*. Further, information about mentoring needs to be effectively disseminated to help independent studio teachers build a sense of belonging to a professional community. Second, respect is a prerequisite for any mentoring situation. Both parties are vulnerable and some risk is involved. Both have a stake in creating a safe, comfortable way to ask for and receive help, and also to give help, allowing it to be received or not, without further recourse. Third, teachers from underrepresented minorities may feel higher

expectations to mentor while contending with social bias and professional isolation. Many underrepresented minority faculty in university settings, for example, report feeling pressure not only to be a model for students, but also to take on mentoring obligations that might interfere with their own research and professional academic success. Finally, encouraging peer mentoring among younger members of the teaching profession and intergenerational communication pose additional challenges to establishing a culture of sharing.

## **MENTORSHIP SETTINGS**

Each setting has a different knowledge base and culture, allowing individual choice to determine virtually every step of the way mentoring is initiated, managed, and terminated. Broad categories range from formal organizational settings, such as universities and professional association programs, to informal mentoring aimed at broadening horizons like repertoire or meeting individual needs within or outside of larger organizations. Private mentoring relationships can be established in any setting for short or long-term consultations. Lastly, workshops or conferences can often offer one-time opportunities for delegates to collaborate or presenters to engage with potential mentees.

Higher education institutions may have formal or informal mentoring. Full-time faculty mentoring usually concerns the tenure process with varying timetables from three to eight years. Senior faculty may be assigned as mentors for a new faculty hire, sometimes with a financial or professional development incentive, to offer guidance during the first year of a tenure track. Informal mentoring relationships might continue thereafter. One mutual benefit is that senior faculty have the opportunity to learn from younger colleagues by “keeping good lab notes” on their skills and interests. More experienced faculty may also be tapped to mentor new faculty in other departments, widening their sphere of influence and opening doors to potential future interdisciplinary collaborations. Almost without exception, such relationships bring mutual satisfaction from achieving a successful bid for promotion and tenure.

Adjunct faculty with logistical needs and concerns about job continuation may benefit from finding a mentor on the full-time faculty. Adequate spaces in which to work and coordination with student scheduling, potential weekly headaches for part-time voice instructors, would certainly benefit from an advocate who is on site every day. Sporadic or limited contact with full-time faculty may jeopardize an adjunct's ability to become known and to establish credibility as a fine teacher. The relative isolation of adjunct teachers also poses difficulties in creating a community with other adjuncts to confer on solutions to students' vocal issues or even seeing students of other teachers perform.

Independent studio teachers could benefit from mentoring as they begin to establish a private practice. Geographic isolation can make observing or studying methods, other than the one a teacher has been taught, difficult at best. Issues of student retention arise if an independent teacher views a mentor as a possible competitor for current students.

### **TAKING THE FIRST STEP**

- Be a model of an open-minded mentor. For instance, ask “May I help you in finding local community resources as you set up your independent studio?”  
“May I offer some perspective on this situation?”
- Engage colleagues in areas of their expertise: “What strategies would you use in teaching this particular repertoire?”  
  
“Can you recommend a song in Spanish that would be suitable for a student at this age?”  
“I am experiencing a challenge with one of my students and I value your thoughts. How would you handle this issue?”
- Ask a colleague to watch you teach: “Would you mind sitting in on one of my lessons and offering me feedback on how I present this concept?”  
“I am having a problem with X with one of my students. Let me show you what I have been doing in our lessons. What would you do differently?”

- Ask to take a consultation lesson with a colleague: “I would value your input on my approach to this technical issue.”
- Engage in and enact mentor/mentee best practices, described below.

Set boundaries for the relationship at the outset. Both parties should make explicit arrangements to avoid imposing on each other’s time or autonomy. Formulate a plan with a goal, terms, timetable, exit point or termination. Mentors must assume that it may be difficult for a colleague to reach out for help, so the mentor will often be the first to offer assistance in a nonintrusive manner. A presumption that a mentor will automatically be harshly critical or negative can be managed with open communication and sensitivity. Mentors must expect that information will be used and interpreted in ways that may differ from the detail or application originally offered. They must strive to create a nonthreatening environment for group interactions. Both mentors and mentees need to be open to learning from each other; for instance, asking “Am I missing something?” can allow for continuing discussion rather than either party feeling misunderstood or cut short. Confidentiality is all-important to encourage a safe environment for candor and exploration. Identity and records must be protected. When in doubt about a matter of confidentiality, ask. Mentees should seek clarity about which mentor statements are specific to the individual and which are more generally applicable. Letters of recommendation from a mentor should be requested with a waiver of the right to view the contents. A final note: treat all as colleagues, especially in any public forum.

A number of noteworthy mentoring models follows. Some are formal, some are focused on a particular repertoire, and others are based on shared teaching. AATS advocates offering mentorship whenever possible as a collegial gesture. We understand that the following programs offer mentorship without charge or that the mentoring teachers are paid through organizational sponsorship rather than by participants.

*NATS Intern Program.* A ten-day intensive residency for members of NATS focusing on studio teaching skills under supervision of, and dynamic exchange with, recognized master teachers. Begun in 1991, this program covers tuition and housing for twelve voice teacher interns per year and is hosted annually by different schools in the US and Canada. 2017 marked the beginning of including collaborative piano interns. (visit [www.nats.org/nats-intern-program](http://www.nats.org/nats-intern-program)).

*NATS Mentored Teaching Experience.* A program, reinstated in 2017 from an initial 2015 program conceived and implemented by Kathleen Arecchi, in which three mentor teachers, prior teachers or alumni of the NATS Intern Program, give feedback for mid-career or other teachers not eligible for the NATS Intern Program. A maximum of 32 selected studio teachers upload two video samples of their work that are evaluated by four mentor teachers. Then an hour-long, in-person follow-up meeting with a mentor teacher occurs during the three-day NATS Summer Workshop. (visit [www.nats.org/2017\\_Mentored\\_Teaching\\_Project](http://www.nats.org/2017_Mentored_Teaching_Project)).

*ACDA mentoring.* The American Choral Directors Association website states that ACDA “is focusing on mentoring as a way to assist our membership in finding allies in the never-ending task of learning and growing professionally. Our national leadership has determined that a mentoring program is one of the best uses of our resources, human and financial, as we seek to inspire excellence in choral music education, performance, composition, and advocacy. The ACDA Mentoring Program is open to ACDA members across the country and some ACDA state chapters offer state-run mentoring programs.” (visit <https://mentoring.acda.org>).

*AOTOS Pathways program.* The Association of Teachers of Singing in the UK offers individually tailored courses with a focus on mentored training, with an average ratio of three experienced AOTOS members teaching nine student teachers. Some of these experiences, such as Access Day, an annual one-day basic skills course, are offered without cost. (visit [www.aotos.org.uk](http://www.aotos.org.uk)).

*ICVT2017 presentation by Susanna Mesiä on international teacher collaboration.*

Learning from Each Other: Collaborative Expertise in Nordic Higher Education, Pop & Jazz Vocal Pedagogy. A project between pop and jazz vocal teachers in higher education in several Nordic countries, in which they shared professional expertise and co-constructed solutions to pedagogic challenges. (Contact: Susanna Mesiä, senior lecturer, Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, doctoral candidate Sibelius Academy, Helsinki.)

*ICVT2017 presentation by Carole Blankenship/Sarah Holman interscholastic team-teaching.*

Demystifying the Traditional Studio Experience: The Benefits and Challenges of Undergraduate Collaborative Teaching. The traditional approach of a voice studio has historically been shrouded in the mystical secrets of a single voice teacher whose techniques were guarded and whose singers were defended. These colleagues shared their approaches to interactive modes of studio teaching. (Contact: Dr. Sarah Holman, professor of voice at Wheaton College Conservatory, IL, and Dr. Carole Choate Blankenship, associate professor and chair in fine arts at Rhodes College, TN.)

*NATS-NYC Mentor Teacher Program.* An opportunity for apprentice teachers to observe master teachers teaching specific styles of material to develop advanced teaching skills. Experienced teachers may also enroll to broaden their teaching experience and receive feedback. (Contact: Dr. Jeanne Goffi-Fynn, singing voice specialist, member of AATS, senior lecturer and director of Doctoral Cohort Program in Music at Teachers College, Columbia University; visit [www.nats.nyc.org](http://www.nats.nyc.org)).

*Chicago Chapter NATS Teaching Partnership Workshop.* Introduced in April, 2017, this group teaching experience featured a 25-minute lesson taught to a participant's own student followed by interactive work with one of three distinguished voice pedagogues in either classical or music theater. CCNATS members were encouraged to observe this process and exchange ideas. Contact: Prof. Karen Brunssen, President-Elect of NATS,

member of AATS, associate professor at Northwestern University; visit [www.chicagonats.org](http://www.chicagonats.org)).

## **NEXT STEPS: EXPANDING THE PRACTICE OF MENTORING**

AATS advocates for embedding mentoring in the field of voice teaching. This paper offers an initial discussion and a few examples of best practices. How can we effect a change of culture around mentoring?

- By openly discussing obstacles.
- By assuring confidentiality.
- By seeking commonalities with colleagues from both our best and our worst experiences with mentoring.
- By reinforcing student-centeredness in our teaching.
- By moving from the transferral of information (the “banking” style of teaching) toward transforming our profession.
- By encouraging self-assessment as well as peer and mentor assessment of our work.

AATS is calling for further research and presentations on best practices in mentoring. To that end, we are inviting all *Journal of Singing* readers to participate in a survey on mentoring that will initially be distributed at the national NATS Conference in June, 2018, and subsequently available in an online format in a future issue of the journal. This survey has been approved by the Columbia University institutional review board.

AATS wants to send out the message about changing the culture around mentoring to those who would benefit, in particular new voice teachers, our students, established colleagues who insulate themselves, and geographically isolated independent studio teachers.

AATS is embarking on a pilot mentoring project in New York City at Opera America in conjunction with our regular meetings. The mentoring we receive from each other at

every meeting has inspired us to plan how to share that in individual sessions with a wider circle of teaching colleagues.

AATS is looking to encourage university-based training, as well as continued education, in best mentoring practices possible. The Academy's goal is to support renewed interest in mentoring and to work toward a new culture of collaboration and knowledge sharing.