# Mentoring Foreign Language Teaching Assistants, Lecturers, and Adjunct Faculty

Benjamin Rifkin, Editor

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# Historical, Theoretical, and Pragmatic Perspectives on Mentoring

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The classically-minded reader will recall that Mentor was the name of the Ithacan noble whose identity Athena assumed in order to act as a counselor to Ulysses's son Telemachus in Homer's *Odyssey*. The character of Mentor was given more prominence in Fénelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (1699),[1] and from there, gained currency in French and English as a generic noun signifying an experienced and trusted guide. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists citations with this meaning beginning in 1750.

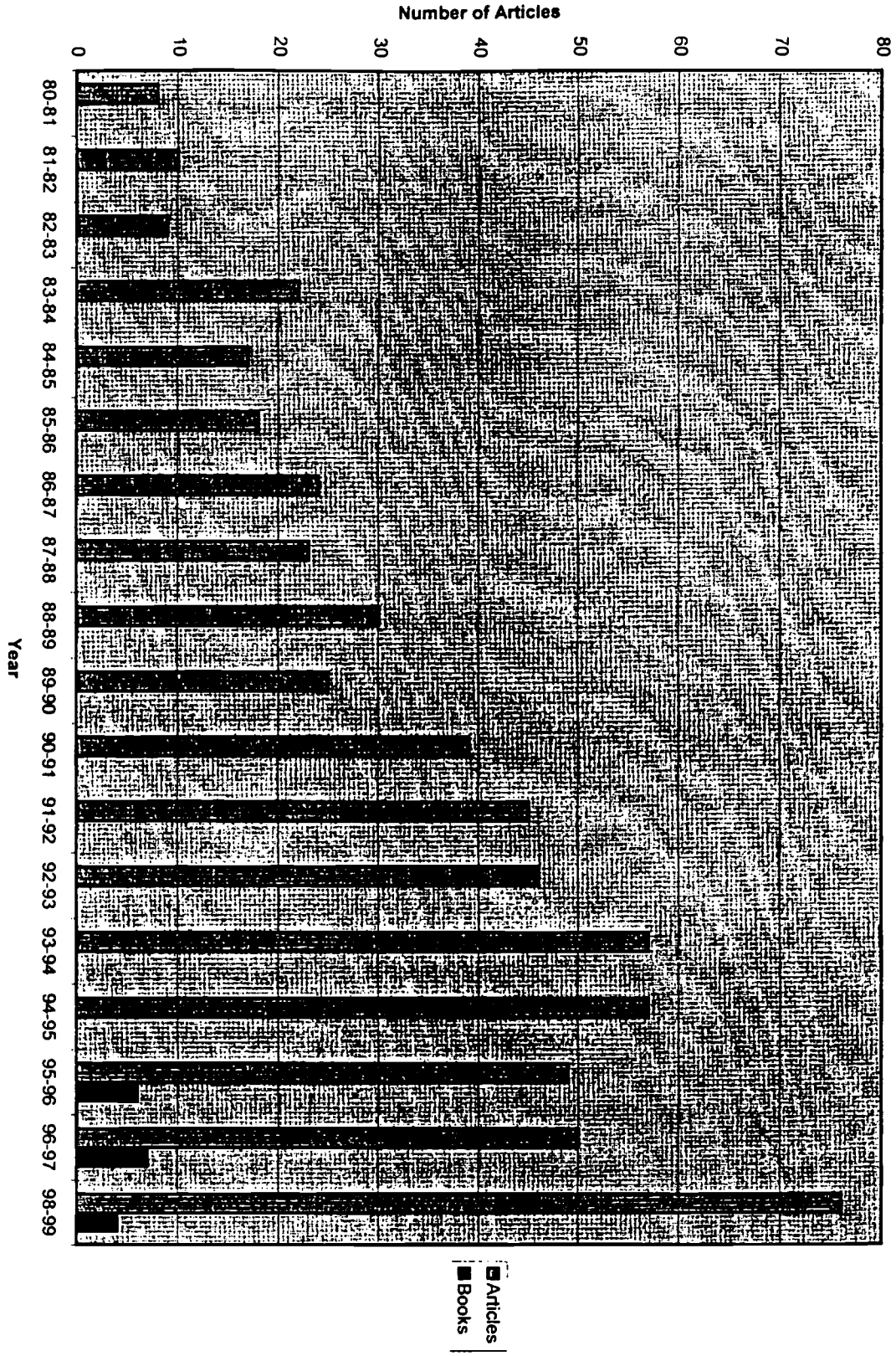
A check of the *Education Index* from the years 1935–1999 reveals the first appearance of the descriptor "mentoring" in 1980, with eight entries listed. The number of articles and books on mentoring has steadily increased, as the following chart illustrates.

A closer examination of these entries reveals that few deal specifically with mentoring in the context of the teaching of foreign languages and literatures (FL). This chapter's goal, then, is to examine current models of mentoring, and to relate them to issues that are specific to our discipline. We will then make recommendations for a research/action agenda.

## Review of the Literature

Luna and Cullen (1995) attributed the introduction of the concept of mentoring in the educational literature to the research of Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee (1978). These investigators undertook a longitudinal study of the importance of the mentoring relationship in the adulthood of young men, using biographic methods that built on the works of Freud, Erikson, and Jung.

Luna and Cullen summarized four broad conceptualizations of academic mentoring:




Mentioning Citations in The Education Index
1980-1999

- "Mentoring is a process by which persons of superior rank, special achievements, and prestige instruct, counsel, guide, and facilitate the intellectual and/or career development of persons identified as protégées" (Blackwell 1989, p. 9).
- Mentoring in education is the socialization of faculty members learning the rules of academe (Carter 1982).
- "[Mentoring] involves a special kind of socialization for leadership roles . . . . The process is one of extending and expanding personal efficacy and influence" (Moore 1982, p. 28).
- Mentoring involves colleagues who are role models, consultants/advisers, and sponsors for peers (Schmidt and Wolfe 1980).

Hawkey (1997) provided a wide-ranging review of the literature on mentoring, focusing on the interactions between mentor and student teacher. She identified four approaches: an organizational approach that examines the roles and responsibilities of the different personnel involved in teacher training; a functional approach that analyses the developmental stages that novice teachers experience and assigns corresponding roles for the mentor; an interpersonal approach that emphasizes interactional over professional aspects of learning to teach; and a "constructivist"[2] approach that "argues that mentors do more than respond to the needs of their mentees; they bring their own perspectives, values, and assumptions to the mentoring task, which influence the type of mentoring they develop" (p. 326). She concluded that each framework is of limited use because none can address the idiosyncratic nature of mentoring and learning to teach, where the complex play of cognitive, affective, and interpersonal factors resists typological categorization. We will return to this observation in our discussion below.

Specifically addressing the American university context, Nyquist and Wulff (1996) postulated a developmental approach to supervision, based on the level and background of the teaching assistant (TA). Mentoring, in their view, is a relationship between peers, and develops only after teaching assistants have had considerable experience. With beginning graduate students, or "senior learners," i.e., those that have been selected based on "their demonstrated competence as learners rather than as teachers or researchers" (p. 5), the supervisor will assume a managerial approach. This role requires setting standards, appointing, motivating, coordinating, monitoring, and possibly dismissing.

At a second level, graduate students with more experience may be considered "colleagues in training," who are at a discovery phase.

They are ready for innovation, to formulate and test hypotheses. The supervisor will then take on the role of model, demonstrating behaviors and attitudes about the instructional or research process. This stage is more collaborative. The supervisor shares reflections and decision making with the teaching assistant, and encourages reflective practice and questioning.

At a final stage, the supervisor may become the mentor of the teaching assistant, with more peer-like interaction. The mentoring relationship gives TAs the opportunity "to learn collegial roles, to ask questions, seek information, express concerns, or suggest ideas in ways that they would not when working with you primarily as a manager or model" (p. 14). To foster this relationship, the authors emphasized the need to collaborate, to provide opportunities for dialogue, and to view the TAs as decision makers.

Nyquist and Wulff operationalized this mentor relationship in the following chart:

| | |
|---|---|
| Relative Emphasis on Supervisor's Role | "You make the decision. Let me know if I can be of help to you. I'm interested in the outcome." |
| Teaching Assignments for TAs | Design and teach a basic course; assist with an advanced course |
| Research Assignments for RAs | Conduct research project using supervisor as a resource |
| Teacher Training Activity for TAs | Reflective practicum over curricular and pedagogical development and potential approaches to students |
| Function of Evaluation | Provide feedback as a colleague on developing a personal teaching or research style and approach. |

(Nyquist and Wulffe 1996, p. 27)

Boyle and Boice (1998) likewise explored mentoring within the context of the American university system. Based on two studies performed with new faculty and graduate teaching assistants, they established a model for systematic mentoring, founded on three components: planning, structure, and assessment. Adequate planning facilitated high involvement, a critical factor for the program's success. Moreover, early recruitment ensured that mentoring meetings would become a priority in the participants' routine, such that other events that would be

planned around the meetings, rather than the opposite.

The investigators found that three structural elements were crucial for sustained systematic mentoring: weekly mentor-mentee meetings, regular follow-up by program directors, and periodic group meetings.

Finally, they asserted that assessment should include three levels of data: program involvement data; "bonding" data[3]—information regarding the compatibility and bonding of mentoring pairs; and context data, using the participants' records of their mentoring meetings.

This review of the educational literature on mentoring may leave the reader more confused than enlightened. Malderez (1999) remarks on "a bewildering range of interpretations of the term. Most assume a one-to-one relationship between mentor and mentee, the 'student'-professional in the relationship, but even these often describe differing roles and functions for the mentor" (p. 4). She reproduces the following chart in an attempt to classify the divergent roles and functions:

| Role | Functions |
|---|---|
| 1. Model | —to inspire<br>—to demonstrate |
| 2. "Acculturator" | —to show mentee the ropes<br>—to help mentee get used to the particular professional culture |
| 3. Sponsor | —to "open doors"<br>—to introduce mentee to the "right people"<br>—to use their power (ability to make things happen) in the service of the mentee |
| 4. Support | —to be there<br>—to provide safe opportunities for the mentee to let off steam/release emotions<br>—to act as a sounding board—for cathartic reasons |
| 5. Educator | —to act as a sounding board—for articulation of ideas<br>—to consciously create appropriate opportunities for the mentee<br>—to achieve professional learning objectives |

(Malderez 1999, p. 4)

Luna and Cullen likewise point out the absence of "a widely accepted operational definition of academic mentoring" (1995, p. 6). The single constant appears to be a one-to-one relationship between mentor and mentee, a relationship that fosters individual growth (cf. Luna

and Cullen 1995, p. 5).

## Mentoring in the Foreign Language Context

As mentioned above, research on TA training in foreign language departments has not addressed mentoring in a sustained, theoretical discussion.[4] On the other hand, the profession has a long history of concern for the supervision of teaching assistants. We will now examine this concern in the context of the mentoring frameworks outlined above.

A search of the literature reveals a call for action as early as 1955, when an MLA Conference Report bemoaned the paucity of teaching experience and training possessed by the majority of M.A. and Ph.D. candidates. In addition to recommending additional experience, the report favored increased coursework in methodology, linguistics, and language. It further proposed the creation of a "certificate for college teaching" that would document training and level of language mastery.

In 1963, the MLA, supported by the Carnegie Corporation, polled Ph.D.-granting departments in foreign language with regard to their TA-training practices. Fifty-two departments at thirty-nine universities were represented in the survey, with the following results reported:

> From the questionnaires, it is clear that the average department a) offers no course in the art of teaching, b) makes no arrangements for class visiting, and c) provides no effective supervision. Some chairmen disclaimed any concern about teaching training. In some departments, there were teachers in charge of lower-division language teaching, [*sic*] who felt they had, or ought to have had, responsibility for supervision, but they could not assume it as an extra burden in an already heavy schedule (MacAllister 1966, p. 401).

MacAllister reported that in the "few" departments that allowed for supervision of teaching assistants, a faculty member was given teaching credit for this duty: "He usually holds a pre-term briefing session, meets with the assistants periodically, and sets up a schedule of visits to their classes, followed by conferences" (p. 31). This procedure was deemed "the best current practice, short of giving a regular methods course for graduate students and assistants" (p. 31).

This situation had changed somewhat by 1970, the year Hagiwara undertook a survey of TA training and supervision on behalf of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages. He found that out of 157 replies (no response rate noted), 38% of departments conducted preservice orientations and 24.8% required methods training (cited in Ervin and Muyskens 1982). Both he and Berwald (1976, also cited in

Ervin and Muyskens 1982)[5] called for further efforts in TA training and supervision.

In 1979, Nerenz, Herron, and Knop likewise surveyed graduate foreign language departments, sampling ninety universities, with a response rate of 57%. Of these institutions, 91% had some form of required TA training.

This initial survey was complemented by another one that Nerenz, Herron, and Knop (1979) administered to teaching assistants and former graduate students in French at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This 1978 questionnaire sought to determine the relative value of various components of the TA-training program. With a 46% and 36% response rate respectively, the two groups of respondents evaluated as the most effective supervisory techniques:

1. discussions of the observed session with a professor or an experienced teaching assistant after self-critiquing;
2. discussion of the observed session with a professor;
3. written comments on the observed session from the professor;
4. discussion of the observed session with an experienced teaching assistant (p. 886).

Among the recommendations that followed the discussion of her 1979 survey on TA training and evaluation, Schulz advised that "supervisor should be given sufficient released time from teaching duties so that he or she can make frequent classroom observations and be available for individual consultations as needed" (1980, p. 6). The remainder of Schulz's remarks confused supervision and evaluation, addressing issues of timing and format.

In a 1983 survey of 326 institutions, Di Pietro, Lantolf, and LaBarca summarized the ten components commonly found in TA training programs, albeit in different configurations: (1) pre-service orientation; (2) college methods course; (3) high school methods course; (4) pre-service workshop; (5) demonstration classes by a supervisor; (6) weekly group meetings; (7) peer-teaching demonstrations; (8) visitations by a supervisor; (9) supervisor-conference with the TA; (10) peer visitations (1983, p. 368).

Hagiwara's historical assessment on the "state of the art" in TA training (1976) grouped the literature into three categories: descriptive, pedagogical, and prescriptive:

The articles the writer came across were of three basic types: descrip-

> tions of successful programs, containing concrete details and, although designed for particular departments, offering features worthy of imitation by others; descriptions of courses in applied linguistics, methodology, or a single phase of teacher training such as interaction analysis and micro-teaching; various criteria, guidelines, and resolutions issued by professional organizations and conferences, such as MLA, ADFL, AATF, and the Northeast Conference, all decrying a lack of systematic training for college-level teaching and advocating the establishment of sound "TA training" (p. 7).

Fast-forwarding to the present, Olsen made a similar plea:

> One may reasonably presume that quite a few excellent training programs for teaching assistants already exist. However, ten unsystematic inquiries confirmed Showalter's[6] observation that pedagogical training for our teaching assistants varies greatly from casual and almost non-existent to comprehensive. I would like to appeal to ACTFL—or another umbrella organization in our disciplines—to solicit descriptions of the pedagogical support for all junior teachers in graduate departments, publish this information, and initiate a debate that might lead to some recommended and broadly adopted standards (1998, p. 503).[7]

Rava's 1991 study was the first to outline a systematic approach to mentoring in the context of a foreign language department. Her three-phase model called for an initial meeting with a senior professor before the beginning of the semester. During this session, "the mentor must be ready to spell out course objectives and the methods used to devise them and then must provide the TA either with a course syllabus and reading list or with the parameters for designing such a syllabus. The professor thus explains the process of developing a semester's program and of choosing materials. The mentor must also address questions of TA responsibility and freedom in curriculum development evaluation, and teaching methods" (p. 52).

During a follow-up meeting with the senior professor, "the TA [is given] a chance to present his or her part of the course to the mentor" (p. 52). This meeting is paired with the first as the follow-up aspect of phase one.

Rava proposed that the second phase of the process should involve class visits, with professor and TA observing each other's courses. Again, the relationship between the mentor and mentee is lopsided, with the senior professor serving in more of an evaluative capacity: "TAs will have become accustomed to such visits and will know how

to observe and how to use an observer's comments and suggestions for self-improvement" (p. 52).

During the third phase, the focus would be on grading. The professor "explains his or her methods of evaluation as a model for the teaching assistant" (p. 52).

Finally, the mentor and mentee should evaluate their endeavors over the course of the semester, and write a joint report to the chair.

At least five conclusions may be drawn from this brief review of TA training in FL departments:

1. Although mentoring might be implicit in the supervisory models, it is not a strongly delineated concept and is never defined in a rigorous fashion;
2. Despite the distinction made by some writers between novice and experienced TAs and their respective needs, no model is based on a developmental scheme, where the power differential between supervisor and TA is reduced to a more collegial, peer-like relationship;
3. Supervisory models favor coursework, informational meetings, classroom observations, and follow-up conferences;
4. There remains a perception that there should be more and better TA programs and national standards;
5. Surveys, reflection pieces, the dissemination of models, and the recommendations of professional organizations seem to have had little impact on the perceived quantity and quality of TA-training programs.

## Obstacles to Mentoring

As we have illustrated above, the surveys and reports on TA training are noteworthy for their alarmism. The overall impression is one of crisis: future college professors are not being prepared for teaching; undergraduates are being incompetently taught by poorly-prepared TAs. Why should this be the case? A number of answers are forthcoming, and while some of the documents cited may be familiar to our readers, we feel this review of departmental culture is necessary to situate our final comments. In this section, then, we explore institutional barriers to good pedagogical mentoring, specifically (a) the anti-teaching bias prevalent in the professional context, particularly as it influences the culture of the individual department and (b) the dichotomy between TA perceptions and faculty perceptions of TA effectiveness. A

further barrier, the lack of a useful knowledge base on mentoring, is taken up in our final discussion.

"Any junior scholar who comes in and pays attention to teaching at the expense of research and publishing ain't going to get tenure" (Mooney 1990, p. 1A). This remark made at the 1990 meeting of the American Association for Higher Education expresses in the most straightforward manner the present day climate of the academy. The authors agree with Boyle and Boice (1998) that most faculty holding prestigious university positions did so by focusing the greatest part of their energy upon their research agendas rather than upon teaching. Graduate programs, desirous of placing their graduates in the best jobs and at the same time painfully aware of the "catastrophically depressed" job market (Kernan 1992, p. 24), perpetuate this bias. While Stanford and Harvard have recently decided to reward departments and individual faculty for an emphasis on undergraduate teaching (Delbanco 1999, p. 38), these measures are so extraordinary as to be the proverbial exceptions that prove the rule.

It is not surprising, then, that even in those institutions that have TA-training programs in place, many students express the desire to return to their own research as soon as possible, having been "already time-pressured and well socialized by the doctoral-granting university" (Boyle and Boice 1998, p. 160). Thus, attempts to improve teaching via mentoring may be hampered by the general impression that time spent on improving teaching is time taken away from writing books and articles.

An article by Jones (1993) gives us additional insight into this situation. Jones surveyed teaching assistants in the psychology department of "a university whose campus-wide TA training program has been lauded as an ideal model" (p. 149). Although the low response rate (20%; N=18) precludes any broadly-applicable conclusions, Jones' analysis is nonetheless provocative: "The results of this survey show that TAs view their training program quite differently than program directors do. Even programs that have been praised in national reviews, as the campus-wide portion of this study has, are perceived by TAs as merely neutral in effectiveness. According to these TAs, encouragement to participate in training does not exist, topics of program discussions are quickly forgotten, and faculty feedback remains dreadfully weak" (p. 152).

Even if this study lacks statistical validity, it is easy to imagine—or identify—a completely "ghettoized" foreign language TA training program, directed by a single pedagogue, whose areas of professional specialization are shared by few, scorned by many as intellectually in-

ferior, and do not rank high in the departmental/university reward system. It is no wonder, then, that students receive implicit or explicit messages that discourage interest in training, resulting in discussions that "are quickly forgotten."

Bernhardt (1998) reinforces this point, suggesting that the history of foreign language instruction in the United States, in particular its marginalization, may influence the self-perception of the FL professoriate, as well as apprentice professors (TAs). This marginalization, and the struggle for FL to be considered a legitimate discipline, may well have resulted in seemingly conflicting goals, such as the ability to communicate versus knowledge of high culture (pp. 54–56).

This situation also explains why the mere existence of a TA training program engenders complacency. By setting up and running a training program, the language program director (LPD) has satisfied his/her service or teaching obligations, but not his/her research agenda, by which s/he will be judged. There is little incentive to reflect or innovate. By the same token, the remaining departmental colleagues are satisfied (and often relieved) that teacher training "is taken care of." Clearly, these circumstances are not auspicious for the development of a mentoring program—and yet may explain why any effort to move in a new direction is hailed as an exemplary model worthy of imitation.

Another factor that may inhibit further training initiatives—such as mentoring—is the disparity between TA and faculty perceptions of teaching. Brown-Wright, Dubick and Newman examined this disparity in a questionnaire study of TAs and faculty (1997) which revealed that TAs had a higher opinion of their performance than the opinion held by faculty members of their own performance. Some TAs have argued that their generally superior performance on student evaluations also attests to their competence. Hence, a resistance to continued training.

Furthermore, Bashford (1996) noted that graduate students are much more likely to accept critical comments on their research than they are to accept evaluation of their teaching. What goes on between a TA and his/her students is more private and "inviolable" than what is, for instance, written on literary theory by the same person.

These observations are supported by Feiman-Nemser and Floden's 1996 study on the cultures of teaching, in which they discussed the "hands-off" norms that are prevalent in teacher-teacher interaction. Noting that teachers typically work in isolation, they quoted Lortie (1975) who described the ideal colleague "as someone willing to help, but never pushy. A norm against asking for help in any area of serious difficulty prevails because such a request would suggest a failing on

the part of the teacher requesting assistance. A complementary norm discourages teachers from telling a peer to do something different" (Feiman-Nemser and Floden 1996, p. 509). Although the relationship between teaching assistant and supervisor involves a different status/power hierarchy than that described by the authors, the private nature of the teaching task, supported by the constructs of teacher authority and academic freedom, no doubt explains why TAs are less receptive to critical feedback on teaching. For true mentoring to occur, it will probably be necessary to develop a more collaborative pedagogical discourse.

## Directions for Future Research

It may be safely stated that most foreign language professionals intuitively feel that mentoring is a "good thing." Yet, a return to Table 1 leads us to reflect again upon the mentoring construct within the system of recognition and rewards in the academy. Are we witnessing a "bandwagon" effect, where "reformers" preach the latest trend and subsequently move on when the term is no longer "profitable," i.e., when the term no longer signifies innovation, generates publications, and forwards careers? Pennycook (1989) cautions us that academic knowledge is not innocent: "The knowledge produced in the central academic institutions is legitimated through a series of political relationships that privileges it over other possible forms of knowledge" (p. 596).

It is perhaps with these issues in mind that Feiman-Nemser (1996) issued this call for caution:

> Enthusiasm for mentoring has not been matched by clarity about the purposes of mentoring. Nor have claims about mentoring been subjected to rigorous empirical scrutiny. The education community understands that mentors have a positive affect [*sic*] on teacher retention, but that leaves open the question of what mentors should do, what they actually do, and what novices learn as a result (p. 3).

Likewise, Hawkey greeted the literature on mentoring with enthusiasm and alarm. She notes that much of the writing is either "descriptive or declarative with little analysis or theoretical underpinning to the study and practice of mentoring" (1997, p. 325).

Clearly, then, the greatest need in the field is empirical research. Feiman-Nemser identified four areas of concern: (1) the effects of mentoring on teaching and teacher retention; (2) factors that enhance the outcome of mentor–mentee relationships; (3) structures and resources that facilitate the mentoring dyad; and (4) the place of men-

toring in professional development programs and accountability checks (1996, p. 4).

In addition, Feiman-Nemser outlined "thorny issues of policy and practice" that need clarification or resolution in order for mentoring to remain viable. Should mentors assist *and* assess? It is argued that "novices are more likely to share problems and ask for help if mentors do not evaluate them" (p. 4). Nevertheless, mentors may be asked to assess for reasons of accountability or professionalism. For Feiman-Nemser, the issue is not straightforward: an either-or solution disadvantages one party in the collaboration.

A further issue is the extent to which the mentor relationship should be formalized within a program. Since the affective bond between mentor and mentee determines to a great degree the efficacy of the relationship, should mentors be chosen or assigned? Citing Tauer (1995), Feiman-Nemser suggests that "program developers may be wise to focus on creating optimal conditionals rather than trying to make optimal matches" (p. 4). (See Leaver and Oxford in this volume.)

Another policy question is the amount of release time (if any) that should be provided to mentors. If no release time is provided, the mentee and mentor are led to believe that the institution does not value the mentoring process.

Finally, how and when do mentors learn their craft? Are they professional language program coordinators, or are they chosen on the faulty equation of experience = expertise? Do they have knowledge of clinical supervision, theories of learning and teaching? Are they able to articulate their own beliefs about teaching and learning, or do they adhere to idiosyncratic intuition and insist on rigid models?

Unless these research and policy issues are addressed, the term "mentoring" may well become a buzzword that signifies innovation without substance. Furthermore, if mentoring lacks credible theoretical underpinnings, it will be that much harder to introduce it into TA training programs that present inherent obstacles to innovation.

## Notes

1. The following passage from Fénelon's work suggests the expanded role attributed to Mentor:

   N'oubliez pas, mon fils, tous les soins que j'ai pris, pendant votre enfance, pour vous rendre sage et courageux comme votre père. Ne faites rien qui ne soit digne de ses grands exemples et des maximes de vertu que j'ai tâché de vous inspirer. [Don't forget, my son, all the cares I took, during your childhood, to make you wise and brave like your father. Never do anything that isn't worthy of his great examples and the maxims of virtue that I tried to inspire in you. (translated by H. Jay Siskin)] —The goddess Minerva, speaking in the voice of Mentor. Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télé-*

*maque,* Book X

2. Our terminology.
3. The authors developed a Mentoring Index protocol to quantify this variable.
4. This will change, of course, with the publication of the present volume. Moreover, a session at the 1999 conference of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, presented by Lalande, was devoted to mentoring. Entitled "Mentoring and the Foreign Language Teaching Professional," it is described in the program as follows:

   "Is mentoring for you? What are the qualities of a good mentor and a productive mentoring relationship? This presentation addresses these questions, provides information about various mentoring programs, identifies practical and theoretical considerations for effective mentoring, and proposes a classical model of mentoring designed particularly for today's FL teaching professional" (p. 108). ACTFL. 1999. Program. Yonkers: p. 108.
5. Ervin and Muyskens' article discusses a survey of perceived needs among teaching assistants. Among their conclusions, they recommend that a TA training course address specific professional skills. The top four concerns were: methods and techniques; teaching the four skills; teaching conversation (getting the students to speak); making the class interesting. Responses diverged according to the experience and linguistic background of the respondent.
6. Elaine Showalter, the then-president of the Modern Language Association.
7. Note, however, that in addition to the 1955 MLA Report cited in the body of the text, ADFL made the following recommendation:

   "We, the Executive Committee and member departments of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages, therefore affirm and earnestly recommend to our colleagues (especially in graduate departments) that the foreign language profession now assume the responsibility for determining the criteria for acceptance to practice, as well as the instrumentation by which proficiencies are to be measured. We recommend that every graduate program include not only knowledge of language and literature, but also learning theory, measurement, and teaching experience sufficient to prepare the aspirant professor to teach well at all levels that are likely to be required of him or her upon appointment to a full-time position."

   Hagiwara also alludes to other calls for accountability issued by the Northeast Conference and the AATF.

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