

When the Master Makes Mistakes

What mentors have to learn from their mentees

FROM FAIRY GODMOTHERS TO wise wizards, many of our favourite stories feature sage advisers lending a helping hand to the less experienced. These relationships form in real life, too, albeit with less wand-waving. Students and new professionals seek out mentors with the hope they'll learn skills, build confidence and make connections. It's clear what motivates the mentee to join the relationship—but what about the mentor?

Last summer, **Shelly Jun**, '15 BSc, '17 MSc, mentored a U of A student who had received funding through the Undergraduate Research Initiative (URI). Jun was helping her as the student looked at how some of the URI's partner agencies use evaluation to inform their programs.

Jun, a research co-ordinator with the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families, says she doesn't consider herself a natural mentor. But she made the leap for a simple reason: she remembered how much mentorship had meant to her when she was a student. Like her mentee, Jun had also received funding and mentorship through the URI, an experience that helped her get into graduate school.

Here are four things Jun learned from her experiences as a mentee and mentor.

1. Put the mentee first.

As a mentee, Jun learned more from supervisors who treated her like a colleague rather than an employee. "What probably affected me the most, and encouraged me to follow their example, were the mentors who were invested in my growth," she says.

2. Don't think you're Yoda.

Once she started mentoring, Jun quickly realized she would not just be wisely doling out advice. In fact, being a mentor brought up some personal challenges, she says. "It helped me identify areas for personal development, including patience and active listening."

3. It's not your project to perfect.

Jun noticed her own hesitations to let go when it came to mentees' projects. "It's easy to fall into the mindset of wanting to do all the work myself," she says. "But I'm getting better at delegating and being patient with the iterative nature of the process."

4. It's a beautiful circle.

While a mentee may feel intimidated by their more-experienced colleague, Jun says the mentor should be equally ready to learn. "A lot of my learning has been around seeing my flaws and then having the opportunity to try again. And try again."—ANNA HOLTBY

A TIME TO TALK

When a piece of the communication puzzle—the ability to talk—is missing, innovative solutions can help

THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD MARC BOUTILIER understands the challenges of not being able to speak in a world where oral communication is the norm. Most especially, he knows the pain and isolation of not being heard.

He also knows the difference that communication devices and strategies can make. Boutilier, who has autism spectrum disorder and apraxia, uses an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device, which electronically speaks the words he types.

"I like that I can talk," he says. But it's hard when people are impatient.

"If people are not familiar with Marc, they tend to dismiss his slow typing or his playing with the keys as, 'Oh, he really doesn't have anything of importance to say,'" says his mother, **Gail Boutilier**, '85 BEd. "They won't wait. They will just move on."

Some people don't let him finish typing, instead assuming they know what he is trying to say. Others jump in to type his words for him. "This really doesn't give Marc a sense his voice matters."

Support has come through AAC Camp Alberta. Offered through the U of A's Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine and March of Dimes Canada, the annual camp brings together kids who use communication devices and teaches them new ways to use them. "It helped Marc see he wasn't alone or strange because he used a device to speak," Gail says. The camp also offers fun activities, like swimming, swinging, music and campfires. In 2020, the camp was virtual with activities like building living room forts, crafts and dancing.

"The primary purpose is to provide a camp experience to children who use AAC, in an environment where it is supported and valued," says Karen Pollock, an expert in speech-language pathology at the U of A and co-founder and director of the camp. Sessions are offered for parents and siblings, too. "AAC is a game changer that opens up so much."

Boutilier's mother, Gail, agrees. "There are lots of other people in this world who speak this way. No one treated Marc as a novelty or like he was less intelligent because he didn't use the spoken word."

The benefits don't stop with the campers. Pollock and her students build a body of research about how campers benefit and the students gain valuable experience. "We've been approached by families and professionals in other communities who are interested in setting up similar camps," says Pollock. "AAC Camp is one of the most rewarding experiences of my career."—**JENNA C. HOFF**, '02 BSc(PT)