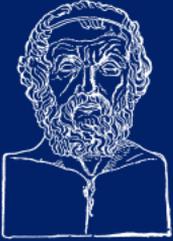


Mentorship: A Scientific Literary Perspective #2

To see the scientific perspective of mentoring, first we must start with the origin, misunderstandings, and long tradition of mentorship, and for that we must take a brief detour into some old literature, Homer's *The Odyssey*.



When Odysseus set sail to fight in the Trojan War, he left his old friend, Mentor, in charge of his household and charged him to look after his son, Telemachus. That is where the concept of mentorship comes from.

However, the story is more complicated than that.

Mentor himself made a bit of a mess of running Odysseus's household. Further, the guidance that he provided Telemachus came not from him, but from Athena disguised as Mentor. Why did the grey-eyed goddess need to cloak herself in the guise of an older man to make Telemachus listen to her? Was it just her usual guile or was there some rhetorical reason? And was her guidance out of the goodness of her goddess heart, or did she have an agenda? Finally what does all that matter for our purposes?

Further, Athena also appeared to Odysseus as Mentor, and while Odysseus knew it was Athena, he played along, also reaping the benefit of Athena's advice and encouragement delivered through the guise of his friend.

Athena-as-Mentor



"Telemachus, / your comrades at arms are ready at the oars, / waiting for **your** command to launch. So come, / on with our voyage now, we're wasting time." (Athena-as-Mentor, *The Odyssey*, Book 2: Lines 442-45; emphasis in translation)

"Some of the words you'll find within yourself, / the rest some power will inspire you to say." (Athena-as-Mentor, *The Odyssey*, Book 3: Lines 28-30)

"Where's it gone, Odysseus--your power, your fighting heart /...
 Come, old friend, stand by me!... /
 Rousing words-- /but she gave no all out turning of the tide, not yet, / she kept on testing Odysseus and his gallant son, / putting their force and fighting heart to proof."
 (Athena-as-Mentor and narrator, *The Odyssey*, Book 22: Lines 236-249)



Defining Mentorship for STEMM

Athena-as-Mentor can help us think through a shared definition of mentorship

1. Mentorship was never a dyad, but rather an alliance

Despite a long tradition in most disciplines of conceiving of mentorship as a unidirectional flow of information and support from an older mentor to a younger mentee, even the origins of the (named) concept show that it was never that simple.



2. Mentorship affects all the partners in the alliance

Because mentorship is an alliance, the effects of the mentoring relationship(s) go far beyond the mentee. Indeed, not only do mentors reap benefits from the alliance, the field as a whole does as well. Athena **did** have an agenda, and helping Telemachus and Odysseus reach their goals helped her reach her larger ones.

3. Mentorship focuses on both professional development and psychosocial support

If Athena had only focused on motivating Telemachus or Odysseus by appealing to their professional side, the results would not have been as favorable. She knew what her audience needed to succeed, and she provided both guidance for what they needed to do to succeed strategically and encouragement when they were feeling defeated. Both kinds of support are crucial.

4. Mentors must often hold back and let the mentees lead

Just as Athena refrains from taking the lead in battle, instead choosing to use words to motivate Odysseus and Telemachus, mentors must sometimes refrain from doing the easy thing and taking the reins. Learning often requires taking leadership even when one doesn't feel ready, and a good mentor knows how to encourage a mentee through that experience without enabling them.

A Working Definition of Mentorship in STEMM

"Mentorship is a professional, working alliance in which individuals work together over time to support the personal and professional growth, development, and success of the relational partners through the provision of career and psychosocial support." (The Science of Effective Mentoring in STEMM, 37)

Sources:

Consensus Study Report [The Science of Effective Mentoring in STEMM](#) (2019).
Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles.