

Chapter 6

Redefining the Proxemics of the Mentorship

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ABSTRACT

The sociopolitical controversies on campus that have resulted in “safe spaces” have pressured traditional structures based on proxemics, such as the mentorship, to reinvent themselves or disappear. In the chapter, “proximity” itself is defined not in terms of spatial contiguity but as an attentional structure by which the mentee achieves an intimate understanding at a distance of the objective achievements in teaching and writing that distinguish her mentor and other role models and that provoke acts of creative mimesis and exegesis by the mentee. Inspired by the ancient Stoic practice of the “care of the self” as explicated by Michel Foucault, the crux of the redefined mentored relation is not inculcating knowledge but guiding the growth of the mentee’s critical consciousness in preparation for a career and a life well-lived, befitting a noble spirit. Since the focus of the redefined mentored relation privileges distance and objective spirit (via the critical study of works) over personal interaction, the scholarly autonomy of the mentee is a noteworthy learning outcome.

INTRODUCTION

The Absurd Authority of Peer Judgment in Social Media

According to research by Chambliss and Takacs (2014), “the most valuable relationships students have with teachers are mentorships” (p. 53). Mentorships connect students and faculty members in an intellectual alliance that last longer than a course or a few semesters. “The defining characteristic of a mentor is a concern for the student beyond the immediacies of a course” (p. 54). It is regrettable that conditions on many campuses today are not propitious for mentorships. For example, the conspicuous rise of adjunct teaching, with its abrupt scheduling and tentative contracts, crimps the opportunities for mentored relationships. Another, less remarked trend, is that the authority epitomized in the disciplinary rigor of the mentor, and integral to her powers of guidance and role modeling, is being gradually shunted into the

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interstices of institutional history while hand-wrangling continues over how to further empower *student-centered learning*, an ideology which finds social media a perfect vehicle for its global enthronement. It does not help the cause of mentoring that today's political climate encourages a disrespect for expertise, scientific and otherwise, a dire development reported by Thomas Nichols (2017) in his book, *The Death of Expertise*. The practices of social media have exacerbated the problem, arguably creating a perfect storm for mentorships by transferring authority from distinguished teachers and intellectual luminaries to generally adolescent, often anonymous peer surveillance. Although it may cause discomfort for fans of social media, it pays to take a closer look at this "perfect storm" that is causing adverse conditions for the growth of mentorship opportunities.

The interfaces and apps of social media behemoths such as Facebook and Instagram are engines of social equalization via peer influence, converting delicate souls into Big Data while instilling them with the illusory feeling of achieving meaningful self-expression. On the one hand, "New media thrive on differences to create predictable individuals" (Chun, 2016, p. 18); on the other hand, the force of peer persuasion via social media acts as "a tidal wave that is flattening everything in its path" (Lovink, 2015, p. 180). Like the uncritical comforts of *public trust*, which millions of gullible Facebook users have been alarmed to see betrayed by corporate "data harvesting," it is alarming how *peer judgment* has been exempt from critique, growing into an absurd, infantilizing authority unchecked by dialectical mediation and expertise. Its aesthetic order or regime of taste (re: hair, clothing, use of language, choice of music, etc.) is immature yet sovereign, capable of destroying a life when applied as judgment to a wayward individual. The posting of stylized selfies and tweets, the exchange of quirky news items and trending memes, at best amounts to superficial, ersatz forms of personal expression lost in a sea of other selfies and tweets and memes. It is unlikely these whimsical postings mean: "I am making thoughtful, critically informed choices and decisions that are true to my innermost calling." It is more likely they mean: "Much like my peers, I am circulating largely pictorial evocations of selfhood that are superficial and trending; at any given moment, my identity is in flux, my future, indeterminate." These trivial displays of selfhood preset by algorithms offer the illusion of choice. Collective individuation occurs as a generalized, reciprocally affirmed (liking each other = becoming alike) peer consensus unchallenged by dialectical mediation. In other words, everyone individuates in the same general way within user groups, using the same interface, with the limits and possibilities of individuation set by algorithms and peer surveillance, not by critique or dialectical exchanges inside or between radically different user groups. The popularity of apps is due to the illusion that they further differentiate users from the routines of common interfaces. Each app, such as WhatsApp and Snapchat, constitutes a sub-universe of practices within the digital commons wherein a connected group feels itself distinct from nonusers of their app. But again, sociality reigns in such a coded niche of exchange, with self-expression taking a generalized form or format, following certain codes and rules that *simulate* subjective individuation *within* a collective individuation that is actually what Bernard Stiegler (2015a) calls "technical individuation" (p. 118). In short, the precondition of app-enabled performances of selfhood is not the spontaneity of consciousness as described by existential thinkers, but technical coding, which, to repeat, presets the limits and possibilities of self-expression. As these codes become second nature for users, they become integral to their self-understanding, so that, if they wish to continue communicating, they can only think and act *with* them and not *against* them. Researchers Temple and Choi (2014) have concluded that "sexting" on Snapchat and other apps "is a new 'normal' part of adolescent sexual development" (e1291). This explains why students implicated in "sexting" scandals never thought they were committing the crime of distributing child pornography, but only doing what *felt natural* on their app. In this way the critical

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