The Promise of *Adaptive Mentorship*©: What is the Evidence?

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Abstract

This article describes *Adaptive Mentorship*© (AM), a mentoring model designed by the authors to be applied in any coaching, supervisory, mentorship, preceptorship, apprenticeship, or training setting across the post-secondary, professional-education, or occupational-training spectrum. The authors derived the AM model from earlier contingency leadership approaches, and in this present article they synthesize the research results that they and others have accumulated regarding the effectiveness of the model. During the past two decades, they have used these research findings to apply, refine, and disseminate the model in higher education settings. The authors describe AM's rationale and implementation procedures; they consolidate the body of research findings; and they summarize the model's strengths and limitations. They conclude this report by inviting interested mentorship practitioners/researchers in *any* field of professional development to consider this evidence in determining whether AM has potential to enhance their own mentoring programs.

Keywords: Mentorship, Leadership, Internship, Coaching, Training, Adaptive mentorship, Practicum

1. Introduction

Mentorship scholars and practitioners in fields of professional education have conceptualized mentorship as a developmental process by which an individual with more knowledge and skill in a field (i.e., the *mentor*) assists a person with less knowledge and skill (i.e., the *protégé*) to develop in these areas (Ralph & Walker, 2011a; Rose Ragins & Kram, 2007). Universally, there has been a growing attentiveness to the quality of the mentorship process conducted in all professional disciplines and occupations (Johnson, 2006; Carnegie, 2011), which in turn has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in the number of related research studies, publications, conferences, and websites that have appeared during the past three decades (Chun, Sosik, & Yun, 2012).

Some of this research has indicated that although the relationship between mentors and protégés is typically positive (Linn, Howard, & Miller, 2004; Muschallik, & Pull, 2012), a lingering deficiency occasionally re-appears within the mentorship transaction, related to such negative elements as: inadequate/inappropriate guidance, unacceptable supervisory interventions, unproductive mentoring responses, or poor partner communication (Lortie, 1975; Taherian & Shekarchian, 2008). There has thus been a subsequent call for better mentorship training and more stable developmental relationships (Asare, 2008; Myall, Levett-Jones, & Lathlean, 2008).

Our own research has confirmed the existence of these mentorship difficulties (Ralph, 1994, 2002a, 2005; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2009a), which we believed could be reduced by the application of a clear conceptual model to guide the entire mentorship process (Goodlad, 1994; Hughes, 2004; Ralph, 1998; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2009b). We therefore developed the *Adaptive Mentorship*© (AM) model as a viable approach to enhance mentoring practice in any training or supervisory milieu. We believe that AM, which we formerly called *Contextual Supervision* or *CS* (Fritz & Miller, 2004; Ralph, 1998, 2005; Stephens & Little, 2010; Watt, 1998); and which we derived from a range of contingency and situational leadership approaches (Blake & Mouton, 1978; Fiedler & Garcia, 1987; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988; Ralph 2004). Our research, and that conducted by others identified in this article, has demonstrated the potential for applying AM in *any* mentorship situation in *any* field of professional education or occupational training (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2010; Ralph & Walker, 2012). In this present paper we summarize the research findings regarding AM's record to date, and we respectfully invite interested mentorship educators and planners to consider this evidence to help inform their own mentorship programs.

2. Methodologies Used to Research Adaptive Mentorship[©]

We first describe the AM model and then summarize the methods we and others have used to research its efficacy. Because we received a federal grant (see Acknowledgements[1]) to disseminate the AM model, we and others have widely published/distributed its description and research record. The references cited in this article attest to the international scope of these research and dissemination efforts in higher education venues.

2.1 The Adaptive Mentorship Model

Adaptive Mentorship focuses on mentors adjusting their mentorship behaviour in response to the task-specific development level of protégés they are assisting in the learning/supervisory situation (Chrosniak, Ralph, & Walker, 2013; Ralph, 1996a, 1996b; Ralph & Walker, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). We represent the AM model in Figure 1.
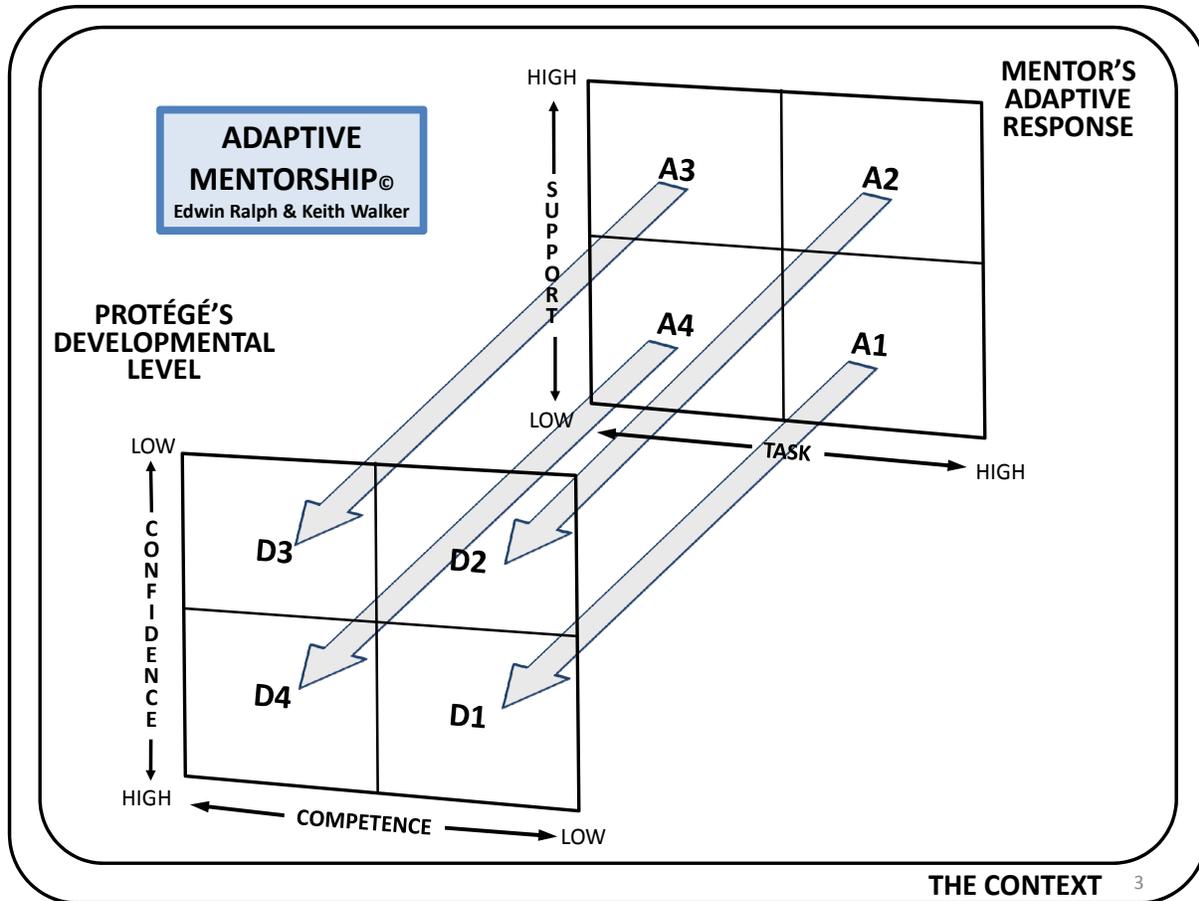

Figure 1. Adaptive Mentorship[©]. The mentor matches his/her adaptive response to synchronize with the skill-specific developmental level of his/her protégé (from Ralph and Walker, 2011a, 2012).
Note. See Acknowledgement[2].

The outer border of the diagram represents the context of the mentorship relationship. These contextual factors include psychological, social, organizational, and cultural aspects within the practicum/work setting. Many of these influences cannot be changed by the mentor or the protégé; however, the key factor over which the participants *do* have direct control is their own behaviour. Mentors can change their mentorship response, which consists of two dimensions shown in the A-grid: their adaptive "task" response (i.e., the degree of direction given regarding the technical, mechanical, or procedural aspect of the protégé's performance), and their adaptive "support" response (i.e., the degree of expression regarding the "human" or psycho/social/emotional aspect of the protégé's learning).

For the protégés, the key element over which they have most control is their competency-specific developmental level in performing particular skill-sets. This developmental-level consists of two dimensions, as depicted in the

D-grid: their developmental "competence" level (i.e., their ability to perform the task), and their developmental "confidence" level (i.e., their degree of self-assurance, composure, and feelings of security and/or safety in performing the skill-set). The core of the AM model is represented by the larger arrows linking the D-grid with the A-grid, which portray the mentor's matching of one of four basic adaptive "A" responses with a similarly numbered "D" developmental-level exhibited by the protégé in his/her performance of the particular competency. The application of AM consists of the following three phases.

2.1.1 Determine the Protégé's Development Level

The first phase is for the protégé/mentor pair to determine the existing development level of the protégé to perform the specific competency being practiced at the time. As illustrated in the "D grid" of Figure 1, a protégé's skill-specific level of development consists of both his/her *competence* and his/her *confidence* levels in performing that task. The D1 quadrant reflects an individual with "low competence" and "high confidence" to accomplish the task (i.e., he/she does not know exactly *how* to perform it, but is confident, willing, and eager to do so). A protégé at D2 is low on both the competence and confidence dimensions; a protégé at D3 shows high competence and low confidence in it; while a protégé at D4 is high on both dimensions.

A protégé's developmental level may be ascertained in three ways: (a) by the mentor's formal and informal observations of the protégé's actual performance of the skill set; (b) by the pairs' informal conversations about the protégé's specific progress in it; and (c) by the protégé's answers to the mentor's direct questions about his/her progress in that task. The levels of a protégé's development are skill-specific, they are changeable over-time, they may be different for different competencies, and they are not permanent labels of a protégé's progress (Johansson-Fua, Sanga, Walker, & Ralph, 2011; Ralph, 1996a, 1998, 2000, 2004).

2.1.2 Synchronize Mentor's Response

After determining the protégé's task-specific level of performance, the mentor must appropriately adapt his/her mentorship response to correspond to the existing developmental level of the mentee regarding the competency in question. This matching process represents the essence of AM. As depicted in Figure 1, the mentor's adaptive response also has two dimensions: the amount of *support* the mentor provides (i.e., the human-relationship aspects of encouragement, positive reinforcement, praise, and psychological/emotional bolstering of the protégé as he/she attempts to develop the skill). This support is revealed outwardly by *genuinely* positive words, pleasant facial expressions, affirming gestures, and accepting body language.

The other response-element is the *task* dimension (i.e., direction regarding the technical or mechanical component of mastering a competency), in which the mentor's response varies along a continuum of lesser to greater amounts of guidance or specific technical advice about the performance. This task-dimension involves such behaviours as telling, showing, guiding, demonstrating, advising, directing, or providing procedural strategies regarding the protégé's "technique." *Task*, however, embraces more than refining one's functional techniques or performance tactics; it also encompasses the broadening *and* deepening of protégés' holistic understanding of professional identity and its attending social, ethical, and moral aspects.

The key principle in correctly matching the A and D quadrants is that the mentor's *task* response must be *inverse in magnitude* to the extent of the protégé's *competence* level; and simultaneously, the extent of the mentor's *support* is similarly *inversely proportional* to the novice's level of confidence in performing the skill-set. In short, the degree of mentor response is opposite to that of protégé development.

2.1.3 Continually Observe and Adapt Mentor's Response

The mentorship pair continually and mutually monitor the protégé's changing level of development, and the mentor would accordingly synchronize his/her adaptive response to match, in *inverse* degrees, the protégé's changing development level(s). As a protégé advances from D1 to D2 to D3 to D4, the mentor *reciprocates* by responding correspondingly with A1, A2, A3 and A4 adaptation

2.2 Methods Used to Research AM

During the past twenty-two years we have conducted and published a series of studies for the purpose of assessing the effectiveness of Adaptive Mentorship (or Contextual Supervision, CS). In this section we summarize the methods we used to conduct that research.

2.2.1 Research Conducted by an Individual Mentor

Ralph (1991, 1992, 1993a; Ralph & Yang, 1993) first reported how he had personally/privately implemented the CS model as part of his mentoring duties. He was a faculty internship-facilitator in a college of education where he

mentored several cohorts of mentor-protégé pairs in internship or extended-practicum programs. He conducted similar research, when he served as a faculty peer-consultant for new post-secondary university instructors (Ralph, 1995, 1996b, 1998; Ralph & Konchak, 1996).

2.2.2 Research Conducted with Cohorts of Mentor-Protégé Pairs

Moreover, Ralph (1996a, 1998, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2005) reported results from several studies investigating the use of the model by several cohorts of instructional mentors whom he trained in K-12 teacher-education. For this research, he had provided formal workshops to groups of mentor-protégé pairs regarding their application of the model during teacher-candidates'16-week extended-practicum programs in school settings.

In all these studies Ralph collected survey data from mentorship pairs, who independently marked on of copies of the A- and D-grids where each mentor and protégé thought he/she and his/her partner were positioned at that point in time. That is, protégés plotted where they thought they were at on a D-grid sheet, and mentors likewise selected on a D-grid form the quadrant in which they thought their protégés were performing for the skill-set being considered (e.g., classroom management and oral-questioning), two skills long considered to be essential to effective teaching that promotes student learning (Eggen & Kauchak, 2009; Kasin Lemlech, 2010). After each partner independently completed his/her "D" plotting for the protégé, the pair discussed their respective choices and rationales.

Next, each partner independently marked an "x" on an A-grid form in a quadrant they thought the mentor was performing with respect to adapting their mentorship response to the protégé regarding the skill-set or competency being practiced. They subsequently discussed their "A" markings, and the overall similarities and differences between their respective A and D rankings.

The self- and partner-plotting for the two AM grids were recorded both at the beginning and near the end of the 4-month period, in order to give a "pre-" and "post- reading" of participants' perceptions of their own and their partners' then-current positions on the D and A grids. He then collated these data with respect to the total number of individuals whose plottings of their own performance and that of their partners matched similar quadrants (i.e., A1 with D1, or A2 with D2, and so on).

2.2.3 Research from Inter-Professional Expert Panels

A third method that we, the authors, used to ascertain the efficacy of the AM model was to present the model to several *panels of experts* (Turner-Bowker, Saris-Baglama, Derosa, Paulsen, & Bransfield, 2009), whom we requested to judge its effectiveness. As a consequence of our receipt of a federally-funded public outreach grant[1] (Ralph & Walker, 2011), we were able to disseminate the AM model in several locations in Canada, the United States, Europe, and the South Pacific. At the time of writing this article, we had already conducted 47 AM workshop/seminar/forum sessions in several countries that ranged from one to six hours in length (Ralph & Walker, 2013). In these sessions, we collected evaluatory feedback from 573 respondents who volunteered their written comments concerning the AM model. The confidentiality and anonymity of these respondents and their institutions were maintained, and they were representative of a wide range of professional disciplines spanning the fields of education, government, business, industry, health-care, military/police, and religious/church organizations .

Attendees at these meetings had been involved in mentorship programs offered in their respective units (or had an interest in doing so); and by virtue of their experience/position, we thus considered them as members of expert panels (Keeney, Hasson, & McKenna, 2001; Strauss & Ziegler, 1975; Wiersma & Jurs, 2008), capable of providing us with objective feedback and candid assessments regarding the efficacy of the AM model. Panels of experts, and approaches derived from them, have been used extensively as qualitative-research methodologies in the social sciences, in which knowledgeable and respected leaders in particular fields deliberate/collaborate to provide guidance and direction for problem-solving, decision-taking, and policy-making (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004).

At the beginning of each AM workshop, we advised attendees that we would invite them to provide us with a voluntary assessment of the model, which consisted of a printed form with two questions: *What is positive about the AM model?* and *What are its pitfalls/challenges?* We also informed volunteers that we would be using their comments to assist us in improving future workshops, and refining the AM model.

2.2.4 Recent Research

As a result of gaining knowledge about the AM model through our dissemination efforts of workshops and/ or publications, mentorship leaders/organizers in 13 professional settings accepted our invitation to adopt or adapt the model in their organizations and subsequently to publish their findings. Eleven publications have appeared to date (identified in the following paragraph); while two other units were continuing their research on the model at the time

of this writing, namely: the Internship Program at the Faculty of Education, University of Regina (T. Salm, personal communication, October 22, 2010), and the Faculty of Nursing, McGill University (N. Ponzoni, personal communication, October 17, 2012).

The 11 published studies, which are listed in the References section, addressed the following topics: applying the AM model in undergraduate advisory programs (Chrosniak, Ralph, & Walker, 2013); using the AM model to mentor EAL university students (Khoii, 2011); adapting the model for teacher-candidates completing their in-school internship (Chin & Kutsyuruba, 2011); mentoring student nurses (Jennings & Couture, 2011); implementing the model in a unique medicine/nurse practitioner mentorship arrangement (Ralph & Shaw, 2011); adapting the model for mentoring undergraduate pharmacy students (Hawrysh, 2011); employing it to enhance the mentorship of business students (Posner, 2004); adjusting the model to enhance dietetic preceptors' mentorship practice (Haskey, Floer, Walker, & Ralph, in press); and adjusting the model to fit how mentorship was conducted in three cross-cultural, inter-professional settings (Johansson-Fua, Sanga, Walker, & Ralph, 2011; Johansson-Fua, Ruru, Sanga, Walker, & Ralph, 2013; Ruru, Sanga, Walker, & Ralph, 2013).

3. Findings

In this section we highlight the findings that we derived from all four sets of published research studies that have been conducted on the Adaptive Mentorship (and Contextual Supervision) model.

3.1 Findings from an Individual Mentor's Application

Ralph's (1991, 1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1998; Ralph & Yang, 1993) published reports on his personal use of the Contextual Supervision model revealed several positive aspects of the CS model, which helped him to: (a) clarify and understand participants' roles and behaviours in the mentorship process; (b) adjust his leadership style and response to match the developmental levels of the mentor/protégé pairs with whom he worked in the internship; (c) reinterpret interpersonal problems that arose as often being the result of mismatched mentor response and protégé development level; and (d) defuse these misalignments by assisting the mentor/supervisor to correct and re-synchronize his/her leadership style to correctly match the existing development level of the protégé. The negative aspect of CS was that, like any conceptual model in the social sciences, it could be misused, underused, abused or unused. In other words, it was not a proverbial "silver bullet," but needed to be wisely used (Ralph, 1993b).

3.2 Findings from Cohorts of Mentor-Protégé Pairs

The findings from the studies of cohort mentor-protégé pairs (Ralph, 1998,2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2005) suggested that when mentors/supervisors were familiar with the AM (CS) model and its principles, they were more consistent in their matching of their mentorship response appropriately with the development levels of the supervisees (e.g., A1 with D1, A2 with D2, etc.). The cohort studies also confirmed that mentors seemed to prefer using mentoring responses or styles with higher *support* and lower *task* responses when working with other adults; and that protégés, as a whole, tended to rate themselves lower in skill development than their mentors rated them.

One further limitation seemed to be that even when cohorts had been exposed to AM training and preparation during initial workshops, there still seemed to exist among a certain percentage (15%-20%) of mentors somewhat of an ambiguity or a misinterpretation regarding some AM principles and /or their implementation of the model. Yet, it has also been confirmed that the AM concepts and principles, once understood and accepted by personnel in the mentor/protégé roles, are relatively easy for them to apply (Ralph, 1998, 2004, 2005, Ralph & Walker, 2011b; Watt, 1998).

Ideally, if the AM model functioned perfectly, there should be a 100% agreement of matching of A and D grids; in fact, some of our previous research (Ralph, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2005) showed that the mismatching phenomenon could actually be reduced if the mentorship-program organizers provided participants with additional workshop time to become more acquainted with the model, and if the AM facilitator made more deliberate reference to the model with the cohorts and pairs during mentoring seminars and site-visits. Not surprisingly, the initial mismatching weakness could be alleviated by having participants spend more time becoming acquainted with the model's use.

3.3 Findings from Inter-professional Expert Panels

Our preliminary analysis of the 573 Adaptive Mentorship evaluation forms submitted by 47 panels of experts representing a variety of professions and occupations from several countries (Ralph & Walker, 2013) revealed that: (a) referees enumerated twice as many positive aspects than challenges for the model; (b) the typical positive features were that it presented a clear conceptualization of the process; it offered the participants understandable guidelines for action; and it helped indicate where conflicts might arise and how to rectify them; and (c) the typical cautions that

were identified by the experts were that: users of the AM model must be well trained in applying its principles and practices; the model should not be construed as a rigid or mechanical constraint, but rather be understood as a conceptual tool that provides practical suggestions and sensible guidelines; and above all, it should be "adaptable," just as its name implies.

3.4 Most recent research

A review of the findings from the published studies (cited in Section 2.2.4, above, and in the References section) corroborated the positive results identified in the above research, namely, that:

the AM model appears to clarify users' conceptualization of the entire mentorship process;

it offers reasonable guidelines for the mentor and protégé, alike, to help them fulfil their respective obligations during the mentoring enterprise;

it can help users to re-interpret many of the so-called relationship difficulties from being "personality clashes" to being mentors' mismatching of their A-responses with a protégé's existing D-level, and it can subsequently help partners correct these mismatches before such mistakes escalate;

it requires that participants be provided with a sound rationale, clear explanations, sufficient training, and ample practice in order to acquaint participants with AM's procedures; and

it offers participants an intuitive instrument that they can **adapt** to fit their mentorship settings and interests, rather than being expected to blindly **adopt** an unfamiliar approach.

By contrast, the small but persistent number of caveats regarding the model, which were identified by respondents in this most recent body of research, corresponded with the limitations indicated in the earlier studies summarized above. For instance, the following points were mentioned by a few respondents: (a) a reluctance to use any approach that placed individuals into categories or boxes; (b) a concern that "external agents" were attempting to force a "foreign approach" on unwilling recipients; (c) a rejection of the model's diagram as being confusing and unmanageable; (d) a repulsion from expending the obvious effort, time, and persistence required to prepare/train all participants to understand and apply the AM model; and (e) an unwillingness to work with certain participants in organizations who habitually resist innovations of any type.

A possible strategy mentioned by two panel experts, which has potential to reduce these limitations, was to prepare/train mentors and protégés to employ key questioning and *professional learning conversations* as part of the mentoring/coaching process (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Earl & Timperley, 2008; Chrosniak, Ralph, & Walker, 2013). These scholars have asserted that team members need to engage in evidence production, authentic discussion, respectful critique, reflective dialogue, and collaborative conversation-- regarding both the content and the process of the mentorship enterprise. These authors also claimed that if participants would perform these activities, their professional competence and confidence would be bolstered, compared with participants who merely interacted with one another in a transitory or surface manner. At the same time, however, we also believe that a caveat exists to using these types of learning conversations or to applying any conceptual model in the social sciences and humanities, including Adaptive Mentorship. This caveat is that success will occur only if participants remain vigilant both in (a) respectfully addressing defensive behaviour in themselves and in their colleagues, and (b) persistently pursuing shared leadership within the group (Argyris & Schön, 1996).

4. Discussion and Concluding Comment

In conclusion, however, we found that the common thread throughout all the AM research to date was that the amount of positive feedback from users and assessors of the AM model outweighed their cautionary advice at a two-to one rate. Yet, the respondents also suggested areas where the model could be enhanced. For instance, typical comments illustrating the positive aspects were: "It helped me understand how protégé viewed their own needs;" "It gave both of us a basis for discussion where we both used the same language . . .;" and "It helped define my role as a mentor-teacher as [my protégé] developed." By contrast, specific suggestions for future improvement were: "I suggest that the model be presented very early in the relationship and in depth prior even to meeting each other . . . ;" and "Tell new pairs to keep reflecting on what stage you and your protégé are at, and adjust your support accordingly."

We believe that the research on AM that has been conducted and reported to this point affirms that the model has potential not only to help users clarify their holistic conceptualization of the mentoring process, but that it offers participants guidance in how to act, respond, and behave at specific stages or phases in the mentoring journey. The

research also indicates that the model can be adapted across cultures and professional disciplines, wherever practitioners apply it across the educational/training landscape. We therefore wish to conclude this article by repeating Barry Posner's (2004) call from nearly a decade ago to interested mentorship researchers and/or practitioners that they follow his example first of trying the model, as he did at the Leavey School of Business, and then of accepting his invitation (p. 151): "Let's hear from you about your own experience." We are hopeful that the evidence we consolidated, here, will attest to the model's promise; and we join Posner in extending this request to other interested scholars and practitioners to consider adapting the Adaptive Mentorship model, researching its effects, and sharing their findings and insights.

Acknowledgements

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