

Roman mentoring and modern universities: mentoring in the Roman Republic

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Abstract

Historically mentoring is a process of transferring knowledge from an experienced individual, to an inexperienced individual. It has been an integral aspect of educational agendas for thousands of years, as the value of peer mentoring is both enriching to the mentee's development, and the mentor's repute. This project aims to compare the mentoring practices of the Roman Republic to those of the contemporary world. The Roman Republic placed mentoring at the core of its educational systems. In an extremely competitive Roman world, the right mentor could guarantee not only political and social success, but also survival. Mentoring in the professions of oratory and politics have been chosen as examples from the Roman Republic, with the orator Cicero as a case study. Contemporary authors' opinions of what exactly constitutes mentoring, and the role of a mentor, are the foundations for the comparison of Republican practices to a selected modern case study: Macquarie University's *Telemachus Angels Ancient History Mentoring Program*. Research papers and monographs have been utilised in conjunction with ancient evidence, particularly the writings of Cicero himself, and also the *Telemachus Angels* mission statement and mentoring projects. The juxtaposition of Roman and contemporary mentoring indicates that the similarities outweigh the differences in number. However the differences are not insignificant, for they highlight class, cultural and gender prejudices that were held as the norm in the Republic, mirrored in the West until the twentieth century. Whilst the attitudes toward and the focus of mentoring may have changed after the civil rights movements of recent memory, there is much to be learned from the practice of Republican mentoring. From Republican practices recommendations can be made to improve mentoring programs in modern universities.

Keywords: Mentoring, *tirocinium*, Cicero, similarities, differences, contemporary universities

Introduction

Mentoring is an integral facet of education, particularly in the tertiary educational system. Whilst contemporary literature concerning the processes and functions of mentoring originates in the 1970s, mentoring itself has been in practice for thousands of years. Mentoring was a prevalent practice in the political institutions of the Roman Republic (509-27 BC). A wealth of written evidence has been left to us by the Roman orator and politician Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) about the mentoring he received from his family and other prominent men of his day. In contemporary universities mentoring programs are, of course, in place. Macquarie University's *Telemachus Angels* mentoring program has been active since the early 2000s, assisting first year Ancient History students in the transition from their previous studies to university life. Through a comparative study of ancient sources and current scholarship, similarities and differences between the mentoring practices and functions in the Roman Republic and the contemporary world have been observed. Role modeling and teaching, career development, promoting and sponsoring, ongoing friendship and counseling are common themes amongst ancient and contemporary mentoring practices. The findings are reported in this paper, utilizing the work and career of Cicero as a case study for the Roman Republic, and the *Telemachus Angels* program for contemporary mentoring.

Mentoring

The historical development of the term "Mentor" originates with an Ancient Greek steward by the name of Mentor ([Anderson & Shannon, 1995, p. 25](#)). When King Odysseus left Ithaca to fight in the Trojan War, his son Telemachus was entrusted into Mentor's care. It is from

this Telemachus that the Macquarie University *Telemachus Angels* program derives its name. Anderson and Shannon argue that there is much to be learnt from this story about the nature of mentoring. For them mentoring is an intentional process of nurturing, which is also insightful, supportive and protective (p. 26). Mentoring has been a subject for critical analysis since the mid 1970s, however there is little consensus in the literature as to what defines a mentoring relationship, or what roles and functions one must perform to be considered a mentor.

In 1978 Levinson defined a mentor as an older, more experienced individual, who wields a high level of status and influence in the field a young novice aspires to enter (p. 97). A mentoring relationship is a mutually beneficial relationship, which affords a young novice the opportunity to expand their talents ([Cohen](#), 1995, p. 6). Mentors use their experience and influence to assist mentees with attainment of their own goals, whilst receiving respect and recognition from peers for contributing to the development of new talent ([Kram](#), 1983, p. 614). Mentoring however is much more than education. Ward, Thomas and Disch describe mentoring as a “mechanism for human development” ([2012](#), p. 411). Whilst field related skills are taught, the mentor empowers the mentee with the ability to handle the many highs and lows that life can offer (p. 418). It is a bond between two individuals who have come together for the love of what they do. From this bond long lasting friendships and partnerships can be forged as a solid foundation of trust is built (Anderson and Shannon, 1995, p. 29).

Maynard and Furlong present three models through which mentoring can be viewed and analyzed ([1995](#)). The apprenticeship model is indicative of the traditional pattern of mentoring. An inexperienced individual demonstrates behaviour to a mentee, who then proceeds to emulate that behavior (p. 18). Central to the apprenticeship model is the

concept of role modelling, an imperative mentoring function which shall be revisited later. The competency model adds a critical dimension to the apprenticeship. The mentor demonstrates behavior; the mentee performs that behavior and is observed (p. 19). Mentors then provide substantial feedback on the outcome of the pupil's activity. The competency model also stresses the need for pupils to follow their own routines as well as imitating those of their mentor (p. 20). Maynard and Furlong's final model is the reflexive model. Reflexivity places the observational and critical tasks in the hands of the mentee. Mentees reflect on their own learning and progress (p. 21). Additionally they consider the results of their strategies in comparison to those of their mentor.

Mentoring is not defined by roles, but by the various functions a mentoring relationship fulfils ([Levinson, 1983](#), p. 98). The scholarly literature holds no consensus as to what functions are necessary for a relationship to actually be considered a mentoring one. Functions are broken down to specific attributes or activities, which are then listed as additional mentoring functions. This was the case with Levinson's "teaching" function (1978, p. 98). Kram listed "challenging assignments" and "coaching", but not teaching, even though these would be considered aspects of teaching (p. 614). She categorized the mentoring functions into two distinct divisions; career focused and psychosocial (p. 614). The career oriented functions were honed to the professional advancement of the mentee through sponsorship and instruction, whilst the role of the psychosocial functions was to foster holistic growth. For the purposes of this paper the mentoring functions which have appeared most frequently in the scholarly literature, namely; role modeling and teaching, career development, promoting and sponsoring, ongoing friendship and counseling, will be compared to the Roman models of mentoring.

Cicero's Context and Background

By the end of the second century BC Rome had achieved dominance of the Mediterranean world, an area spanning from Spain to the coast of North Africa and Turkey. Marcus Tullius Cicero was born in 106 BC at Arpinum, a town 70 miles south east of Rome ([Mitchell](#), 1979, p.2). He was from the Tullii Cicerones, a family which had long wielded influence in local politics, but under the patronage of *princeps senatus*, leader of the Senate Aemilius Scaurus had been introduced to society in Rome (p. 3). Cicero's father moved the family to the city of Rome, and Cicero received his boyhood education from a wide variety of intellectuals. Among them were his father, Uncle Aculeo, and Licinius Crassus an acquaintance of the family. His father however abstained from the political sphere, which had severe implications for the esteem in which he was held by the Roman nobility (p. 4). Lineage was held in the highest regard by the Roman nobility. Whilst Cicero's heritage was respectable, his father and grandfather had not entered political office. Therefore to some, Cicero did not have the familial foundations for success in politics. He was labelled a *novus homo*, or new man (Mitchell, 1979, p. 2). The Roman nobility was intensively competitive in regards to political office ([Hall](#), 2005, p. 264). Hillard argues that Roman youth were "imbued with an ethos of achievement" and at an early age would have singled out their allies and competitors ([2005](#), p. 3). In 90 BC Cicero was 16, old enough to be legally recognized as a man, and Rome was facing an impending crisis. The Italian peninsula was divided between Rome, her colonies, and allied Latin and Italian cities. The stability of Italy would soon shatter in the Social War, a conflict between Rome and the Italian cities. It was in this year that Cicero exchanged his boyhood toga for the toga of manhood, the *toga virilis*. As was tradition Cicero's father accompanied him to the Forum, to see him attached to a notable

politician and orator, a mentor who would facilitate career advancement and social networking.

Role Modelling and Teaching

Role modelling and teaching are two interwoven characteristics of the mentoring process. The mentor presents modes of behavior and strategies for problem solving, acting as a role model for the novice, who absorbs these modes through observation and imitation (Anderson and Shannon, 1995, p.26; Maynard and Furlong, 1995, p. 18; Ward, Thomas and Disch, 2012, p. 419). In the process, the mentor teaches their mentee essential skills for career and social development. Cohen describes mentors as role models who “represent the profession” (1995, p. 8). Levinson’s explanation of role modelling was much broader, describing the mentor as a pseudo parent, who through careful instruction and demonstration empowers the mentee to realise his or her dreams (1978, p. 99).

In the Roman world role modeling was at the heart of mentoring practices. From the information available in the ancient sources, mentoring was only available to the noble families. If mentoring was in practice for the plebeian or lower class, it has not been recorded. For an elite Roman boy, education and aspiration to achieve began the moment he was born. Bonner explains that Roman youths were influenced by a variety of role models including: historical exemplars, relatives and distinguished professionals (1977). Fathers were lifelong role models and mentors, who would provide the foundations for other intellectuals to shape and further develop skills (Bonner, 1977, p. 17). Cicero writes that for the budding orator and politician, the manner in which his father spoke at home was very influential (*Brutus* 210-211). He writes that he himself sat with his father and

recited the laws of Rome until he had committed to memory the entire Twelve Tables (*De Legibus* 2:59). Fathers would inform their sons about historical exemplars, great generals and politicians whom they should aspire to equal. Richlin argues that Rome was a society in which “older men trained younger men, and lifelong friendships were formed” (2011, p. 92). Members of the Roman elite introduced their sons to intellectuals at an early age. Cicero writes that he often frequented the house of Marcus Licinius Crassus, who personally wrote his curriculum and selected instructors (*De Oratore* 2:2).

A crucial mentoring institution in the Roman Republic was the *tirocinium*, an initiation into the world of politics and oratory. When a young boy of the nobility received the toga of manhood, his father accompanied him to the Forum and attached him to a notable general, politician or orator. This was a period of time whereby the young man would learn the skills of his trade by observation and imitation (Corbeill, 2002, p. 43; Quintilian *De Oratore* 10:5:19). Teaching by example was a highly praised educational practice in the Roman world. Over a century after Cicero’s death Pliny the Younger praised the *Tirocinium* as a “recognized custom” whereby students learnt modes and principles of behaviour by observing their elders (*De Amicitiai* 8:14:4-6). The author Quintilian noted that orators should declaim with their students daily, until “they take his utterances home with them” (*De Officis* 2:2:8). Cicero writes that his father introduced him to Quintus Mucius Scaevola the augur, “so far as I could and he would permit, I should never leave the old man’s side” (*De Amicitia* 1:1). Mentors within the social institution of the *tirocinium* behaved as pseudo fathers, an aspect of role modelling which was also observed by Levinson in relation to contemporary mentoring. They were the representative of the young man’s father in educational and professional settings. Under the patronage of Scaevola, Cicero learnt much of the nuances of civil law, committing many of Scaevola’s opinions and

sayings to memory (*De Amicitia* 1:1). In the *tirocinium* a budding orator learnt the ways of the Senate, the language of politics and the mechanics of constructing an argument. As Quintillian writes, the pupil learns “the weapons of his warfare” (*De Oratore* 10:5:20).

The *Telemachus Angels* mentoring program was founded at Macquarie University by Ronika Power, with the support of the Department of Ancient History in the early 2000s. The *Telemachus Angels* act as vital role models for first year Ancient History students, with an emphasis on inclusivity. Every question is a good question in the eyes of these mentors, who go above and beyond to provide a network of support. According to the *Telemachus Angels Mission Statement*, mentors aim to encourage “self-initiated learning, self-confidence, self-esteem, communication and networking” (Power, 2002). This is achieved through a variety of channels, whereby the *Telemachus Angels* impart modes of behaviour and skills to first year Ancient History students. Essay writing seminars are conducted to introduce new students to the format, language and research practices of tertiary ancient history essays, as the Romans imparted skills through the *tirocinium* apprenticeship. Ancient history specific library tours are offered to first year students by the *Telemachus* mentors, in addition to the general tours offered by the library staff. It is through these methods of teaching and role modelling that the *Telemachus Angels Program* builds a strong foundation for the future success of all first year ancient history students.

Sponsoring, Promoting and Career Development

There exists an interwoven trio of mentoring characteristics; sponsoring, promoting and career development. Mentors wield considerable leverage through their social connections and the knowledge and experience they have acquired over the course of their careers

(Anderson and Shannon, 1995, p. 26). Ward, Thomas and Disch argue that mentors first engage with the protégé, acknowledging his or her current goals and discovering new ones (2012, p. 417). Mentors then utilise this pool of resources to actively sponsor their protégés in an effort to assist in the attainment of those goals. By acting as a sponsor for the mentee in professional and social settings, the mentor directly or indirectly promotes the novice amongst colleagues, effectively enhancing the mentee's career prospects (Anderson and Shannon, 1995, p. 29). They advocate the advancement of protégés, thereby gaining recognition from their superiors for nurturing fresh talent (Levinson, 1978, p. 98; Kram, 1983, p. 614). This is partly the reason behind the historic age difference between the mentor and the mentee, as the elder members of a profession traditionally held seniority.

Mentoring in the Roman world was focused on developing prospects for careers in the military, politics and law. Sponsoring and promoting were a common practice of mentoring in the Republic, particularly in regards to the *tirocinium*. An elite boy's first sponsor would have been his father, who would have had to secure the apprenticeship prior to the boy's sixteenth birthday. Bonner argues that when it came to securing an apprenticeship family connections and political alliances were of the utmost importance (1977, p. 85). A young man by the name of Caelio was brought to Cicero on the day he received the *toga virilis* (*Pro Caelio* 9). It is probable that he and Cicero were acquainted beforehand. Once the apprenticeship was secured the young man would accompany him to the Forum social gatherings. Tacitus writes that the protégé would have to become acquainted with supporting his mentor in the courts, political discussions, and "escorting him in public" (*Dialogus* 34:2). The politician or orator acted as a patron. Consequently the protégé was privy to a vast new range of opportunities for social networking and career development. Mitchell argues that a strong and broad network of "personal connections"

was invaluable for political success, something which mentors could provide (1979, p. 1). By mere association with an experienced orator the public expected that the protégé would eventually become like him, for “they have themselves selected them for imitation” (*De Officiis* 2:46).

In the Telemachus program sponsoring, promoting and career development are also characteristics of the mentoring process. Sponsoring occurs in the second semester of every year, where the current mentors can select an outstanding first year student, who has proved by their interactions with the mentors that they possess the capability and personality to be a member of the team. In terms of career development the program offers a number of opportunities tailored to first year ancient history students. Archaeological fieldwork seminars are offered to provide information concerning digs currently under operation by Macquarie University. Above all the program aims to “create a legacy of care” (Power, 2002). The mentors are there for the students, and the program hopes to foster a sense of pride amongst first year students, so that if they are called to take up the mantle of mentor they are more than willing. A crucial facet of Republican mentoring was that the elite were essentially training their replacements. Van Der Blom argues that Cicero’s own training under Scaevola and Crassus not only influenced his path to political office, but also shaped the manner in which Cicero would teach his own pupils (2010, p. 314). In this same respect, the *Telemachus Angels* program does not just shape students’ learning, but the manner in which they will mentor for the duration of their degree, and for the rest of their working life.

Counseling and Ongoing Friendship

The importance of an ongoing friendship between the mentor and the protégé cannot be underestimated. What cements the bond in a mentoring relationship is a climate of trust, respect and affection. It is with these comforts that a mentee is able to place their future in the hands of a mentor, believing that they will act in their best interests. As a counsel and confidant they provide moral support in times of crises (Anderson and Shannon, 1995, p. 31; Levinson, 1978, p. 98). Ward reminisces about his own mentor, arguing that of all the influence Allan Schnaiberg exercised on his career and studies, it was their friendship which he cherished and valued most of all ([2012](#), p. 101).

Friendship was just as important for the success of mentoring relationships in the Roman Republican era as it for those of the contemporary world. Rawson argues that it was an “essential” aspect of Roman education ([1979](#), p. 18). Quintillian writes that if the mentor correctly instructs his students, then of course he will be liked among them. He stresses that the mentor should be “the object of their affection”, as protégés will imitate a mentor they like with more ease than one whom they perceive to be a tyrant (*De Officiis* 2:2:8). Tacitus comments that during his year of apprenticeship in the *tirocinium*, he participated not only in his mentor’s political speeches and trials, but accompanied them to social gatherings and listened to their “casual talk” (*Dialogus* 2:1). According to Cicero this accompaniment was common. He mentions an occasion where two young pupils by the names of Gaius Cotta and Publius Sulpicius were taken on a leisurely vacation to the town of Tusculum, north of Rome (*De Oratore* 1:24). Their patrons were Cicero’s esteemed mentor and friend Crassus and another of Cicero’s acquaintances; Marcus Antonius. There they discussed matters of common concern, including those of a political, philosophical and moral nature. It is clear from Cicero’s letters that when he himself became a mentor, he maintained solid

friendships with many of his pupils. The letters between Cicero and Plancus are exemplary of this, notably because Plancus' reply has survived. Plancus writes of the affection he has shared for Cicero from boyhood (*Epistulae Ad Familiares* 10:4:1). He writes that Cicero was the only man whom he had "consistently observed the sacred reverence due to a father" (*Epistulae Ad Familiares* 10:4:1).

The *Telemachus Angels* program has set fostering social networking and friendships as one of its key goals (Power, 2002). The program aims to assist students in becoming involved with university life. Mentors introduce students to the various student societies with a focus in Ancient History, as well as any other quirky and interesting groups that may be available including: The Macquarie Ancient History Association Student Society, The Dark Ages Society and The Museum Society. New students have the opportunity to meet each other at the annual first semester launch hosted by the program and the Department of Ancient History at Macquarie University. One on one mentoring can be arranged via email for assistance with specific issues. It is all of these methods and strategies which make the faces of the *Telemachus Angels* recognizable to first years. Over time they grow to trust the mentors, actively seek their advice, and in some cases a long lasting friendship is formed. Ward writes that he would visit Asian restaurants with his mentor, and Cicero writes that his pupils Hirtius and Dolabella introduced him to "the art of dining" (2012, p. 103; *Epistulae Ad Familiares* 9:16:7). In both modern and ancient times, friendships were essential to a successful mentoring process, and inspiring the younger generation to take up the mantle of mentor, alongside their former mentors.

Similarities and Differences

Whilst there are a horde of similarities in regard to mentoring functions and practice, it must be recognized that the society and politics of the Roman Republic were vastly different to those of the contemporary world. These factors included or excluded potential pupils and mentors from the mentoring process. In particular this occurred in regards to culture, gender and class. The Roman people were not racially prejudiced. The city of Rome by the Late Republic in the 90s and 80s BC was a multilingual hub of hybrid cultures, as well as the traditionally dominant Greek and Roman cultures. Warfare had opened Rome to the cultures of Spain, Sardinia and Carthage, bringing new customs and religions to the Italian peninsula. The discrimination experienced in the Roman Republic was based upon culture, not skin colour.

In terms of gender prejudice, whilst it is true that mentoring was predominantly male oriented, there did exist a number of individual cases where females acted as mentors and received mentoring. Before Cicero's time, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus lost their father at an early age. Their mother Cornelia took the place of their father in every respect, serving as a role model and devoting herself to their education with "scrupulous care" (Bonner, 1977, p. 15). Cicero comments that the Gracchi were influenced heavily by the manner in which their mother wrote and spoke, just as other young boys had been influenced by their fathers in the same respect (*Brutus* 210). Cicero also mentions a number of women whom he knew to be receiving mentoring from their fathers. He makes particular mention of Laelia, commenting that he was glad to have heard her speak on multiple occasions, and the resemblance her manner of speaking bears to that of her father (*Brutus* 210-211).

The literature on contemporary mentoring practices emphasizes the importance of mentoring for the encouragement and success of disadvantaged and non-traditional

students (Ward, 2012, p. 100). Whilst the *Telemachus Angels* program fosters a sense of inclusivity, mentoring in the Roman Republic was strictly limited to those born into wealth and status. Talent that might have been found in the *plebeian* class went ignored and undiscovered.

Conclusion

Mentoring is a crucial mode for socially and professionally developing the pool of young and talented members of our society. The importance of mentoring was recognized in the Roman world, and was essential to the coherent functioning of Roman politics and society. A number of similarities in practices and purpose have been observed between the Roman institutions of mentoring and the *Telemachus Angels* program at Macquarie University. However there are significant differences between the mentoring of the Republican era and the contemporary world. Factors such as gender, class and culture were defining characteristics of implied social policies of exclusion and inclusion in the mentoring process. What is certain from this research is that mentoring has and always will be a strategy for learning.

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