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## From Tennis to Teaching: The Power of Mentoring

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## **FROM TENNIS TO TEACHING: THE POWER OF MENTORING**

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I teach modern European history at Bryn Mawr College. Prior to even thinking about joining academia and before coming to the US, I was a professional tennis player. I was fortunate enough to have some amazing coaches, including nine-time Grand Slam champion Judy Tegart Dalton. But it was truly my college coaches at UC Berkeley, Jan Brogan and Kathy Toon, who have been the most important mentors in my life.

Jan and Kathy provided me with all the tools to figure out who I was, what I wanted, and how I could achieve my goals. They modeled what it was like to ask hard questions, confront insecurities, and figure out concrete ways to overcome them. Through being on one of the US's most competitive tennis teams I also learned that losing, contrary to everything I had experienced previously, was not the worst thing in the world. It was failing to try my best, not doing something just because I might not be good at it, or playing the victim of circumstance that was unacceptable. On and off the court, my coaches taught me how to see my fears as opportunities to try my all, feel challenged by being pushed outside of my comfort zone, and to take ownership and control of my life.

As a student-athlete I learned to formulate and express my ideas, bring the best out of myself regardless of the circumstances, and welcome constructive criticism. In short, sports became a vehicle to teach me how to take full responsibility for my actions and navigate my own life.

Now, as an educator I find myself thinking about the ways in which I could use my teaching similarly to how my coaches used tennis. I love history and believe that knowing the histories of the past should be required of our educated citizenry. To that end, I aspire to have my students embrace critical and independent thought as an intellectual responsibility. But most importantly, through teaching about history I hope to provide students with the tools so they can also become the drivers of their lives, even outside of the classroom and beyond college.

My experience with Bryn Mawr's Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) and working with my student consultant, Alexandra Wolkoff, was an important step in developing my own teaching style and translating my aspirations into a more tangible action plan. Not having taught at a liberal arts school, I found that my partnership with Alexandra proved instrumental in adjusting my course planning and in-class activities. Her commitment to our partnership and constructive engagement with the course engendered a relationship that reminded me of my tennis days.

On my tennis team we adhered to the so-called "championship team" principle: the idea that anyone, regardless of their rank or seniority, could lead, and we all had to hold each other accountable for bringing our best. The partnership that Alexandra and I formed worked on the same principle. I made it clear early on that we were a "team" and I was counting on her constructive feedback to bring the most out of the class.

At the beginning of the semester I set out to focus on three main goals: to maintain a high energy level consistently during class time (particularly when lecturing), to act as a facilitator rather than a lecturer as much as possible, and finally, to make students responsible for generating and

shaping class discussions. In the first two weeks of the semester I failed at each of these. My nerves made me sluggish, I talked/lectured too much, and the students only spoke when I forced them. The observations and constructive feedback of Alexandra solidified my sense that things were not moving in the direction I wanted.

Ever politely in her notes she would point out that I seemed to have low energy, read from my notes without making eye contact with the students, or appeared less than confident. She also brought my attention to the parts of the class that had worked, which helped me identify concrete things I needed to change as well as those that I didn't. I became more aware of how I interacted with students and what energy level I brought to class.

Having the opportunity to talk things through with Alexandra, along with some of the discussions we had during the initial meetings of the faculty pedagogy seminar in which we participated as new faculty, proved crucial for changing the dynamics of my class and consequently, in meeting my goals. In several ways, I shifted my focus from me to my students: regarding what they were getting from the class materials, the questions the material raised, and the ways I invited and responded to student engagement. Each of these shifts moved me closer to the kind of teacher I wanted to become.

In conversation with Alexandra I shifted the focus from what *I* thought the students should take away to hear and engage with, to what the *students* thought they were getting from the class materials. Alexandra had a crucial role in this shift. Not only did she let me talk through my ideas but also by sharing some of her own experiences about her favorite classes, she helped me to conceptualize teaching differently. Even if I continued to feel strongly about the issues the class should grapple with, I made creating considerable space for the students to articulate their own ideas a priority.

Similarly, rather than focusing on the questions *I* thought the class must answer I started paying attention to what questions the readings and discussions raised for the *students*. The effects were unmistakable. The class was transformed into a lively intellectual space where students took charge of the discussions and I became a facilitator. I talked less and when I did, I consciously worked on covering content that built on students' ideas. In this way, students themselves became part of the "Champion Team" and we were now all there to bring the most out of the class. They were instrumental not only in making me rethink my teaching strategies but also in helping to implement them.

Finally, incorporating a mid-semester evaluation and more generally feedback from the students was a key insight of my TLI experience. For instance, I learned that for students it was important to receive structured feedback on the work they did outside of the class (in the form of weekly response papers). Being inspired by one of the guest speakers who came to faculty pedagogy seminar and encouraged us to experiment with teaching techniques, I flipped the classroom and made students' responses the central organizing element. Here's how it worked:

Once a week, the class would start with a student's response to the assigned readings on the board and the class would evaluate the response for its content, analytical level, and relevance. Next, I would project on the board some of the most thought-provoking questions that the

students raised in their responses. First in groups, then as a class, we answered the questions. Finally, the class considered the connections between the answers and the larger themes of the class. This segment would allow me to highlight issues that I thought would be important to cover, and if necessary, provide a mini-lecture summarizing the main takeaways. Using students' responses to start and structure discussions acknowledged students' work outside of the class on the one hand and, on the other hand, made them responsible for their own learning. Since students knew that their responses and questions would shape class discussion they seemed to be more invested in their written responses. Having thought about and contemplated ideas raised in the readings prior to coming to class, when discussing those ideas in class students were more willing and able to engage in higher levels of analytical thinking.

In terms of my teaching, these changes to my practice have taken me a long way toward realizing my goals. On a personal note, working with a student consultant has been the closest to the type of mentorship I used to have with my coaches. Through a relationship based on mutual trust, we challenged one another in our new roles as a professor and a consultant. While Alexandra's observations supported me in reshaping my teaching style, I hope I was also able to expand her confidence in the value of her insights and quiet leadership style. Having the opportunity to share some of my experiences, knowledge, and simply learn about the aspirations of a smart and driven student has been an incredibly rewarding experience. Being party to her figuring out her goals for after graduation and witnessing her steps to make them happen has made me realize why my coaches invested so much in mentorship and why I became an educator.