

Mentoring new entrants to our profession: worthwhile and enriching

Sam Berner

I will never forget the incident when, at one of my exhausting and exhaustive workshops, a well-established colleague asked me if I wasn't afraid to share this much of what I knew with other translators. Seeing puzzlement on my face, she explained, "*Aren't you afraid they will take work away from you?*"

Well, the answer is a resounding "No", and for a number of reasons. One, there is plenty of work around for those who know how to find it. Two, I have enough confidence in my capabilities to know that I won't be losing my clients to newbies. Three, and this is most important, I don't see my mentees as "competition", but as long-term alliances for the future.

I have mentored most of my adult life – new teachers as a school principal, new writers as a publisher and new translators as an experienced one. There is nothing highly structured in what I do, and I follow my intuition and good sense in deciding who will benefit from my knowledge sharing. So far, it has been extremely rewarding, not just emotionally, but professionally and financially as well. Many of my mentees have particular skills and gifts that complement mine, thus facilitating the creation of healthy working teams.

At another professional gathering, a colleague told me rather haughtily, "*No one mentored me. I had to learn everything alone from scratch. Why should I offer it on a plate to someone else?*" I thought to myself, God, if we only had more people willing to mentor more often, we would have fewer such psychologically scarred humans around. Mentoring is not "giving it on a plate" to a mentee, it is a relationship-building exercise that enriches both sides of the equation.

I am increasingly finding out that the newer generation of translators, especially those arriving from Europe with T&I qualifications, have a lot to offer in this relationship. They have a much more cosmopolitan view of the profession and are their grasp of the theoretical basis, which most of us are beginning to forget in the hustle of everyday work, is still fresh. So it often happens that the mentoring goes both ways. As Galileo Galilei said, "*I have never met a man so ignorant that I couldn't learn something from him.*"

Many professional organisations as well as commercial corporations have official mentoring programs. The American Translators' Association (ATA) has one in place, "established to develop and implement a program to train ATA members as mentors and mentees in an enhanced, informal mentoring relationship." Mentors get awarded PD points for participating; there are workshops on how to do it.

I am aware that there are among us those who love to mentor, but the don't feel very sure how to go about it. Some fear that they might not have the resources – time especially. So I would like to state here what mentorship is categorically not:

- It is not an act of professional "baby-sitting". It is more an act of teaching how to ride a bike. You don't do it all day, seven days a week. And if you do it right, then

your mentee should be cycling up the hill in 6-12 months. Electronic communication has made life so much easier.

- It does not include setting up businesses for your mentees – but it includes looking over their feasibility studies, business plans and marketing exercises (you might make them better, but who knows, you might also learn a new approach from them).
- It does not involve giving your mentee jobs, or sharing your clients with them, unless you are so inclined. I do recommend my mentees to my clients, if they are not working in my language pair.

I was very pleased to see that a number of experienced AUSIT members are mentoring already – albeit outside of their official AUSIT capacity. At the AUSIT Biennial Conference in Brisbane, VIC/TAS long-time member Eva Hussain gave a very interesting presentation called “Injecting New Blood Into T/I” in which she explained how her own mentoring program at Polaron is being run. She stressed the fact that the majority of us are over 45 years old – aptly termed Translatosaures – and that AUSIT faces extinction, if we don’t get mentoring the newer generation. Eva strongly believes that surrounding yourself with young, enthusiastic and innovative people is the only way to progress in this industry, or any other industry for that matter. Otherwise we risk getting left behind. Her suggestions were summarised as follows:

1. Talk to people wanting to get in
2. Mentor new starters
3. Support student placements
4. Support internships programs
5. Support students in AUSIT
6. Get information
7. Move with the times

I am aware that others are doing this as well. Worried about the lack of Greek-language interpreters in QLD because of attrition due to old-age and illness, the ever-active Effie Antoniou has been mentoring young Australian Greeks in Brisbane for the past three years, preparing them for their NAATI exams. In WA, Trish Will is doing her bit, and trying to get others interested. Silvana Pavlovska is taking on young T/Is on traineeships at the International Interpreting Agency – I met some of her trainees at my workshops. Brad Paez (VIC) has prepared a research proposal to look into issues vital to students – such as English competency and localisation issues, and is working with the Professional Development Committee on specific activities to assist students learn about and become committed to the industry. Moira Nolan has been working tirelessly in Tasmania, running crash courses since 2004 and starting a new “interpreting study group” this year.

I am sure there are tens of others motivated by their commitment to professionalism and improving of this industry. All we need is to streamline it somehow, and make sure that information will be shared between the mentors, and that there is a targeting policy aiming at beefing our membership and ensuring we don’t join the exhibits of some natural history museum. And this is what the National Professional Development Committee (NPD Committee) is looking into doing. If you are interested in becoming a mentor, please

contact the NPD Committee through sberner@arabic.com.au or andre@languageadvantage.com.au .