Stories of Hope

Reimagining Education

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48. "If you know, you know": Creating lightbulb moments through reverse mentoring

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Abstract

This chapter examines how reverse mentoring can cultivate mutual hope among students and staff in Higher Education (HE) through humanising, authentic conversations that spark transformative "lightbulb moments" and inspire activist mentalities for institutional and cultural change. Drawing on existing HE hope literature and previous research on reverse mentoring, the chapter positions reverse mentoring as a vital beacon of hope in an increasingly disillusioned sector, highlighting it as both a site of agency and a new pathway for generating hope. While acknowledging criticisms—such as the perceived limitations of individualised conversations—the chapter argues that these interactions can catalyse broader cultural change by reshaping wider relationships beyond the mentoring dyad. It concludes with a call to action for more intentional efforts to foster lightbulb moments, expose HE communities to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) topics through lived experiences, and embed EDI goals firmly into everyone's work.

Keywords: reverse mentoring; humanisation; conversations; hierarchy; equity, diversity and inclusion; under-representation

This chapter argues that reverse mentoring can generate hope in Higher Education (HE) as it contributes towards mutual humanisation of staff and students to one another and the occurrence of "lightbulb moments" of realisation. This is facilitated through the personal exploration of topics not typically broached in staff/student engagement when the usual order of hierarchy is maintained, as in more traditional mentoring, and when time for staff–student conversations is typically much more limited. These moments can generate a ripple or web effect across institutions, engaging a wider range of people in conversations about equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and calling them to action through a self-authored obligation, generated through meaningful and often emotive conversations.

Designed to intervene in the status quo, reverse mentoring intentionally sets up collaborative conversations between people who have some difference between them, perhaps due to life experience, opportunity, background, or identity. It challenges deficit narratives around under-represented identities by empowering people to become mentors who may be more used to playing subordinated roles in HE or viewed as being in need of mentorship themselves. Consequently, it seeks to challenge (and reverse) power dynamics and hierarchies historically embedded into the fabric of organisations or communities. For example, a disabled student who aspires to join the legal profession may be mentored by an "able-bodied" lawyer about how to "get in". A Black junior academic may be mentored by a white senior professor about research progression. Those who fulfil the traditional habitus of HE (and other elite professions such as law) are often assumed to be good mentors due to their dominance of the field (Bourdieu, 1977). Yet how often do we suppose that there are benefits to flipping the mentoring roles in these examples? This is what reverse mentoring is centred around—the importance of lived experience expertise. In the human resources context, reverse mentoring can be simply "the pairing of a younger, junior employee acting as mentor to share expertise with an older, senior colleague as the mentee", which has potential to "build the leadership pipeline, fostering better intergenerational relationships, enhancing diversity initiatives, and driving innovation" (Marcinkus Murphy, 2012, p. 550). Wendy Marcinkus Murphy (2012) also notes reverse mentoring is "an opportunity for learning by both participants

and a creative way to engage millennial employees". In this context, the basic premise of reverse mentoring in the workplace is applied to the student/teacher dynamic.

Such traditional mentoring dynamics as those noted above reflect wider representation problems. The progression of staff representation in HE in the UK is slow (AdvanceHE, 2022—noting that over 80% of staff in these statistics are working in England) and historically bound up with institutional oppression and discrimination that will take decades to undo. This must remain a priority for our sector. However, in the meantime, we can't blindly continue and hope that one day this problem will be solved by someone else above us. We must act now to empower students who may not see themselves in the staff they work with or the futures they aspire to. Where we recognise students' lived experiences as expertise through reverse mentoring, we can support them to feel liberated by their identities and experiences, rather than oppressed (Freire, 1970). We can also develop the practices of staff who share their enhanced knowledge and skills with other students and peers. Centring students as knowledge producers through the role of mentor to staff "may disrupt traditional forms of knowledge construction" (Wallin & Aarsand, 2019, p. 71) that serve to keep marginalised voices suppressed and consequently, move the dial forwards on the progression of equity in HE.

Cultivating hope

Existing studies elucidate many benefits of hopefulness. Hope is important to a range of factors in HE study including academic success and wellbeing (Coetzee et al., 2022). However, how we facilitate hope when everything, currently, feels hopeless on many levels in our sector is a mounting challenge. To name just a few significant issues impacting the HE sector as I write: the student mental health and wellbeing crisis (ONS, 2022; Tribal, 2022; Student Minds, 2022), the legacy impact of COVID-19 on campus communities and engagement (Darroch, 2023; cf. Holden, 2022), the cost of living crisis and student poverty (Carter, 2023; ONS, 2023), industrial action and increasing divides between HE staff and management and the continued implications of a Conservative government "crackdown on rip off degrees" (Department for Education,

2023), seeking to strip dignity from the study of many critical areas. In the UK, the sector is also in deep financial distress with many institutions announcing redundancy schemes at present (Times Higher Education, 2025). Consequently, this is "a time where it is increasingly difficult to think radical and dream of a different society" (Wallin, 2023, p. 57). To cultivate hope in these conditions, we have to do things differently and intentionally. There is growing evidence that intentional interventions can facilitate the development of hope (Gallagher, et al., 2017; Yotsidi, et al., 2018). If there's one thing we need right now in HE, it's hope.

In experiencing what may be perceived as idealistic staff–student relationships through reverse mentoring, for example, relationships through which we see each other regularly, talk about non-academic topics, trust one another with our stories and identity characteristics, hope can be created. Through the trust and cohesion built during reverse mentoring, we don't have to put on a façade, leading staff and students to describe it as therapeutic. This is the sort of hope that encourages us to think that maybe all of our student relationships could be this fulfilling (and vice versa for students with staff relationships). "Hope, as a cognitive process […] lays in the heart of the process of pursuing a goal" (Yotsidi, et al., 2018, p. 396). Whilst we might all have goals of being more inclusive, having better relationships with our students, listening meaningfully to others and being good or better allies, those goals may fall by the wayside without the essential prerequisite of hope. For example, if we always feel time poor, have to focus too much on content in the classroom and don't have lived experiences to draw on, "ideal world" goals may feel unattainable. We need something motivating us to act or change—an impactful story.

Reverse mentoring conversations can light or relight the fire that motivates us to depart from the status quo where that is not serving us or our students. The status quo is nearly always the easiest option. The option we take out of necessity, out of fatigue, out of helplessness to change. However, the hope created through for other relationships through fulfilling reverse mentoring connections may enhance self-efficacy and, consequently, perceived ability to succeed (Sezgin & Erdogan, 2015), supporting the generation of new pathways fuelled by agency promoting discussions (Snyder, et al., 1991). It can also create hope for students that there is care, compassion and desire to change

rising up from the roots of HE and that their voices and experiences are a pivotal part of that change. Knowing high levels of hope can also play a protective role (Coetzee, et al., 2022), we owe it to our students to intentionally facilitate this protection from what may otherwise be marginalising or discriminatory HE experiences, especially for those with often marginalised identity characteristics and limited forms of capital.

Why reverse mentoring?

My reverse mentoring journey began with a pilot scheme through which international undergraduate students studying law mentored academic and support staff on issues linked with their lived experiences (O'Connor, 2022). Although HE reverse mentoring is relatively under-researched, there have been a number of empirical studies in recent years that have contributed to building our understanding (e.g., Petersen & Ramsay, 2021; Cain et al., 2022). I expanded my reverse mentoring work to the students as partners and the co-design field (see Mercer-Mapstone, 2017), recognising the importance of embedding students' voices as mentors *and* in the design of the scheme itself to facilitate holistic authenticity. This project used reverse mentoring to develop "business as usual" practices within HE, focusing on personal tutoring. I recruited a team of students who self-identify as under-represented to co-design a reverse mentoring scheme that ran across campus. The scheme was part "traditional" reverse mentoring, focused on students' lived experiences to build personalised connections, and part "action research" as staff/student pairs worked together to develop proposals for improving personal tutoring institutionally, based on their reverse mentoring learnings. Other work I have led includes: international students mentoring campus police officers (O'Connor, 2024); junior and aspiring lawyers mentoring senior leaders in law firms; and students from a range of under-represented backgrounds mentoring university senior executives (O'Connor, et al., 2025). My work has also explored the influence of reverse mentoring on self-determination (O'Connor, 2023a) and self-authorship (O'Connor, 2023b) in students, both closely associated with hope. This work has been united by a common thread of spotlighting mentors' vast lived experiences to challenge dominant

narratives in HE and offer hope to students and staff through the practical act of contributing towards change, rather than regarding change as something we read about in strategies or that happens to us. Reverse mentoring, where it has a clear purpose, centres us (staff and students together) as the doers, the activists, the changemakers. It is a true enactment of partnership.

An underpinning strand of my ethos as an educator is challenging traditions and the view that a traditional or non-traditional student or university experience exists. I was drawn to reverse mentoring as an intentional disruptor of power dynamics and its ability to expose what "non-traditional" might mean for individuals behind the label. Where we focus on EDI as a conversation topic or theme between student mentors and staff mentees, reverse mentoring may expose mentees to real-world experiences of racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of discrimination and microaggressions that we never truly understand if we don't experience them personally, protected by privilege. To be inclined to act, we need an internal "lightbulb moment". Hearing personal stories from those who truly understand these experiences is, in my view, the best way for us to take responsibility for and action against discrimination—to make us mutually human to one another. As HE staff, we cannot be bystanders in the pursuit of equality. This has always been a primary goal of my reverse mentoring work—to support myself, colleagues, and students to engage in the fight against inequalities in HE (and consequently the wider world), whilst also empowering students to recognise and value their self-worth and contribution to a greater good. For all the negative narratives, challenges, despair, and stories of being let down by hierarchical systems I hear from students, the catalytic power of reverse mentoring conversations continues to give me hope. Hope that there are ways for us all to connect and understand one another, no matter how different or distant we might first appear. Hope that lived experiences, particularly of people from minoritised backgrounds, can become sources of power and influence, instead of HE being continually shaped by hierarchies and out-of-date power structures that stifle change and progress. Hope that things will change, because they have to, but we have to be part of the movement.

Beyond the conversations: Is it enough?

Whilst reverse mentoring can support in humanising staff and students to one another through authentic one-to-one conversations, it also encourages improved relationships more widely and more ethical considerations when engaging with others beyond reverse mentoring. Knowing the fifteen students I co-designed the above-mentioned reverse mentoring scheme with has changed me as a person. It also changed their perspectives of self and what it means to be or feel under-represented—this can itself be a source of empowerment as opposed to a deficit label (O'Connor, 2023a). It isn't just that we built great working relationships with each other—those relationships also influence how we interact with others. I found it influenced my day-to-day relationships with other students, and helped build the students' confidence to interact with other "senior" figures in the university.

I learned (and am continuously learning) about the intersectional experiences of trans students, non-binary students, students who have had experience in prison, students with hearing related disabilities, students of different faiths and religions, students of colour, and much more. I also learned what it's like right now to be a student coming from a very similar background to my own. Whilst I never thought of these students as anything other than human, hearing their stories and working closely with them to achieve a common goal, underpinned by our shared sense of under-representation, made them so intensely human to me that memories of our discussions have influenced my approach towards others in my daily life since, at work and beyond. The potential influence of developing these detailed relationships with students cannot be underestimated. I am a better human now than I was before I worked with these students and therefore a better teacher, researcher and tutor. They also regard themselves as more worthy, more confident and more powerful. Reflection on reverse mentoring experiences can change our perspective on how we view our classrooms and other student facing spaces. Where we centralise being human and understanding and knowing one another as paramount to success, we decentralise an overt focus on content and learning for assessment, restoring some of the joy into academia that pressure and process may take away. Staff unite with their students as co-learners—we become

one another's lightbulb moments each day—the learning journey never ends.

There may, understandably, be doubt as to how much individual conversations can contribute to changes on a broader scale. At my first academic conference several years ago, I discussed reverse mentoring as a catalyst for culture change. At this point, I hadn't done any reverse mentoring and was exploring study design. Someone in the audience said: "we know trickle effect doesn't work", implying that because of the one-to-one nature of reverse mentoring relationships, they are not capable of influencing institutional culture. I doubted myself and worried they were right. Feelings triggered by imposterism as a junior, working-class, female, first-generation academic were all around me (see Simpkins, 2018). However, I have seen and researched many examples of reverse mentoring since then and now feel confident to challenge this view vehemently. Reverse mentoring has significant potential in our sector, provided it is used as a vehicle or stepping stone towards something else, not as an end in and of itself. Conversations are only the beginning of the process—conversations are the facilitator of hope. It's what we do subsequently, in response to these feelings of hope, that creates change on a wider scale.

I count every student and staff member who has engaged in reverse mentoring work with me as part of a community centred on genuine trust and love (Shakir & Siddiquee, 2023) that I feel privileged to belong to. This is vital, given evidence that staff are significantly challenged in supporting students' sense of belonging if they do not themselves feel that they belong (Blake et al., 2022). The work we have done has supported me to be more actively engaged in the fight for equity alongside students (and staff) who shatter "traditional" moulds and concepts in HE—together we are activists, promoting grass-roots leadership on institutional issues (Kezar, 2010). Colleagues who took part in my pilot project years on still tell me how their mentors' stories have stuck with them and informally influence their day-to-day practice as teachers and humans. "Personal partnerships are rooted in emotions" (Felten, 2017) and emotional experiences stay with us. The more staff I engage with as mentees, the more I am reminded how scarce an opportunity it is to be able to listen to our students talking about who they are, what they have experienced in life and how it impacts on their University experience

and being able to reciprocate in these conversations, deciphering them clearly from pastoral support meetings. These conversations should be at the core of all we do, rather than just being the concern of pedagogical research projects. The embedding of our identities as staff and students into our practice as educators and learners must be reciprocal, and it must be part of our future sustainability as a sector.

There are also many examples of student mentors going on to other projects, roles and opportunities fuelled by what they learned through reverse mentoring, using their enhanced confidence and skills to catalyse change more widely within their schools and networks. Although one-to-one conversations are a vital part of the process, as noted, reverse mentoring is ultimately about what we do within our multifarious micro-communities in response to those conversations. That's where the impact happens. This isn't our job alone as researchers in reverse mentoring. If student mentors, staff mentees, and co-designers feel fully empowered by reverse mentoring, they will also take up the mantle of influencing and impacting others, widening our community and spreading messages of hope and humanity. Through this, our seemingly "invisible" collaborations are brought to light "so that these practices can be shared" (Kezar, 2010). So, the short answer to the question in this sub-section is no, reverse mentoring is never "enough". But it's a start and if we don't start, nothing ever changes. And if we don't share, we miss an opportunity to inspire someone else to stand up and share their stories too.

Switching on the lightbulbs: Concluding thoughts

To create lightbulb moments across our communities, reverse mentoring must be carefully planned and supported and it must be reciprocated. As bell hooks (1994, p. 21) said, "I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share". In a sector that is becoming increasingly concerned with EDI, belonging and mattering, we must not assume that students can or will want to engage with us around these topics if we are not reciprocating. Reverse mentoring provides a clear signal to students that their voices and experiences matter—they are experts—but also that what they know and understand about *us* matters. Our human connection is as

vital as our academic connection, but the latter is suffering under many aforementioned weights bearing down on our sector. We need to be intentional about addressing and repairing this community damage.

You can start smaller if a reverse mentoring scheme seems too involved for where you are or what capacity you currently have. Start finding out who your students are, why they are here, and what influences them but, crucially, let them come to understand this about you in return. Once we start this work, we need a plan for longevity and widespread engagement, because hope generated through conversations can be jeopardised if students (and staff) face non-inclusive, inauthentic approaches elsewhere outside of the reverse mentoring "bubble" you might create. The ability to be human with one another is about culture. Cultural acceptance of a new way of doing things is challenging to achieve in HE, which stands on a deeply entrenched history of hierarchy, elitism, and privilege. We have to be prepared for adversity along the way but we must not let that take away the hope we can generate through these conversations.

This chapter has sought to convince you of the power of reverse mentoring to create lightbulb moments, which can, in turn, instigate meaningful change and connection between people who may previously have seen themselves as separated by divides. In the context of academic development, Susannah McGowan and Peter Felten (2021, p. 473) ask: "Are we contributing to a more just and humane world […], or are we part of the machinery maintaining failed, inequitable, and unjust systems?" This is a question we should all be asking ourselves in the context of our own practice. Reverse mentoring provides a useful setting in which to explore these questions. What I particularly value about reverse mentoring conversations is that, provided they are centred on the support and wellbeing of mentors, they unite people with particular lived experiences and those without, rather than viewing them as in opposition to one another (Wallin, 2023). Whilst much work on hope in academia focuses on building hope in students, reverse mentoring has the unique benefit of reciprocal hope building for students *and* staff. Consequently, such schemes can put EDI work on everyone's agenda, rather than relying on a few people (typically people already marginalised within HE) to further progress—as the oppressed, we need our "comrades" to make freedom from oppression a reality

(Freire,1970, p. 47) or, to translate that into more millennial terminology, "if you know, you know" (and then you have to take action). When we experience lightbulb moments, they become part of us to the extent that we can no longer regard ourselves as outside of the work needed to make a change. We may still feel on the periphery, but we become part of the conversation and, crucially, part of the mission for change through our united sense of hope. So, let's start talking...

Steps toward hope

- Leverage reverse (or reciprocal) mentoring in your organisation to humanise relationships and cultivate hope.

- Facilitate, with guidance, authentic, student-staff conversations that spark lightbulb moments and inspire activist mentalities at all levels for institutional and cultural change.

- Use one-to-one or small group reverse mentoring experiences to influence broader relationships and drive larger cultural shifts within Higher Education—one relationship and interaction at a time.

- Actively expose staff and students to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) topics and ensure that advancing EDI becomes a shared responsibility across all workloads.

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