

## Tom Palaima on the power of mentors

**A mentor provides far more than inspiration and sage advice, says Tom Palaima, who fears for the future of such guiding relationships in the era of Moocs**

*Times Higher Education* November 14, 2013

[Tom Palaima](#)



*Source: Education of Achilles/Jean Baptiste Regnault*

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I have been meditating upon mentors – slightly unmoored still by the loss of my own mentor of nearly 40 years, the father of Mycenaean epigraphy, Emmett L. Bennett Jr, who died in December 2011 – and on massive open online courses.

I have spent nearly my whole life, since kindergarten in 1956, in love with learning and teaching. I have derived lots of pleasure and satisfaction from thinking, reading, exploring new ideas, and trying to identify and then answer questions and solve problems. These are all to me social processes that need to be protected and nurtured for the good of society. So when people tamper

with the personal and interpersonal humanising elements of education, I feel they are defiling something sacred and making it harder for others to learn what it is to be human in the ways in which I was lucky to have had the chance to do.

Let me make two strong opinions clear. First, Moocs are a threat to the educational environment. Second, being mentored in a meaningful and lasting way is an endangered phenomenon.

Moocs are championed as democratic. Once we have Moocs, we are told, virtually everyone who so desires will be able to take courses taught by star professors. This will happen because there are staggering amounts of money to be made by whoever figures out how to satisfy the market demand for Moocs.

Let us accept that it is possible to solve the formidable socio-economic and technical problems of developing, producing, delivering, maintaining and updating Moocs and making them available to the large number of students who do not have ready access to computer resources. Who will be among the tens of thousands of students being educated by an assortment of Moocs? How and what will they be learning? What will professors and programmes producing Moocs *not* be doing that they do – and do well – now? That is, what are the opportunity costs of Moocs? What will students, faculty and society at large be losing in the process?

Moocs in the US appear to offer an artificial virtual democracy through higher education reality television programmes set at [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#), the universities of Harvard or Stanford or my own [University of Texas at Austin](#), to mention the most aggressive players at the moment.

In May, Nathan Heller in *The New Yorker* magazine did us a service by describing the [construction and operation of Moocs at Harvard University](#). His profile makes it clear that Moocs are not a panacea for public or private higher education. He reports that [Stanford University](#) president John Hennessy believes that “the gold standard of small in-person classes led by great instructors will remain”. But where and how will this happen, and for how many faculty and students? Who will be the future great in-person instructors, trained by Moocs? How will these instructors conceive of education?

In Heller’s article, Gregory Nagy, a professor of Classics at Harvard, is ecstatic that one part of the Mooc for his popular “Heroes for Zeroes” mythology course might capture images of fog at the site of ancient Delphi and then show online something like the mist in which the god Apollo pitilessly and terrifyingly brings about the lonesome death of the Greek hero Patroklos. But how does showing such an image affect the capacities of imagination of the anticipated tens of thousands of online students, already bombarded with electronic images? They will not experience creating their own personal mental versions of what Nagy describes as the ultimate in “*holy terror*”.

Generation after generation of ancient Greeks, as innumerable as the leaves of trees unfurling, flourishing, drying, falling and decaying season to season, had their own imaginative powers ignited when they heard the words of the epic sung in performance. Their songster poets never

described in detail the face of Achilles or Odysseus. Medea did not murder her children onstage. Oedipus did not blind himself onstage either.

To me, Moocs seem to be the antithesis of the personal interaction between students and mentors that helped many of us figure out how we would face our lives ahead, inside and outside academia. Mentors inspire us and get inside our minds. They let us see who they are and why and how they are who they are, even when they don't know they are doing so. They are three-dimensional. They are flesh and blood. They have flaws and foibles, irritating habits and idiosyncrasies. They have off-days when they don't think straight or lecture well, when they digress – and we usually remember their digressions as insights into their souls. They have days when they are scintillating and right on topic. They show us how to fail and how to keep on keeping on.

We learn a lot from the mistakes our teachers and our mentors make, not least of all how to rely on ourselves and when to fish or cut bait. A Mooc, however, is a perfect song assembled by electronic wizardry. A Mooc is a big-budget Hollywood film with awesome special effects. We still crave the humanly flawed and extemporaneously inspired live performances of music and theatre – and with good reason. The effects of single acts of mentoring are what George Eliot might call “incalculably diffusive”.

One of the brightest and most significantly socially engaged scholars I know said the following about his PhD mentor (he wishes to remain anonymous for fear that what he says could be taken the wrong way):

“I had a bit of a crush on my mentor in graduate school. All of us who were her students did. That's pretty common, I think, though it's not often talked about directly. I fell in love with her writing and her ideas before I met her, and sought her out as an adviser because of that.



*I carry his voice around in much of what I do and I invoke him more and more. The greater the distance since the days in which I was his student, the more present that voice has become.*

“Mentoring can be an intense relationship defined by admiration and respect but also some degree of vulnerability. What makes this especially complicated is that it’s also a power relationship. That power asymmetry then feeds into the amplifying emotional drama, whether you relate to your mentor as, among other things, a father or mother figure, a ‘crush’, or whatever. You sense that some key aspect of your self, some part of who you want to be, is tied up into this other person’s view of you, and you’re intensely conscious of all of your interactions together. Mentors take an interest in your whole identity, and you in theirs. Handled appropriately, all that energy gets channelled into the work you do, the commitment to the work.”

Documentary film-maker Louis Massiah, a MacArthur fellow and founder and director of the Scribe Video Center in Philadelphia, offered me another slant on this personal side of mentoring: “My mentors have been ‘comrades’, rather than ‘parents’. The learning comes from seeing how they address the problem at hand, how they live their lives, do the work, rather than merely listening to what they preach.”

Indeed my mentor – who I suspect nowadays would be diagnosed with some degree of Asperger’s syndrome – was first an intellectual father figure, reserved, with traces of awkward kindness and human playfulness. By slow degrees he became a friend and, during visits or travels, a relaxed and delightful companion. He occasionally was a reliable comrade during academic skirmishes. He was a kind of godfatherly grandfather to my only son, who bears his name.

I have had few scholarly conflicts, because my mentor modelled for me an approach of being open and honest and accepting of reactions to his own ideas. He revelled when something he had studied could be viewed in a new way. In his last years, when he was in the late stages of Alzheimer’s disease, he became a 10-year-old child, happy to be given ice cream and to hear music, two of his lifelong passions. He was happy to see in my face what I know he recognised there as the care and love of a “scholarly stepson”. In those final years, I assumed the role of a stepfather, too, and I also acted as a loving stepmother, the role that Phoenix recalls playing for Achilles in *Iliad* Book 9.

Another scholar, who also wishes to remain anonymous because of her understandable sensitivities about the subject, told me how, when she was a graduate student, her mentor, without her knowledge, contacted the man who is now her husband and spoke to him honestly and frankly about her significant talents and the kind of support she would need to have from her partner if she were going to reach her potential and be productive and happy in our profession. Her mentor laid out for him how difficult it is for women to succeed in academia. Fortunately for us all, her husband took her mentor’s advice into his heart and has kept it there and acted upon it. She spoke with deep gratitude and a regret that university regulations now create, albeit for good reasons, an environment in which such personal interventions in the lives of students are discouraged.

Ricardo Ainslie is a professor of educational psychology who makes films and writes books about communities and individuals under stress, often stemming from violent acts (see his sombrely humane book *Long Dark Road* about the people of Jasper, Texas after the famous race-

crime murder there in 1998, and his 2013 book *The Fight to Save Juarez* about the effects of drug trafficking and drug wars on that community). He moves through his life with the memory and voice of a formal, rather impersonal mentor personalised inside him:

“My mentor as a graduate student was a man named George Rosenwald. He was a gifted intellect, and in a discipline (psychology) bent on proving its scientific mettle, Rosenwald was a continental philosopher who spent his career critiquing the blind application of quantitative methods to understanding human lives. He was, in other words, an anomaly in our field.

“A group of students met with him weekly, and we took turns presenting our work, eager for his insights. He was old school, and I could not bring myself to call him by his first name until I was wrapping up my doctoral studies six years after starting graduate school. He conveyed his engagement with you via his intellect; warm and fuzzy he was not.

“Perhaps because survival as an early career academic in psychology required the very methodological approaches that he critiqued, it was not until I was tenured, when I began to do qualitative work for the first time since my dissertation, that the full impact of his ideas became clear to me. That awareness has only deepened with time, which is why I would describe him unequivocally as a mentor rather than as someone who was an important influence. The term ‘mentor’, to me, implies something deeper and more profoundly altering.

“Today, I feel as if I carry his voice around with me in much of what I do and I invoke him more and more in my work. Paradoxically, the greater the distance since the days in which I was his student, the more present that voice has become.”

In Ainslie’s case, the spirit or voice of his mentor years later acts much like Socrates’ personal *daemon*, pointing the way around distractions and hazards and false values, perhaps even pointing past the illusions spread by Moocs, to what really needs to be done for the good of society. And his mentor’s voice encourages Ainslie to be creative in ways that are important for society at large, ways that do not meet the increasingly Procrustean criteria of how a clinical psychologist in a modern research university should spend his time and use his creative intellect.

In the School of Social Work at UT Austin, Michael J. Ferguson also goes where his mentor’s voice leads him. Ferguson was voted this year one of the “Ten Most Inspiring Professors at UT” by the Texas Exes Association of 99,000 former UT students. Ferguson focuses on social policy, poverty, social justice, and welfare reform and juvenile justice programme evaluation. I know first-hand how he works with honours students and on projects outside the university.

Ferguson attributes his own passionate concern for the poor, the powerless and the imprisoned to his mentor, Abe Osheroff.



Osheroff (1915-2008) is legendary for his lifelong social activism. He knew killing poverty at a young age and lived to be one of the last surviving veterans of the famous Abraham Lincoln Brigade who fought for democratic ideals in the Spanish Civil War (see the 1974 documentary *Dreams and Nightmares* – directed by Osheroff – and *The Good Fight* [1984]).

Ferguson explains what Osheroff still means to him as a mentor: “I met Abe while sitting in on a class he was teaching about the Spanish Civil War at the [University of Washington](#) in the early 1990s. After I became a faculty member here at UT in 1999, I invited Abe to visit campus twice. On one of his visits, Abe sat in on one of my courses. It was nerve-racking because Abe was such an accomplished speaker. When the class was over, Abe looked at me and said: ‘The students like you. They know you are giving them good information...But they don’t love you. Your task is to become a beloved professor....’ (You have to imagine Abe emphasising the last three words in his thick Yiddish accent.) I’ve been trying to live up to that ever since.”

Finally, Michael Marder, associate dean for science and mathematics education at UT Austin, co-director of our model UTeach programme, and a specialist in cracks and how things break, reminds us that mentors through one significant act can bring about the same kind of revelatory changes in our life plans that St Paul experienced on the road to Damascus. Marder writes of the mentor who turned him into a scientist in one meeting:

“When I was in elementary school, I was called to the principal’s office. This was terrifying, but I had no choice but to go. It was not the principal who wanted to see me but a huge man with a black shoe that had a very large black heel. Next to him was a plastic tub full of stuff. He talked

to me for a while. I have no memory of what he said. He gave me the tub, told me to take it home, and said it was mine.

“Inside the tub was a spool of wire, a photocell, a transistor, some switches, a buzzer and other electrical equipment. I discovered I could set up the photocell near the window in my bedroom so that if it was a sunny day, the buzzer would go off when it was time to wake up for school. At least, I could get this to work for part of the year a few days at a time.

“Playing with the tub of stuff had consequences. I developed the idea of becoming a physicist and it settled in me so firmly that no course I took much later as an undergraduate at Cornell could dislodge it, although some seemed designed to try. I knew that the man with the tub was an education faculty member and he had carried out some type of education experiment on me: the first of a series that became increasingly radical as I went through elementary and junior high school. Later, when I was a physics faculty member at UT Austin and had the chance to work with education faculty, I grabbed it. Our collaboration, known as UTeach, has turned into one of the largest programmes to prepare science and mathematics teachers in the US. It involves more than 35 universities. And I developed a course where I could sometimes give students tubs of stuff, and encourage them as future teachers one day to do the same.

“The mentor donating the tub of stuff was Max Beberman, a professor of mathematics education at the University of Illinois, who died quite young [aged 45] just a few years after he called me to the office. He was one of the inventors of New Math, whose main ideas still come and go across the US as an essential part of our math wars. The first meeting I had with him came from his faith in the power of open-ended discovery, and it turned out to be an event that oriented me to my path in life.”

I think about these stories of mentors when I think about Moocs. When I think of mentors, I think of a lesson that my good friend Leon Golden, 20 years my senior, a classical scholar and profound humanist, stressed again when I called him recently. Yossarian at the end of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, and Achilles at the end of the *Iliad*, both know full well that their worlds are replete, as is ours, with acts of inhumanity and brutality, rapacity and greed that they cannot stop. What do they do?

Yossarian and Achilles reach out humanly to one person. Achilles smiles and gently touches Priam, the father of Achilles’ hated enemy Hector. He grants him his son’s body and a suitable time of truce to bury him properly. Yossarian heads off, not to save his own skin, but to Rome where he will risk his own life in an effort to find one poor, abandoned young girl, “Nately’s whore’s kid sister”. Mentoring, ultimately, is reaching out one-to-one because the world’s problems are too big to take on alone.

Marder reminded me that small acts of connection in teaching can be unimaginably significant. I know Emmett L. Bennett Jr never knew how he affected the whole of me, not just my research in Mycenaean studies. Beberman and Rosenwald likely never grasped the impacts they had on Marder and Ainslie, respectively, and all the human beings their lives have touched inside and outside our formal higher educational systems.

As George Eliot writes of Dorothea at the end of *Middlemarch*: “But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

These are fitting words to describe and to thank mentors everywhere.

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## Reader's comments (1)

#1 Submitted by PalaimaT on November 21, 2013 - 12:49am

Prof. F. Stephen Halliwell, author of the book *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity*, has kindly written to me and pointed out that I made a mistake in writing that Achilles smiled at Priam at the end of the *Iliad*. Leon Golden had reminded me that in books 23 and 24, as Achilles goes through the process of becoming human again, he smiles. I transferred Achilles's smiling at Antilochus in Book 23.555 (during the funeral games that Achilles is conducting) to the meeting with Priam in Book 24, where a smile would be out of place. As Prof. Halliwell reminds us, the real power in Book 24 is in how Achilles struggles with his strong feelings in order to recognize in the father of his hated enemy Hector a human being worthy of sympathetic treatment who should be granted his son's body and a suitable period in which to carry out rituals of public mourning for him. My apologies for nodding about Homer.

Tom Palaima