UF Graduate Online Mentoring
Teaching Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Hello, my name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey, and welcome to the Teaching Beyond the Podium podcast series. This podcast is on teaching and learning, and our guests offer their best tips, strategies, innovations, and stories about teaching.

Today, we're going to get to talk about mentoring, which is a tried and true method of guiding and helping students, particularly graduate students, achieve their professional goals. However, with so many graduate and undergraduate programs being offered entirely online, one would wonder-- can students get the same level of attention and care from their mentors online? Our guest today, Swapna Kumar, thinks so, and has some great ideas to share.

Swapna Kumar

I'm Swapna Kumar. I'm at the School of Teaching and Learning at the College of Education, and I'm in the educational technology program. I'm clinical associate professor.

Alexandra

Swapna started out teaching foreign languages and found herself looking for authentic materials and resources to support flexible learning. In the early '90s, this content was not always readily accessible, and she had to work to identify creative solutions.

Swapna Kumar

So I started off teaching German as a foreign language at the Goethe Institute. And part of language teaching is materials and authentic materials. So there was a lot of media that I needed to use in my teaching. And it was not always available those days, so I got really into, how do I acquire and make this accessible to my students, make materials that help me teach and help them learn? And I taught adults who traveled a lot for work, so it was about, how do I support them?

Alexandra

In the early '90s, Swapna started turning towards the web and instructional design as a means of meeting her students' needs. She capitalized on the wealth of materials and endless possibilities that the internet had to offer.

Swapna Kumar

I also worked with a couple of groups of people who worked with software companies. And so that helped. That's what really interested me. And then I wanted to learn how to do this well myself, once so I got into instructional design. And everything that comes with the early days of web design and instruction design is what I did.

Alexandra

Turning to the web and the possibilities of web design meant that she could really meet her students where they were and help them to connect existing knowledge to new learning.

Swapna Kumar

I guess I've always taught adults, and that comes with the fact that they need things that are relevant to their situation, that are available to them, regardless of what they're doing in their lives. Because it's about helping them learn. And that's what I'm really passionate about, that, if someone's a professional, if someone's a mom, if someone is-- wherever they're at, they should be able to learn.

Alexandra

In her work and online teaching and learning, one of her greatest concerns is the student experience. How can we infuse student online learning with the same level of quality and engagement?

Swapna Kumar

So we all have a really good grasp of what an online course should look like-- a good online course, a quality online course. And I know I'm using these terms loosely, but I think we have some sense of that. What we do not, I still think, have such a great grasp of-- how do we work with graduate students online who are trying to do research, who are trying to do projects, be it

doctoral students, be it masters students, at a distance. That's not necessarily part of a structured, modular online course. How do we structure these experiences online for them? How do we structure these experiences, which are so integral to our work at a university, also with that level of quality?

Alexandra

Swapna explains that one of the most important aspects of creating a quality online learning experience is through student engagement. And one of the best ways to do that is through mentoring.

Swapna Kumar

So I call it mentoring because I think it is about the human being and their professional development. Because we know that any mentor/mentee, student/professor, whichever kind of relationship it is, is about the two human beings involved. And therefore, even if you have a system-- I guess the reason I bring that up is you can say you have this effective system. It's about the people involved.

So it is about the personalities, it is about the people, their working styles, everything. So the best system can fail, depending on who's involved, or can work really well, depending on who's involved. We can only have strategies and practices that we say have worked across a number of different types of students and over multiple iterations of, I would say, data collection-- feedback from students, feedback from faculty, trying to see what works-- is how I've learned more about it.

Alexandra

According to Swapna, mentoring is not limited to supervising student work, but more about being present and available. And she has carefully thought through and researched the best, most effective ways of supporting, engaging, and mentoring online students. You can find some of her research in the podcast description. The results unanimously show that students really value communication.

Swapna Kumar

So something that every single student-- it's interesting-- every single student has said is, I really appreciate synchronous communication. And that is real time, what we probably used to do sitting face-to-face. Today, it could be a phone call. It could be a Zoom or an online video conference in any-- Skype, or whatever you use. So students across the board love it, because

they feel it's necessary to clarify any doubts they might have as they read it. Faculty have said, I can write it as nicely as I want, but maybe there's something lacking to the tone.

Alexandra

One of the common challenges with mentoring or teaching a group is that students or mentees will often find themselves at different stages of their work. It can be particularly difficult to manage when some students are much further along than others. However, Swapna shares her idea on how this can be handled to the benefit of all.

Swapna Kumar

So another really good practices is, if you have six students at various stages of a research project-- they're all working on their research projects. They're all at various stages. And someone is really far ahead. You're trying to work with them and show them what to do, but you do require the others to be present, so that they're seeing how this works. It helps them enormously going forward, is what they have said before.

Alexandra

Another important aspect of an online class or mentoring relationship is that the mentor/mentee relationship really needs to be carefully structured, and expectations need to be clearly laid out.

Swapna Kumar

So the one thing we've seen across feedback from faculty and students is structure. You need a tremendous amount of structure in the online environment. For any of these experiences, compared to-- face-to-face, you could say, oh, yeah, let's meet next month. Come by my office, and we'll talk about this, or let's make an appointment.

But in the online environment, it's really important that you have some kind of a timeline, that you have milestones, that you say, we're going to meet at this time every month, or have a date already. We can push it if we need it, but we need this. These are the things that we're going to do. These are some ground rules for how we're going to work together.

For instance, if you send me something to read-- as a mentor, if you say, if you send me something to read, I will get back to you. I have to set expectations. Especially for a working professional or someone who's working in the field-- I will get back to you within two days, or seven days, or I will put this on my calendar for these two hours to read on that specific day after you send it to me. So it's a contract.

Alexandra

Swapna provides her students with choice on how they manage their collective work, because there are a multitude of ways of doing this. However, she finds it is essential to make those decisions early on and have everyone on the same page.

Swapna Kumar

Today, there's collaborative documents you can use and software you can use. Google Drive is just one example, Google Docs or something, where you can actually have a timeline. One good practice we use is, you have an Excel spreadsheet, and you say, we're meeting on this date, or you're sending me this on this date.

And we maintain a document where, between the students and the professors, either multiple students, as to we're working as a group, as to who's doing what, tasks. It's like project management. Tasks-- this is who did this, this is when it was achieved, this is where we're at. And it might sound so simple, but everybody's busy with so many other things in their lives that this keeps everybody on track.

And it's a common space. And today, the internet allows you to have these spaces. You could have a Dropbox where you share documents and articles and research. If you use bibliographic software, things like Mendeley Refworks or Zotero, for instance, they allow you to even make groups where you share research articles and you can see each other's annotations and tags and everything.

Alexandra

The framework Swapna uses helps students to develop organizational skills they'll be able to use in their future careers.

Swapna Kumar

Putting these strategies in place, such as timelines, such as milestones, such as these are the software we will use, this is a common repository for resources for our group-- helps the student have that structure to work with, have something that they can fall back on. And they know what to expect. And then they can create that timeline, according to-- they can also say, that particular day, I have this something else going on, and I can't actually do this. Can we move it by a day? And there is scope for negotiation in that environment.

The benefits have really been, students have said, I know what to expect. I know what is expected of me. Which sounds simple, which is true of any good teaching, learning situation in the online environment, especially in one that is not within a course or a module.

I keep saying that. It's far more important that the student knows what's expected, knows what needs to be done. And not just to get a grade, but to learn. Because they're learning these skills also moving forward for other teams they will work in, other institutions they will work at.

Alexandra

It is also important for a mentor to structure and organize the time and method of providing feedback to students.

Swapna Kumar

What do I need to do? I need to take a decision on what I'm comfortable with, what level of contact I'm comfortable with, how often I want to meet with students, how often I want them to send me things. How does this process work? How do I give feedback? There's people who actually prefer to give audio feedback and not written feedback.

So also, do I like to work in a group? Do I like to work one-on-one with my students? How much of group work do I want? How much of individual contact do I want? How much of community- - how do I want my students to build community?

And that's another area here, that's-- if you're working with a group of them, how can I encourage them to support each other, that I'm not the only one answering and working individually with every single student? Can I somehow create-- similar to what we do in online discussions in a class. Do I want to have a discussion forum area? Maybe I do want to have a module and put everything in one place. But maybe I want to work with different tools.

Alexandra

Life and work can be quite challenging. Both mentors and mentees may run across roadblocks and obstacles, so it's important and helpful to communicate frequently, remain flexible, and be aware of the challenges others may face.

Swapna Kumar

One of the things that has been integral to see our talk we do at the beginning of any project, or any dissertation, or any kind of research, is it's important, even if you feel you're not performing

up to your own expectations as a student, even if you're not able to work on the research due to life events or other things going on, if you feel you're not able to just write. Sometimes there's writer's block. Well, you've never written this kind of a project before.

So a lot of this is about their perceptions of themselves, of what they should be doing and how they should be communicating. Or maybe just they're overwhelmed with other things and don't have the time. And it's easy for a student who's not on campus, who is not forced to see the people they're working with, to put off writing an email or communicating. And sometimes it's far easier to say, could I have a phone call with you? Or could I meet with you and just tell you?

Because they start to write emails-- and this is feedback I've heard from students. And I can't say I've not been in that situation myself, where you're starting to craft an email. You don't know how to say it. You don't know if it's appropriate to say this in writing. You don't even know where to start. And so to ask for a conversation, to always know that it's important to communicate.

Alexandra

Swapna is inspired by the collaborations and innovations her students, who are mentees, come up with when working together in an online class or group.

Swapna Kumar

Each group takes what you suggest as good practice and makes it their own, based on who they are, how they work. They take it to a higher level sometimes. Those are the stories that have amazed me, when I hear, oh, yeah, we just presented at a conference together. They might have graduated three years ago. They're like, I'm doing this and that person's doing that, so we compared this, and we got some great ideas and that helped my institution, and I did this. So there is so much that they take forward from that experience, which I think has been amazing.

Alexandra

These online mentor/mentee relationships provide a humanized experience and opportunities for deep, rich learning that students are able to carry forward with them.

Swapna Kumar

It's not just one student, but that has consistently happened, is where I have given feedback to one person on their writing or on their research design. And then I hear exactly the same words coming out of their mouth when they're talking to a peer. And it's just so identical to what I said.

And I think that is the most satisfactory moment, because you think, wow. They're actually living what you modeled.

Alexandra

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Teaching Beyond the Podium podcast series. We're happy that you joined us, and we hope to see you next time for more tips, strategies, and ideas on teaching and learning at the University of Florida.