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Jone Rymer
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"Only Connect": Transforming Ourselves and Our Discipline through Co-Mentoring

Jone Rymer
Wayne State University, Detroit

When I met Debby Andrews at a conference almost 25 years ago and we ended up talking the night away, I thought I had stumbled upon a great idea for developing myself as a scholar-teacher in business communication: "Only connect," I thought—form friendships with colleagues in the field. Over time I connected with many stimulating colleagues in the Association for Business Communication (ABC) and elsewhere, people who became my friends and with whom I shared ideas about teaching, doing research, and publishing. A few became very close friends who conversed with me in depth about our various professional endeavors and our personal lives. In the process, we opened up new worlds for each other. We each gave the other feedback on ideas and manuscripts, asking tough questions and providing alternative perspectives on our individual efforts to publish. We consulted about our careers, helping each other confront unsettling changes at our uni-

Jone Rymer (Ph.D., State University of New York at Buffalo, 1970), is Professor of Business Communication in the School of Business Administration, Wayne State University, Detroit. This essay is a revised version of the Outstanding Researcher Award (ORA) lecture presented at the plenary session of the annual convention of the Association for Business Communication, San Diego, November 8, 2001.

The phrase "Only connect" is the epigraph from E. M. Forster's novel Howards End. As Forster used the phrase nearly a century ago, "Only connect" exhorts us to confront the disconnections and fragmented nature of our lives by communicating in depth and developing mutual understanding with others. Although "connect" now often refers to instant electronic communication, the human element is still the starting point. William Safire (2001), calls it "the surge of understanding" we feel in establishing real rapport with a friend (p. 19), and Robert Putnam (2000) urges us as individuals "to reconnect" with others and restore the sense of community in our lives (p. 403).

I acknowledge my great debt to my co-mentoring colleagues named here, but wish to note that I do not speak for them. This is my perspective on these relationships; my colleagues may have quite different views. I also thank those who have discussed co-mentoring with me and those who have provided helpful responses to drafts of this manuscript: Gail Thomas, Priscilla Rogers, Nancy Schullery, Charlotte Thralls, Doug Kevorkian, and the Journal's anonymous reviewers. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jone Rymer, 3701 Middletown, Ann Arbor, MI 48105; e-mail: jone.rymer@wayne.edu
versities and negotiate tenure/promotion processes. We laughed and enjoyed good times together.

My story undoubtedly sounds familiar. I tell it because although many of us have been finding great rewards in "close collegial relationships," we have had no name for them, we have not discussed or realized their possibilities, and we have not celebrated them as we have "networking" and "collaboration."

After reflecting on my collegial friendships and reviewing some of the scholarship on developmental relationships over the past year, I believe that many of our close friendships with colleagues amount to peers mentoring each other or, in a word, "co-mentorships." Simply put, a co-mentorship is a mutual mentorship of a pair of close, collegial friends committed to facilitating each other's development. Covering both professional and personal concerns, they jointly mentor each other at the current stages of their careers/lives, whether they be early, midcareer, or late. Under ideal conditions, individuals can develop several co-mentorships by linking up with colleagues from anywhere in the world, thereby creating a personal co-mentoring network.

If we go about forming and nurturing such collegial relationships with greater awareness of their potential, I believe that co-mentoring can facilitate our individual development as scholars, teachers, and members of our profession, and in turn, contribute to the maturation of business communication as a discipline. Here, then, I would like to advocate that we develop "co-mentorships" with our colleagues in business communication, especially those at other academic institutions across the globe. I will begin my discussion of co-mentoring by recalling the relationship of trust that forms the basis for all successful mentoring. After reviewing the research that supports the idea of peer mentorships, I propose a model of co-mentoring, suggest its potential for individuals and for the disciplinary community, and note the benefits of some practical applications for us in business communication. I then describe how we can form and nurture co-mentorships, concluding with a brief look at co-mentoring and our professional community, the ABC.

Throughout this discussion, I use my personal experience with collegial friends to illustrate aspects of co-mentoring, telling the story from my own perspective. Just as the personal element is critical to the learning in a mentorship, so acknowledging the personal is essential to understanding the phenomenon of co-mentoring and appreciating its potential (see Bell, Golombisky, Singh, & Hirshmann, 2000; Mullen with Cox, Boettcher, & Adoue, 1997). A recent study of the transformative power of developmental relationships among women demonstrates that participants were little aware of the significant contribution of these friendships to their professional and personal lives until they narrated their experiences for the researcher (Carter, 2002). Just as the telling of their sto-
ries facilitated self-discovery, my reflections have helped me to understand my development and to recognize how my close collegial relationships have been a catalyst for shaping who I have become as a teacher, scholar, and member of this professional community. Sharing our stories acknowledges that this personal element is a legitimate part of our scholarly life, a way to better understand ourselves as professionals (Bruner, 1986; Perkins & Blyler, 1999). Sharing my experiences here—the successes and the missteps—will, I hope, provoke others to consider the significance of their own collegial relationships and the future opportunities co-mentoring might offer them if practiced with greater awareness.

True Mentoring Is Based on a Trusting Relationship

The core of mentoring is a close, developmental relationship based on mutual trust. The traditional mentorship (from “Mentor,” the wise counselor in Homer’s Odyssey) is an experienced, senior person who facilitates the development of a younger novice in a caring relationship. Such a nurturing relationship of teaching, advising, counseling in a life-cycle framework is essential to all the major models of traditional mentorship, including Erik Erikson’s in psychology, Levinson’s in education, and Kram’s in human resource management (Luna & Cullen, 1995). The protégé has developmental needs early in a career, while the mature mentor has generative needs to contribute to the community (Otto, 1994). Thus, both participants benefit from the relationship, but the principal advantages of the relationship are to the protégé—whose career and personal development benefits have been validated by decades of research in organizations (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

The critical factor for successful mentoring lies in participants’ satisfaction with the relationship itself (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000)—a relationship that requires developing trust and engaging emotionally at the personal level (Kram, 1985). True mentoring is not only about career development. Mentors and protégés regularly talk about many other aspects of their lives, developing close feelings over time. Successful mentorships thus represent strong “ties,” deep connections of high levels of trust and caring with mentors who are motivated to help their partners (Granovetter, 1973; Krackhardt, 1992).

Although formal and informal mentoring programs have proliferated in the corporate and academic worlds, not all “mentorships” are based on strong relationships of trust (Feldman, 2000; Jablin, 2001). Informal mentoring (which tends to be self-initiated and focused on long-term developmental goals) has some inherent advantages in creating strong bonds, but the formal programs (which tend to assign, train, and support mentors) also produce many successful mentorships. Irrespective of the type of program, weak relationships between partners result in marginal mentorships, whereas strong relationships of trust benefit the protégés and their organizations (Ragins et al., 2000).
Our practical experience with mentoring likely confirms the importance of the strong relationship between mentor and mentee. Some members have developed rich, informal mentorships within ABC or on their own campuses, and others have designed productive formal mentoring programs (like Carol Roever and her colleagues who have mentored undergraduates who present at the ABC European Regionals). However, many of us have had disappointing mentoring experiences and recognize that the current "mentoring" rubric so popular in both business and academic organizations covers a wide range of relationships, only some of which are true mentorships based on mutual trust.

**Co-Mentorships Derive from Theory and Research in Several Disciplines**

Like traditional mentoring, co-mentorships depend on a strong learning relationship of mutual trust. However, co-mentorships differ sharply from traditional mentoring (equality replaces hierarchy in the relationship, for example) and reflect research and models for peer mentoring in several disciplines, models that enable the mentoring process to deal with increasing uncertainty and complexity and to facilitate significant individual change for both partners.

Using social network theory and mentoring research, Kram and her colleagues in human resource management (Kram, 1985, 1986; Kram & Isabella, 1985) have demonstrated that peers can fulfill a variety of mentoring functions across all stages of life, and do so as well or better than senior mentors. Individuals can benefit from multiple mentoring relationships, including those with close collegial friends who provide both career and psychosocial mentoring (primary mentors) and those with colleagues who offer some career mentoring (secondary mentors). By developing several complementary mentorships from a diversity of backgrounds, an individual can form a small "developmental network" potentially representing a rich range of perspectives rather than the exclusive view offered by the traditional mentor (Higgins and Kram, 2001).

Multiple mentors and a mentoring network construct are also put forth by Mullen and her associates in higher education (Mullen, 1997; Mullen et al., 1997; Mullen & Kealy, 1999). Committed to "breaking the circle of one" for those without mentors in academia, these scholars have developed creative redefinitions of traditional mentorships. Many mentoring pairs can collaborate to become equal co-learners or "co-mentors" in the context of a group, partners teaching and learning together to fulfill ever-changing needs throughout their lives, not just at the beginning of their careers. Other scholars also suggest the benefit of splitting mentoring functions among many fellow academics, including peers (e.g., Wheeler & Wheeler, 1994).

Extending the concept of peer mentoring, scholars in other fields have confirmed and elaborated the significance of developmental, dyadic rela-
tionships both in business and in the professions. Organizational behavior scholars (Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000) have shown how important mentoring-type relationships are for facilitating academic careers of business school faculty, noting that collegial peers, including co-authors, most often fulfill these roles, not traditional mentor figures. Organizational communication scholars (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000) have fostered "dialogic" mentorships of equals in a relational learning partnership rather than traditional transmission of expertise from senior to junior member. The private dyadic relationship of trust enables dialogue, an opportunity to achieve generative learning to benefit not only the individual partners but the organization, helping it to become a true "learning organization" (also see Barker & Camarata, 1998).

Building on research on women and on feminist studies, scholars in education and communication (Carter, 2002; Kalbfleisch & Keyton, 1995) also have emphasized the relational learning component in mentoring, and they have offered alternative models of interaction and adult development to construct new mentoring models. Such studies not only indicate more appropriate mentoring practices between women (e.g., more emotionally expressive, intimate ways; Bell et al., 2000); they also raise possibilities to explore more open, "other" centered (Buber, 1970) mentoring practices for all peers—practices that, based on a more altruistic rhetoric (see Couture, 1998), might be more caring and less agonistic, more collaborative and less hierarchical, more concerned with relating to others and achieving mutual understanding. In short, studies of women's mentorships make it clear that there is no single way to mentor. Gender is simply one factor that shows different patterns of behavior can fulfill mentoring functions (e.g., Gersick et al., 2000; Fritz, 1997); there are also many other potential differences between mentoring pairs, as for example, in learning style and world view (Egan, 1996). All co-mentoring partners—but especially partners separated by such divides as gender, race, or ethnicity—must accommodate to these differences, working together to shape their unique mentoring relationship for their mutual benefit (see Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993).

Proposed Model of Co-Mentoring

In proposing a model of co-mentoring as a means of advancing our individual and disciplinary aspirations, I am synthesizing my own experience with the research and models based on these various strands of scholarship, especially from Kram and her colleagues in management. This model of co-mentoring—only a partial model, to be sure—is one I hope will provoke discussion in our community and eventual development by others. Here I will present three essential components of the model, components that contrast with the traditional model of mentoring with which we are all familiar. The first focuses on the nature of the relationship as
a friendship of peers rather than a hierarchy of a senior mentoring a junior member. The second defines the primary communicative action as dialogue between partners rather than the mentor's transmission of the community's collective wisdom to the novice. The third expands the concept of mentoring into a network of co-mentorships instead of an exclusive relationship of a single mentor for each protégé.

**Co-Mentors Are Close Colleagues in a Mutual Mentorship**

Co-mentors are peers in a mutually beneficial relationship. Each co-mentor nurtures and is nurtured in a reciprocal, synergistic process. Based on equality inside the relationship, the co-mentorship is a collaboration serving the individual needs of both peers at their particular stages of career/life. Co-mentors may differ markedly in age, status, skills, and knowledge, yet within the relationship the partners act as equals, each contributing to and benefiting from the mentoring relationship, often complementing each other's efforts with different abilities/knowledge and attributes of power/status.

Co-mentors are close friends, each nurturing the whole person. Co-mentors are colleagues who develop a friendship over an extended period, sharing inner thoughts and feelings. Arising out of the interaction, the co-mentorship represents a primary collegial relationship that develops in an organic and unpredictable way and lasts as long as it satisfies both partners. The mutual knowledge, emotional connection, and trust built up in the relationship enable the in-depth mentoring experience that serves both professional and personal needs.

While carpooling between Ann Arbor and Detroit long ago, Barbara Couture and I talked and laughed our way into a close friendship. Bringing different experiences, knowledge, and skills to the relationship, each of us taught many things to the other. She initiated me into the wonders of word-processing and systemic linguistics, while I introduced her to teaching with cases and to developing new cases with business contacts. I was a mother recently returned to academe after several years at home; Barbara, a decade younger and just out of graduate school, provided essential nurturing to “jump start” my scholarly career. She challenged me to take some risks, to stop analyzing and start writing, and to submit manuscripts for publication.

**Co-Mentors Engage in Dialogue**

Co-mentors are focused on the “other” in the relationship. Each partner attempts to fully engage and understand the other as a person, relating to the other with empathy, explaining views fully, and listening openly. Although they interact in many ways and argue about issues, co-mentors aim not to win arguments but to expand their individual perspectives in the intellectual intimacy of their dialogue and to arrive at a new under-
standing. Each discovers more fully his or her own identity and strengths/weaknesses as a teacher-scholar through the close interaction and relationship with the co-mentor.

Co-mentors engage in open-ended dialogue about a wide range of issues. Partners talk about careers, professional issues, intellectual questions, and personal matters. They reveal needs, interests, ideas, and feelings. Through open-ended, in-depth conversations, the equal peers cooperatively think together—expecting to learn, to be influenced, to develop new knowledge, even to be transformed in beliefs and values by the conversation.

During the two years I spent at UCLA as a visiting professor, Janis Forman and I often walked along the Strand in Manhattan Beach and talked about many of our passions—our sons, our writing, our sons’ writing, collaborative writing, and MBA students’ writing. We wondered together why it was so tough to get smart MBA students to write coherent case analyses, and we wondered, in turn, about the peculiar nature of the case write-up itself. Fascinated by how much we learned by talking openly and engaging each other fully, we eventually turned our conversation into a research project on the genre of the case write-up—using our voices to explore the views of the students (whom I interviewed), on the one side, and their professors (whom Janis interviewed), on the other (Forman & Rymer, 1999). Co-mentors can become co-authors for a time, frequently, as in this case, building greater trust through collaborative engagement in the task, thereby deepening conversations about other professional and personal matters.

Co-Mentorships Form a Network

Co-Mentorships are multiple relationships. No one relationship can satisfy all mentoring needs. Most individuals can have several co-mentorships of close colleagues. These close friends serve as primary co-mentors to fulfill a wide variety of both professional and personal needs. In addition, individuals can have many secondary co-mentors, friendly colleagues in less close relationships who perform some limited mentoring functions. Typically these more distant relationships focus on specific academic interests or professional activities, not the full range of professional and personal areas characterizing primary co-mentors.

Co-Mentorships are complementary relationships in a developmental network. An individual’s primary co-mentorships form a developmental network to provide support and counsel on career, professional, academic, and personal matters. (The network is supplemented by friendly colleagues who serve as secondary co-mentors and also by professional acquaintances who share information.) Each primary co-mentor offers a unique perspective, complementing, at least to some degree, the other relationships. The diversity of the co-mentoring network, and ultimately part of its developmental power, depends on the range of experiences
among an individual's co-mentors on several key factors such as disciplinary background, scholarly knowledge and skills, professional interests, academic institution, life experience, as well as demographics like gender, age, nationality, and cultural/racial/ethnic groups.

For well over a decade Pris Rogers and I have been co-mentors, sharing ideas about teaching ("Try this in class; you'll like it!"), arguing intensely about research on texts (once right through the night until dawn), giving each other feedback on plans and drafts ("I know I can count on you for the 'truth.'"). and chatting about our careers and personal lives as we take "walk 'n talks" along the Huron River in Ann Arbor or e-mail across town or from different continents. Our relationship provides me with satisfaction from counseling her, and I benefit greatly from her generous nurturing. If I ask Pris a question, she sends me files of material. If I tell her about an idea, she makes it her own in the fullest sense of "relational responsibility" (McNamee & Gergen, 1999), facilitating my greater understanding—even though we frequently and vigorously disagree—by her complete engagement with the issue ("Thought of your co-mentoring idea again last night . . ." begins the e-mail). If I admit uncertainties as I move through a "phased retirement" program, Pris, though much younger than I, empathizes and encourages my efforts to reshape my identity for this new stage of my career and life.

My several co-mentorships have encompassed much of my life, both professional and personal, but all have had a strong focus on writing. Complementing these co-mentorships have been other relationships, such as my traditional mentoring of a graduate student that developed first into a collegial friendship and later into a co-mentorship. As a Ph.D. candidate in communication and adjunct instructor several years ago, Nancy Schullery asked me many questions about teaching writing, but after a time she began telling me provocative things about teaching small groups and about gender issues in communication, both topics I thought I knew a lot about. From there our traditional mentorship began to change from the typical hierarchy of senior professor and adjunct instructor to one of equal colleagues in a co-mentoring relationship—a friendship that has offered me another perspective for teaching and researching and for sharing experiences as mothers of adult children.

Throughout my career I have had many collegial relationships in ABC that have supplemented my primary co-mentorships. Affording me many benefits (and I hope, benefiting my colleagues, as well), some of these professional friendships have tended to focus on particular professional issues. During my first ABC meetings, JoAnne Yates and I talked about teaching MBAs, but over time she became a scholarly role model and trusted advisor about several of my manuscripts. Chatting about work and life, John Sherblom and I usually circled back to editing and publishing, with John helping me to appreciate the perspective of a journal editor
and, thereby, to better comprehend my responsibilities (as the chair of the ABC Publications Board). Rooming together at many conferences, Kitty Locker and I talked endlessly on a wide range of topics, but we focused often on ABC itself, with Kitty supporting my efforts to contribute to the community. Melinda Knight introduced me to the practicalities of writing assessment. Other relationships—with colleagues like Kathy Rentz, Charie Thralls, Jenny Gilsdorf, Linda Beamer—had no topical focus but provided long-term friendships to talk openly about a wide range of professional and personal issues in our lives. Each of these colleagues, as well as others, fulfilled some co-mentoring roles for me, complementing my primary co-mentorships.

**Potential Value of Co-Mentoring**

This brief introduction suggests that co-mentoring has significant potential for individuals and that a network of co-mentorships compounds the value, especially if the network is quite diverse (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Well-known benefits proclaimed by academic mentoring programs (e.g., Sands, Parson, & Duane, 1991) clearly apply to co-mentoring: enhancing career development, giving job feedback and advice on manuscripts, providing quality information, and fulfilling needs for academic companionship.

Hidden benefits of co-mentoring have much greater potential, however. Blending professional and personal development in a holistic fashion, they tend to be private matters between the partners. Several examples suggest the potential. Because co-mentors are aware of each other’s strengths/weaknesses and are highly motivated to help, they can facilitate the development of their unique talents and also support their efforts to cope with inadequacies (see Kram, 1985). Because co-mentors learn together in relationship with each other and understand each other’s histories and dreams as well as the struggles and victories of today, they can support their individual efforts to transform themselves as teachers and scholars while counseling them on becoming more self-aware (see Carter, 2001; Kram, 1986). Because co-mentors are close friends who trust and confide in each other, they can deal more confidently with highly complex and ambiguous information, thereby advancing their individual intellectual growth and facilitating their scholarly work (see Bokeno & Gantt, 200; Nahapet & Ghoshal, 1998). Overall, in these and many other ways, a co-mentorship can help individuals achieve greater competence and a greater sense of confidence and satisfaction in their various professional roles.

Although the informal (or “natural”) co-mentoring process inherently focuses on benefits to the participants (who, after all, formed their relationship for that purpose), co-mentorships also have potential as a resource for the field. Indeed, co-mentors are inextricably linked to business communication as members of the disciplinary community—a socially con-
structured way of organizing our various academic activities to produce and disseminate knowledge through particular genres, as for example, by publishing journal articles and providing referrals on candidates' credentials (Reinsch, 1996; see Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). In this framework, networks of co-mentorships—voluntary relationships of trust based on mutual obligations and reciprocity\(^5\)—constitute a form of "social capital" for the disciplinary community, contributing to its life and productivity, including its "intellectual capital" (see Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Co-mentorships can especially facilitate the creation of disciplinary knowledge by a collective learning process of combination and exchange and by "dialogic power" or thinking together to produce new, even breakthrough ideas (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000; and see e.g., Isaacs, 1999).

As webs of private, trusting relationships, co-mentoring networks can also encourage cooperative interaction, disseminate important information, inculcate valued traits in members, and create a more altruistic culture in the disciplinary community (Coff & Rousseau, 2000; Putnam, 2000). In contrast with groups, the special strength of co-mentoring pairs lies in the privacy of the trusting relationship that fosters risk-taking and supports innovation to challenge conventional community views (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000). Thus, networks of co-mentorships, especially diverse co-mentoring networks, represent an opportunity to improve our contributions to disciplinary knowledge and to the well-being and resilience of the disciplinary community.

**Benefits of Co-Mentoring for Business Communication**

The potential of co-mentorships is great, both for individual scholar-teachers and for the discipline. To illustrate how they might benefit us, I will discuss how they can alleviate some uncertainties we face in our roles as faculty members and as scholars in business communication.

**Co-Mentoring Can Alleviate Some Uncertainties in Our Academic Positions**

Most of us have had no academic mentor in business communication during our graduate studies in traditional disciplines like communications, education, or English, and we work in departments where we have few if any colleagues in our field (Beard & Williams, 1993). Although we are not unusual in feeling bereft of collegial support in our academic units (Gersick et al., 2000), we may feel especially isolated without the presence of others who fully understand our discipline. Called upon to defend our courses and our research (e.g., Pomeranke, 2001), we may be reluctant to admit problems or to ask for help from those who seem unsympathetic to business communication. Even if we develop local champions, they may be unable to give the counsel we need.
Co-mentoring with a peer from another university can alleviate this sense of isolation, providing us with a safe place to confront local challenges. Most important, a trusted colleague from the outside—like Pris Rogers has been for me in recent years—can discuss the issues confidentially and in a disinterested fashion, listening supportively to our concerns, advising us on dealing constructively with change, and helping us devise strategies for becoming stronger advocates of our programs and our discipline. Other colleagues can help with some specific co-mentoring functions for our local programs. For example, faced with an unexpected proposal on distance learning at my university last year, I called Jim Suchan in California with whom I had formed a friendship through many ABC projects, convivial dinners, and one very heated argument during a group e-mail discussion. A specialist in distance learning, Jim spent over an hour on the phone, not only answering my questions and offering advice, but allaying my anxieties about the proposal’s implications for my program and for me personally, and helping me craft a successful strategy for my dean's meeting the next day.

Co-Mentoring Can Alleviate Some of Our Uncertainties as Scholars

One critical issue giving rise to our uncertainties as scholars lies in the multi-disciplinary nature of our field. As so many have noted (e.g., Graham & Thralls, 1998), business communication offers us no ready-made identity or common knowledge base. Even reading the literature in The Journal of Business Communication demands learning about a variety of research methods and theories that we may not have covered in our graduate training. Publishing work that addresses broad questions and forges new paths often means being able to “translate” from other fields (as Forman [1998] discussed in the 1997 Outstanding Researcher Award [ORA] lecture), and even, at times “to get inside the head of other disciplines” (as Rogers [2001] explained in discussing the concept of convergence in the ORA last year). Although collaborating with a coauthor from another discipline can represent an answer, such linkages, especially with those from radically different research traditions, may not be as productive as we might hope (Deetz, 2001).

Co-mentorships offer the opportunity of translation—bringing other disciplines into our own understanding and recasting them to be useful for our purposes, or even transforming them by an innovative merger with our own disciplinary perspective (Sherblom, 1998). Long ago Linda Driskill tutored me as we met at several conferences. Armed with dozens of reprints introducing me to the contingency theorists, Linda translated ideas and answered my “dumb questions” from 6 a.m. to midnight. In talking through and synthesizing a communicative perspective with a contingency view of organizing, she helped transform my understanding of
business communication. Equally important, in helping me understand a significant body of management scholarship, she helped me transform myself from an English composition person who happened to be teaching in a business school to a full participant in a management school faculty. Subsequently, I shaped a new voice in my teaching of MBAs and adopted a more multi-faceted orientation to my scholarship.

Another critical issue giving rise to our uncertainties as scholars lies in our need to publish more and better work. As leaders in the field like Lamar Reinsch (1996) have stated unequivocally, "... business communication will not mature further as an academic field without a strong, consistent emphasis on research" (p. 44). Many of us need to submit more manuscripts and particularly more manuscripts of quality to journals in our field and in allied areas. In my own case, I have several unsubmitted manuscripts in the drawer, projects that took much effort but that never seemed quite ready to send off for review. Other scholars may have similar needs or quite different ones to help them produce more and better work, thereby advancing their own careers and contributing to the discipline.

Co-mentorships can enable our scholarly projects, offering us an arena to participate in the disciplinary conversation and bring our efforts to fruition. As Kathryn Rentz (1993) explained in editing a JBC special issue on business communication as a discipline, the key to our future is learning how to talk with each other so that we can participate better in the disciplinary conversation. Moving from our individual viewpoints to common places of understanding, we must learn to know each other and learn how to talk with each other in our informal conversations in hallway chats and e-mails, and from there to our formal conversations in presentations, panels, and publications. Co-mentoring talk is grounded in this disciplinary conversation in which we construct and disseminate new knowledge. Indeed the presence of the "other" in the co-mentoring relationship helps us truly engage in the interaction with a segment of the larger audience—discovering what and how to contribute and hearing how our own words anticipate and respond to others in our academic community (Bakhtin, 1986).

In contrast with the comments of journal editors and reviewers or feedback of most colleagues, private conversations between co-mentors are based on trust, openness, and intimate knowledge of us as persons. Co-mentoring thus provides a safe harbor for a researcher to talk about a project before it begins and while it is ongoing: to think aloud about hazy ideas; to figure out what one really means; to argue one's view vigorously; to hear the "other side" from a well-meaning devil's advocate; to rehearse meaning before shaping one's voice, formulating a sense of the audience, and committing ideas to paper; to provide confidential feedback on rough and successive drafts before the manuscript is ready to submit to other colleagues and finally to an editor. Overall, a co-mentor can challenge us to probe more
deeply and move to the next level in our scholarship—in effect, helping us produce better work to contribute to the disciplinary conversation.

Moreover, a co-mentor—knowing our strengths and weaknesses—can provide the counsel and support we need to become more productive scholars—to get the work out. I believe that some of my unsubmitted manuscripts over the years were due to my lack of confidence in my work, but I was reluctant to seek advice. Like so many brought up in a tradition of individualism, I felt I should be quite self-reliant about my solo pieces. Lack of confidence, as we know, is not uncommon among writers, especially among women, but understanding that point intellectually may not be sufficient to overcome anxieties and act (Stone, 2001). I now recognize that discussion and feedback from knowledgeable co-mentors can help me “hear” segments of the disciplinary community in an audience, bolstering my self-confidence and enabling me to move forward and, perhaps, contribute more fully to the discipline.

**Forming Co-Mentorships**

Co-mentoring depends on forming several collegial friendships and nurturing them into strong, trusting relationships. Like models of growing intimacy in workplace peer relationships (Kram & Isabella, 1985; see Fritz, 1997), co-mentorships will tend to evolve over time from distant acquaintance, to friendly colleague, and finally, to close collegial friend. Although developing a co-mentorship is an unpredictable process contingent not only on the persons involved but the circumstances (Bullis & Bach, 1989), partners tend to build up the level of close trust very slowly in three phases. In the initial phase, colleagues make contact and exchange information about teaching or research, superficially chatting about careers or personal matters. As acquaintances in a professional network, their relationship has a low level of trust and little personal involvement; they represent the “weak ties” so useful for gaining novel information (Granovetter, 1973). Over time, some of these acquaintances develop into friendly colleagues who exchange information, discuss professional topics, and give some career feedback. Performing secondary co-mentoring roles, these scholar-instructors—who may read the same journal articles, meet at conference sessions, and query each other by e-mail—have a moderate level of close trust and mutual knowledge. Finally, after an extended period, a few of these collegial friends develop into very close friends with whom there is a high level of trust and personal involvement, including emotional engagement. These “special peers” can become primary co-mentors who facilitate the partner’s development over a full range of professional and personal aspects of life.

Since co-mentors ultimately derive from our individual social network of professional acquaintances, our co-mentoring experiences depend on forming a robust social network. If we are to have the opportunity to
develop “bridging” co-mentorships with those unlike ourselves (Putnam, 2000), we must first reach out to build a truly diverse network of acquaintances. By developing contacts with instructor-scholars from many groups and backgrounds, we can broaden our opportunities to build stimulating relationships with colleagues from a wide range of perspectives and experiences, including those from other academic institutions, both near and abroad. Finally, we can attempt to nurture some of these associations into co-mentorships with peers from very different backgrounds and groups (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

Our natural inclination, of course, is to form close bonds with those like ourselves, particularly in such matters as gender and race (Monge & Contractor, 2001). Although I have had many collegial friendships with both men and women from different backgrounds than my own (including some who have played secondary co-mentoring roles), my primary co-mentorships have all been with white women whose backgrounds are not very dissimilar from mine. Indeed, it is a challenge to form co-mentorships that cross gender, racial, ethnic, cultural, or even disciplinary lines. Studies indicate potential pitfalls in mentoring of highly dissimilar partners (e.g., Luna & Cullen, 1995), and some explicitly advocate “bonding” relationships between partners from the same group, especially for women (e.g., Kalbfleisch & Keyton, 1995) and for members of racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Okawa, 2002). Still, the potential value of forming bridging relationships to groups unlike ourselves is enormous for expanding our knowledge and developing us in new ways, and many are reaching across barriers to find mentors, and doing it with some success (see Higgins & Kram, 2001). Certainly I consider it my loss that I did not take advantage of opportunities to develop a co-mentorship with someone more unlike myself. Armed with special sensitivity to potential differences between our peer’s expectations/behaviors and our own (e.g., see Beamer, 1992), therefore, I believe we should seek friendships with colleagues from a wide range of backgrounds and, transcending the limitations of our own identities, build a bridging co-mentorship with a true “other.”

**Nurturing Co-Mentorships**

Mentoring success depends on the strength of the unique relationship between the partners (Ragins et al., 2000), so flexibility is paramount in nurturing a co-mentorship. Accommodating to each other’s styles, monitoring and discussing the process openly (especially any disagreements), and assuming mutual responsibility are the kinds of actions likely to foster the unique relationship. Nevertheless, research does show that successful mentorships tend to derive from a strong relationship of trust with emotional closeness, a high level of reciprocity, and frequent interaction (see Gibb, 1999; Granovetter, 1973; Jablin, 2001; Kram, 1985, 1986). Although not everyone is well suited to mentoring and not all pairs can collaborate...
effectively (Egan, 1996), most academics can optimize their chances of developing a solid co-mentorship if they attend to these essential principles, especially building trust over a period of time by accepting the risks inherent in a deep, interdependent relationship and by working to mitigate those risks (see Sheppard & Sherman, 1998). To focus our attention on the principles for developing trust, emotional closeness, reciprocity, and strong communication, I have cast them as brief guidelines.

**Establishing Trust**

We must trust our co-mentors and we must earn their trust. To achieve trust, we must protect their vulnerabilities, and we must take risks, willingly making ourselves vulnerable. We must show our openness in various ways: Sharing our inner-most thoughts and feelings. Asking dumb questions and revealing our own ignorance. Confronting differences and giving honest feedback. Challenging our co-mentors when we believe it to be in their best interest.

**Creating Emotional Bonds**

We must build close personal bonds with our co-mentors. Empathizing with them and demonstrating our good intent, we must relate to our peers and care for them as whole persons. Attempting to understand their perspectives and to explain our own, we must internalize each other’s views. Emotionally connecting with them, we must develop intimacy and a sense of mutuality. Engaging in activities for work and for pleasure, we must tell each other stories about our experiences and build a meaningful, shared history.

**Contributing Altruistically**

We must recognize our obligations to reciprocate in a co-mentorship and contribute in an altruistic fashion. In practical terms, we must willingly give more than our “fair share” to helping our co-mentors, acting as if we do not expect anything in return. We must orient ourselves to the other person and to long-term personal development, not our own career success. While true altruism between close colleagues may be rare, partners must assume a strong sense of reciprocity and act altruistically if the co-mentorship is to succeed.

**Communicating Regularly and Fully**

We must keep the conversation going with our co-mentor on a regular basis. We must meet face-to-face as much as possible—arranging to attend conferences and planning private time to talk; taking leaves, sabbaticals, and visiting appointments; arranging meetings around vacations or business trips. We must use the telephone, exploit new technologies like web conferencing, and adapt e-mail practice with our partners to expand the
channel so it functions as a "rich medium" (see Carlson & Zmud, 1999). We must communicate fully and effectively. Many of the communication skills that foster co-mentorships are skills that we teach, especially effective interpersonal skills like empathic listening, but also engaging in dialogue, managing conflict, giving textual feedback, coaching and modeling, working collaboratively. As long as we are vigilant about our practices and, in effect, "practice what we teach," we should be capable of effective co-mentoring.

**Co-Mentoring and the ABC Community**

The Association for Business Communication affords us the opportunity to participate in co-mentoring and to contribute to our community—both the discipline and the Association itself. In tracing the history of our association, Kitty Locker (1998) explained the preeminence of ABC in the field: "The Association for Business Communication has shaped business communication as a discipline; indeed, without the Association, it seems unlikely that business communication would exist as an academic enterprise" (pp. 39-40). And in words prescient for co-mentoring, she concluded: "ABC can provide the network we need as we ... continue the work of creating new knowledge and bringing our discipline to maturity" (p. 40).

Indeed, ABC does provide places for us to connect with colleagues and to build our co-mentoring networks. ABC conferences, especially the regional meetings, are ideal places to make new contacts in business communication, to talk with familiar colleagues, and to spend time conversing in depth with a few collegial friends. For meeting new contacts, the new ABC website promises to be a significant resource to help members find those with mutual and/or complementary interests. The Association's journals also represent a tool for identifying members with particular knowledge, skills, or interests. Literature reviews, reference lists, authors' notes (including e-mail addresses), and of course, the articles themselves, are ways to learn about research networks and to locate contacts. For learning to know colleagues well, ABC offers opportunities to join or form a group. ABC "Interest Groups" (such as the Intercultural Communication group and the MBA Consortium) offer ways to participate in extended discussions and activities with colleagues who have similar professional concerns. Collaborating with others to propose conference panels and workshops opens other possibilities. The "Research Round-Table," a special session at annual conferences for several years, suggests a model with an informal co-mentoring component and a format enabling many to learn to know colleagues who share research interests.

Although the Association provides members with various support to pursue co-mentoring, we must seek out colleagues and engage them in meaningful conversation, and we must assume the responsibility for exploiting the infrastructure to advantage. If we seize the opportunities available to us, co-mentoring can connect us more firmly with ABC and...
strengthen the organization itself. Just as co-mentoring relationships represent social capital for the discipline, so they do for ABC—as long as one of the partners identifies strongly with the association and the co-mentoring process fosters that identification (in a form of “concertive control” as see Mumby, 2001; also see Bullis & Bach, 1989). If many individuals develop trusting, emotional linkages with co-mentors who have solid allegiance to ABC, they could augment the Association’s social capital, particularly the altruistic culture so necessary to keep it going, and in turn, advance the cause of the discipline itself. For example, co-mentoring networks can support commitment to writing thoughtful and thorough manuscript reviews for ABC journals and a willingness to go the extra mile in meeting urgent publication deadlines. Co-mentoring networks can also extend ABC’s infrastructure, for example, by encouraging novice authors to circulate their in-process manuscripts to senior colleagues for detailed, supportive feedback long before submitting them to journal editors.

Forming new co-mentorships could also strengthen the Association. Developing collegial friendships (and eventually co-mentorships) with new or current ABC members could, over time, result in a more diversified and committed membership, retaining members who may otherwise drop out and developing stronger allegiances to the association among many others. Developing co-mentorships with business communication colleagues who are currently not members of the association could also diversify the membership and increase it, an important benefit for any professional association in an age of declining memberships (Putnam, 2000).

The most exciting opportunity, however, rests in developing co-mentorships between ABC members from different regions of the world. International members have now expanded to nearly a quarter of the full membership, a sufficient proportion to allow members to connect with co-mentors from any of our major regions—Asia Pacific, Europe, Central/South America, or North America. Such co-mentorships would, of course, expand the partners’ horizons, even transform them as teachers and as scholars, but co-mentorships linking diverse members could also transform the Association into a more truly international group, more global in outlook and more attuned to the increasing complexity and change we face in the twenty-first century (see Sherblom, 1998).

Ultimately, it is up to us as individuals to make co-mentoring happen. Mentoring programs don’t make the difference; people do. We as individual members must reach out to our colleagues next door and to those in other parts of the world. We must form and nurture co-mentorships ourselves. Above all, we must truly connect at a deep level of trust and caring that will enable our mutual understanding and growth.

From my experience, I believe that co-mentors can help us live better professional lives that will bring many benefits to ourselves and to our discipline. But it is not only the goals one can achieve through these rela-
tionships that matter. Rather, I echo those who say, that good colleagues are a central reward of academic life (Gersick et al., 2000). In this spirit of friendship, I encourage others to “Only Connect.”

NOTES

1. Carter's study of midcareer women's developmental relationships was published by JBC in January 2002 after I presented this lecture at ABC in San Diego.

2. Although co-mentors can be equals in a common-sense way, true equality may be impossible because power is enacted through the co-mentoring conversation itself (see Bokeno & Gantt, 2000; Mumby, 2001). Still, it is the sense of equality in terms of needs and benefits and a willingness on the part of both partners to help the other that matters. A very senior co-mentor who can provide valued career sponsorship to a novice may benefit greatly from the latter's technical knowledge, for example.

3. Coauthors are not synonymous with co-mentors, though they may frequently overlap (see Gersick et al., 2000). Coauthors must inevitably focus on the task, whereas co-mentors tend to focus on the relationship.

4. Kram’s (1985) traditional mentoring model also includes a final “redefinition” stage in which mentor and protégé can transform the mentorship into a friendship.

5. This reciprocity is “generalized reciprocity” or generalized trust. It is short-term altruism and long-term self-interest allowing members of communities to contribute without keeping track and enabling one to trust an individual without having any direct contact (Putnam, 2000).

6. A New York conference on “The Anxiety of Authorship,” featuring prominent women authors (literary and academic), proposed mentoring as a primary solution to women’s anxiety as authors.

7. Assumed to reflect both altruism and long-term self-interest, mentoring is typically explained by principles of social exchange theory (Gibb, 1999; Monge & Contractor, 2001). Partners may act out of reciprocal or “quid-pro-quo” altruism; or their actions may involve complementary altruism of members with different needs, as when a senior member gains satisfaction from nurturing others (Otto, 1994). Mentoring should also be seen against the background of generalized trust in the disciplinary community (Putnam, 2000), as well as the efforts by some to inculcate deeper relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, 1999).


9. The address for the new ABC website is www.businesscommunication.org. It will offer a members-only site with working space for interest groups and an on-line directory.

10. ABC Interest Groups are grass-roots associations of members who meet at the annual conference and conduct activities throughout the year according to their own agendas. Members can form a new interest group by finding ten other like-minded colleagues and contacting the President.

11. The format of the Research RoundTable required an extended session. Members submitted abstracts of their work-in-progress ahead and were assigned (along with a couple other authors and several respondents) to a RoundTable, a
discussion group focused on a common topic. Instead of listening to presenta-
tions, members discussed each of the projects at length and gave feedback to the
authors on completing their work to submit for publication.

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