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# Mentoring a Peer: A Feminist Ethic for Directing Undergraduate Humanities Research

Amy H Chen  
*University of Iowa*

Kathryn Ross  
*University of Iowa*

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## CHAPTER 17 \*

# **Mentoring a Peer:** A Feminist Ethic for Directing Undergraduate Humanities Research

*Amy Hildreth Chen and Kathryn Ross*

## Introduction

During the academic year of 2015–2016, Special Collections instruction librarian Dr. Amy Hildreth Chen served as Kathryn (Katie) Ross’s mentor through the Iowa Center for Research by Undergraduates (ICRU) at the University of Iowa in order to direct Katie’s scholarship on the overlooked role of women editors in science fiction. Specifically, Katie examined how women editors of science fiction fanzines shaped the genre throughout the twentieth century as well as contributed to the development of fan culture.

While our time together began as an official affiliation mediated by university bureaucracy, we quickly realized that we did not fit into the binary roles prescribed within higher education. For example, classifications like faculty/student, faculty/librarian, and librarian/researcher did not describe our relationship. Many ICRU fellowships grow out of connections made between faculty and students in traditional classroom settings, but Amy is not a faculty member, so Katie was never her student. Amy oversaw Katie’s research as an academic librarian who holds a PhD, not an MLIS. As a result, Amy simultaneously inhabited the role of a faculty member

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and a librarian. Yet Katie's research took priority; when Katie pursued her work in special collections, Amy provided support. But the hierarchical binaries in higher education that are the most telling—and the most difficult to circumvent—are based on age, race, gender, and class. In this, we mostly avoided fitting into stereotypical roles. We are peers in race and gender as well as in age. Notably, one marker of identity—class—was a point of difference. Katie is a first-generation and nontraditional college student, while Amy was neither.

Our unconventional partnership gave Amy an opportunity to practice her feminist pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy emphasizes egalitarian relationships, mutual learning, and a student's active and equal role in academic inquiry. As a result, Katie and Amy developed a friendship, Katie pursued her research in a field outside Amy's expertise to an advanced level, and we expanded ICRU's focus on partnership to include the perspectives of a variety of other professionals throughout the university. Academic librarians, whose roles automatically place them outside traditional professor-student dyads, have the unique opportunity to employ feminist pedagogical principles of relationship, empowerment, and community to benefit their students as well as themselves.<sup>1</sup> Our experience shows that a feminist approach to teaching undergraduate research allows librarians to embrace the opportunities provided by their alternative route to academic mentorship.

## Background

The Iowa Center for Research by Undergraduates (ICRU) is a year-long honors program that provides funding and academic mentoring to students from all disciplines who engage in scholarly or creative work. ICRU matches students to faculty members and professional staff who agree to support their project. Beyond the contribution of a poster to the undergraduate research symposia in April, ICRU has no formal requirements.

Examples of ICRU projects range widely, depending on the discipline. In September 2016, postings for ICRU students included research positions in internal medicine, anatomy and cell biology, archeology, and German literature.<sup>2</sup> The University of Iowa Libraries did not list any postings in September 2016. However, during Katie's fellowship with Amy in Special Collections over the 2015–2016 academic year, the university libraries also supported three other ICRU students in the Digital Scholarship and Publishing Studio (DSPS), Research and Library Instruction (RLI) division, and Conservation and Preservation.

## Partnerships

While ICRU allows students to work with professional staff members, rather than only faculty, ICRU emphasizes the faculty option. This focus is notable on the center's website. For example, "What Students Say," a section of the site, only gives students the option to learn the benefits of "working with faculty mentors" alongside other choices such as "presenting at research festivals" and "the impact on career goals."<sup>3</sup> As can be expected, student reviews of the ICRU experience focus on connections with faculty only. For example, one student remarked, "My research experience gave me greater perspective on what a professor's job really is and the many things they do to help their students. It helped me define the attributes I should be looking for in a mentor and teacher."<sup>4</sup> As Katie elected for an ICRU fellowship in Special Collections, rather than in her major of English or Education, it was her decision to be paired with professional staff rather than a member of the faculty. As a result, Katie opted to learn about alternative employment opportunities while pursuing an unconventional ICRU mentor.

It is important that Katie herself chose to pursue an ICRU fellowship and then a non-traditional ICRU partnership because, while feminist pedagogy outlines a variety of theoretical approaches and applied practices to avoid the "teaching of dominance," feminist pedagogy often still assumes students have limited agency.<sup>5</sup> After all, most university education unfolds when students enroll in a required course administered by an instructor whose authority is prescribed through formal mechanisms, such as the use of syllabus and assignments, and learned behaviors, like a teacher's more formal dress or role as discussion leader. In contrast, Katie elected to participate in ICRU—research fellowships are not required to graduate at Iowa—and then picked a project administered by the university libraries.

Katie's specific research interest for the ICRU fellowship examined fan-produced little magazines, colloquially referred to as "fanzines," edited by women in early science fiction communities. Her paper examined three exemplary fanzines edited by women who resisted patriarchal publishing communities by producing their own works, demonstrating a feminist approach to their craft. Katie specifically examined four pioneering fanzine editors: Myrtle Douglas, Lee Hoffman, and Janice Bogstad with Jeanne Gomoll. Katie identified how each fanzine demonstrated an ethos of inclusivity, refuted patriarchal practices, and established feminist heritage within fan communities. Katie interpreted the aesthetic of each fanzine by incorporating a paratextual reading of the material objects.

Amy supported Katie's work over the course of the year by creating meetings that privileged Katie's thought process, status, and interests. First, Amy oriented herself as an interested peer seeking to enrich and expand Katie's work

rather than oversee it. Second, meetings occurred at a variety of locations, such as a corner of the library where whiteboards are set up or in a coffee shop. However, Amy never suggested meetings in Special Collections' reading room or at her office, as both spaces would reiterate Katie's identity as a student, rather than Amy's peer. Third, Amy did not frame herself as Katie's only mentor. Instead, Amy introduced Katie to other librarians who had their own one-on-one meetings with Katie. This way, Katie developed a community around herself and her work that grew from Amy's support but did not require mediation.

Katie's achievements exceeded the boundaries of the ICRU Fellowship and Amy's own experience: Katie presented at a science fiction convention as well as an international academic conference during summer 2016, will co-teach a graduate class on science fiction at Iowa in fall 2016, and was nominated as a Fulbright fellow following her graduation in 2017. Amy, who also attended the University of Iowa for her bachelor's degree, did not begin presenting at conferences until after her first year in her doctoral program, enrolled in but did not teach graduate classes as an undergraduate, and was never nominated to be a Fulbright scholar!

## Katie's Reflection

My success, however, should not indicate that the project was without its challenges. My difficulties varied from working with unprocessed collections, addressing a hostile graduate student at an academic conference, and coping with a fan at a science fiction convention who interrupted my presentation. Any researcher, seasoned or novice, finds unprocessed collections more difficult as they require more time to examine and may present unexpected contents. Fanzines are an excellent demonstration of investigating these unexpected contents, as they often have multiple authors (that are both established writers, "fans," and variations of these two) and contain very subjective narratives. I benefited from using collections at my university, rather than traveling as many researchers must do. Proximity, however, only made it more convenient to spend more time in Special Collections. My research took longer to complete than it would have otherwise because the collections were continuing to be processed. Then, when it came time to present my research, I faced confrontations from both my academic and public audiences. A graduate student questioned my research as she felt my status as an undergraduate de-legitimized her work. While the graduate student was likely surprised and threatened that I was an undergraduate, I needed to tactfully assert that the rigor of my work spoke for itself. When a fan talked over me during my convention presentation, overshadowing my words and taking my limited time on stage, I addressed the fan concisely, regaining my power to control my space.

I used the community and partnerships that I developed to address the challenges that arose during my ICRU fellowship. In order to better understand the unprocessed collections, I met with several librarians: Laura Hampton, digital project librarian; Lisa Gardinier, Spanish and Iberian studies librarian; and Sara Riggs, library assistant III. Pete Balestrieri, curator of science fiction and popular culture, warned me of the negative feedback I might receive from academic and popular audiences, while providing beneficial suggestions for how to react to these challenges. When I attended my academic conference during summer 2016, Amy cheered me on, provided moral support, and enjoyed my photographs of England.

It is impossible to fully articulate the immense benefits of working with a mentor whose personal philosophy aligns with that of their student, in both ideology and practice. The opportunities that Amy provided expanded my worldview and academic goals, giving me a sense of self and purpose. Amy demonstrated how a successful professional collaborates with faculty in Special Collections, and her positive presence and rigorous academic standards profoundly shaped my academic success.

## Amy's Reflection

While I enjoy my role as an instruction librarian, my identity as an alternative-academic (alt-ac) occasionally makes me feel uncomfortable. I bring a different perspective to the table than my colleagues in the library and in the wider university. I often wish other librarians were more interested in my research. Likewise, when I collaborate with faculty members, they often see only my ability to serve them rather than perceive me as a fellow academic, albeit with a different job title and description. I feel like I, too, am an academic, as I perform research, teaching, and service in my role as a librarian. When I worked with Katie, I felt that my identity helped rather than hindered our relationship. As a librarian, I could provide Katie with access to collections and encourage her to consult with a variety of information professionals. As an academic, I could ensure that Katie learned how to situate her work within current disciplinary fields. Within our partnership, I benefited from both sides of my alt-ac identity without having to act solely within one role or the other. I deeply appreciated my time with Katie as a way to find the positives in my dual identity.

Additionally, over my time with Katie, I began to admire her ability to use research as an opportunity to seek support from administrators, department heads, tenured professors, curators, and specialized staff. I saw how Katie's bold approach to research meant that she practiced discussing her area of interest with different constituents, in the process learning how to adapt her

message to suit her audience while gathering new insights from their feedback. As a result, Katie's research grew more sophisticated as she integrated different perspectives into her writing. In contrast, I did not learn how to use professional networking to deepen my scholarship until after I completed my PhD. Now, I use Katie as a model for how I can engage with academics as well as practitioners when I conduct my own research. Katie's approach to research reminded me of the value of community, a core principle of feminist theory.

## Assessment

ICRU does not require any assessment for mentors to better understand their students' experience during the fellowship. Instead, assessment only occurs by ICRU judges during students' year-end poster presentation at the Undergraduate Research Festival. While Amy did not formally assess Katie's research, she did provide feedback throughout by holding conversations to reflect on Katie's progress through the collections she used, referring Katie to knowledgeable experts when needed and providing comments on her drafts.

If Amy wished to evaluate Katie's research formally, she could have drawn from a wide variety of literature on feminist assessment. For example, Maria T. Accardi's *Feminist Pedagogy in Library Instruction* suggests feminist teachers adopt Classroom Assessment Techniques (CAT) in class activities.<sup>6</sup> The CAT Amy found most useful to adapt to a non-classroom environment like the ICRU fellowship is the "muddiest point" prompt, which requires the student to write a short response to the question, "What is the muddiest point in your research?"<sup>7</sup> This question would function as a meeting conversation starter that would help Amy facilitate Katie's work while upholding her feminist pedagogy principles.

Similarly, Amy could have used assessment to help improve Katie's poster presentation. Four judges ranked Katie on the impact of her visual content, narrative, and presentation quality. On a 1 to 12 scale, Katie received an average of 8.75 on her visual content, 7.5 on her narrative impact, and a 9.25 on her presentation quality. Amy believes ICRU's assessment of Katie would have been higher if Amy herself had been better situated to support this style of scholarly communication. As an English PhD, Amy had not created a poster for her own research until June 2016,<sup>8</sup> which was after Katie presented hers in April 2016. Nevertheless, Amy should have helped Katie refine her research question(s) and polish her presentation by taking more initiative to learn the qualities Katie would be assessed on prior to the presentation. In the future, Amy will use her experience observing ICRU judges and designing her own poster to better support future mentees.

## Recommendations/Best Practices

Academic librarians are well-positioned to benefit from applying feminist pedagogy to their support of undergraduate research. Our example shows that feminist pedagogical practices ideally begin even before a partnership is arranged. Students who freely decide to be mentored by academic librarians may be more likely to benefit from unconventional support. However, allowing students to opt-in to librarian mentors may not always be possible on every campus. Furthermore, providing such a choice may unintentionally affirm faculty's central role in mentoring students rather than acknowledging the diverse skillsets found among all university personnel.

Fostering egalitarian relationships between teachers and students may come more easily when considering how to approach partnerships involving non-traditional students who may be the same age, or older, than their teachers. But while working with non-traditional students may seem as though it is an opportunity to help underprivileged students from "at risk" populations, this attitude does not reflect a feminist mindset. Rather, academic librarians mentoring non-traditional students should seek to include their partner's knowledge into conversations and avoid suggestions that their expertise places them at an advantage at all times. One way to avoid reaffirming hierarchy is to schedule meetings in locations that are not affiliated with the librarian's position within the university in order to favor places where both student and librarian can talk as equals. This egalitarian approach does not mean that librarians should shy away from assessment. While assessment places the student below the teacher, academic rigor requires feedback. Frame assignments to be assessed as opportunities for peer review rather than a time for the student to be evaluated on their subject mastery. Assessment should foster conversation, rather than criticism. One way librarians can position themselves for assessment conversations is to explain to the student that you want to prepare them to be judged by their field's requirements. You want to help ensure their success as their guide on the side.

Warm connections between two people often come from a conscious or unconscious understanding of shared identities and goals. Feminist pedagogy reiterates that diversity is valuable. Students may not have similar academic interests, career objectives, or personalities to their mentors. To become a better feminist mentor, recognize how similarity fosters comfort and therefore connection. Push to expand to expand the limits of what makes you comfortable and avoid opportunities to guide students to better emulate you. Allow students to shape the relationship by valuing how their learning unfolds and how they prefer to interact. This approach may mean that some of your connections may not be as warm as the relationship we depicted here; that is fine. Appreciate the opportunity instead to contribute where and how

you can rather than hold an ideal in your mind. Furthermore, welcome the possibility that students may teach you or exceed your own achievements.

The feminist pedagogy resources we appreciate the most are those that are interested in how to ensure equitable relations between mentor and mentee. For example, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* emphasizes developing non-binary partnerships where teacher and student take turns playing each other's role.<sup>9</sup> Freire argues that this type of role shifting allows for more authentic and collaborative experiences to emerge. We think that academic librarians may find it even easier to practice Freire's pedagogy than professors would because our identities are exterior to traditional teacher-student roles. More recent scholarship on feminist pedagogy like John D. Rich, Rameeka Manning, and Brionne Cage's "Feminist Pedagogy in the Classroom" emphasizes how equitable relationships between educators and students can be constructed through the development of course content and the classroom environment. However, librarians who wish to learn more about feminist pedagogy should not just turn to scholarship; they also should reach out their colleagues. Many librarians probably practice their own version of feminist mentorship and can share their experiences. Combining published approaches and practical first-hand knowledge will allow you to create unique relationships that suit both your personality and skills and your students' needs.

## Conclusion

Through the Iowa Center for Undergraduate Research (ICRU), Katie, a non-traditional undergraduate, chose to work with Amy, a non-traditional librarian. Our unconventional partnership, which resisted traditional hierarchical binaries so often found in academia, allowed Amy to practice her feminist pedagogy, which emphasizes empowerment, community, and relationships. The result was not only that Katie developed a successful research program and ties to professionals throughout the university libraries, but also a close friendship to Amy. Our case study shows that academic librarians who embrace their position as unorthodox mentors to undergraduates and seek to appreciate the mutual advantages that arise from these arrangements can impart as well as partake of the learning opportunities these connections provide.

## Notes

1. "What is Feminist Pedagogy?" TeAchnology (blog), [http://www.teach-nology.com/teachers/methods/feminist\\_pedagogy/](http://www.teach-nology.com/teachers/methods/feminist_pedagogy/).
2. "Current Research/Creative Postings for Undergraduates," Iowa Center for Research by Undergraduates (September 15, 2016), <https://uiowa.edu/icru/article/current-research-postings>.

3. "What Students Say," Iowa Center for Research by Undergraduates, September 15, 2016, <https://uiowa.edu/icru/what-students-say>.
4. "What Students Say about Working with Faculty Mentors," Iowa Center for Research by Undergraduates (September 15, 2016), <https://uiowa.edu/icru/article/what-students-say-about-working-faculty-mentors>.
5. Dr. John D. Rich, Rameeka Manning, and Brionne Cage, "Feminist Pedagogy in the Classroom," PsychEd (blog), *Psychology Today* (February 10, 2015), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/psyched/201502/feminist-pedagogy-in-the-classroom>.
6. Maria T. Accardi, "Feminist Assessment," *Feminist Pedagogy in Library Instruction* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press): 2013, 71–87.
7. "Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs)," Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt University, <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/cats/>.
8. Amy Chen, "Twentieth Century Literary Collection Acquisition Patterns," Poster Presented at the Society of American Archivists, Atlanta, GA, August 2016.
9. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

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