



# Mentors as Educators

Creating the Optimal Living Classroom

BY J. RYANN PEYTON

---

**A** mentor plays many roles in a lawyer's professional life—supporter, capability developer, thought planner, and process partner. Inherent in each of these functions is the role of educator. Often overlooked by mentors, the role of educator is vital to the success of the mentoring relationship. A mentor should serve not only as an educator of practice competencies and professional skills building, but also as a guide on well-being, resiliency, and relationship development. Whether intentional or not, mentors create living classrooms for their mentee students. When done right, these living classrooms provide a strong sense of belonging and an inclusive space where mentees of all backgrounds can learn.

## **The Living Classroom Concept**

The living classroom concept is based on the idea that learning styles change over time and that learning environments should be flexible enough to fit a diversity of learning strategies and students.<sup>1</sup> In the traditional sense, a living classroom is focused on the physical space and its components (i.e., furniture, technology, configuration, elements of nature, hands on learning space, etc.). However, when applying the living classroom concept to professional mentoring relationships, the focus shifts from physical space to the six conceptual learning areas of a living classroom. These six concepts come together to create an optimal learning experience that fosters success for each mentee's professional learning needs.

## **Learning Area #1: Instruction**

In this concept, the mentor delivers competency and skills-building instruction. The focus is on conveying specific material to the mentee. Communication and feedback are highly encouraged and can be delivered in person, virtually, through shadowing, or through written review and revision.

## **Learning Area #2: Context**

Through the context concept, the mentor conveys the interconnectedness of practice areas, the legal community, and the profession as a whole. The mentor illustrates interconnectedness by using tools, resources, and real-world examples that provide a wholistic context for the instruction.

## **Learning Area #3: Collaborate**

Using the collaborate concept, the mentor provides opportunities for the mentee to work with additional mentors or peers to receive external perspective and insights. The mentor uses their own connections in the legal community to generate collaborative partners for the mentee. The goal is to provide the mentee with an improved network and community through which to expand learning.

## **Learning Area #4: Gather**

Here, the mentor empowers the mentee to direct their own learning by gathering the people, tools, and resources they need to further their professional learning goals. The mentor's role is threefold: (1) help the mentee identify the people or items to gather, (2) provide context as needed, and (3) provide insight about the effective use of gathered resources.

## **Learning Area #5: Reflect**

The mentor employs the reflect concept to create a space for the mentee to slow down and reflect on their learning. In generating opportunity for reflection, the mentor validates the mentee's learning process and meta-cognition skills, which ultimately encourages lifelong learning.

## **Learning Area #6: Share**

In the sharing concept, the mentor supports the mentee in promoting or sharing their learning

with the broader community. One example of sharing is sponsorship, where the mentor uses their position in the profession to open doors or create opportunities for the mentee or assists in promoting the mentee within the broader legal community.

### **Mentoring as a Pathway to Belonging**

Mentors who use the six learning area concepts meet the mentee where they are, validate the mentee's experience as a learner, and help instill a genuine sense of belonging in the mentee. Sense of belonging is broadly understood as a feeling of mattering, connectedness, acceptance, support, affirmation, and validation.<sup>2</sup> It is intricately tied to the natural human instinct to connect with others and feel included.<sup>3</sup> People who feel they belong perform better, are more willing to challenge themselves, and are more resilient. Conversely, deficits in a sense of belonging can have debilitating consequences for a person's psychosocial well-being.<sup>4</sup>

To date, there is scant empirically derived research examining the sense of belonging as it pertains to lawyers in underrepresented groups. However, literature on the experiences of law students from historically excluded groups documents strong feelings of isolation, exclusion, dismissal, marginalization, and hostility, as well as an overall feeling of not being welcome.<sup>5</sup>

Increasingly, the literature also demonstrates the importance of mentoring relationships on the success of groups who have faced decades-old disregard in the legal profession.<sup>6</sup> Yet research is limited on how best to serve lawyers from underrepresented groups through mentorship. Without research from our own profession, it can be helpful to look at research available in other professions. For example, research from the education profession suggests that mentees in underrepresented groups prefer and benefit from "equity-minded" mentoring relationships.<sup>7</sup>

### **Equity-Minded Mentoring**

In the context of education, "equity-mindedness" refers to the perspective or mode of thinking exhibited by practitioners who call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes.<sup>8</sup> But the concept easily translates to the mentoring of lawyers from underrepresented groups.

Mentors who question their own assumptions, recognize stereotypes that harm lawyer success, and continually reassess their practices as mentors and leaders to create change in the profession can more effectively improve their mentees' sense of belonging.

Engaging mentees as active participants in their professional learning is a central tenet of equity-minded mentoring. The mentoring relationship is not something that happens *to* the mentee. Instead, it happens *with* the mentee. Equity-minded mentors listen to and build relationships with their mentees. They let them know that their ideas are important and central to the betterment of the legal profession.

### **Inclusive Classroom Techniques**


Inclusive classroom techniques developed by Rosetta Lee provide a framework for mentors seeking to create, support, and uphold equity-minded

mentoring relationships where mentees can both learn and reach their full potential.<sup>9</sup> This approach incorporates four guiding questions: *Do you see me? Do you hear me? Will you treat me fairly? Will you protect me?* The goal is for the mentee to be able to answer yes to these questions. Below are just a few of the techniques that mentors can use to advance this objective.<sup>10</sup>

### **Do You See Me?**

- Incorporate multiple perspectives into the instruction and collaborate with people with diverse backgrounds.
- Share personal history that demonstrates experiences of marginalization or a greater understanding of experiences of marginalization.
- Create opportunities for mentees to share personal experiences if they choose to do so.

# Trial Coming Up? I can help



**SCOTT JURDEM**  
Best Lawyers in America  
Inducted American Board  
of Trial Attorneys  
Board Certified Civil Trial Advocate —  
National Board of Trial Advocacy  
*Life Member — NACDL*  
*2006–2021 Colorado Super Lawyer*  
*"Don't Get Outgunned"*

JURDEM, LLC  
820 Pearl Street, Suite H, Boulder, Colorado, 80302  
303-402-6717 sj@jurdem.com www.jurdem.com

- Make efforts to connect with mentees on a personal level (e.g., learn about their values and demonstrate curiosity about their lives).

#### Do You Hear Me?

- Seek content and experiences that allow mentees to be the experts in various aspects of the mentoring relationship.
- Offer mentees regular opportunities to provide feedback.
- Give mentees a concrete process for expressing any concerns about the mentoring relationship, sharing their experiences as a mentee, and discussing other challenges they may be facing.
- Demonstrate empathy toward mentees and others *at all times*.

#### Will You Treat Me Fairly?

- Create clear and high expectations for mentees to engage in the mentoring experience and for yourself as a responsive mentor.
- Support mentees in struggle and push them in success.
- Create a mentoring experience that contemplates and values different types of success.
- Don't hide the ball—create concrete steps for mentee improvement and learning.

#### Will You Protect Me?

- Minimize classic marginalizing experiences in the profession (e.g., learn how to pronounce the names of people with different cultural or ethnic backgrounds, and prepare to support mentees who are the “only” in their organization).
- Call out comments, jokes, or behaviors that are oppressive or exclusive—and do so in the moment.
- Recognize and work to limit or eliminate individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural biases.

#### Conclusion

Fostering a sense of belonging in your mentee is important, but it need not be complicated. While more research is needed to evaluate a



mentor's role in cultivating belonging in the legal profession, the techniques above have meaningfully supported other professions in cultivating mentors and leaders capable of generating trust, empathy, and strong working alliances. These techniques may be particularly helpful to legal mentors and leaders seeking to take an equity-minded approach to their

work with peers and colleagues. Ultimately, we are all responsible for generating equity and inclusion within the living classrooms of our profession. Through our shared need for belonging, the living classrooms of the legal community can become generative containers for the very best we have to offer to one another. **CL**



**J. Ryann Peyton** is the CAMP director and a seasoned consultant and advocate on diversity and inclusivity in the legal field. Before joining CAMP, Peyton focused her law practice on civil litigation with an emphasis on LGBT civil rights.

**Coordinating Editor:** J. Ryann Peyton, [r.peyton@csc.state.co.us](mailto:r.peyton@csc.state.co.us)

#### NOTES

1. Springer, “How Living Classrooms Promote Diverse Student Learning,” Artcobel (blog) (Aug. 7, 2017), <https://www.artcobel.com/blog/living-classrooms>.
2. Strayhorn, *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students* (Routledge 2012).
3. Hagerty et al., “Childhood antecedents of adult sense of belonging,” 58(7) *J. of Clinical Psych.* 793 (2002); Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (Harper & Row 1954).
4. Sargent et al., “Sense of belonging as a buffer against depressive symptoms,” 8(4) *J. of the Am. Psych. Nurses Ass'n* 120 (2002).
5. Deo and Christensen, “Diversity and Exclusion,” Ind. Univ. Center for Postsecondary Research (Sept. 2020).
6. Abbott and Boag, “Mentoring Across Differences: A Guide to Cross-Gender and Cross-Race Mentoring,” Minority Corporate Counsel Ass'n, <https://www.mcca.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Book7-Yellow.pdf>.
7. Griffin, “Rethinking Mentoring: integrating equity-minded practice in promoting access to and outcomes of developmental relationships,” in Kezar and Posselt, eds., *Higher Education Administration for Social Justice and Equity: Critical Perspectives for Leadership* 93-110 (Routledge 2019).
8. Dowd and Bensimon, *Engaging the “Race Question”: Accountability and Equity in U.S. Higher Education* (Teachers College Press 2015).
9. Kirsch, “Everyone belonging at school through diversity, equity, and inclusion learning with Rosetta Lee” (2019), <https://cohort21.com/teachingtomorrow/2019/07/05/18-everyone-belonging-at-school-through-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-learning-with-rosetta-lee>.
10. Lee, “Inclusive Classroom Practices” (2019), <https://bit.ly/3oq6Fph>.



# CLE Annual Pass

Unlimited access to world-class training and resources, all from your home office

## Get the best education for your practice at the best price

- Colorado content
- Key case law and legislative updates
- More than 150 programs a year
- Knowledgeable and experienced faculty
- Access to thousands of home studies 24/7
- 10% off all CBA-CLE publications

## No matter where you are in your career

- **New Lawyer Edge**  
For attorneys in their first 5 years of practice
- **Basic or Elite Pass**  
Discounted or free live seminars, unlimited access to CLE home studies and more
- **Law Firm Pass**  
Deeper discounts for firms with 3 attorneys or more
- **PASS65**  
For attorneys aged 65+

CBA • CLE

[www.cba-cle.org/clepass](http://www.cba-cle.org/clepass)

(303) 860-0608

*The nonprofit educational arm of the Colorado Bar Association and the Denver Bar Association.*

