

Mentoring with Meaning: Advocating for Art Education's Future through  
Multidirectional Mentorship

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Like so many initiatives in higher education, my journey into mentorship began with a mass email. A blanket mass email, to be precise. Targeting professors, department coordinators, prospective graduate mentors, and potential undergraduate mentees, the email encouraged departments to prepare promising undergraduates for graduate study by establishing one-on-one mentoring partnerships between undergraduate and graduate students. In short, the mentoring program would fast-track fresh-faced undergraduates for the hardened life of graduate school by revealing what advanced specialization programs entailed. Named the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) Pre-Graduate School Internship,<sup>1</sup> the program was largely designed for students who had set their sights on law school, top engineering departments, or medical school. Skimming the email, I quickly realized there was just one hitch: I was not involved in any of these aforementioned areas. I frequently Googled legal advice, struggled to assemble Ikea furniture, and (shamelessly) referred to WebMD.

However, the mass email *had* included The University of Texas at Austin's Department of Art and Art History, which encompassed art education. The mass email *had* found its way to me, Allison Clark. As an art education graduate student working toward my master's degree, I contemplated what advice I could share with an undergraduate. "Consider taking a gap year" and "never go into debt for graduate school" flooded my mind. Then I remembered that the role of mentor required more than just sharing (un)solicited advice. Mentoring is a form of advocacy, inherently strengthening a field's community by preparing the next wave of members and leaders to push further than their predecessors.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship, see <https://moody.utexas.edu/academics/academic-enrichment/intellectual-entrepreneurship-program>

In this article, I (the mentor) and Julia Caswell (the mentee) explore the benefits of multidirectional mentorship in art education. By discussing our entwined experiences during the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship at The University of Texas at Austin, we argue that advocacy in art education must be situated within positive human relationships, shared learning experiences, and clearly defined goals in order to acquire lasting significance. First, I outline my path to mentorship by detailing the internship program's central objective, recruitment process, and curricular implementation. Next, I introduce the internship's capstone project, in which Julia created an innovative teaching tool that she shared at the 2016 Annual Texas Art Education Association (TAEA) Conference. Julia will then delve into her personal and professional motivations for pursuing the internship program, revealing how the mentorship experience has influenced her perceptions of advocacy in art education. Lastly, we conclude by reflexively reviewing how the internship impacted our teaching philosophies, and we consider the many potentialities mentorship maintains for art education's projected future.

### **Mapping the Mentorship Journey**

Receiving the mass email promoting The University of Texas at Austin's IE Pre-Graduate School Internship was just the first step to becoming a graduate mentor in art education. And, as we all know, reading an email does not in itself create action. In this section, I review the internship's primary objective, recruitment process, and curriculum, providing a basic framework for others who might be interested in establishing an internship/mentorship program at their own school, museum, or community center.

### **What did the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship aim to do?**

Exhilarating. Exhausting. Exciting. There are many words that come to mind when we think about graduate school, and former graduate students—myself included—often describe

their experiences on a spectrum of highs and lows. Yet, when I return to my expectations of graduate school as an undergraduate at Rice University, it is clear to me that I did not have a full understanding of what graduate school involved, or what it would (and would not) prepare me for. All I knew was that if I wanted to work in an art museum's education department, a graduate degree could help get me there. Based on my own experience transitioning to graduate school, therefore, I knew how valuable a virtual cheat sheet could be to someone considering graduate programs.

Cue the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship. Hosted by the UT, the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship's primary objective was to:

Connect undergraduates with faculty and veteran graduate students in their field of study to explore those unique aspects of graduate study that make it distinct from the undergraduate experience (e.g., conducting research, writing for scholarly audiences, participating in seminars, serving as teaching and research assistants, publishing articles in professional journals, becoming members of scholarly organizations and learned societies, preparing for an academic or professional career, etc.). ("IE Pre-Graduate School Internship," 2015)

By pairing undergraduates with a graduate student active in their prospective field, the internship sought to provide firsthand experiences that replicated graduate student life. How? Through internship projects, tasks, and assignments that were to be determined through negotiation between the undergraduate mentee, graduate mentor, and faculty supervisor. Additionally, all three contributors were required to sign internship contracts stating their voluntary consent to participate in the program ("IE Pre-Graduate School Internship," 2015).

### **How were the undergraduate mentees, graduate mentors, and faculty supervisors selected?**

Before discussing *what* Julia and I accomplished in the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship, it is first necessary to explain *how* we came to work together. The internship involves three key players: the undergraduate mentee, the graduate mentor, and the faculty supervisor. As

the self-nominated graduate mentor, it was my responsibility to identify an undergraduate student with whom I could collaborate for an entire academic semester, or 15 weeks. There were two main ways in which I could do this: (1) by notifying my department's undergraduate coordinator, who would spread the word on my behalf; or (2) by advertising the opportunity to the roughly 30 undergraduate students I already taught as a Teaching Assistant for UT's Visual Art Studies program.

Interested in articulating my personal vision for the internship, I decided to promote the opportunity directly to my undergraduates before class one day. Uncertain how the internship would be received, I followed up via email with a handful of select students who I thought might especially benefit from the experience. After teasing out potential curricular themes with the already-busy undergraduates, Julia and I agreed we could dedicate a portion of our time in the upcoming Spring 2016 semester to *explore* current and emerging research methodologies in art education; *examine* the processes for writing grant proposals, graduate schools applications, and internship applications; generatively *discuss* key topics in art education; and, above all, *discover* what graduate life can look like in art education. Because the internship's success was rooted in a tailored, negotiated curriculum, it was imperative that Julia and I maintained a one-on-one mentoring relationship. Thus, in order to ensure the mentee selection process was as fair as possible, I notified each interested undergraduate that the position would be filled on a first-come, first-served basis. Consequently, once Julia and I decided to move forward, I was no longer eligible to team up with other students.

In order to ensure the internship proceeded without academic violations or inappropriate conduct, UT required a faculty supervisor to oversee each mentorship pairing. For Julia and me, selecting our faculty supervisor was simple: we both worked with Dr. Heidi Powell, who taught

the course I had shared the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship with. Upon her acceptance of the faculty supervisor position, Julia and I were able to begin cooperatively designing the internship's curriculum.

### **What did the internship include?**

When co-designing the internship's syllabus with Julia, I was guided by two overarching principles: (1) the curriculum would have to include themes Julia was eager to learn and that I was prepared to teach; and (2) the curriculum would have to be solidified enough to provide a consistent format we could both follow, but flexible enough to account for emerging learning opportunities (Osberg & Biesta, 2008; Riley & Roach, 2006; Tyler, 2013). Julia and I had agreed upon a general curricular framework before the internship commenced in January 2016, but the weekly readings, assignments, and topics had to be distilled into a standard syllabus that we could submit to Dr. Powell and the University of Texas at Austin for final approval. Thus, I cracked open my faithful curriculum design books over the winter holiday and began visualizing, crafting, and refining my very first syllabus.

Due to the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship's generous give-and-take, Julia and I were not required to cover any specific topics; the only constraint guiding our decisions was that each assignment, reading, and activity must lift the veil of mystery enshrouding graduate school in some way. However, we wanted to do more than just create projects that simulated my daily responsibilities as a graduate student. I found that approach to be too obvious, too unhelpful if Julia entered a graduate program herself. She might benefit slightly from seeing how *I* experienced graduate school, but she could certainly benefit from a toolbox of art education resources tailored to meet *her* immediate academic and professional needs as a first-year graduate student.

With this ultimate goal in mind, I turned to Ralph W. Tyler's (2013) four fundamental questions pertaining to curriculum design:

1. What educational purposes should the school [or educator] seek to attain?
2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
3. How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
4. How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained? (p. 1)

Because question one was already resolved, I moved on to question two: how would Julia and I actually create an art education toolbox? After reflecting on my core courses as a first-year graduate student and consulting Julia, I chose art education research methodologies as our first main topic. It would take four weeks and we would only truly cover action research (Buffington & McKay, 2013; Klein, 2014), program evaluation (Smilan, 2014), and historical research (Bolin, 2013), but I hoped this grounding would enable Julia to develop her own research project that she could pursue as the final capstone project in the internship. Each reading would include a brief reading response, which Julia and I would discuss during our weekly meeting in the department's teaching assistant office (see Figure 1). In order to prepare Julia for the realities of securing research funding in graduate school, I also selected readings that clarified the grant proposal process (Carr, 2015; Tremore & Smith, 2009). Furthermore, Julia would be required to draft a project proposal—much like a graduate student's thesis proposal—that broke down her capstone project's financial and logistical needs.



*Figure 1.* Seen discussing in Author 1's shared Teaching Assistant office, the pair met each Wednesday afternoon to review their weekly reading assignment and long-term projects.

Graduate school is more than research, though, and it was crucial that our collaborative syllabus reflected graduate students' professional concerns. Consequently, we dedicated several weeks in March to what I imagined was the perfect practicum for Julia : she would be required to draft a complete application, including statement of purpose, for one summer internship of her choice; identify at least three graduate programs she could see herself applying to in the fall, and provide justifications for her selections; and nurture a professional identity online by creating a LinkedIn profile, which would complement her NAEA Digication e-Portfolio. To vary the weeks' workloads, I included three weeks in which Julia would not receive any new assignments and could instead accompany me to one of my graduate courses.

Once the core assignments had been decided, I began mulling over how I could evaluate Julia's participation and completed work. The IE Pre-Graduate School Internship required Julia to attend a monthly campus-wide meeting for all of the interns, which would account for 25% of



Julia's final grade. Thus, what Julia and I achieved together would determine the remaining 75% of her final grade. In an effort to ensure Julia enjoyed her experience—the program's primary aim is to encourage students to pursue graduate school, after all—I opted to implement an adaptable grading system based solely on what Julia gained from each assignment and activity. Was she seeing something “new” about graduate school's possibilities? Was she expressing sincere interest in exploring art education's current and emergent research trends? Was she applying our conversations to her reading reflections and following her thread of thought through to fruition?

As it turned out, yes. To all of the above.

### **Curricular Example: Designing Original Research for the 2016 Annual TAEA Conference**

In order to demonstrate how Julia internalized and thoughtfully (re)articulated the internship's key topics, I will briefly review Julia's capstone project after unpacking how and why I designed the assignment.

When I created the internship's final project, I was seeking to produce an educational endeavor that drew upon each major theme animating our semester together. The project had to prominently feature an art education research methodology, as well as an actionable research design that could be realized during a summer internship. What's more, the assignment needed to epitomize the emergent curriculum design's ultimate strength: exploration (Jones, 2012). Therefore, I crafted a broad yet simultaneously focused capstone project, written with the following description:

A primary objective of this course is for you [Julia] to explore current and emergent research methodologies in art education. The purpose of this assignment is to assist you in meeting this course objective by articulating a research question of interest to you by formulating a research proposal and corresponding application for the 2016 Annual Texas Art Education Association (TAEA) conference. (Author 1, personal communication, February 22, 2016)

By leaving the details up to Julia, I enabled her to assume the role of an art education graduate researcher, who regularly has to develop a project for an upcoming conference that can be implemented within a relatively short time frame and without the advantage of a grant cycle. It was, quite honestly, the most realistic assignment mirroring my daily life as a graduate student that I could conceive. Plus, her freshly formed art education toolbox might come in handy. Thankfully, it did.

Julia embraced the challenge wholeheartedly, quickly formulating a central research question and appropriate research methodology within a few short weeks. Working primarily without my assistance, she designed the project to reflect both her personal research interests and meet a need she witnessed during her student teaching observations. Producing an immersive audio walk crafted specifically for the art classroom, Julia explored how audio could be employed as a critical pedagogical tool and examined its potential benefits for student engagement (see Figures 2 and 3).





*Figures 2 and 3.* By sharing her project with Author 1, Dr. Heidi Powell, and Dr. Christina Bain, Julia gained valuable feedback on how she might implement her audio walk during her upcoming summer internship and TAEA presentation.

### **Reflecting on the Mentorship Experience with Julia**

Now that I have explained the internship program's primary objective, recruitment process, and collaborative curricular design, it is time to share the stage with the mentee herself. In the following interview,<sup>2</sup> Julia recounts her experience as an undergraduate mentee, demonstrating how her role evolved throughout the semester and how our partnership transformed her view of art education.

**Allison Clark (A1):** What prompted you to pursue the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship?

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<sup>2</sup> This interview was conducted via email in August 2016, roughly four months after the internship concluded. We decided to delay this interview in order to provide ample time for reflection, essentially seeing which aspects of the internship/mentorship experience stuck with us the most.

**Julia Caswell (A2):** I was skeptical at first. I wasn't certain more coursework would be worth it, and I wasn't even really sure if graduate school was in my future. After we met outside of class and discussed the process of collaboratively crafting a course syllabus, I realized my skepticism stemmed from my past understanding of what it meant to be a student. But the IE-Pre Graduate School Internship was designed with flexibility, and would not be as cut and dry as so many of my other college courses.

**A1:** How would you describe your role in creating the course syllabus?

**A2:** From the start, you [Author 1] and I had an open line of communication through email. I emailed you a few objectives I thought would be helpful to pursue, as they directly related to my interests. I wanted to learn about graduate school in general, as well as relevant research methodologies and professional development. And, by professional development, I mean all the small things that aren't truly covered in my major's classes: submitting internship applications, creating a curriculum vitae, selecting graduate courses, writing grant proposals, drafting professional emails, and speaking in front of others in a formal environment.

**A1:** Why was it important that we co-designed the syllabus together? How did the process impact your internship experience?

**A2:** Because the course was collaboratively designed, my input into the course was my direct outcome. I did things that were hard—things I would much rather not do, if I'm being honest—but overall they were for my benefit. Creating the syllabus together opened the door for more possibilities for growth and a new level of independence.

**A1:** How would you describe our relationship throughout the semester?

**A2:** At the beginning of the semester, the mentoring relationship felt as though you [Author 1], the more experienced graduate student, were guiding me, the less experienced undergraduate

student, through the process of self-guided study. But as the semester went on, I noticed we both were learning from the experience. We both learned from each other, and we had the opportunity to speak about things that we wouldn't normally speak about in an educational setting. So, in a way, it felt as though we were shifting from the typical unidirectional student-teacher relationship to something more reciprocal. For example, you disclosed some of the rougher aspects of academia I might not have known otherwise, and I was able to share alternative ways of thinking about technology in the classroom with you.

**A1:** What was one of your most memorable learning experiences in the program?

**A2:** Discovering that I am an advocate for all things I feel passionate about. Art education is so much like art advocacy. I learned that if I feel like something is not being done in the field that could be useful—or is being done incorrectly, or could be updated—I learned to speak up about those things. I became active in my approach to my own learning. This was reinforced by the multidirectional mentorship relationship and the open-ended questions you asked me. You always asked the best questions. I learned so much when you asked me if I liked going to museums and I negotiated it for a long time. It influenced my learning and also my teaching style. That discussion, and the discomfort I felt with not knowing, provided me with the space for creative problem solving that later I used in my capstone project. I really go into thinking about the contemporary learner and how we approach art education today. It was a valuable skill to learn.

**A1:** What were some of the challenges you encountered within this emergent curriculum?

**A2:** Oh, that's pretty easy. Choosing a capstone project and sticking to it. Once I opened up to all the possibilities I could imagine, I saw that so many of my ideas were not yet available for people to engage with. Judging by the literature reviews I began for each potential topic, I was

not alone in my thinking. Fortunately, many of my early ideas hold promise for the future of art education. Now it's just a bit of a waiting game for the correct resources, spaces, etc.

**A1:** How has participating in this internship impacted your current and future goals in art education?

**A2:** During the mentorship process, I began to see myself move into a facilitator role. Advocacy is not all about what you have to say. More often than not, it is about listening. I found myself bouncing ideas off of you [Author 1] and soaking in what you had to say. Perhaps it was not the conversations about graduate school that made me want to pursue a PhD, but rather the skills I learned in terms of facilitating productive conversations, creating avenues for open leadership, researching different topics, dedicating time to innovative thinking, and discovering my passion for life-long learning. I think these are my big takeaways. I now see myself as a good fit for continuing art education at the graduate level and sharing my findings with others.

**A1:** What advice would you give someone who is interested in developing an internship/mentorship program at their own institution?

**A2:** Go for it! I grew more this past semester than I had ever grown before. I saw myself as both a teacher and a student. If you are thinking, "Yes, I want to do this," then my advice is to seek out opportunities to build a relationship with a mentee or a mentor. If you are thinking, "Eh, I'm not sure about this," remember that this is what you make it! It *is* flexible, and if something isn't working out, you move on to another project, reading, or topic. There were many times when we did not finish what was on the agenda for the day. In these instances, I would arrive to our weekly meeting with one burning question, and we discussed it from all sides and ends. In short, I think the key thing to remember when creating a reciprocal mentoring relationship is to follow the experience's ebbs and flows.

### **Conclusion: Making Meaning from Multidirectional Mentorship**

Mentoring can be difficult. It can be time consuming, and it can become all encompassing. But, as Julis demonstrated in the above interview, mentorship is also one of the greatest gifts art educators can provide their community. By enthusiastically encouraging emerging students, teachers, and scholars to question their surrounding environments and constructively dissect the “why” motivating their actions, mentors can model productive, responsive inquiry. This skill is critical at all levels of art education: preservice, K-12, higher education, museum, and community art. Yet, it is often difficult to illustrate reflexivity’s rigor without engaging in one-on-one discussions that promote unfiltered queries, questions, and quandaries. It is in these moments that positive multidirectional mentoring relationships prove invaluable to our field, as they invite the mentee and mentor to suspend their assigned role and collaboratively engage in dynamic dialogues as co-learners and co-teachers.

For both Julia and me, the IE Pre-Graduate School Internship at ABC University deeply impacted our teaching philosophies, creating an increased emphasis on reciprocal communication, open-ended exploration, and art advocacy. In Julia’s own words, the mentorship motivated her to reframe the role of an art educator:

It is now my belief that all humans have a desire to communicate, and it is the job of an art educator to seek out opportunities for students to communicate while also encouraging students to invest in their learning. I now see the merits of life-long learning, as well as the process of analyzing learning experiences with which we ask our students (and ourselves) to engage. I also now view art education in a social context. There is importance in preparing students for their present and future social lives, work, and citizenship. (Julia Caswell, personal communication, August 29, 2016)

Like Julia, the mentorship experience has reminded me to remain open to students’ input, and to actively construct opportunities for self-directed interactions with artwork. While I might provide the general framework for investigation by identifying a unifying theme, such as life in graduate

school, *we* should collectively determine how to flesh out the finer details. More broadly, my academic relationship and eventual friendship with Julia has prompted me to reevaluate how my past mentorship experiences have led me through college, graduate school, and my first “real” job. Such examples of traditional mentorship are plentiful, but Julia and I argue that the power of multidirectional mentorship—which designs moments for both the mentee and the mentor to actively learn from each other, and implement key takeaways in their own research and teaching practice—affords greater opportunities for learning, growth, and reflection for each participant.

Most importantly, multidirectional mentorship is more than a professional courtesy or a line on your résumé. It is the life force sustaining our field, connecting emerging art educators with experienced community members by creating something bigger and better than any of us could ever achieve on our own. In short, multidirectional mentorship advocates for our entire art education community by aspiring to inspire and reinforcing the idea that we all have something to teach, as well as learn.

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