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Professional vertigo in neoliberal higher education

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ABSTRACT

In a number of publications, Bonnie Urciuoli has explored the ways in which neoliberal discourses have come to be used in contexts of higher education, particularly in representations of students marked by race and class. I reflect on my own work with an organisation utilising neoliberal discourses for the representation of students in order to show that the organisation engages other types of people on campus, such as faculty members, but fails to provide them a tenable subject position. I engage with Urciuoli's work in order to ask why the contradictions faculty members face in their work with the organisation do not pose a threat to the organisation's activities and reproduction.

High school students apply to the Posse Foundation in hopes of being chosen for inclusion in a 'Posse', a cohort of ten students sent to a particular college or university where tuition fees are waived. The foundation explains that students are chosen for their 'extraordinary academic and leadership potential', and that students chosen 'might have been overlooked by traditional college selection processes' (The Posse Foundation 2014). Many of the students in the programme are racially marked and certainly count as 'diverse' in the ways the college represents student demographics. Diversity has become a common descriptor on college and university campuses in the United States. While many people have critiqued the notion for its deflection of attention away from the relevance of social justice to issues of social difference, diversity, when it is used to describe students and faculty, is nearly always seen as a positive attribute. Each Posse is paired with a 'mentor', a faculty or staff member, whose responsibilities include leading group meetings and outings, having one-on-one meetings with Posse members, and reporting back to foundation personnel about Posse members. Several mentors have reported to me in a variety of contexts that supporting racially marked students outweighed any material benefits in the decision to become a mentor, and this was certainly true in my case.

Once I agreed to become a mentor, one of the first things that struck me was just how much preparatory work was required. Elaborate instructions had been created by the foundation to provide mentors with techniques of interaction with Posse members and plans for group meetings, and lengthy training sessions were devoted to the instructions' inculcation. Yet, in mentor training sessions as well as in a retreat with mentors and the members of their Posse, foundation personnel made the role of the mentor ambivalent –

even untenable – by ignoring or even disregarding aspects of the instructions for mentors just after they had been reviewed.

I have found Bonnie Urciuoli's work on neoliberal forms of value creation in higher education to be helpful in thinking about the professional vertigo I have experienced working with Posse as a mentor. Indeed, Urciuoli has written about the Posse Foundation in particular, and her reflections on Posse are part of her more general explorations of the rise of neoliberal discourses and subjectivities in higher education, especially their involvement of race and class-marked students in elite institutions which use diversity as a frame of description. What makes Posse neoliberal is that it draws students to campus based on the way they fit identity categories marked by social inequality. Yet, once they arrive on campus, the same students are given attention by Posse and by the institution for exhibiting qualities rather difficult to pin down like leadership, communicative skills and enthusiasm. The social structures of inequality that made the students so attractive to the organisation and the college are erased and replaced with traits located in the individual and put on offer to the campus as a whole.

I engage with and extend Urciuoli's insights by noting that organisations which foster neoliberal subjectivities in higher education can include types of people whose participation is not immediately relevant to the benefits brought by the creation of neoliberal subjectivities. A signal contribution of Urciuoli's work is her identification of a pattern consistent across her examples of neoliberal discursive activity wherein an institution or organisation defines a new role for someone with an already defined role – students become Posse members and faculty become mentors – in order to extract more value by shifting frames of the person's subjectivity. Whereas Urciuoli provides evidence that students note the lack of connection between their identity configured in terms of social justice (their subject position outside of neoliberal discourse) and their identity configured in terms of skills (their subject position within), I provide evidence that faculty find that their position as defined and elaborated by the foundation is simply untenable. Yet, whereas Urciuoli's race- and class-marked student subjects struggle with the lack of resonance between their representations by neoliberal discourse and their experience, faculty members are able to ignore the lack of fit between what they are instructed to do and able to do. This article compares the value students and faculty provide to the foundation and the college in neoliberal discourse in order to explore the reasons for which the untenable subjectivity offered to faculty in their role as mentor does not become more of a problem.

Urciuolean approaches to neoliberalism in higher education

In a substantial number of publications, Urciuoli has identified some of the ways in which discourses of higher education at elite, liberal arts institutions have come to exhibit neoliberal relationships between institutional identity and student subjectivity. Liberal arts describes coursework and subject matter in US higher education that is distinct from that offered in professional programmes such as engineering, law and medical school. Relationships between institutional identity and student subjectivity resemble those between corporate identity and worker subjectivity because the corporate sector has come to be infused with 'an ethic of entrepreneurial self-management' (Urciuoli 2010b: 162; see also Gershon 2011 and Greenhouse 2011). That is to say, workers must consider

themselves responsible for anticipating the ways in which they might become valuable and preparing themselves accordingly. One cannot, of course, know exactly what employment market conditions one will find. Rather, one can best prepare by making oneself flexible enough to be able to adapt to what one might find.

The notion of skill has come to mediate labourers and their work in neoliberal discourses. Urciuoli notes,

The term *skill* itself denotes a technique that if properly inculcated should guarantee a positive outcome, generally characterised as increased productivity. The nouns that precede *skills* fall into the following categories: particular practices such as typing that show up in job descriptions or, conversely, generic practices that enhance employability (job, career, business); informing or being informed, and/or persuading (communication, listening, presentation); working with others to get a job done (management, leadership, team); and interacting generally (personal, social). (2010b: 165–166)

While what actually constitutes a skill can include a vast array of activities not necessarily related to each other, the attainment of a skill offers the worker something by which something else might be accomplished. That something else need not be specified. Rather, what is crucial is that the skill enables the worker to prepare for the future. Urciuoli (2008; see also Urciuoli and LaDousa 2013) argues that the proliferation of ‘skill’ in employment discourses indicates that this term has become a primary means for workers to prepare for the indeterminacy that confronts them.

Liberal arts institutions, Urciuoli has shown, have embraced a neoliberal emphasis on an individual’s skills, especially the skill to communicate successfully, however that is determined. Urciuoli shows that schools’ use of skills to represent students enables two semiotic processes. First, by emphasising communicative skills in representations of students, schools can position themselves as resonating with corporate discourses about employees. Second, given the indeterminacy of what might count as the manifestation of a skill, schools can invoke a rather diffuse set of representations of students and activities (Urciuoli 2003a, 2008, 2010b, 2014, 2016a). Urciuoli explains that it is at a certain type of school, the elite liberal arts institution, that skills discourse is especially useful. Such schools cannot invoke corporate preparation as that which is on offer because that would undercut the claims that they offer a liberal arts degree. After all, the provision of a liberal arts curriculum gives them their position in the market of higher education. At such schools, campus leadership has come to embody the communicative efficacy implied by possessing and enhancing skills. Skills have come to mediate representations of higher education at elite liberal arts institutions, denuded of any overt tie to corporate training, and substantiated, instead, with attractive images and textual renditions of students engaged in a purposefully underdefined collegiate life taking up positions in student government, clubs, and other on- and off-campus organisations.

Urciuoli has shown that these possibilities of representing personal and institutional success are problematic for students of colour and/or students from working class families. While Posse draws far fewer than half of minority or working class students to campus, they are especially well represented among students in the programme. Yet, Posse’s representations of students and success resonate with those of the school in that it decries racial and class markedness as a rationale for its operations. As *Posse: The Mentor Manual* explains, ‘These [Posse] scholarships are neither minority nor need-based grants’ (The Posse Foundation 2016: 14). Urciuoli explains:

By setting itself up as trainer of leaders and change-makers, Posse can take credit for students' work as 'campus leaders'. But it is the students doing the work, and they are doing it by not only institutional enactments but by themselves becoming symbolic capital for an agency outside the school using them to boost its brand. (Urciuoli 2016a: 218)

Urciuoli draws on interviews with students of colour who are so often from working class backgrounds to show how poorly discourses of leadership and skills reflect their college experiences (2003b, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2016a, 2016b). One of the reasons for the lack of connection, of course, is that they have indeed been raised in situations unlike those in which most of the students were raised – largely white and upper-middle class – and yet discourses of leadership and skills purposefully evacuate racial and class distinctions.

The reflections below, derived from my own experiences with Posse and from discourse published by the organisation, show that mentors play a very different part in the creation of value for the organisation than do students. While discourses of leadership tend to position students favourably, they seem to require the disciplining of faculty members. The next section provides accounts of the ways the Posse training sessions and retreat had mentor and scholars initially interact in highly structured ways, yet ignored the mentor's inability to act on instructions learned in training. The next section reviews the organisation's presentation of the mentor's role and responsibilities, and reflects on moments when the organisation's scripting of the interaction between mentor and scholar becomes a liability. The following section reviews some of the ways in which Posse materials are overt about the fact that mentors should not interact with Posse scholars as professors interact with students. The final section reflects on possible reasons for which the organisation can afford to involve professors in situations in which the lack of fit between instruction and practice is so overt and in which professors are told to refrain from doing what they were hired by the college to do.

Training and the retreat: structured interaction

The organisation hosts two events during the summer for faculty mentors. The events are meant to prepare mentors for their next two years of work with the students and the organisation and meant to provide a structured environment wherein they can meet and bond with their students. First, faculty mentors from all of the campuses with which the organisation works travel to participate in a two-day session at an office on Wall Street in New York City. Each morning, the mentors gather to listen to presentations and participate in group discussions for approximately eight hours. The sessions include the presentation of 'the handbook', a chance to divulge mentors' fears, and an engagement in modelled conversations between mentors and students. Second, faculty mentors from campuses associated with a particular city attend a retreat with their groups of students later in the summer. The retreat begins in the organisation's office, and then mentors, students and organisational personnel travel to a location outside of the city to engage in highly orchestrated team building activities and discussions. Some activities involve the various campuses and groups, but most of the activities are for the mentor and students from a particular school. In them, personnel either guide activities in which everyone engages or mediate discussions between students and, sometimes, between students and mentor.

A tension emerged almost immediately during the sessions on Wall Street and continued during the training retreat. On the one hand, training personnel and organisational materials and guidelines stressed that schedules, meeting themes and rules for interaction must be determined prior to engagement, and must be strictly followed. On the other hand, engagement in the activities and discussions required more time than was allotted to them. For example, training personnel demonstrated repeatedly that the tightly timed schedule of the meetings on Wall Street was inadequate to completing many of the tasks set forth in the schedule. In my own mentor cohort, a mentor from another campus asked me what I thought about the emotional impact the students were likely to have on us, and whether I felt that I could display emotion to the students. I replied that I had no idea how to answer her question, but that I thought it was an excellent one for wider discussion. She raised her hand and posed the question to the larger audience. The organisation trainer explained that 'every group is different' and that one would need to make such questions part of the group's 'process'. The mentor followed with a question that indicated that she was unsatisfied with the vagueness of the answer she had received. She began by noting the display of emotion for which the organisation seems to allow ample occasion for, and asked what the students and mentors get in return. She guessed that the tuition waiver offered to Posse Scholars and the stipend offered to mentors might be possible answers. The organisation trainer replied that there was no time left to discuss the matter, but that the mentor should follow up with other mentors in discussing the question.

In the retreat in the students' home city, the schedule was highly orchestrated, but it allowed for more time for assigned activities than it had on Wall Street. Another dimension of the tension between plan and execution emerged on the retreat. For example, it had been stressed in the training sessions on Wall Street that a 'one mic' (one microphone) policy should be strictly enforced during meetings on campus. The idea behind the policy is that what a person has to say should be respected, and part of showing that respect is to refrain from talking while that person is speaking. In order to reinforce the policy, a bright plastic 'koosh ball' was tossed from a person who had been speaking to another person to signal to the larger group that the right to speak was being transferred. The koosh ball was used in training on Wall Street and it also appeared in many of the sessions during the retreat. On Wall Street, the training personnel gave each mentor a handbook and a koosh ball. Both items were ever-present at the training on Wall Street, and the koosh ball was used extensively during discussions at the retreat near the students' home city. Finally, the handbook foregrounded the one mic policy in several places, and a number of sessions on the retreat invoked the policy as essential to participation in forthcoming meetings on campus. In keeping with the theme of having specific and explicitly articulated rules guide our activities, one of the sessions during the retreat involved a member of the organisational personnel guiding a discussion of what was expected of students in the group. 'One mic' was listed near the beginning of the list of expectations.

In preparation for engaging with the members of my posse on campus, I travelled to an island near one of the urban areas associated with the posse, an island frequently utilised for team building exercises by corporations and other organisations. Many of the activities during the retreat involved a group activity requiring cooperation among the group. A conundrum emerged quickly. Mentors were to accompany the posse members as they

engaged in their team building exercises, but just how to mentor should engage with the group was left wholly unclear.

For example, we were led to a location by a member of the training personnel and handed off to another set of training personnel who were in charge of the specific activity. In one exercise, two trainers had the group line up in rows facing each other. I asked if I should line up too and one of the trainers indicated that I should let the students face the challenge. The challenge involved standing shoulder to shoulder, making a 'v' with the fingers. A tent pole was laid across the collective cradle. Students were told that they had to lower the tent pole collectively, but, in doing so, no one should come out of contact with the tent pole. After several unsuccessful attempts, a handful of students began to offer ways to approach the task, such that four to five people were talking at once. My first act of participation with members of the posse was to invoke the 'one mic' rule that I had heard invoked repeatedly as a guide for group activities and discussions. One of the trainers told me that I should not interfere, and that I should let the students work out the problem for themselves. I explained that I was confused about my role because, at some point, at least, I would need to enforce the rules that had been stressed throughout the training. I apologised by way of explaining that I was used to the classroom wherein the ability to enforce rules like one mic is unambiguous. The trainer pointed to the students talking about the best way to approach the tent pole exercise and noted, 'this is not a classroom'. I replied with indignation, 'but I am a college professor', and proceeded to watch silently as the students did, indeed, finally manage to lower the tent pole to the ground.

In an activity the next day, the facilitator assigned to our group for the next two years led us in developing two lists. The first list was entitled 'expectations of the group'. A student would mention something important for them to do and the facilitator would write it down on a large piece of paper big enough for everyone to see. The students included a number of the points stressed during the training that had taken place on Wall Street and during the last couple of days of the retreat. 'One mic' was mentioned near the beginning, and other items included showing up to meetings consistently, being on time and attacking the idea, not the individual. The second list was 'expectations of the mentor'. Many of the same items found their way onto the second list. The second list also included the college's policy that students should not ride in faculty members' cars and that college vehicles should always be reserved for group trips. Drawing up the lists took all of our time during the session, and, at no point did we discuss the ways in which we had lived up to or failed to live up to the bar set by our lists.

These vignettes from the orientation session and retreat reveal a dynamic that would be true of the relationships between organisational guidance and experience once we reached campus. Highly structured are the timings of meetings, rules of engagement in those meetings, and topics to be covered in meetings. Also highly structured is the interaction between facilitator in the students' home city and the students, on the one hand, and the mentor, on the other hand. What is left unclear is how such highly structured interactions are to result in – much less guide – the 'success' of the students, measured in the students' acquisition of their undergraduate degree. But, the connection between our success as a group, the realisation of students' 'extraordinary academic and leadership potential' (The Posse Foundation 2014), and the orchestration of the ways we should

interact, remained mysterious in our interactions during the retreat and on campus during nearly two years of meetings.

The handbook and the mentor's role

The handbook was ever-present during the two days of initial training. Mentors were asked regularly if they had their handbook, and lost handbooks were the focus of collective attention until their owners were identified. During discussion sessions, when mentors posed scenarios in which they imagined they would have no particular plan for engagement with their students, they were told to 'remember the handbook'. At the same time, trainers reiterated often that mentors should diverge from the handbook, and that they should not follow the handbook too closely lest the students come to feel that group meetings are too scripted.

The handbook and its place in the organisation's preparation of mentor and students for their interactions on campus thus exhibited the same paradox as the lists of expectations drawn up during the retreat. Guidelines are to be created or consulted, but then, ultimately, are to be ignored. Yet the handbook is much more explicit and helpful than the lists in providing clues about what the organisation sees as required to constitute the group and guide interactions. The handbook resembles the lists in that it identifies two identities salient for the group, Posse Scholars and mentor. But, while each list of expectations created at the retreat served to embody the point of view of each of these identities, the handbook provides rather elaborate descriptions of the identities themselves. Thus, the handbook serves as a useful resource for exploring the ways in which the organisation imagines the roles involved in the group what the relationships between those roles is to be. One of the first sections of the handbook describes 'the posse mentor's role':

The Posse mentor plays a critical role in the success of the Posse Program. Posse scholars look to the mentor to help connect them to valuable campus resources, to push them to excel, and to boost their spirits when they are feeling low. It is critical that the mentor, the Posse staff, and the university liaison have a strong collaborative relationship in order to best support Posse Scholars. (The Posse Foundation 2016: 15)

The highly structured descriptions of expectations articulated in the mentor and student lists are absent in the description of the mentor's role. The handbook initially describes the mentor's role as exceedingly agentive ('help connect', 'push' and 'boost'), but without much in the way of particular definition ('campus resources', 'excel' and 'spirits'). While the vague reference to 'campus resources' makes sense given that the organisation works with dozens of campuses where resources are, no doubt, quite varied, just how the mentor is to provide the emotional work entailed in boosting spirits is never quite specified.

However, the handbook immediately returns to its highly structured set of guidelines when it offers the 'job description' for the mentor:

The Posse mentor is responsible for helping the Posse have a successful college career. The mentor does this by meeting with the Posse members individually and as a group during the first two years on campus. It is a two-year position with three mandatory training seminars prior to the Scholars' first semester of freshman year. The position requires approximately

15 hours of work per week. However, the mentor must be accessible to students as needed. The main role of the mentor is to motivate Posse scholars to persist and graduate. (The Posse Foundation 2016: 15)

The handbook proceeds to elaborate the various obligations the mentor has to the organisation and to the students. The obligation is measured in number of hours and years. Mentors will meet with each of the ten students for at least one hour every other week; mentors will meet with the group of ten students for at least two hours every week; mentors will engage with the campus liaison in the students' home city via a weekly phone call for at least one hour; mentors will participate in the Posse Plus Retreat in a city close to campus once a year; and mentors will engage in all of these activities for two years.

The handbook proceeds to offer hundreds of pages of meeting ideas sequentially arranged to correspond to points in the academic year when specific meetings might be appropriate. Meeting ideas run the gamut from the creation of and reflection on academic and professional goals to the discussion of physical and emotional wellness, homesickness, campus social divisions, personal identity, conflict resolution, time management, summer internships and self-esteem. One gets the sense that the handbook is meant to reassure the mentor that potentially any aspect of group activities and dynamics is anticipated, and that two entire years of group meetings and topics are laid out. The handbook is explicit that:

There is no sequence of campus workshops that will suit every Posse. However, there are eight workshops that are foundational to the Posse Program and critical to the success of Scholars. They are: 1. The First Posse Meeting; 2. Norms and Expectations; 3. Campus Resources; 4. How I Made It; 5. The Career Center; 6. Wellness; 7. Interviewing; 8. Graduate School and Fellowships. (The Posse Foundation 2016: 37)

Just after enumerating the workshops that are essential, the handbook requests in bold type, 'Please be sure to include these titles in your selection of workshops' (The Posse Foundation 2016: 37). The handbook then states, 'Although there is flexibility within the curriculum, this manual provides a suggested sequence from which to base your modifications' (37). One is left with the sense that some meetings are essential and need to happen in the correct order, but that the mentor is ultimately free to decide on particular meeting themes as the semesters progress.

I conducted early meetings by urging the students to talk about what they were doing in their classes and what they were discovering about campus. In our one-on-one meetings, a few students asked whether we might have 'more structure' to the meetings. One of them asked whether I might include an exercise more in keeping with the preparatory work they had done in their home town during the year before coming to college. I modified questions from the handbook's module on time management and asked the students to engage in the exercise during one of our weekly group meetings. After a few minutes, one of the students exclaimed, 'What the fuck is this?' I explained that some of the students had asked for activities more like the ones in which the students had been engaged before coming to campus. I would find out much later that the student who asked for the exercise was trying to avoid more conversational interaction and that the student who had asked the rather pointed question was upset by the 'scripted' feeling of the exercise.

After this and similar incidents seemingly fuelled by my use of the handbook in group meetings, I turned to colleagues on and off campus I knew had been mentors. The first

colleague I spoke with stopped me mid-sentence and said that he ‘never even opened’ the handbook after the summer orientation sessions. He went on to explain that the students ‘really hated’ the handbook and had asked him not to use it in preparation for their meetings. He advised that I ‘get rid of it’ to make the students happier. I spoke with another former mentor who described the handbook disparagingly as ‘that thing’. She expressed surprise that I had read it. When I explained that I had modified the questions of one of the modules, her response was simply, ‘Oh brother’. She rolled her eyes as she responded. When I asked about her reaction, she explained that the handbook was ‘just too scripted’ for her. ‘Just be yourself’ was her final advice. I did talk to several other former mentors who were not quite so dismissive of the handbook and its potential to help in the orchestration of the group meetings. But no one with whom I spoke was enthusiastic about it. Indeed, some former mentors told me that the only way one should use the handbook is if the students do not realise that you are doing so.

In sum, the handbook holds an especially important place in the organisation’s presentation of itself to the mentor. Organisational personnel stress the importance of the handbook just as the handbook provides a plan for the two years of meetings. Yet, when mentors turn to the students to begin to engage, the handbook becomes a liability, or, at best, something to be masked. What makes sense of this shift is an aligned set of tensions between structure and experience, time constraint and emotional engagement, and obligation and authenticity. These tensions emerged in moments during the training session for mentors, the retreat for mentors and Posse scholars, the handbook’s language, and the students’ and mentors’ reflections on the handbook.

Role shift

The handbook incorporates tokens of the language of collegiate life to describe some of Posse’s positions, activities and goals, but also creates a set of referring expressions of its own. For example, on the one hand, the handbook calls the set of workshops outlined within a ‘curriculum’, but, on the other hand, it refers to the faculty, administrative, or staff member assigned to the group a ‘mentor’ and the members of the group ‘Posse Scholars’. The use of widely known terms from higher education would seem to offer the organisation resonance with matters academic or collegiate, while the coinage of terms of its own would seem to set the organisation apart and offer a way of pointing to or indexing the organisation (to those, at least, familiar with the terms). What the handbook fails to make explicit is that the organisation also draws on pre-existing roles in higher education. Outside of the organisation, for example, mentors are professors and Posse scholars are students. But there is a difference. Posse scholars come to the college as students whereas mentors have already been professors (or, less frequently, staff members or administrators) for some time. Indeed, every mentor I have met is a person who has worked in higher education for several years, and every professor I have met in the programme has received tenure.

The handbook is quite explicit, however, in outlining how the organisation views the relationship between the roles of mentor and professor, on the one hand, and the roles of Posse scholar and student, on the other hand. A rather frequent theme regarding the relationship between the roles of mentor and professor is that inhabiting the role of mentor means refraining from acting like a professor. In the description of ‘basic

workshop design’, the handbook introduces ‘facilitation rules’: ‘There are seven fundamental rules for facilitating Posse workshops. It is important to remember that these facilitation rules apply to all of your interactions with Posse Scholars, even when a workshop is not in session’ (The Posse Foundation 2016: 40). The handbook does not provide rules for the possibility that roles will become complicated – that mentor might become professor and Posse scholar might become student – and this was a source of concern and discussion at the training sessions. The handbook delivers the seven rules of facilitation in the form of imperative commands: ‘1. Treat the Posse as Experts; 2. Facilitate, Don’t Teach; 3. Stay Neutral; 4. Be an Ally; 5. Listen Actively; 6. Keep the Momentum; and 7. Maintain Safe Space’ (The Posse Foundation 2016: 40–43).

As one reads through the explanations accompanying the commands, one senses that the commands constitute a warning not to be too much like a professor and not to treat Posse scholars as students. For example, under the first command, ‘Treat the Posse as Experts’, the handbook explains:

Workshops are designed to draw from Scholars’ experiences. Value these experiences as an integral part of the dialogue. Ask questions and be genuinely interested in their responses.

Do not be afraid, however, to challenge Scholars’ responses. Be sure not to introduce your perspective as the final authority on the issue, instead, always encourage Scholars to consider and weigh the arguments for themselves.

Make sure Scholars feel like they play a critical role in the success of the meeting. Empower them to ask questions of one another during the workshop. Ask the Scholars why they feel the topic of the day is important to discuss.

What is gained by treating the Posse as experts?

The workshops are more dynamic and interactive.

Posse Scholars bond and learn from hearing each other’s perspectives.

A sense of mutual respect is developed between you and the Posse Scholars. (The Posse Foundation 2016: 40–43)

In sum, the instructions to mentors command mentors to treat posse members as authorities on their own lives and experiences. Mentors must refrain from representing themselves as authorities on issues discussed. Mentors must value Posse Scholars’ contributions to the meetings, and, in return, members of the posse will come to respect the mentor.

The relationship between mentor and Posse scholar gets particularly complex when the handbook commands the mentor, ‘Make sure Scholars feel like they play a critical role in the success of the meeting. Empower them to ask questions of one another during the workshop’ (The Posse Foundation 2016: 40). The mentor is to give the scholars the ability to be agents by appreciating their experiences, by refraining from being an authority, and by giving them the ‘power’ to ask questions of one another. The verb ‘empower’ is especially interesting. The organisation indeed commands the mentor to empower the students. The mentor is thus responsible for the agentive disposition of the scholars. And, ostensibly, this disposition on the part of the mentor requires a shift from dispositions assumed in other roles. This is made explicit in the next ‘facilitation rule’.

Indeed, the next ‘facilitation rule’ commands the mentor to ‘facilitate’. The second facilitation rule is the only that uses the name of the whole set of rules. The second facilitation rule is also different from all the rest because it makes explicit that some other role and attendant habit must be avoided. The second rule is ‘Facilitate, Don’t Teach’:

In most other educational environments, the teacher is typically framed as the expert. Teachers know the material, impart knowledge and generally dictate the outcome. Though there are moments when teaching is appropriate, your primary role in Posse meetings is to facilitate. When you facilitate you:

Guide the group through an experience without attempting to dictate the outcome of discussion.

Use what is said in the meeting to shape the discussion.

What is gained by facilitating, not teaching?

The focus of the meeting is on the scholars, not on you.

Posse Scholars learn from each other.

It is at this point in the handbook that one learns that the elevation of students to experts (and thus, to Posse scholars) requires that the mentor abandon the role of professor. Posse carves out a place for itself in the world of higher education by noting that most everything in that world is dictated by professors by virtue of their possession of knowledge and the student’s desire to attain it. Indeed, it would seem that Posse gains value, in part, by transforming a relationship that already exists, that between student and professor. Posse is so valuable because hierarchies get to be subverted and students get to emerge as something seemingly impossible in ‘most other educational environments’. But the fact that mentors seem to derive little benefit by what is provided to them by the organisation seems unimportant to the value created by the organisation. The organisation signals little concern about the fact that the mentor comes to inhabit a role filled with inconsistency and even contradiction.

Conclusion

In writing this article, I have failed to live up to one of Posse’s assertions conveyed in the handbook to faculty: ‘The focus ... is on the scholars, not on you’ (The Posse Foundation 2016: 40). I have done so purposefully so that I could focus on the mentor’s involvement with Posse to complement Bonnie Urciuoli’s reflections on the place and experiences of students in the organisation. I think she would find familiar the insight that to do many of the things I have been hired to do by the college – teach, engage in ethnographic research, seek publication on that research, engage in committee work and so on – I have to abandon the role I’ve been instructed to inhabit as a Posse mentor. Urciuoli has shown that this play with roles – the use of pre-existing ones in new guises – is typical in neoliberal discourses. Just as Urciuoli has shown that Posse Scholars so often do not find connections between experiences and representations of leadership, I have shown that mentors do not find connections between instructions and practice. This is true of scripted moments of interaction as well as published descriptions of the interaction between scholar and mentor.

But there are certain differences between the lack of fit between experience and representation in the cases of scholars and mentors. Never, for example, does Posse explain that what a scholar does is incompatible with what a student does. Indeed, a refrain in training sessions with mentors, as well as in published materials of the organisation, is the message that Posse scholars are students first. Posse scholars can abandon Posse activities because they must do academic work like take a test or leave town on a class field trip. Explicit, however, is that a mentor must refrain from being a professor. One might ask why the incompatibility between the roles of mentor and professor is not more important to representations of the organisation (or the college or university), especially when the subject position of mentor is so fraught with the tension between rules for structured interaction and its lack of resonance with experience with the Posse. Urciuoli's investigations have provided part of the answer: Posse scholars are students, like all the rest on campus, but they are especially valuable because they are campus leaders with the added benefit to the college of being diverse. For Posse, the focus is, indeed, 'on the scholars' because they are what lends the organisation its representations and its value to the college. Mentors, in contrast, are already gainfully employed, and their employment is directed at activities lacking in value to Posse and its scholars: in an academic register, teaching, research and service. Their work for Posse is measured in time, and not in any other parameter that would make sense to their position as a professor. And while extremely detailed and concrete rules and obligations seem to be aimed at addressing the rather inchoate relationship between Posse scholar and mentor, such rules turn out to conflict with the command to treat scholars as experts.

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