

INQUIRY:

A Journal of Undergraduate Research

FACULTY PERSPECTIVE:

Influences on Growth

by Professor Karen E. Adolph

If you are very lucky, resourceful, and receptive, you will work with mentors who will change your life. Sometimes the teachers you least expect, in fields far removed from your ultimate career, will influence your future path. I have been extremely lucky, and I have always sought out older, wiser people who could provide me with guidance and inspiration and serve as models for exemplary ways to craft a life. My mentors changed nearly every aspect of my intellectual life—the way I work, the things I think about, my style of communicating ideas, and the criteria for evaluating my own progress. They also changed my personal life by showing me that a variety of personal choices and lifestyles could support the kind of intellectual life that I admired.

Ansei Uchima was my toughest professor in college. He was a small man in drab sweater vests who hardly talked and rarely smiled. Students called all of the other professors by their first names, but he was always “Mr. Uchima.” At my studio interview, he flipped through my sketchbook without pausing on a single drawing. He said, “No more self-indulgent portraits. You need to look at how things grow.” The next class, he handed me a small wildflower and told me to draw it. He also handed me a postcard with a self-portrait by Egon Schiele, and said, “If you draw portraits, you must draw very well.” For months, at every class, he’d hand me a flower or a plant to draw. While the other students cut etchings and carved woodcuts, I looked at how things grow. After a year, Mr. Uchima had a stroke and was bedridden. Students would go to his apartment in Washington Heights and arrange still lifes for him to look at. “No,” he’d hiss. “Can’t you see the composition? Put that bowl over there in the light.”

Kris Phillips was my most supportive college professor. She could see endpoints for me when I could not see them for myself: I could be a painter, a teacher, a psychologist, or a combination of all three. Kris envisaged me as a sort of Rudolf Arnheim, a former professor at my college who studied the psychology of art. But, I think she’d be pleased at how I’ve turned out. I still worry about visual perception and how things grow, but my path led me from art to developmental psychology. Kris was also my most demanding professor. “That’s a beautiful painting,” she would say, “but it could be better. You can do more. You can try harder.” All of her students—male and female—would do anything to please her. She was gorgeous and sexy, and always in the midst of a complicated love affair, but somehow she always made time for each of us for a special visit to the Frick, a trip to NY Central Art Supply, a dinner, or a quiet talk in the studio.

Charlotte Doyle was like the fairy godmother in Cinderella: tiny, frumpy, eccentric, and capable of engendering tremendous transformations. She believed that learning is an emotional experience, that when you write something for students to read or talk to students in the classroom, you must go to where they are and draw them forward by touching their hearts. One of my jobs during college was to take Charlotte’s notes, written with stubs of yellow pencils on the backs of envelopes and ditto sheets, and type the manuscript for an introductory psychology textbook. I loved visiting her office to get clarifications on her wrinkled bits of writing. She’d sip tea from a jelly jar while unlocking a new aspect of psychology. I also compiled the index. Those were the days before computers and every time I made a mistake, I’d have to begin typing the page again. As a special favor to Charlotte because her clutter bothered me so, I organized her bookshelves and file cabinets. Years later, I tried to give my husband the same favor as a Christmas gift. After a day, he asked me whether for Christmas I could just stop cleaning his office.

Sarah Wilford was the most elegant professor. She was over six feet tall in swishing long skirts and wore her white hair in a Mrs. Robinson-do past her shoulders. She taught us how to read to a class of preschoolers, using verve and emotion to keep them wide-eyed and attentive, holding the book facing out so the kids could see the pictures. She also taught us how to help preschoolers to sit quietly while another teacher read to them: Take an antsy, tired, or distracted child on your lap, but sit very straight so that your body provides only a focus and a frame for the child to control posture independently. “You’re not a cushion,” she’d tell us, “It’s not about you nestling in with a child, it’s about helping children to become independent of you.” Sarah spoiled my perfect GPA with an A- because, as she told me in her richly modulated, elegant voice, if I really wanted a career in early education or teaching, I would need to learn how to criticize and argue with my peers and supervisors without expressing disdain. That blot on my record, she told me, would remind me that my success didn’t depend on other people being stupid.

Ulric Neisser was my official advisor in graduate school, utterly charming, fast talking, and terrifying. Your typical east-coast intellectual with bottle-thick glasses and wild hair. Dick is the most beautiful writer in psychology I’ve ever read. Toward the end of my first year, I asked him to pay for the mailing of a parent feedback letter that described the results of my first experiment. “Gladly,” he said, “If you pay me a nickel for every word in your feedback letter with more than two syllables.”

I revised the letter and about broke even. Dick is one of the smartest people you will ever talk to. He was famous among the graduate students for being a demanding conversationalist. We never knew which ideas would hold his interest that day or for how long. The trick was to plunge in with all the creativity and wit we could muster, nervously watching Dick's face for that dreadful glazed expression that meant in a few seconds he was going to stand up from his desk to signal that the conversation had ended. Dick was one of the most generous academics I've ever met. He let all of his students chart our own course and supported our efforts with time and money. He happily supported my research on infant crawling and walking even though his specialty was memory and he had made his name studying adult cognition.

Esther Thelen adopted me into her lab for the last three years of my graduate studies. She showed me how to observe how infants grow. It was a bit like drawing flowers. The trick was to note the details while looking past them to see the underlying patterns. The lab was immersed in a massive microgenetic study, collecting kinematic and electromyographic data each week from four infants as they learned to reach and locomote. Esther would lay the tracings in a path that curled around the laboratory floor, with movements in real time nested within movements across the session nested within movements across the weeks. She'd walk slowly alongside the trail of papers, looking intently at the tracings, while the train of graduate students followed behind her like ducklings, waiting for her to discern the patterns. Then she might ask us to represent the data a different way, and we'd begin the slow walk again the next day, with the new visualization of the data. Esther saw infants' movements the same way that she viewed their learning and development: as improvisations on a theme, endlessly generative and creative, with individual idiosyncratic solutions providing the details that engender the global patterns of change. Esther was stylish and loved to shop. Neck scarves were her trademark, a different one for each outfit. When Esther died of the cancer that destroyed her jaw and neck, her husband gave her students and colleagues the scarves she wore to hide her disfigurement. I have one that I never wear because I don't want it to lose her smell.

Eleanor "Jackie" Gibson was my most important mentor because her ideas about perceptual-motor development were at once most natural and most challenging to me. Her nickname, Jackie, was based on her maiden name, Jack, but she preferred "Eleanor." At the memorial service following her death, all of her students and professional colleagues called her "Jackie" and all of her Quaker friends and neighbors called her "Eleanor." We

went around the room, taking turns saying our remembrances. Maybe 30 or 40 students were there, gathered around the living room. All of us had different stories about how Jackie had touched our lives. That's the thing about mentors: Each student takes away something different but equally important. Jackie loved behavior: infant behavior, animal behavior, motor behavior, social behavior; looking, reaching, crawling, walking, talking, crying, exploring—all of it. Whenever stymied by a finding or unsure about an interpretation, she'd say, "Let the data speak to you." She took immense pleasure in watching data collections, poring through videotapes, staring at spreadsheets, and playing with numbers. She always seemed pleasantly surprised to find that she was wrong about something. "Well, dear" she'd say, "We've got to listen to the data." If a paper were rejected, she'd say, "Do another experiment. The data will convince them." She took hard work for granted. Once when a student complained that he was working 60 hours per week at his postdoc and didn't have time to write up his dissertation study, Jackie said without missing a beat, "Well, dear, what do you do with the other 40 hours?" Jackie was in her late 70s when I became her student, but she was still intensely active intellectually. She looked like a plump, hairy, little grandmother, but she was formidable. Although she'd been publishing psychology experiments for 50 years, she viewed the study of infant behavior as stretching out in front of her, not behind. She published her last book when she was 92. "You must have work," she'd say, "and you must have love. You need a life that always has both."

One of the great joys and satisfactions in my own life is being a mentor. I especially love working with undergraduates because I know that I have the opportunity to contribute to students' lives without being responsible for their professional careers. My lab students will probably not become developmental psychologists or study motor behavior. Like my path from fine art and early education to developmental psychology, they may end up in careers seemingly far removed from their college experiences. But I watch them grow and beam with pride at their accomplishments at venues like this Research Conference and I feel confident that they can take with them skills and ways of working and thinking that will be useful in whatever careers they choose.

I'm so grateful that despite the fact that NYU is a large and sprawling research university, the administration and faculty believe in the magic of undergraduate research and make it possible for undergraduates and faculty to form mentoring relationships. I congratulate all of you—students and mentors—on your personal and professional accomplishments.

*Karen Adolph is Professor of Psychology and Neural Science. Her research interests focus on infant learning, perceptual-motor development, infant skill acquisition, exploratory activity, and problem solving. Her research is supported by grants from the National Institutes of Health. She has also received numerous other honors including: a James McKeen Cattell Award from the Association for Psychological Science, the Robert L. Fantz Memorial Award from the American Psychological Foundation, the Boyd McCandless Award from the American Psychological Association; and a Young Investigator Award from the International Society for Infant Studies. At NYU she is the recipient of the College's Golden Dozen Teaching Award and the Department of Psychology's Distinguished Teaching Award. Professor Adolph is the author of *Learning in the Development of Infant Locomotion*. She has also published extensively in numerous psychology journals and in the *Handbook of Child Psychology*, the four volume reference that spans the entire field of child development.*