

Abby Lynes and Beverly Ann Chin

Learning and Reflecting Together: A Conversation with Dr. Beverly Chin about the Power and Importance of Mentorship

Hailing from Great Falls, Montana, **Abby Lynes** is in her final semester of the University of Montana's Master of Arts in English Teaching program. She is passionate about the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the classroom, and as a future educator, she looks forward to creating collaborative learning spaces where all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Beverly Ann Chin, Ph. D., is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Montana. She has been a member of NCTE since 1975 and a member of MATELA since 1981.

Beverly Ann Chin may have retired from academia, but that doesn't mean she is done learning.

After spending almost 50 years in the field of English Language Arts, Beverly sat down with graduate student Abby Lynes and Assistant Professor of Literacy Education Stephanie Reid to share some wisdom with the two colleagues about the power and importance of mentorship in teaching and learning.

The interview served as a follow-up to Beverly's keynote speech, entitled "Mentoring: Sharing Our Journeys, Honoring Our Stories, Transforming Our Profession," which she delivered at the Montana Association of Teachers of English Language Arts (MATELA) conference in Great Falls on Oct. 21, 2021. In that keynote presentation, Beverly reflected on the collaborative, synergistic nature of mentorship, her experiences as a mentee and mentor, and her advice for current and prospective ELA teachers.

A dedicated member of the English teaching community, Beverly has directed the English teaching program and the Montana

Writing Project at the University of Montana for the past 40 years and retired in May 2022. During her career, Beverly has presented keynote speeches and workshops for educators in over 20 countries.

A Past President of NCTE, she has served on its Middle Level Section Steering Committee and on the Executive Committees of CEL and CEE (now ELATE). She is a former Board Member of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and a Senior Project Consultant for the 2011 and 2017 Writing Frameworks of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—also known as "The Nation's Report Card." Beverly is also the author and editor of textbooks and video programs on teaching writing and literature.

Additionally, Beverly has won several prestigious NCTE awards, including the NCTE Distinguished Service Award, the Rewey Belle Ingles Award for an Outstanding Woman in English Education, and the Richard W. Halle Award for an Outstanding Middle Level Educator. The University of Montana honored Beverly with its Distinguished Teacher Award. A Past President of MATELA, she also received its Distinguished Educator Award.

A. Lynes & B. A. Chin

Currently, Beverly serves as a Board Member of Writing Coaches of Montana, a non-profit organization of community volunteers dedicated to mentoring elementary through high school students on their writing assignments.

Beverly mentors and teaches with kindness, compassion, and care. She is ever-curious and ever-questioning. Her students know her as someone who leads through empowering students and engaging them in authentic inquiry. From the moment undergraduate and graduate students enter her classroom, they become teachers through Beverly's mentorship and experiential approach to teaching.

Beverly has worked hard to achieve everything she has accomplished, but she makes teaching look and feel natural as she seamlessly weaves theory and practice. She approaches the profession with collaboration and inclusion at the core of her ethos, and all those who have spent time with her are privileged to have experienced learning within the unique, dynamic, and vibrant environment that is her classroom.

With almost 50 years of experience, the number of lives Beverly has touched through teaching is inspiring and immeasurable. She is truly a testament to the impact one teacher can have over the course of a career.

In the following conversation, we delved deeper into some of the most pressing issues Beverly discussed in her MATELA 2021 Conference Keynote Speech.

ABBY: The first question that we wanted to ask you is: How do you define mentorship?

BEVERLY: Mentorship is the relationship between a more experienced person who is the mentor and a less experienced person who is the mentee. As mentors and mentees, we work together to support each other, to explore our professional lives, to be members of a learning community, and to become the best educators and human beings we can be. That synergy – that positive reciprocal relationship – is one that inspires me all of the time – both as a mentee and as a mentor.

ABBY: I love how you describe that. Why is mentorship so important to you?

BEVERLY: Mentorship is important to me because I've had wonderful mentors in my life who have guided and inspired me throughout my career. Ever since I decided to become an English language arts teacher, I've been fortunate to find mentors who supported and nurtured me. In turn, I am pleased to contribute my time, energy and experience to mentor others and to strengthen and expand our professional community. For me, mentorship is both an honor and a gift of service.

STEPHANIE: From your perspective, why is mentorship so integral when we think specifically about teaching and English education?

BEVERLY: Mentorships are valuable aspects of most professions and vocations. Whether you're a carpenter or an electrician, a landscape architect or a chef, a physician or a real estate agent, mentorships benefit employers and employees.

A. Lynes & B. A. Chin

Mentorships are particularly important in the English language arts teaching profession because they bring together early career and experienced colleagues who benefit from working together and learning from each other. As mentors, we share our knowledge and experience in order to introduce mentees into our profession. Mentors help mentees learn the procedures of a particular school as well as introduce mentees to the larger issues of English education, including pedagogy, curriculum, standards, and assessment.

For example, mentors can explain the processes of curriculum and/or textbook adoptions. They can discuss the policies of addressing challenges to books. Mentors and mentees can attend school board meetings; afterwards, mentors and mentees can debrief the critical issues and consider the implications of board decisions. By partnering as mentors and mentees, we analyze what is going well and what can be improved for our classrooms and our communities.

ABBY: Absolutely. Would you advocate for schools to have a formal mentorship program?

BEVERLY: Many schools have formal mentorship programs that work well because they have clear goals and thoughtful matching of individuals. However, sometimes there are programs in which somebody gets assigned a mentor, but the designated mentor may not have the most appropriate experience or the right personality for that particular individual. I encourage schools to have formal mentorship programs and hope the mentees and mentors form genuine relationships in

which they are committed to each other's well-being and professional success.

Figure 1.

Beverly takes the stage to deliver her MATELA Keynote Speech at the state MFPE Conference.



ABBY: Thank you for that insight. What are the key ideas you shared about mentorship in your MATELA keynote speech?

BEVERLY: My talk was titled “Mentoring: Sharing Our Journeys, Honoring Our Stories, Transforming Our Profession.”

Mentorships are mutually beneficial relationships between mentor and mentee so that each person's journey is rewarding and invigorating. Throughout our careers, mentors and mentees need trusted people with whom we can share our disappointments and delights.

A. Lynes & B. A. Chin

By being engaged members of our professional learning communities, we draw upon each other's strengths and talents. We nurture and support each other as we discover our unique and universal challenges as educators. In sharing our journeys, we have partners who have similar professional interests and compatible personalities. Together, we celebrate our individual and collective successes and accomplishments.

In sharing our journeys with others, we are also honoring our stories as reflective practitioners. As mentors and mentees, we reflect on our values, pedagogies, and decision-making processes. We may discover why we do what we do and re-envision ways in which things can be improved. We share our questions, observations, and challenges. Together, mentors and mentees can set goals, work on projects, take risks, and applaud accomplishments. We often co-present workshops, co-chair committees, and co-author articles. By giving voice to our stories as trusted, respected colleagues, both mentors and mentees are empowered as authentic lifelong learners.

Also, mentorships provide valuable opportunities for transforming our profession by welcoming all individuals into our learning/teaching communities. From my first years as a classroom teacher, I have deeply appreciated the supportive, collaborative networks of NCTE and NWP and their local, state, and regional affiliates. In these and other similar literacy organizations, such as the International Literacy Association and Writing Coaches of Montana, we value each person's unique talents and willingness to contribute to our mission of supporting

literacy learning for all students and professional development for all educators.

As veteran members recruit and mentor new members, we work together on projects and take leadership roles in our associations. Just as individuals are energized through their commitment to these organizations, our profession is shaped and transformed through everyone's perspective and participation.

At the individual and collective levels, mentorships are essential for the vitality of our profession. Together we advance and enhance literacy education in our classrooms, communities, and society.

STEPHANIE: It feels like your definition of mentorship is heavily influenced by the work of English teachers and English education, as well as the importance of sharing stories. I was just wondering if you could speak to that influence.

BEVERLY: In telling our stories – as mentors and mentees – we are the narrators of our careers. We re-create and reflect on the people, places, and contexts that have affected our values, feelings, thoughts, and actions. By sharing our stories, we are writing our memoirs as we recapture and reexamine significant events, people, and decisions that have helped to shape who we are now – and who we wish to become. Mentorships become truly metacognitive when we see our stories as windows and mirrors into our past, present, and future.

At NCTE, NWP, and MATELA conferences, educators gather to learn current research and best practices; to discover new authors, illustrators, and texts; and to join efforts to

A. Lynes & B. A. Chin

advocate for strong, solid policies that serve our students and society. These professional development events are vital to supporting and sustaining English language arts educators throughout their careers.

When I am at these events, I am delighted to talk with my former and current mentees who share their experiences as they continue their career journeys. It is especially rewarding to hear how the strategies they learned in my methods courses are working with their students.

I am also pleased to meet individuals who ask me to be their mentor as they pursue advanced degrees or as they apply for new positions in the K-12 environment or at universities. As new mentees, they share their concerns and stories – and I listen carefully and gently ask questions to help them reflect on their interests, goals, and talents. It is gratifying to know that my guidance may help someone consider a new perspective or affirm their own career choices.

STEPHANIE: That's a beautiful way of seeing the significance of stories in mentorships. Thank you.

BEVERLY: Absolutely! When I was an undergraduate student at Florida State University, my English education mentors, especially John Simmons, encouraged me to join NCTE and its state affiliate, Florida Council of Teachers of English (FCTE). During my first years as a secondary English teacher at Melbourne High School in Florida, I learned from experienced teachers, especially the English Department Chair, and became active in FCTE. While I taught English education at Arizona State University, my colleagues,

notably Robert Shafer, introduced me to NCTE leaders, who immediately invited me to join their committees and learn more about the organization at the national and state levels.

In 1981, when I arrived at the University of Montana, I was eager to find mentors who would help me learn about MATELA and its strong, positive relationship with the Office of Public Instruction. Carolyn Lott, then an English teacher at Loyola High School in Missoula, warmly welcomed me to MATELA. As we drove across the state to board meetings and conferences, Carolyn shared her experiences in the affiliate, and I expressed my enthusiasm to contribute to MATELA's mission. Together, we worked to increase MATELA's influence in state education programs and policies. From Carolyn, I learned that mentors' stories embody valuable lessons of commitment, community, and collaboration.

A few years later, Claudette Morton, the OPI English Language Arts Specialist, appointed me the Chair of the ELA Committee of Project Excellence, a state project involving all curriculum areas K-12. She and I created agendas, organized subcommittees, and made timelines and flowcharts. Claudette's mentorship offered me first-hand opportunities to learn about developing state ELA standards, writing K-12 curriculum guides, building consensus with diverse constituencies, and speaking to policy makers and the public.

Throughout that multi-year project, I reflected on my leadership style and developed networks that included stakeholders and honored diverse voices. I also learned that

A. Lynes & B. A. Chin

many classroom strategies for establishing inclusive and respectful learning environments can apply to the protocols for productive conversations in “the boardroom.”

As the Director of the English Teaching Program and the Montana Writing Project, I am deeply dedicated to mentoring new and experienced teachers. It is a privilege to listen to the stories of my mentees – and to share my stories with them. Because our relationship is grounded in trust, respect, and kindness, our conversations enable us to explore issues that relate to job satisfaction, work environment, and career goals.

Drawing upon reputable resources such as NCTE resolutions and position statements, we discuss creative, productive ways to address controversies in education. I enjoy advising undergraduates and graduates as they seek employment, rehearse job interviews, or apply for advanced degrees. And it is always a joy to partner with my mentees in presenting workshops and publishing articles.

Over the years, I have had the pleasure of mentoring secondary teachers and university professors from other countries. Our mentoring relationship begins when these international educators come to UM to audit my methods courses or when they network with me at global conferences.

Many international educators face challenges similar to the ones we face in the United States: How do we motivate and engage our students as readers, writers, and thinkers? How can we inform parents, administrators, and policy makers of the current research and best practices in literacy education?

Together, we explore strategies that help their students learn English as a new language or to improve literacy in their native languages. In our conversations, we learn about other countries’ standards, curricula, and assessment policies regarding literacy. As their mentor, I suggest ways to establish or expand professional development opportunities and to work with their educational agencies on literacy initiatives.

ABBY: What wisdom do you have to share about mentoring with (a) prospective teachers and (b) current teachers?

BEVERLY: For prospective teachers and early career teachers, I strongly recommend they seek mentors whose teaching philosophy and pedagogy they admire. Prospective teachers should consider mentors who are generous with their time and expertise. The mentor should be someone with whom you want to spend quality time. Look across time and place to consider with whom you – as a beginning professional – wish to connect.

For example, potential mentors might be your university faculty, your student teaching supervisors, and your former K-12 teachers. As you begin your relationship, consider the topics and issues you feel comfortable sharing at that time. As your relationship evolves, both you and your mentor will smoothly move into more in-depth discussions that reveal more details of your teaching journeys and stories.

When you meet with your mentors, be prepared with your questions, and focus your conversation on one or two items. Mentees should not be afraid to ask questions. Your mentor’s role is to guide and support you –

A. Lynes & B. A. Chin

not to judge you or make decisions for you. Prospective and early career teachers should not feel “guilty” if later in their careers they discover better, more effective and/or creative ways to teach. As long as you are doing your best every day as a teacher, you will continue to experiment, reflect, learn, and grow.

For experienced teachers, I encourage them to see themselves as mentors and to seek people who wish to be mentored. By offering to serve as a mentor, we show prospective and early career teachers that we care about their professional journeys and personal well-being. We should remember how we may have felt as a beginning professional or as an experienced teacher who is new to that school.

Inviting mentees to participate in school and community events is a natural way of helping them learn about the local culture. When we attend state and national conferences, we should look for opportunities to introduce mentees to the leadership of these groups and encourage them to volunteer to serve on committees. As we share our enthusiasm for teaching and learning, we should describe how we keep ourselves energized and optimistic about our careers.

Also, I encourage experienced teachers to consider National Board Certification, a voluntary advanced certification for accomplished educators. One of the core propositions of NBPTS is that “Teachers are members of learning communities.”

Mentoring other teachers and collaborating with colleagues is central to NBPTS as well as NCTE and NWP. Through metacognition and

mindfulness, we honor and celebrate our professional lives.

Whether mentorships span one year or multiple years, it is the quality of the relationship that makes a profound, lasting impact on both mentee and mentor. I hope all teachers have rewarding careers and wonderful colleagues. I hope all teachers are active members of professional learning communities—local and national. Above all, I hope all teachers see themselves as empowered lifelong learners and passionate advocates for literacy education for all students.

Concluding Words

All those who have worked with or learned from Beverly are fortunate to have done so. In reflecting on this interview, I (Abby) realized that the impact Beverly has had on my life is astounding. If it weren’t for the relationship I formed with Beverly, I might not have pursued English teaching as a profession. Beverly’s belief in my potential, as well as the innumerable hours she spent advising, teaching, and mentoring me—and so many others—has profoundly transformed my life. By believing in her students, Beverly has made me and them better teachers and better human beings.

Abby Lynes is a newly qualified secondary English teacher. To contact, please email abigail.lynes@gmail.com.

*You may contact **Beverly Ann Chin** at beverly.chin@umontana.edu.*

Copyright © 2023 by the Montana Association of Teachers of English Language Arts.