

Mentorship from the inside

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Abstract

In this article we interview **Jose Francisco Sanchez Herrero** from the Germán Trias i Pujol Institute in Badalona. He is Selma's tutor and gives us a glimpse of what it is like to be a mentor in an academic setting. If there is one thing we learned from the interview, it is that mentoring can help us achieve goals we might not accomplish otherwise.

Like any good race, life is so much better when you have someone cheering from the sidelines. During the rough parts they are a reminder of why you wanted to be there, and in the good parts they celebrate with you. That is why many academic programmes have a mentoring element, sometimes also called tutoring.

In this piece, we benefitted from Selma's recent involvement in a new academic pursuit to interview her new tutor, Jose Francisco Sanchez Herrero. We are thrilled to bring you this story, and we hope it will bring some insight into the life of a mentor. Enjoy!

Tell us a bit about yourself and how you became a tutor.

I am a biologist from the University of Alicante and I have a master's degree in bioinformatics from the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. I did a PhD in Genetics at the University of Barcelona on the application of bioinformatics methods in non-model organisms. Nowadays, I am a bioinformatics technician in the genomics and bioinformatics unit of the Germán Trias i Pujol Institute in Badalona.

In addition to my work as a researcher, I have participated in teaching several undergraduate and master's degree subjects and tutored several undergraduate and master's degree students in research projects.

I knew about the UOC (the Open University of Catalunya) through personal experiences of friends and family and in particular, I found out about this tutor position through LinkedIn. I went through a selection and training process and started as a tutor in October 2020.

Have you always felt a pull towards tutoring, or did it just "fall into your lap", so to speak?

I have always enjoyed teaching and mentoring but you could say that this position just fell into my lap without thinking about it.

Do you feel that tutoring requires a certain degree of personal involvement? Why?

It requires a significant amount of personal involvement as this is not my main job and I have to put in extra hours in the evenings, nights, or weekends.

Did you receive any specific training to become a tutor and do you think this training was valuable?

I received a training, a short one, which could have been more specific and valuable in some aspects. It was sufficient for a first introduction to mentoring.

Are there any prerequisites to be a tutor in certain areas?

You must be actively working in the field in which you are going to participate and have significant previous experience. It may not be necessary to be 100% linked to the same area of research but it is required to have previous experience and to hold a PhD.

What skills do you use to explain things and motivate students?

I think my main skill is my personal experience. I try to put myself in their shoes and explain as best I can and always try to look after the student's interests.

How many students can you tutor at any given time and do you feel exhausted if you go beyond that number?

This is my first time as a Master's tutor and I have a high volume of students (>110). I don't usually have many cases every day as it depends on the timing (enrolment vs. teaching period), but equally the key is to be systematic and use the right tools. It is also important to prioritise the most important cases.

I can get overwhelmed if there are too many cases to be counselled on the same day, especially if they are urgent.

Have you made friends with any of the students and do you keep in touch with them after the mentoring is over?

No. They have simply contacted me via social media but I have that information available myself. I try to maintain a professional relationship with the students.

How do you see mentoring: as a part of your job or as an opportunity to go further?

I see it as both. It is a side job to my main job but it is also an opportunity to gain professional experience in the world of teaching.

What is your ideal student like and are there certain characteristics that facilitate your role as a tutor?

I don't have an ideal student because at the end of the day, the teacher's job is to make everyone learn and there should be no favourites.

It is appreciated when the learner has a good look at the materials available before asking a question. Most of the time we have access to the same information, but the learner is in a hurry or not experienced enough to find the information. This is normal and we have all gone through this stage.

"Show me a successful individual and I'll show you someone who had real positive influences in his or her life. I don't care what you do for a living – if you do it well, I'm sure there was someone cheering you on or showing the way. A mentor."

Denzel Washington



How do you resolve conflicts or divergence of opinions?

I have not yet had such experiences. I imagine that I must take account of both sides and look for the best solution for everyone.

Do you think the mentoring culture is important in science? Why?

I think it is. Many times, students are motivated and have the desire to pursue a scientific career but do not have the means or the knowledge to start it. The tutor can advise on this part and accompany the student at the beginning of his or her stage given his or her experience and knowledge.

What are the skills and knowledge that are best acquired through tutoring, compared to the usual teaching models?

I think the possibility of having close advice from someone experienced in the subject can help you solve problems and address concerns.

Have you ever learned anything from your students that has had an impact on the way you work?

I haven't had the opportunity as I have only been in this position for a short time but I'm sure the time will come when I will acquire it. The new

generation is coming on strong and have a lot to contribute.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author information

Selma Reguieg, PhD

Selma has been a medical microbiologist since 2011. After her specialisation in microbiology, she was appointed head of a laboratory department in a public hospital of Berrouaghia, Algeria. Then, she turned to the private sector and became the manager of a medical analysis laboratory. In December 2020, she enrolled at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya UOC to study for a master's degree in Bioinformatics and Biostatistics, where she met the tutor who was interviewed.

Diana Ribeiro, MPharm

Diana is a freelance medical writer based in Cascais, Portugal. In 2019, she left her work in community pharmacy and began working as a medical writer, providing medical writing assistance in both medcomms and regulatory writing. When she is not working you can find her running, cooking, or reading.