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Best Practice or Buzzword? the Opportunities and Challenges of Mentorship for EDI in Creative Technology

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores mentorship as a much-celebrated strategy for improving equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) across a range of exclusionary working sectors. As a tactic for addressing underrepresentation and scaffolding entry, progression, and success within historically homogenous industries, mentorship is seen as a normatively beneficial practice. Yet, despite its association with greater opportunities and potential for breaking barriers, mentorship is rarely defined and how it is enacted is typically absent from discussion. Our research project tackles this ambiguity on the impact of mentorship for EDI aims and values, with a specific focus on creative and technological industries where exclusions in participation remain pernicious. Drawing on critical feminist analysis of public-facing materials about mentorship in these sectors and 40 interviews with mentorship program organizers and creative tech workers who have engaged in mentorship relationships, we outline the characteristics of mentorship activities from the perspective of three key stakeholders in EDI- corporate units such as employee resource groups, third-party companies who provide mentorship services to organizations and individuals, and community groups featuring mentorship as part of their activities. Our exploration of these three distinct models of mentorship demonstrates that the context where these activities are organized shapes their implementation, evaluation, and overall potential impacts, including for intersectional feminist aims. We conclude by arguing for the value of communal-based approaches to mentorship for more transformative outcomes related to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

1 | Introduction and Context

While promoting her 2018 best-selling book *Becoming*, Michelle Obama declared, “I am the product of the generosity of other people’s mentorship”, highlighting the ongoing significance of mentoring across time periods, cultures, and professions (Fassinger and Hensler-McGinnis 2005). Mentorship has also come to be framed as an important tool for addressing issues of underrepresentation in diverse contexts, as demonstrated by Matthew Reeves (2023) when he writes in *Forbes* that “mentorship is a diversity supercharger”. That Reeves is the CEO of a mentorship platform called Together where program pricing begins at \$10,000 USD yearly and mentorship is listed under

“Products” indicates that promises of mentorship’s power are already thoroughly commodified, and that diversity discourse is fully imbricated in business-focused ventures led by the demographics most dominant within creative tech (white cis-gender men). Still, the perceived value of mentorship for supporting inclusion remains a dominant narrative, including within industries combining media, design, and technology such as video games, visual effects, and animation.

Within these fields, which we refer to as ‘creative technology’, there are well-known and acknowledged issues of marginalization and exclusion. In recent years, a range of organizations and companies across sectors have begun to engage in equity,

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diversity, and inclusion, or EDI, activities to address industrial inequities and their impacts on design and content. Within this EDI push, mentorship has been a normalized and celebrated mode of supporting marginalized communities to gain entry and then advance through exclusionary domains. But despite this emphasis on the assumed benefits of mentorship, there are rarely any evaluation metrics provided for these activities, and there is commensurately little scholarly research on these specific fields aimed at understanding how mentorship can meet EDI goals and indeed transform exclusionary industrial contexts. Research that considers the unique nature of creative technology is vital as the outcomes of these fields have been shown to maintain, reify, and reinscribe oppressive norms in new technological and communicative forms (Benjamin 2019; Broussard 2023; Costanza-Chock 2020; Noble 2018).

Our project aims to fill this gap, informed by the role of inequities in design and storytelling but also by lessons from existing interdisciplinary scholarship on mentorship relations, particularly antiracist and feminist research. Within some domains, mentorship is a celebrated interpersonal practice, especially for supporting people historically excluded from education and industry (e.g., Burke and McKeen 1990; Wright and Wright 1987). A robust corpus of management and psychology literature frames mentorship as a powerful tactic for increasing the number of women within male-dominated sectors (Dreher and Ash 1990; Kram 1983; Ragins and Cotton 1999; Scandura and Ragins 1993). Clearly, these positive narratives, often emphasizing individualized successes and outcomes within diversity work (Green 2018; Kalev et al. 2006), inform many of the contemporary optimistic discourses of mentorship's potential.

In contrast with studies often focused on quantitative and numerical levelling of workers in a given field (the “add women and stir” approach to diversity), our theoretical framework for understanding mentorship in practice is informed by feminist scholarship considering a range of sectors, where critics have focused on the contextual and institutional norms marginalized people grapple with inside these industries. This includes critical race and intersectional feminist scholarship exploring the potential of mentorship initiatives for addressing axes of marginalization and exclusion beyond quantitative metrics in various institutions (Buzzanell et al. 2015; Vargas et al. 2021). Here scholars point to myriad challenges in mentorship, including gendered, racialized, colonial, classed, and language-based barriers to access to appropriate mentors (Alvarez and Lazzari 2016; Shivers-McNair et al. 2019), tokenization of marginalized people in homogenous sectors (Chandler 1996), and the contradictions between traditional, hierarchical approaches to mentorship and existing homophilic networks and insider connections (Brown and Montoya 2020). There is also evidence that mentorship can perpetuate existing power dynamics if not undertaken in a critical manner focused on justice (Bay-Cheng et al. 2006; Benishek et al. 2004; Brown 2009). This is an important insight for creative technology fields as discourses celebrating the optics of equity, diversity, and inclusion sit uneasily alongside business goals and corporate norms where highly individualized approaches such as Lean In feminism (Rottenberg 2013) and confidence culture (Orgad and Gill 2022) dominate.

Overall, despite the prominence of mentorship initiatives as a solution to inequities in homogenous industries, in terms of EDI and intersectional feminist aims, little is known about how mentorship is enacted in practice and the transformative potential of these relations. While the management scholarship tends to focus on individual traits and personal successes, feminist approaches to mentorship emphasize its potential to meet EDI aims and create structural change, including not only increased access but also retention and promotion. Scholarship beyond creative tech indicates that the effectiveness of diversity programs, including mentorship, is rarely concretely evaluated, but meta-reviews suggest that practices and structures requiring organizational responsibility and accountability are usually most effective (Kalev et al. 2006). As these authors and Ahmed (2012) demonstrate, approaches that focus on changing individuals rather than institutions do not lead to transformation and can entrench inequalities. Diversity work accounting for structures of power and dynamics of privilege, even in organizations promoting EDI, are more likely to be successful in achieving inclusion (Irawan et al. 2024).

In light of this, our study takes a critical feminist perspective to addressing gaps in knowledge about mentorship in practice. Our approach to the exploration of mentorship for EDI in creative tech is informed by the critical and transformative ethos of feminist approaches to social inequalities, balancing an awareness of the key shaping role of formal organizations under capitalism in defining diversity as a business case (Irawan et al. 2024) and the significance of practices beyond the ‘firm’ for reconstituting and transforming social norms (Janssens and Zanoni 2021). In line with this, our approach to examining the impact of mentorship is oriented toward not only critiquing business as usual but to exploring practices on the ground to support imagining more sustainable, inclusive, just, and even utopian futures (Benjamin 2022; Levitas 2013).

To that end, our team began by mapping out mentorship and related EDI initiatives offered by creative tech companies and groups in Canada and the U.S, including corporate, NGO, community, and grassroots organizations. We recruited from these programs, our own networks, and snowball sampling with existing participants, with an emphasis on including individuals from historically marginalized backgrounds in creative tech fields, resulting in a participant pool that included only one white cisgender male interviewee. We conducted 40 semi-structured Zoom interviews of 60–90 min with professionals in these fields who have acted as mentors and/or mentees, and individuals who have organized mentorship programs. We followed an open-ended, exploratory interview script focused on understanding experiences of mentorship as well as how mentorship is structured, what benefits have been obtained from these relationships, and what values and visions have shaped mentorship relationships. While our participants came from myriad creative tech industries, from news journalism to video games, UX design to software engineering, and included people at the earliest stages of their professions to individuals at the highest levels of seniority, all but one of them came from backgrounds historically underrepresented and marginalized in creative tech, typically based on gender and/or race. Our analysis is ongoing but so far has entailed high-level team coding using Taguette, and critical and thematic analysis of recurrent

patterns (Owen 1984; Lawless and Chen 2019) of the reports generated with the coding tags.

The analysis below represents our preliminary insights on mentorship organizing based on our observation that mentorship is quite variously defined, according to the different contexts in which it is organized, undertaken, and, less often, evaluated. While informal mentorship was common among our participants, this paper focuses on the more formalized practices we mapped and that participants discussed in the interviews (here we do not name specific companies or initiatives to protect anonymity). In line with our theoretical framework focused on transformation and attention to power dynamics shaping exclusion and injustice, we intend to draw on these insights to undertake feminist participatory action research (Frisby et al. 2009; Goodnough 2008; Krumer-Nevo 2009). Therefore, our next phase involves codesign workshops with mentorship stakeholders and community members intended to share and iterate on some of the critical practices we outline at the end of this article. In what follows, we examine three broad institutionalized approaches to mentorship our interviewees participated in (as mentees, mentors, or organizers), beginning with the most visible stakeholders in the mentorship game: corporate entities in creative tech.

2 | Corporatized Equity: Investing in EDI via Mentorship

Our mapping of mentorship activities found that a range of creative technology organizations enthusiastically proclaim their investments in a range of equity, diversity, and inclusion activities, including, as expected, mentorship. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (van Dijk 2017), a perspective on discourse well-suited to understanding the reproduction of social inequalities and power dynamics such as sexism and racism, we examined a range of texts, including EDI statements, diversity reporting, and formal HR policies pertaining to employment equity shared on public-facing websites, particularly the largest transnational companies in creative tech. Along with our interviews, these materials offer important insights into dominant approaches to EDI and mentorship activities in corporate contexts.

Based on our critical analysis of these public texts, we identified three main themes characterizing a corporatized approach to EDI. Firstly, EDI in these environments is often framed as a matter of superficial tweaks to images, where people of color in particular become ‘color added’ (Ahmed 2012) to business-as-usual in photos, illustrations, and other visual assets such as Microsoft backgrounds and Metaverse avatars. Within exclusionary sectors, images of historically marginalized subjects are akin to “icing on the cake” in Kat Gupta’s terms (cited in Pearce 2017), where outward celebrations indicate a much more diverse and inclusive culture than is actually characteristic of the context. This resonates with Chandra Mohanty (2003) related characterization of diversity as “benign variation” suggesting a “harmonious empty pluralism” (p. 193). These ultimately serve to reify white (as well as cis, heterosexual, able-bodied, and otherwise privileged) identities as the norm from

which all others diverge. They can also create gaps in expectation for those entering these spaces in creative tech if they do not resemble their promotional diversity (Harvey 2023). This is concerning as participants in our study coming from groups historically marginalized in these fields found these ‘investments in diversity’ to be appealing, a “big green flag for me for an employer” as a woman working as a front-end engineer in advertising described it.

Secondly, within corporate contexts we see diversity in the workforce tied to diversity in the outputs generated by the organization, whether they are on-screen representations as promised by Netflix claiming that “inclusion on screen starts with inclusion in the office” or more opaquely as beneficial to the design of technology. While many argue for the importance of diversity within the broader circuit of culture, especially important given that creative tech firms reproduce cultural identifications, as Anamik Saha (2017) work has shown, one of the consequences is that minority identities are commodified in the service of profit further concentrated in the hands of already powerful major creative tech firms. In this way, EDI gets framed in terms of a business case for diversity (Janssens and Zanoni 2021), where the marketplace is capable of expanding to offer ever more “diverse” options as a means to reach increasingly targeted demographics.

Finally, and even more explicitly, a common business case for EDI promises ‘innovation’ as yoked to diversity and inclusion. Such statements are often accompanied by the colorful images mentioned above as well as profiles of internal Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) targeted at communities such as Veterans at Netflix (Vetflix), Indigenous employees at Pinterest (Pindigenous), and, less playfully, in the categories of Women, Black and African American, and LGBTQIA+ at Microsoft. Given that our participants for the most part highlighted ongoing structural challenges related to EDI in many creative tech sectors, the audiences for these promises seem to be shareholders who may need to be appeased about a focus on belonging, inclusion, and community in these organizations. Proclamations that “Diversity Unlocks Innovation” at Netflix and “Inclusion is Innovation” at Microsoft enables such organizations to remain consistent with the values of “Big Tech,” although at the time of writing, these may be shifting according to the prerogatives of a second Trump term and the anti-inclusion policy recommendations of Project 2025 (Mohan 2024).

In terms of where formal mentorship is offered within corporate contexts, such ERGs seem to play a major role, with our participants referring to groups based on gender and race in their companies. Clearly, these are relatively siloed groups devoted to enhancing the visibility of particular marginalized subject positions as single axis issues rather than intersectional concerns. Furthermore, though research has found that the activities of ERGs, including mentorship, can contribute to the formation of communities of practice within organizations (Green 2018), what our interviews demonstrate is that siloed initiatives can also serve to frame EDI as the responsibility of individual workers or human resources personnel rather than the whole organization or those in the position of leadership. For example, one participant who described the functioning of a

'women's group' in her organization noted that the activities were volunteer-organized and that once contact was made, it was "the mentees [who] should be in charge of owning that relationship and scheduling the follow-up calls and everything." This volunteer-based, peer-to-peer structure was common within corporate mentorship, and places the onus on marginalized employees at the bottom of organizational hierarchies to engage in the labour of diversity work.

Beyond ERGs, formal mentorship in these environments was, according to our interviewees, quite rare. As mentorship was consistently conflated with other types of relationships (from coaches to therapists to friends), it was unsurprising that at times formal mentorship in these contexts was identified in the normal working practices of good managers or HR professionals. But we did hear about a few mentorship programs launched by more senior figures within exclusionary sectors such as software architecture and visual effects (VFX), and this is where we observed that mentorship within corporate contexts can become a 'labour of love' for individuals, where this study is supported by upper management but undertaken on top of regular duties.

When mentorship is led by a single employee 'off the side of the desk' as one organizer characterized it, the benefits and impacts were much easier to ascertain. This participant, a senior developer in her 40s, launched her own initiative within her workplace to address the gender inequalities she observed and experienced in tech, and she noted that based on this program, the retention of newly recruited, more diverse staff was very high, even through the COVID-19 pandemic and the 'great resignation' in tech (Orton 2022). The participant also noted that mentorship was vital to a woman engineer going up for promotion and commencing a leadership position. Across our 40 interviews, this was one of the few times we heard about concrete impacts directly tied to mentorship initiatives. In this case, the approach to mentorship was thoughtfully organized based on both the organizer's previous experiences and workshopping ideas with others, and it included questionnaires to ensure a good match between the needs and expertise of mentors and mentees, training for mentors, and close attention to power dynamics within a relatively small organization.

Enacting mentorship in this way ensures a plurality of perspectives on how to reap the potential benefits of this activity for EDI. It reflected also the more structural viewpoint of this participant, who saw the advantages of mentorship at the level of the cohort rather than the individual, including the importance of a 'critical mass' of individuals who do not simply replicate the 'echo chamber' of tech and who adapt the environment rather than assimilate into its norms. This participant told us a story of not being recognized by a leader as a member of the engineering team after a professional success, and said "this is why the mentorship is so important to me. I need to do things that will actually move the needle and just being good at my job and just progressing myself as an individual will not do it. I need to bring others with me". Her organization of mentorship reflected this more communal way of approaching EDI aims, and while she acknowledged the need for systemic change from the highest levels, she asserted the

need for this kind of grassroots organizing to recruit and promote more women and people of color to build more diversity and equity in senior roles, which she described as "digging a tunnel from both ends". This approach reflects a long-term approach to mentorship quite different from other initiatives that had very short timelines for mentorship pairings, and an approach that recognizes the collective and interdependent rather than individual nature of care (The Care Collective 2020).

Unfortunately, this example was an outlier in the corporate context and was quite different from another, more typical, case of formal mentorship, which we heard about from a 49-year-old participant who worked in HR at a VFX company and also directed a mentorship program for a non-profit industry group. This participant acknowledged the dominance of white men like himself in a variety of creative industries he worked in and characterized mentorship as a key mechanism for "creating culture" in a "people-centered environment". The non-profit's mentorship was run through a paid e-mentoring platform and targeted young people from backgrounds historically marginalized on the basis of income, ability, and race (though anyone could actually participate in the program). The onus was on the mentee with this program to formulate questions, share work in progress, and ping the mentor so they can pick the conversation up 'on their own time'. Though this participant emphasized the importance of "growing community", there was little sense of how any of these thousands of participants ("like 80,000 schoolkids" and "like 1,500 mentors") communicated beyond this chat function between two people.

The emphasis in this program was on scale as these numbers indicate, and from this perspective it is no surprise that the organizer proclaimed, "the Mentor Program has gone from strength to strength". His vision was that role modeling and 'if you can see it, you can be it' was a key driver of opportunities and change within exclusionary contexts, echoing liberal/corporate discourse on the ability to achieve diversity through representation. In terms of program impacts, the organizer could only point to a dashboard indicating the gender and ethnicity of participants, and anecdotes from individuals who attended their events. As with many other mentorship relations, there was a lack of systematic evaluation frameworks for mentors or mentees, and no means of capturing potential outcomes of these activities. This was paralleled by the mentorship in his company, which he described as "I don't want to say scrappy, but they're not governed by super formal structures. And we don't use a lot of tech, it's all Google Forms and Google Spreadsheets. We don't get a lot of metrics. And even with the [MENTORSHIP ORG] we get metrics in terms of numbers, but not in terms of impact." This lack of formality didn't appear to be a feature of the matching or training practices at this company, only in terms of accountability where he said, "the results speak for themselves". This is representative therefore of many mentorship programs where the emphasis is on the formation of mentorship pairs and not on tracing how these dyads work (or don't) or considering what they ultimately achieve, lacking as is so common the evaluation and responsibility metrics that support effective diversity work in corporate environments (Kalev et al. 2006).

While these two cases represent vastly different approaches to mentorship within corporate contexts, they are both shaped by disconnects between EDI value statements and economic imperatives that, even in a less hostile moment in time, only invested partially in equity work. This is best captured in the final comments of the engineer who counted five or six women as success stories of her formal mentorship program. She closed by again emphasizing the importance of a long-term approach and buy-in from the upper levels of management, noting that “at the end of the day, when the economics come into it, you know, I wasn’t sitting in the CEO seat. And so, things changed. The company had layoffs, and I will let you guess who got laid off. So there has to be more than just this idea that companies are going to change. You know, they’re always going to be most driven by economics”. This reflects growing evidence that within corporate contexts, budgetary challenges and subsequent job losses are more likely to impact on diverse workers and/or those working on EDI initiatives (e.g. Broomfield 2024; Shah 2023; Williams 2025).

Overall, across these approaches to formalized mentorship within corporate contexts, while we heard about a range of initiatives and activities, these were largely connected to training, networking, and supporting workers as they undertook specified tasks. Mentorship for EDI in corporate contexts is by and large, then, oriented towards enabling individuals identified as diverse to assimilate fully into the existing structure, rather than to change any features that may be hostile or exclusionary of these groups of people. It is perhaps no surprise then that a major player in mentorship is external bodies, such as the e-mentoring platform we discussed earlier, offering mentorship as a service, which we turn to now.

3 | Commodified Diversity: Mentorship as Proprietary EDI Product

For many participants who had formalized mentorship experiences in creative tech, these were offered not by employers but by programs, both those paid by participants and those subsidized by public funding. Major players within this type of mentorship in creative tech are tech-focused accelerator and incubator programs where the emphasis is on supporting entrepreneurs and start-ups. These types of initiatives are part of a broader ecosystem within tech entrepreneurialism that is seen as a site of informal mentoring opportunities, including hackathons, EDI-focused tech summits, and Discord and Slack-based online communities, as well as coaching programs. Several participants we interviewed had experiences within these entrepreneurial-focused ventures, and one participant, who had started a women-in-tech non-profit organization, enthused that these programs represented ‘investments in mentorship’. Despite the proliferation of such programs, our interviews indicate that though our participants came from historically marginalized backgrounds, the majority of the high-tech entrepreneurial initiatives they participated in were usually not engaged with EDI and, as with the corporate activities outlined in the previous section, the formal components of these activities focused on training productive workers rather than transformation of these industries.

Beyond the start-up sector, a range of other initiatives include mentorship programs as their primary ‘product’. Here we present two examples in Canada: Mentorat Quebec and Monday Girl. The first aims to promote mentorship culture in Quebec via the sale of mentorship program training and webinars to private companies. Subsidized by public-private funding, Mentorat QC offers an explicitly EDI-centered program with Accélérateur Mentorat that names as its priority the inclusion of women and underrepresented groups in male-dominated industries like engineering and animation. Partially funded by the Quebec government’s Secretariat for the Status of Women and aimed at HR professionals, its proprietary program offers several features of interest: it is meant to take 2 months (a quick timeline for tackling historical power imbalances); frames EDI as a readymade matrix that can be overlayed onto any existing workplace; and gamifies EDI by offering employers a ‘badge of honour’ for participation. Upon completion, employers can apply for accreditation through the program that they can display on their websites with a “certified inclusive mentorship” stamp, part of a larger trend in gamifying EDI (Toscana 2025) that Sara Ahmed (2016) has critiqued in the context of equality credentials in the university sector in the UK.

Intermediaries like Mentorat QC sell this training as a product for companies to use in the short term, which limits the potential for lasting impacts of such programs for EDI and the capacity for such programs to create systemic change in exclusionary industries. Their mechanisms and processes, including for accountability, are proprietary and therefore not open to critical scrutiny, and its packaging for diverse industries indicates a lack of sensitivity to specific contexts. Also, this type of mentorship transfers the onus of responsibility for EDI from the employer to a third-party company, demonstrating a neo-liberal product-oriented solution to systemic social problems. This echoes our findings above on the short-term commitment of companies’ EDI and mentorship programs. Within these programs, individual employees are often expected to seek out mentorship, shifting responsibility again away from the employer and onto the worker to change their own conditions. This, therefore, positions mentorship as a tool to manage employees, instead of changing the way that labor works, via an individualization of responsibility for exclusions in alignment with Lean In-style feminism (Rottenberg 2013).

Indeed, though it is usually cited as a normative good, mentorship as a strategy for addressing EDI aims can align with neoliberal capitalism and postfeminism, as our second example, the Monday Girl mentorship program, illustrates. According to their website, for the low price of \$25 CAD per month, individuals can join “the first private members club focused on supporting and connecting next-generation women leaders”, where your “network is your net worth” and you can “upgrade your rolodex” by “building authentic relationships” and “forming genuine connections”. The risk then is that mentorship becomes an iteration of commodity feminism (Gill 2008) for the class-privileged few, where participants can signal belonging with “a C-suite keychain” (\$20) and tote bag reading “The Boy’s Club for Women” (\$25). Monday Girl’s website exemplifies the economics of visibility (Banet-Weiser 2015) around EDI that mentorship can become part of, with a land acknowledgment, intersectional EDI policy, and statement of

trans-inclusivity, checking all the social justice tick boxes in the new world of the “Girl Boss” (Nguyen 2024). While quite different in tone from Mentorat QC, this program is equally opaque about its processes, approaches, and evaluation frameworks, leaving unclear how mentorship can meet EDI aims. One participant in our study organized a similar type of paid mentorship group for women in tech, and she indicated that mentorship in these spaces is configured as “strategic networking” where “women would pay a monthly fee, or an annual fee, to be connected to other women and allies who are a few steps ahead on the same career paths in technology”. As with the corporate mentoring outlined in the previous section, for these intermediaries it seems that the goal and the outcome are the same: to raise the visibility of women in exclusionary industries to showcase role models as celebrated within white (Nguyen 2024), commodity (Gill 2008), and corporate feminism (Rottenberg 2013). How to assess whether this is impactful or transformative at a broader level is left unarticulated.

The outsourcing of responsibility for mentorship and therefore of EDI objectives can be read in several ways. It may be a sign of recognition that mentorship is not a simple exercise, and that EDI work requires specialized knowledge or expertise. More cynically, we can see these programs as a symptom of a lack of centralized accountability by key figureheads within exclusionary organizations and industries, where intermediaries and individuals can ostensibly mentor themselves out of marginalization. Either way, the approach of third-party organizations that sell mentorship as an EDI product is indicative of a trend towards the commodification of social justice.

4 | Networked Inclusion: Mentorship as Community Practice

The third approach to mentorship we found is quite distinct from the dominant kinds of formal programs celebrated in the dominant corporate style of mentoring. Community and not-for-profit organizations tackling longstanding exclusions in creative technology sectors are not new; Women in Games, Women in Animation, and Women in Film and Television are established groups that have included mentorship in their programming for many years. Newer initiatives such as Limit Break in the UK focus their inclusivity efforts specifically on mentorship and allyship for underrepresented groups in the sector. While some of these organizations' websites indicate that they operate on the familiar models outlined above (emphasizing role models and valuing visibility for the sake of visibility), within our study we had the opportunity to speak with organizers and participants in a community organization where the focus was not on a particular creative tech industry but rather on a more embodied approach to EDI. This organization was predicated on the support of women of color by women of color and the desire to build a community to support their professional flourishing, holistically rather than with a focus on a project, a professional skill, or a sector. They described a clear intersectional feminist vision, “a world where women of color have access, equal access and opportunity to all the resources and information and community and networks that they require to formulate success in their lives, whatever that means to them.”

This set of objectives provides a clear sense of direction for organizers to coordinate their actions. While initially they engaged in a range of projects, they found their energies spread too thin to meet their aims for robust support and therefore re-evaluated to focus on mentorship. Here we see a practice of reflection and learning from mistakes that other organizers we interviewed never referred to. They spent time on carefully matching mentors and mentees, based on close examination of applications as well as interviews, a process they described as ‘holistic’ and ‘intuitive’, quite distinct from the checkbox approach others took. This was the only program where we heard about selection criteria for mentors, who had to be women of color but also value-aligned with the organization, including being trans-inclusive. The same applied to mentees, as they were conscious of their need to not overstretch their energies. In this case, they engaged in needs assessment in terms of “people that seem less sure of themselves, or were in a particularly compromising or vulnerable position that they shared with us that they’re like, looking for support and resources to kind of support them through and those kinds of things”. Such selectiveness was essential to the group, as their understanding of mentorship's value is that “community bonds are what leads to our own self-empowerment, that allows us to kind of create the world that we want to be in and that we want to live in”. This was a moment again where we observed the enactment of inclusivity work in alignment with a collective approach to care (The Care Collective 2020) rather than individualized efforts to cope with exclusions in creative tech (Harvey 2021).

This community-driven intersectional feminist approach informed many of their activities. For instance, unlike many programs, they provided guidance to all participants rather than just training for mentees. All participants were given recommendations on how to organize their meetings, including timelines for regular meetings as well as setting the conditions for mutual learning. The community focus also shaped how their program approached mentorship as both a paired relationship and a cohort. At the time of interview, their activities were entirely virtual and though the matching led to pairs, all participants were invited to participate in regular, facilitated community meetings and themed workshops for peer mentorship, thus decentering the solely dyadic formula of mentorship. The community gatherings focused on a range of topics related to personal and professional development and were tailored to participants' needs. Finally, and distinctively from other mentorship programs we heard about, this program was iteratively evolving based on ongoing and intensive feedback from participants. After every program, the organizers reviewed the process from end-to-end, discussing where participants expressed discontent and where relationships were not as beneficial as hoped. They did so based on “tons and tons and tons of feedback”; intensive and ongoing in-built evaluation mechanisms intentionally included in recognition of the fact that “people are different, and cohorts are different and there's a lot of nuance in that, in saying that we're trying to serve like young women of color in Canada, that's an enormous, enormous population. So feedback is really important to us”. Though this kind of tailoring is more labor-intensive than a readymade approach, the organizer told us that it is essential because “one of our things is that you can't serve the community if you don't know what the

community wants you to serve. So, we have to ask, and we have to be informed all the time". In this way, the functioning of this organization, located beyond the frameworks of the 'firm', provides a glimpse into alternative and disruptive modes of envisioning social change beyond the capitalist economy as urged by Janssens and Zanoni (2021).

Of course, community organizations like this and the paid women-in-tech group that we mentioned in the previous section have their own challenges. While they are able to pay organizers a nominal amount equivalent to a "side hustle", they are supported by grant funding that often operates on an annual basis, requiring team members to be in a perpetual cycle of seeking renewal. In tandem with the resources required to engage in EDI-aligned mentorship matching, selection, activity coordination, ongoing feedback, and program revisions, seeking material support is a taxing endeavour. As this suggests, it is those stakeholders with the least power and financial backing that are doing the most intensive work on mentorship for EDI, a dynamic that perpetuates the downloading of responsibility for transforming inequalities to those most impacted by them.

5 | Conclusions

Mentorship as a strategy for EDI (and any other aims) struck us as interesting initially because it is ultimately a tactic premised on relationships, a dynamic of mutual influence, and something that is therefore intensively social and highly impacted by individual backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, moods, and styles. In this way, mentorship is, at its core, an approach that aligns with individualizing discourse, as so much depends on the mentor and the mentee, their compatibility and unique circumstances, and any success story of one-on-one mentorship will be inherently anecdotal. As often as we heard stories about mentors being essential to a participant's development, we were told about cases where mentors were unreliable, inattentive, or, in the worst cases, inappropriate. Yet, mentorship is generally seen as something that can be tremendously beneficial and impactful, and many of our participants sought out opportunities for connecting with others and seeking and offering support, often with communities historically marginalized in their specific creative tech field.

It is because of this radical contingency of mentorship's benefits that we see the collectivist approaches of community organizations to hold the greatest potential benefits for EDI, in particular. Forgoing a reliance on a dyadic model of mentorship and instead sharing advice, guidance, support, and opportunities to a wider group is more likely to weaken interpersonal clashes and to provide the greatest potential for a wider impact. Rather than linking marginalized individuals with a single person who cannot possibly address all of their unique needs, communal mentorship programs enable people to connect with a range of others, both more senior and at the peer level, providing a better basis for longer-term relationships. As one of the participants outlined so eloquently above, a focus on intersectional feminist community care in professional settings can lead to a capacity-building that endures.

The best practices we identified across these stakeholders for formal mentorship are 1) coherence between an understanding of the barriers to equity in a sector and the planned activities, 2) a context-sensitive approach that understands there is a longer time frame required to address long-standing issues, and 3) accountability and evaluation metrics for assessing the value of the activity in meeting EDI objectives and goals. What we rarely saw but would add to this list was buy-in from the most powerful and influential figures in the long-term, including resourcing of time, energy, expertise, and funding across the activities of planning; training mentors and mentees; checking in; designing complementary activities; and ensuring robust organizational capacity rather than hinging an entire program on a single individual.

Overall, alternative approaches to EDI and mentorship suggest that such relationships can indeed be transformative. Communal approaches to mentorship challenge the notion of an all-knowing senior figure advising an entry-level ingénue and the individualization of support and guidance, inverting the dynamic observed by Kalev et al. (2006) where mentoring initiatives are "designed to 'fix' a lack of specific human and social capital in individual workers" (p. 591). Community-based mentorship programs emphasize accountability and what exactly is promised in mentorship, a feature rarely seen in the corporate and commodified models premised on experiential wisdom and business as usual. Mentorship programs, when designed from the ground up with intersectionality, community, and justice as core values, therefore offer the opportunity to exert a positive impact against the larger structural exclusions that notoriously pervade creative tech fields.

Author Contributions

Alison Harvey: conceptualization, investigation, funding acquisition, writing – original draft, methodology, writing – review and editing, project administration, supervision, data curation. **Tamara Shepherd:** conceptualization, investigation, funding acquisition, methodology, writing – review and editing, project administration, supervision, data curation. **Dani Rudnicka-Lavoie:** investigation, writing – review and editing; methodology, validation, data curation. **Emily Mohabir:** investigation, methodology, validation, writing – review and editing, data curation.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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