

Chapter 70

E–Mentoring: Mentoring at a Distance

David Starr-Glass

University of New York in Prague, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

Mentoring involves the creation of a relational bond between a more and a less experienced person in order to advance the learning, socialization, and aspirations of the less experienced partner. Traditionally, mentoring has been conducted through face-to-face meetings, which promote optimal social connectedness, interpersonal attachment, and growing trust and confidence. The limited availability of local mentors, a desire for better mentor-mentee matching, and a concern for flexibility and inclusion have all resulted in attempts to distance the mentoring process. Electronic mentoring (e-mentoring), which uses computer-mediated communication technologies to link the partners, has provided logistical and pragmatic benefits. However, mentoring relies on strong relational bonds and social exchange dynamics, both of which are potentially weakened by social, psychological, and cognitive distance. This chapter explores the dynamics and process of mentoring and how these are altered in e-mentoring. Specifically, it examines transactional distance, distancing the locus of experience, and national culture differences between mentor and mentee. These impacts on e-mentoring are explored and recommendations for practice are presented, as are considerations for the future directions of e-mentoring in educational and organizational programs.

INTRODUCTION

Mueller (2004) was enthusiastic and emphatic: “Although e-mentoring is in many ways similar to face-to-face mentoring, it offers unique possibilities and challenges related to ICT [information and communications technology]” (p. 57). Her review of e-mentoring initiatives was undertaken when e-mentoring was in its infancy. Her particular

perspective was on how mentoring could increase gender equality and strengthen role models in science and technology. But what has happened to the “unique possibilities and challenges” in the ten years following her review? Have the similarities of e-mentoring to face-to-face mentoring converged or have they significantly diverged? Have the unique possibilities of e-mentoring been overshadowed by its challenges?

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To explore the direction that e-mentoring has taken, and the potential that it has retained, it is first necessary to consider traditional face-to-face mentoring with which it has always, and perhaps inevitably, been compared. Mentoring has a particularly long history and has been used extensively in organizational development, social action programs, and higher education (Pawson, 2004). It involves the formation of relational linkages between individuals who have different experiential histories, so that the more experienced can “provide their expertise to less experienced individuals in order to help the novices advance their careers, enhance their education, and build their networks” (Sherman, Muñoz, & Pankake, 2008, p. 244).

Mentoring belongs to a cluster of relational approaches that have been used to enhance performance, to support socialization, and to deepen learning. There are similarities in these approaches and it is often difficult to characterize them specifically, but there are differences. Mentoring, for example, usually results in longer and deeper relationships than those associated with tutoring and it also focuses on broader, more diffuse skills than those developed in coaching (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Jackson, 2005). The dynamics, anticipated outcomes, and participant benefits of mentoring are perhaps closer to those provided by supervised internships in the professions and cognitive apprenticeships in higher education (Dennen, 2004; Dennen & Burner, 2008). In these professional and academic settings, as in mentoring, novices are appreciated as “legitimate peripheral participants” and “the central issue in learning is *becoming* a practitioner not learning *about* practice” (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 48, emphasis in original).

Because mentoring is a relational approach, a critical issue for its success is the matching of an appropriate mentor with an appropriate mentee. Both participants need to recognize the potential advantages of the proposed mentoring relationship. Mentees have to believe that their

prospective mentor possesses the experience, knowledge, and relational skills that they desire. In informal mentoring arrangements, both parties make these assessments independently and come to their own conclusions about the value of the anticipated experience: self-selection is the driving mechanism (Bender, Yaffee, & Sechrest, 2012). In formal mentoring arrangements, where the matching is institutionally brokered, the process is more complex. Those who facilitate the mentoring relationship need to recognize the aspirations of those who will be involved, their partner preference (in terms of culture, ethnicity, and gender), and the anticipated duration of the relationship (Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby, & Muller, 2011; Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012).

As the popularity of mentoring has increased so too has the need to expand the pool of potential mentors and to provide more flexible ways of supporting the relationship. Traditional face-to-face mentoring is limited by the availability of mentors, geographic proximity of the participants, and the logistics of physical meeting. Distance mentoring – especially e-mentoring, which employs mobile technologies and computer-mediated communication – addresses these issues by initiating and sustaining the mentoring relationship irrespective of physical distance. By sidestepping the constraints of distance, e-mentoring opens up new opportunities of increasing diversity, making novel learning connections, and facilitating wider social inclusion. Accessibility and spatial distance, which previously restricted traditional face-to-face mentoring, become irrelevant and e-mentoring brings the promise of richer, better-matched, and more productive mentoring partnerships (Columbaro, 2009; Smith & Israel, 2010). Over the last decade, e-mentoring has been widely promoted and increasingly used; however, its theory and practice still remain underexplored, often overshadowed by personal preference or anecdotal experience (Headlam-Wells, Gosland, & Craig, 2005; Yaw, 2007).

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