Chapter 3.28
Virtual Community Mentoring in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter will focus on the characteristics of a technology-supported virtual community where university students can seek the guidance of professionals in the students' field of study via a mediated mentoring program. Advances in information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet and interactive multimedia technologies, are creating new networking opportunities for students. Mentors and mentees can develop valuable relationships facilitated by multimedia technologies. This chapter will explore the characteristics of both community and mentoring within the framework of a technology-supported virtual community.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-014-1.ch205

BACKGROUND

Connecting students and mentors can be difficult, particularly with regard to time and place. A student's schedule may not be compatible with a mentor's calendar, making a face-to-face meeting difficult. There could be a considerable geographic distance between a mentee and a mentor, making an in-person visit time-consuming and expensive. A mentoring program that utilizes interactive multimedia technologies, however, can overcome the challenges of time and distance to create and sustain a vibrant virtual learning community.

The whole idea of virtual community revolves around interacting and communicating in a mediated fashion. Because the Internet and other multimedia technologies are global, real-time,

interactive, and readily accessible to many at a high bandwidth (Beale, 2000), virtual communities abound. Virtual communities offer people new ways to communicate and interact using multimedia technologies as individual members of virtual communities extend their selves via the computer network (Foster, 1997). As Song observes, "what we find in virtual communities is an understanding of community as communication taken to new extremes" (2002, p. 41).

As with traditional communities, virtual communities can be defined in terms of groups, relationships, common interests, and shared knowledge. The obvious difference is the fact that interaction among members of virtual communities is technology-mediated. Instead of talking face-to-face over the backyard fence, people are communicating and sharing information using interactive multimedia technologies. Their reason for coming together is mutual interest, not a common physical space. The setting is a network of digital information (Kollock, 1999) where, as Negroponte (1995) sees it, the world consists of bits, not atoms. Song states that, "Technically speaking, all virtual communities are essentially electronic and digital communication systems" (2002, p. 41).

"Virtual communities are not physical communities, but exist in the minds of those who inhabit them" (Roberts, Smith, & Pollock, 2002, p. 225). But virtual communities do not necessarily exist solely in cyberspace. While some communities are entirely virtual, some virtual community members do make the effort to meet in a physical space. Geography-bound interactions, however, are not integral to the functioning of a virtual community. In fact, as Ward claims, "the spirit of community or communion that is found among networks of people is far more important than having a sense of place" (1999, p. 98).

This spirit of community can extend beyond the general population and into the realm of education. Higher education can take advantage of the possibilities afforded by interacting using multimedia technologies and provide the opportunity to create new types of communal bonds and redefine the definition of community (Papastephanou, 2005). One approach is to create a virtual mentoring program.

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A mentor can play a critical role in a student's education by providing valuable "real world" information, career advice, general guidance, support, and counsel. A mentor can wield considerable influence in the life of a student, but often it is not feasible both logistically and financially to bring a mentor and a mentee together face-to-face. Technology-mediated mentoring can bridge those gaps in time and place, creating a new learning environment for students in higher education. Advances in information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet and interactive multimedia technologies, are creating new learning opportunities for students and facilitating the process of mentors and mentees developing valuable relationships.

Traditional mentoring relationships occur in a face-to-face environment, with mentor and student physically meeting somewhere and interacting. Today, that is no longer a necessity. Advances in technology have provided new opportunities for mentoring and eliminated the need to coordinate schedules for a synchronous meeting (Duff, 2000).

Technology-mediated mentoring is one way to bring to students subject matter experts that can give advice, feedback, and guidance (Kerka, 1998). Using the Internet and other interactive multimedia technologies such as Web sites, e-mail, chatrooms, blogs, vlogs, wikis, podcasts, instant messaging, VoIP, shared desktops, and tele/Web/video conferencing, students and mentors can connect synchronously or asynchronously in a virtual mentoring relationship. The flexibility in scheduling and the elimination of geographical barriers allows students access to a greater number