Chapter 8
Three Degrees of Separation:
Strategies for Mentoring Distanced Transnational Learners

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring connects an experienced mentor with a less experienced mentee to increase the likelihood that the mentee's goals will be accomplished through the mentor's provision of support, knowledge, and judgment. Central to mentoring is the relational bond between participants. This chapter considers the relational implications when mentoring participants are separated by distance, culture, and task. Specifically, it examines the mentoring program of an American college with students in the Czech Republic, where distanced mentoring supports the completion of an undergraduate dissertation. The chapter reviews the various "distances" encountered and their impact on the mentoring relationship. The main thrust of the chapter is to consider changes in the underlying dynamics of mentoring when it moves to a distanced experience. The effectiveness of mentoring depends on recognizing, adjusting, and strengthening these dynamics. Based on this theoretical framework, and the author's extensive distance mentoring practice, actionable strategies are presented for strengthening relational bonds and improving e-mentoring effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Making a connection between the learner and a more experienced guide was central to medieval universities and persists in contemporary higher education and organizational settings. There are different guiding relationships that bring novice and experienced other together; each has it particular structure, dynamics, anticipated outcomes, and relational strength. For example, in coaching and tutoring the focus is on a short-term and intense relationship designed to enhance the acquisition, development, and refinement of defined skills and competencies (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Jackson, 2005).

By contrast, the supervised internship and apprenticeship are longer-term relationships invested with a greater degree of interpersonal connection. These longer-termed relationships are designed to foster the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but they are also significant in socializing novices into the wider community of work or practice. In these longer-term relationships, the novice is viewed as a legitimate peripheral participant and "the central issue in learning is *becoming* a practitioner not learning *about* practice" (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 48, emphasis in original). Apprenticeship models are generally associated with trades, vocations, and the professions; however, in higher education they are seen in "cognitive apprenticeships" that socialize the novice into the academic community and develop a wide range of required meta-cognitive competencies (Dennen, 2004; Dennen & Burner, 2008).

Mentoring is a guiding relationship with a very long history. In the Homeric legends, Mentor was an older friend of Odysseus. Odysseus spent much of his life wandering far from home and was concerned about the wellbeing and development of his only son, Telemachus. He asked Mentor, his older and trusted friend, to befriend Telemachus and to serve as his intellectual guide. Mentor agreed and often visited the young man, providing him with insights and strategies to cope with the multiple difficulties that confronted him. Sometimes, however, it was not Mentor who appeared at these meetings: it was an apparition that took the form of Mentor. When Athena – the grey-eyed deity of wisdom – wished to assist Odysseus, she took the physical form of Mentor and met with the young Telemachus. Through her advice, Telemachus challenged the unwanted suitors who had overrun his father's palace, attempted to discover the fate of his father, and eventually reunited with him. Telemachus never knew that the prudent counsel that he received sometimes came from a mortal, sometimes from Athena. In this archetypal mentoring relationship, the source of encouragement and wisdom was inherently enigmatic.

Today, the mentor's role might be more prosaically understood as that of someone who provides "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). The modern mentor is a more experienced guide – sometimes older, sometimes wiser – who counsels those with less experience in their journeys of self-discovery and development. The contemporary mentor might cringe at mystical associations with higher knowledge and deities of wisdom, but the ambiguity and complexity of the archetypal Homeric relationship still resonates among mentors and mentees, even when they have only a vague familiarity with the legend. As has been remarked "modern discourses in both coaching and mentoring draw on these early descriptions of mentoring" (Garvey, Stokes, & Megginson, 2009, p. 14).

Mentoring relationships are complex and varied. After an extensive review of mentoring programs for disadvantaged and disaffected youth, Pawson (2004) identified three core elements that significantly impacted mentoring success: (a) the difference in the perceived status of those in the mentoring relationship; (b) the difference in their social identity, or social reference group; and (c) the specific interpersonal dynamics employed in

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