Online Mentoring

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The practice of mentoring has existed as long as civilization. Mentoring as a practice was noted in Homer's *The Odyssey,* and a *mentor*, a word from the ancient Greeks, is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as:

a person who acts as guide and adviser to another person, especially one who is younger and less experienced. Later, more generally: a person who offers support and guidance to another; an experienced and trusted counselor or friend; a patron, a sponsor.

Traditionally, a mentor shares his or her experience and knowledge with a less experienced and knowledgeable individual, in a relationship upon which both parties agree.

In recent years, an emergence of online, e-mentoring or telementoring relationships is taking place across the Web, taking the traditional, longstanding face-to-face practice into the electronic environment. Online mentoring relationships exist among formal and informal learners of all ages. Effective e-mentoring requires extensive planning and commitment (National Mentoring Center, 2002).

Online mentoring relationships can take on many forms: professionals in a field mentoring high school students (Field, 2003; O'Neill, Wagner, & Gomez, 1996); graduate students mentoring undergraduate learners in university settings (Easton, 2003); professional women engineers mentoring undergraduate and graduate women students in the science and engineering fields (Muller & Barsion, 2003); adults with varied interests mentoring youth with disabilities (Connecting to Success, 2003), and many more (National Mentoring Partnership, *http://www.mentoring.org*). Recognizing the potential import and efficacy of online mentoring programs, important funding bodies such as the National Science Foundation (Duff, 2000; Muller & Barsion, 2003), as well as such corporate entities like IBM and Alcoa have contributed to the implementation and development of e-mentoring.

It seems self-evident why children and young adults would benefit greatly from mentoring, and, given the current popularity of electronic communications among youth, e-mentoring has great potential: a caring, learning relationship that facilitates "trust, warmth, and support" (Connecting to Success, 2003). Yet, particularly in the realm of higher education, where research continues to suggest that online learners are "voluntarily seeking further education; highly motivated and self-disciplined; older; willing to initiate calls to instructors for assistance; possessing a more serious attitude toward coursework; and already a holder of a college degree" (Easton, 2003, pp. 88-89), it may seem a mentor is unnecessary. Yet, the complexities of online education, from the frustrations of the technology itself to the potential isolation of online environments to learning the nuances of participating in online discussions all contribute to a situation where a mentor provides a much needed virtual hand to hold, for learners of all ages.

WHAT IS E-MENTORING?

Online or e-mentoring uses the principles of a traditional mentoring relationship but changes the means of communication. The National Mentoring Center (2002) defines this emerging practice as "mentoring projects that use technology to facilitate and support mentor relationships" (p. 6). Instead of the mentor and mentee meeting once a week or once a month for social and /or professional development, e-mentors have the ability to meet more frequently and more conveniently. Typically, online mentoring is done through asynchronous communications, e-mail or a discussion forum, thereby freeing the mentor and mentee from the constraints of time, geography, high costs, or other limiting factors. Unfortunately, in a traditional face-to-face mentoring relationship, mentors and mentees may be matched based on geographic proximity despite other significant incompatibilities. E-mentoring facilitates a relationship with potentially greater compatibility, and, it is hoped, efficacy.

There are many types of online mentoring with various goals and objectives (see National Mentoring Partnership, http:www.mentoring.org/). These will certainly contribute to the ways in which a mentoring program is conducted, but some similar characteristics can be described.

Roles and Responsibilities

Connecting to Success (2002) outlines the characteristics of successful mentoring as "a caring relationship, fostering of the young person's skills by a more experienced person, ongoing, regular communication, trust, warmth and support, clear boundaries of the parameters of the mentoring relationship, administration by an organization that oversees the mentoring relationships." A mentoring relationship should be driven by some objective, though objectives may vary considerably across organizations and programs.

The mentors themselves, as Duff (2000) describes, should be "honest, realistic, positive, and encouraging…" (p. 50). The National Mentoring Center (2002) suggests that greater structure and oversight is needed with youth—"The younger the students are, the more important it is that there are facilitators and projects guiding the relationship" (p. 8).

While mentors are indeed disparate in their roles and responsibilities depending on the type of mentoring program, two main areas comprise the roles and contribute to the responsibilities of all online mentors: First, a mentor can provide support, encouragement, friendship, a person with whom to share joys, frustrations, and feelings; and second, a mentor offers professional development advice and information and serves as an intellectual resource. These two areas often intertwine and overlap. For example, the online mentoring of middle and high school science students by professional scientists involves professional advice on student projects in additional to emotional support on the challenges of completing scientific work (O'Neill, Wagner, & Gomez, 1996).

In an online university or college classroom setting, mentors can assume active roles different from other online mentors, such as those in the Connecting to Success or Ursuline Academy's (Duff, 2000) programs, which are more traditional types of mentoring. The online mentor in undergraduate or graduate online learning can be a supplementary figure to the course instructor, but he or she should not be construed in the formal sense as a "teaching assistant" but, instead, as a "learning assistant." The online mentor negotiates among the instructor, the online classroom and its technologies, and the students' various questions, needs, frustrations, concerns, and successes. The complexities of online learning contribute to a multi-faceted role for the online mentor. As e-mentoring develops, more elaborate roles and responsibilities are emerging.

In online higher education, for example, Albrekston (1995) sees a mentor as one who oversees the asynchronous discussion boards, keeps students on target, answers questions, and posts materials to re-orient students. He suggests that online mentors within a class should not be "heavy handed" in moderating online discussions but should work with students to ensure class objectives are met. Another example of online mentoring suggests that mentors do indeed embody "more central teaching roles" (Easton, 2003, p. 94); the online mentors in Easton's study were described by a faculty member as the "first point of contact to students regarding clarification and encouragement… The most important things they do are to stay in touch with the students, provide quick response to the lead faculty, and do consistent and meaningful grading." Moreover, the online mentor is an "advocate for the students." Easton's research further reveals that mentors see themselves as "a cheerleader, a handholder, and a grader. I create and build relationships with the students, so they feel comfortable coming to me with questions" (2003, p. 97).

What roles and responsibilities does a mentee want of an online mentor? Research by Buchanan (2004) reveals that online graduate students desire a mentor who can straddle the support-friendship/professional advice continuum. Specifically, mentees in a graduate-level program of library and information science expressed a need for a mentor:

- who will ease intimidation of the technology and technical issues in online learning;
- who will help immerse new students into an online program;
- who will give them guidance on the technology itself, but also, on coursework, professional development options, and navigating the institutional maze;
- who will help ease feelings of isolation; and