

Managing The Present, Repairing For The Future: An Online Mentorship Course For Adult Learners

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MENTORSHIP: PRESENT AND FUTURE NEEDS

Thirty-three percent of new teachers leave the profession within 3 years and in five years, nearly half (46%) are gone (Ponick, 2003). In nursing, eager new graduates are devoured in their first 3-6 months in the workforce. Understaffing due to cutbacks in funding and the phenomenon of “eating our young”, as a factor in nursing’s horizontal violence, is a prevalent factor in driving novices from the profession. Hardly a day goes by when one does not hear tales of a professional group in a quandary over ways to attract and retain their novice employees. Why would a profession bring well-educated, optimistic novices into the ranks, only to let them crash and burn in a few months (Ponick, 2003)?

Occupational futurists predict that in the first decade of the 21st century, 8 out of every 10 jobs will be information-intensive, and by 2010, one-fourth of all new jobs will involve technology (Jukes, 1997; Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1990; National Science Foundation, 1997; Nugent, 2001). The challenge of preparing learners for the skyrocketing growth of technology-focused jobs and information-intensive functions is compounded by the prediction that by 2010, those entering the workforce will hold numerous jobs over their lifetime, and will likely undergo 5-7 complete careers changes (Jukes, 1997; Nugent, 2001). In other words, not only will they need to be competent in field-related technologies and information systems; they will need to be proficient in informatics and technology, versatility, support, and critical thinking abilities to transfer learning from one job and career to another.

Riel and Fulton (2001) propose reform in the way we include technology in education advocating that we “do something different, something powerful, something appropriate for all learners in the new millennium” (p. 82). In addition to the need to prepare students to be literate in technology and versatile in information management for career success, the professionals of tomorrow will also need to think quickly, adapt to changing conditions, build alliances to address

large-scale challenges, and work comfortably in a global information environment (Jones, 1990; Morgan, 1993; Riel & Fulton, 2001). One approach that is gaining in popularity is the inclusion of online mentorship programs designed to attract, retain, educate, and upgrade the skills of students and novice employees.

MENTORSHIP: MEANING AND RELEVANCE

The traditional definition of mentorship comes from Homer's epic poem, the *Odyssey*. In this tale, the Greek hero Odysseus journeyed far and for years at a time. He entrusted Mentor, (Athena, goddess of war and wisdom, disguised in male form) with the care and education of his son, Telemachus. Thus, traditional mentorship emerged as a relationship consisting of an older, wiser and/or more experienced person who functions as a wise teacher and confidante, coaching, inspiring, protecting, and, helping the young to realize their aspirations and develop positive qualities as well. Mentors have helped mentees to learn skills necessary for survival and advancement in their fields by teaching them the unwritten organizational rules and values; immersing them in situations where they learn the importance of the right timing for requests; helping them to network with influential persons; and by guiding them in realizing when it is time to let something go (Andersen, 1990; Eisenman & Thornton, 1999; Knouse, 2001).

Mentees seek help in the form of advice, role-modeling, instruction, and support from the mentor. They prefer the qualities of accessibility, dependability, expertise, and trust in mentors, as these characteristics make it possible to ask for help when it is needed, obtain the assistance they need, and know that they can be assured of confidentiality in sharing information and exposing their vulnerabilities. The key criteria differentiating mentorship from other relationships is the determination by the mentee that transformative learning has occurred as a result of the dyad itself (Andersen, 1986). This occurs when the right balance of freedom and protectiveness is maintained, encouraging risk-taking and new ventures paced according to the mentee's readiness to learn. It relies on the nurturance of trust and mutual respect, and is reserved only for those prepared to go the full distance.

Although traditional mentoring has long been recognized as a crucial factor in transformative learning, career advancement and the nurturance of self-confidence, it's a labour-intensive and costly relationship. Furthermore, success is contingent upon conditions that can be difficult to achieve in today's academic and work environments, namely the establishment of trust, the provision of close

and frequent contact, and long-term commitment on the part of both parties (McC Campbell, 2002). Considering the fast-paced society we live in, can we continue to view traditional mentorship as reasonable goal in contemporary academic and work environments? Do other possibilities exist for mentorship; approaches that satisfy the mentoring needs of individuals in our fast-paced, technologically-oriented society?

MENTORING: EVOLUTION OR TRENDINESS?

Mentoring has become very popular in recent times. Popular to the point that if one wants to promote a program, the mere mention of the word, “mentorship” attracts participants like flies are drawn to sugar. While the traditional definition of mentorship may be what students have in mind when they engage in mentoring programs, the actual definition of mentorship has evolved to include just about all helping situations, even those involving a few fleeting email contacts. This change emerged as a result of educators wanting to prepare graduates for the workplace, employers wanting to reduce the costs associated with traditional face-to-face mentorships; organizations seeking ways to attract and retain employees in a competitive job market; the availability of technology that has made it possible for people to develop and maintain relationships over time and distance; and the employer’s realization that employee development is closely linked to a company’s economic growth (Stanek, 2001).

Recent variations labeled as mentoring programs now include telementoring where three emails from a student or novice to an experienced practitioner suffice for the term, “mentoring” (Eisenman & Thornton, 1999; O’Neil, Wagner, & Gomez, 1996).; peer mentorship in which novices support each other in a time-limited learning context; online team mentoring designed to replace one-to-one mentoring with teams of mentees receiving social support and feedback on work performance from several work mentors (Hollingshead & McGrath, 1995); and mentoring circles that provide one mentor to several protégés (Kram & Hall, 1996) – an interesting concept since the term “protégé” is reserved for the “one” novice whom the mentor has specifically chosen, groomed more than others for the purposes of carrying forward the “torch” of the mentor’s work and ideas. Predictably, the mentor circle approach was found to be less effective than others due to the lack of individual attention needed by the “protégés”.

Virtual mentoring provides mentees with access to mentor web pages, list servers for email exchanges, chat rooms, links to reading lists, and tutorial training for into the next generation (Knouse, 2001; Single & Miller, 2001; Spruell & Muhammad, 2000; Wah, 2000). One may ask, however, whether these programs provide mentorship or are they just the snake oil of corporate advertising? How do we distinguish between that which is actually an evolution of mentorship, and that which is something else?

EXPERIENCES IN TELEMENTORING, E-MENTORING, VIRTUAL MENTORING AND ONLINE MENTORING

Eisenman and Brown (1999) developed a telementoring arrangement between new and previous graduates of their teacher development program to provide support, decrease isolation among new graduates, and provide opportunities for the novice to ask “how-to” questions of experienced teachers. Data from focus groups and interview sessions confirmed the usefulness of telementoring for receiving support and practical advice. Face-to-face interactions were suggested to sustain the network through periodic on-site meetings (81). Borja (2002) found the University of Illinois’ telementoring Novice Teacher Support Project was effective in providing pedagogical support for novice teachers seeking answers to questions such as, “Is there ever a time when it is appropriate to bump a student up a small amount in order for them to pass a class?” (12).

Rodriguez and Brown (2000) developed online mentoring activities for a junior-level nutrition course based on the definition of mentoring as a common method of facilitating professional role integration (62). Using e-mail as a substitute for face-to-face communication, they recruited mentors from education and practice, obtaining a commitment of a minimum of 3 e-mails with a student. The approach was deemed useful for learning about the role of nutritionist, and appropriate for rural students who would not otherwise have contact with nutrition experts. However, face-to-face mentoring was acknowledged as having the added benefit of immediacy of response over telementoring.

The need for added face-to-face mentoring opportunities was not consistent. For those living in rural and remote areas of Canada and other countries, for example, telementoring programs such as The International Telementor Centre (ITC) has been successful in pairing elementary school students with adult professionals who spend 30-40 minutes each week communicating online about schoolwork.

Mentees reported it has kept them out of gangs and contributed to their academic success (Rea, 2001). Israel's Learning Communities of Students and Teachers uses a telementoring model that has enhanced communication between the two groups. Are these programs examples of mentorship?

Knause (2001) reviewed the GlobalMecca program for African American professionals, the Women in Transition Sharing Strengths (WITSS) program for women returning to the workforce, the Young Adult Professional Associates program, a broad-spectrum career mentor-matching program in New York, and the US Navy Interpersonal Command program, all of which are described as virtual mentoring and telementoring programs. In contrast with Clutterbuck's (1991) claim that formal one-to-one mentoring arrangements are needed to break the "glass ceiling" for minority women, Knause (2001) found that these programs had the advantage of providing mentoring for women and minorities who could not find appropriate mentors. The reviewed programs also succeeded in providing mentees reading lists, social support, enhancing feelings of confidence by coaching new hires through job-related problems. Although the qualities of the programs were evaluated, there was no indication of the definition of mentorship used in determining whether participants had experienced mentoring or something else.

As Oliver and Aggleton (2002) indicate, we now have no clear consensus on the definition of mentoring, nor can we distinguish pseudo-mentoring from actual mentoring, or even be sure whether mentoring has occurred in any given situation. They suggest that a working definition of mentorship is of paramount importance in creating all types of mentoring programs (33). In addition to clarifying the meaning and intent of mentoring in various usages, clarification of the terms, E-mentoring, telementoring, virtual mentoring, and online mentoring is also warranted.

BECOMING A MENTOR AT KWANTLEN: THE ONLINE COURSE

At Kwantlen University College, the anticipated rise in the number of jobs requiring technological competence in the near future, combined with the absence of a formalized mentoring program open to a variety of professions led to the development of a mentorship course designed to educate people for mentoring relationships using the environment that will be most comfortable to them by the time they graduate with a baccalaureate degree. Students who have enrolled in the

course come to us from business administration, the health sciences, and liberal education studies.

CAHS 3200: Becoming A Mentor, is a 3-credit liberal education course offered entirely online. The course runs for 12 weeks in asynchronous mode, to provide students with flexibility in accessing the course at times convenient for them. Students access the course through Netscape which takes them to a user-friendly screen of streamlined selections including the instructor's biography and welcome, the course introduction, syllabus, calendar announcements, resources, weekly assignments, a student lounge, discussion area, and journaling section.

The course is open to all students. Because the range of computer literacy varies widely amongst students, telephone contact and occasionally an office visit with the instructor is needed to allay anxiety and walk students through the processes of accessing information, posting replies to questions, and learning how to submit assignments for the first time. Although rudimentary in nature, students learn these skills in under 15 minutes. That personal contact and that time, however, can have a pivotal effect on the student's ability to succeed in the course. For those more comfortable with online offerings, the posted directions suffice for an orientation to the course.

A modified version of traditional mentoring is used, consisting of a relationship between an mentor who is an experienced professional in the student's field of interest, and the student as a mentee who can articulate mentorship goals to a mentor. The relationship is seen as going through introductory, working, and termination stages. The introductory stage includes getting to know each other, exploring interests, negotiating goals, a learning contract, and the expectations of both parties. The working phase includes the establishment of trust, progress toward goals, feedback, and the testing of limits. The termination stage may include the end of contact and the preparation of the mentee for the next stage in their career, or it may focus on transformation in the relationship with the mentee and mentor becoming friends, and the mentee testing out the role of mentor with a mentee of his/her own.

COURSE TEACHING & LEARNING: LEVEL I

The course was designed to include three specific levels of learning. The levels were emphasized as a way of addressing different modes of learning, and the

benefits derived from telementoring, on-site mentoring, and virtual mentorship. The first level is the relationship that students have with the course instructor. The relationship emulates the stages of mentorship teaching students, for example, how to establish a working contract with a mentor by having them establish one with the course instructor. This level focuses primarily on process-oriented aspects of mentoring relationships occurring in the context of the course instructor modeling the roles and functions of a mentor while asking the student questions that would be essential to help a mentee reach their personal and professional goals. Students are asked to “check-in” when they have found their way to the welcome note and assignment sections. They receive individualized “welcomes” to their check-in letting them know they have succeeded in entering the course. We share interests and preferences, arriving at an informal learning contract that applies to course requirements, individualized assignments, student-identified areas of growth, and their learning and teaching preferences. We form a partnership agreement that clarifies the terms of our relationship including a discussion of mutual respect, preferences for problem-solving and learning goals. One of the mentee’s greatest fears is the concern that conflict will arise and they won’t know how to handle it, so we discuss this as well, also acknowledging that we may slip into comfortable ways of relating which ignore conflict, but that we will be diligent in trying our best to address it as it arises. This level addresses all aspects of the working and termination stages of mentoring relationships.

COURSE TEACHING & LEARNING: LEVEL II

The second level of teaching and learning in *Becoming A Mentor* is structured to facilitate understanding and appreciation of mentoring processes and challenges, along with opportunities to experience the benefits and challenges of peer support and mentorship. This combined content and process-oriented arrangement involves students in read introductory lectures and consulting varied resources (scholarly articles, animations, video streams, photos, TV programs, etc) on topics such as the meaning, relevance, and application of mentoring in varied contexts; the mentorship challenges of the “glass ceiling”, age and cultural differences; the benefits and transitions of mentoring relationships; and toxic mentoring. These introductory lectures include discussion questions that serve to focus students on a topic. Students are asked to reflect on a topic, relate readings to their own work situation, and post discussion questions pertaining to the course resources. In this way, pedagogical topics and issues can be addressed from a theoretical

perspective, in the work situation, and in discussions with peers and the course instructor.

COURSE TEACHING & LEARNING: LEVEL III

Level III learning experiences focus on graded assignments. These are developed using the negotiative process of contract grading. The assignments cover three streams: personal, professional, and peer teamwork development. The first stream for assignments requires that the student's choice be effective in raising awareness of strengths as a mentee and a future mentor. Among the activities that students have chosen are the re-creation of their life story using drawings, metaphors of rivers, trees and houses, inserting photographs or other artifacts, and providing a narrative of strengths and areas for development that emerged in their journey. The second, or professional stream, requires students to apply what they have learned in a real-life situation, preferably to their present jobs. This assignment includes interviewing a mentor or mentee, establishing a working contract, and developing a learning plan based on goals that are mutually agreeable to mentor and mentee.

The third stream, peer teamwork development, requires students to complete a group project on a topic of interest to them. The project significance resides in the development of collaborative problem-solving and sharing skills; learning from each other's experiences and comprehension of course materials. This is a very effective aspect of the course, particularly valued for the opportunities students have to receive practical advice about concerns such as how to approach a perpetually-angry employee to discuss their behaviour, and ways to set limits on their own time for mentees who seem bottomless in their need for support.

ASSIGNMENT: PERSONAL JOURNEYS

The presence of traditional mentorship and the effectiveness of the course come through most clearly in the assignment called *Personal Journeys*. The assignment instructs students in the stages of mentoring relationships, focusing on self-awareness, the identification of strengths and areas for development, and realistic goal-setting. In this assignment, students use a variety of media to photograph or draw their life journey, revealing only what they wish to share in relationship to mentorship. Submissions have included the student's movement through rooms

in a house, showing the impact of divorce on his level of confidence, and interest in volunteering as a Big Brother. Others have included photos from clinical placements in Tibet, revealing intercultural understanding and areas needing further development to work in a global community. Students comment this activity has transformational power in that they are changed forever by it; made aware that their struggles made them strong, and of how they can be effective mentors to others.

An array of learning resources is provided to address student learning preferences and to show, by example, how one might vary teaching with a mentee. Peer support systems and peer mentoring consists of weekly participation assignments in the form of readings, searches, group work, and participation in discussions. The course aims to engage students in activities that will identify their mentoring needs, and develop skills to become effective mentees and mentors. Course content includes the characteristics, stages, challenges, and rewards of mentoring relationships. Students analyze organizational cultures and explore topics such as the roles and responsibilities of mentors and mentees, distinguishing mentees from protégés, models of teaching and learning, and giving and receiving feedback.

The results have been positive in terms of student comments regarding the usefulness of the course. When asked of they experienced mentorship, according to the traditional definition, the responses have been mixed. Most students felt that the course provided mentorship in the online situation, but room for improvement as needed in finding experienced professionals willing to commit to remain with the mentees throughout the course and to invest seriously in the relationship. Comments included that people at work were helpful, but busy, and students felt they were adding to the mentor's already overtaxed workload. Plans are underway to pre-select mentors for students to enrich this part of the course.

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