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# E-mentoring in Three Voices

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## Abstract

This research shares the experiences of two colleagues who engaged in an e-mentoring relationship for a period of one academic term. Their candid and reflective comments are interspersed among the voices of the best practices literature.

Mentoring is a traditional method of passing knowledge and skills on from an established professional to a junior or new member of the field or discipline. Education has long found mentoring effective and with the advent of online teaching, comes online mentoring, sometimes referred to as e-mentoring, cyber-mentoring, or even virtual mentoring. Instead of actual face-to-face meetings, e-mentoring uses asynchronous, electronic communications to establish and support the mentoring relationship. Knowledge and skills are still shared and transferred but the mentor and mentee may never meet in person. Perhaps the best definition for e-mentoring comes from Mihram (2004) which states: The merger of mentoring with electronic communications to develop and sustain mentoring relationships linking a senior individual (mentor) and a lesser skilled or experienced individual (protégé) independent of geography or scheduling conflicts.

Benefits of e-mentoring include freedom from place and time constraints, flexibility, and both the openness and reflection that electronic communication affords. Due to the release from geographic and time elements, mentor pairings can come from anywhere, not just the colleague next door or across the campus. This can increase trust as the impartial mentor will have little immediate impact of the future of the junior professional (Single and Single, 2005b).

Drawbacks would include lack of structure, lack of administrative support, and no long range planning (Single and Muller, 1999). If e-mentoring is to be widely recognized as an effective strategy, then it must be supported on all levels and accepted within the educational culture, much the same way as traditional mentoring (Anthony and Kritsonis, 2006). Taking e-mentoring to its reasonable conclusion, it speaks to the creation of e-learning communities. A learning community consists of like minded professionals sharing canon, practice, assessment, and innovation (Hughes and Kritsonis, 2006) and its e-learning variant does the same, but exists on the Internet. A learning community has to begin somewhere and e-mentoring on a one to one basis is a place to start.

Directors of distance learning programs should be made aware of the benefits of faculty mentoring in the teaching and development of new teaching assignments, especially when the course is an established course and/or has multiple instructors. While instruction is generally provided in the physical aspects of course development with training on using the instructional interface, less time is spent familiarizing junior faculty with the actual course content and making sure that the instructor is comfortable with the course content.

This is a story of e-mentoring, told in three voices: the voices of the best practices literature, a tenured professor, and a junior professor. The two colleagues were assigned to teach two different sections of the same online course on information storage and retrieval and it would be the first time teaching this course for the junior member. While the course was not specifically aimed at a cohort group, it was a required course and followed the typical academic calendar. The two formed an e-mentoring relationship and the addition of the best practices literature provides the structure for this personal case study. As the key elements of a successful e-mentoring relationship are revealed, candid and reflective comments from the two professors share what they learned, what worked, and what they would have changed.

## E-Mentoring by the Books

According to the literature, there are several areas that should be addressed in a successful e-mentoring relationship. These areas include structure, objectives, administrative support, technical support, communication tools, training and support, and finally assessment. But to be honest, our first experience with e-mentoring came about without any of these areas being addressed prior to the experience. On reflection, though, we discovered that many of these areas fell into place naturally and others were not that important to our situation.

### *The Beginning*

**J** . *It all began when I was assigned to teach a required course on information storage and retrieval. When I earned my Masters of Library Science, we had one database—on a disk—and we were each allowed 12 minutes to search it. For my PhD, I had some of the greats in the field as professors—Tefko Saracevic, Paul Kantor, Nick Belkin—but we talked theory and, to be honest, I kept quiet a lot. As I approached teaching the course for the first time, I felt that I was a pretty good searcher, but had my doubts about being able to impart any worthwhile knowledge to students, especially the technical aspects. Understanding the overall concept is one thing; teaching the details is another. I*

*decided to put my pride aside and ask Lynn, who was considered lead teacher for the course, for some serious help.*

*L. I had been with the school about 5 years when Janet arrived and I had taught the class in question for several years, and had taught it in person, half interactive TV and in-person, and finally completely online. I had worked as a graduate assistant to a former professor who taught the class and of course, I had actually taken it so the nature of this particular course and all methods of delivery were second-hand to me. But Janet was new and the class was new to Janet and I wanted to help. We just seemed to fall into an e-mentoring type of relationship. Even though we were physically accessible to each other, we simply went the same way our classes went, completely online. I had taught this class several times and liked the content and the material. I wanted Janet to like it also and to do well teaching it.*

#### *Structure*

A successful e-mentoring relationship should have a *formal structure* (Mihram 2004). While colleagues may naturally go to each other for questions or information, the degree of mentoring formality needs to be based on the purpose of the mentoring program, the learning objectives, and what the sponsoring institution expects as results. Research indicates that beginning professionals will benefit more from a more formalized mentoring program (Sweeny 1993). The actual nature of the mentoring structure could vary for each profession or discipline. Mentoring should evolve from a voluntary, mutually beneficial interaction to the status of a program (Nickols, 2002). The program should include planning, organization, and assessment (Villar and Alegre, 2006; Luna and Cullen, 1995; Buchanan, Myers, and Hardin, 2005).

In general, there should be a *time period* attached to the mentoring and the time period can follow the academic calendar, a project length, or an arbitrary six or twelve months. The structure of a typical mentoring situation may include the time frame, the actual people involved, the reason for the mentoring, learning objectives and activities, and built-in assessment. Mihram also suggests that there may need for training for both mentors and mentees to facilitate the “coaching” aspect of the relationship (2004).

From an administrative perspective, the 1999 work by Single and Muller lays out a model based on planning, structure, and assessment. Their work provides concrete advice on recruiting mentors, matching pairings, training the mentors, and assessing the pairings (1999). This resource would be useful to a department or college thinking of establishing an e-mentoring program.

*L. Due to the academic nature of a term, we had a natural beginning and ending point and a natural structure to our efforts, even though we did not set out following the best practices. The course already had my syllabus (which we both used) and weekly modules. These kept us on a track we were quite used to and so there was a good degree of structure (accidental though on our part) to our e-mentoring relationship.*

*J. The course is offered entirely online with three optional face-to-face (f2f) meetings so it seemed reasonable that most of the mentoring would occur online. Since our offices are just down the hall from each other and we are generally on campus together at least one or two days a week, we initially began by meeting f2f. Lynn showed me her BlackBoard interface and put me in the course as a teaching assistant. This was mid-semester before I taught the course for the first time. This did give me a chance to audit the course although I did not take full advantage—okay, I took very little advantage—of the situation. Lynn also shared her syllabus and tests with me and gave me permission to copy the course into my BlackBoard Section.*

Some literature suggests a *statement of purpose* (US Quality 2001) or a contract of sorts could be used. In the statement of purpose, in addition to items mentioned above, the plan should be realistic and obtainable. If a new junior professor is faced with designing and creating a new online course, one month and complete readiness is simply not reasonable.

The actual *pairing* of junior to senior member can be informal, but the literature suggests instituting a program to recruit, train, and create the mentor pairs (Single and Muller 1999; Dahle, 1998). Research on pairings found that at one university using face to face mentoring, pairs were made either from within the same department or the senior faculty members came from outside of the department of the junior faculty members. At the end of the program, the across department pairs rated their mentoring more highly (Boyle and Boice, 1998). Junior faculty reported more freedom in discussing issues and concerns with the cross-department senior faculty member because that member would have no impact on the retention, promotion or tenure of the junior faculty member. Obviously in this type of pairing, the structure in place would have to be formal as most junior faculty do not know many faculty members outside of their own department.

*Scheduled communication*, both formal and informal, should be planned (Villar and Alegre, 2006) and communication should be regular and consistent (US Quality Standards, 2001). While there may be daily emails of the more informal ‘how do I handle’ type, there should be scheduled time for more comprehensive communication (Sanchez and Harris, 1996). A new professional will be able to follow directions exactly in order to answer the ‘how do I handle’ type of inquiry but the new professional also needs to know the why, the how, the history, and the elements of the problems and how they interact.

*J. After our initial meetings, our conversations about the course were almost entirely online. I would send Lynn an e-mail, often a panicked e-mail, with a question that a student had asked that I could not answer or did not feel confident about answering. Lynn always responded in less than twenty-four hours so I was able to respond to my students in a fairly timely manner. I also learned that I needed to monitor Lynn’s class discussion board. When it came time for the first test, I discovered that her class had really discussed some things in class that I had just glossed over. As a result, I had to eliminate a couple of questions and make one question an extra credit.*

*L. It seemed to me that we communicated almost exclusively with email and I have almost no recollection of physical meetings. This is interesting to me because we work down the hall from each other, saw each other at faculty meetings, and in other capacities, yet it seems I considered this e-mentoring relationship divorced from my physical realities.*

#### *Potential Communication Issues*

**J** . One big issue was over the recall/precisions “math” problem. I worked it and sent it to Lynn but had the wrong answer. She e-mailed me back and tried to explain it by e-mail. I understood it better, but still couldn't reproduce it. I finally had my engineer husband work it for me. I don't consider this a problem of the e-mentoring but of my lack of math ability.

**L** . The formulas really worried me. Teaching a mathematical formula online is a challenge. Teaching it to someone else so they can teach it to others is an enormous challenge. I found myself worrying whether I was making myself understood and I spent time with the email trying to use clear images and descriptive words. Once, I found myself explaining out loud to myself, thinking that would give me the best language and once, I wrote it down on paper first, again seeking good, clear language for my email response. I also found this to be challenging my ‘professor’ self. If I was a teacher, then surely I could explain this well. I have to wonder if my students got the best explanation ever when we got to the formulas due to my efforts at clarity with my mentoring partner.

To review the literature so far, an e-mentoring relationship should have an overt structure, with an established time period, a statement of purpose, and scheduled communication.

### **Learning Objectives**

The mentoring contract or statement of purpose for the mentoring relationship should have learning objectives specified. Learning objectives set the goals that the instructional partner and the sponsoring organization want the junior professional to accomplish. These objectives are usually quantifiable and relate to all important aspects of the covered content. Within an academic course, a learning objective might be that 75 percent of all students in the junior professor's class achieve a grade of B or higher on the material. Another learning objective aimed at the junior professor might include creating one new, original module for the course to be used by both mentoring partners.

*L . Here again, without formal planning on our part, learning objectives were already built into the situation. The students would ask questions if we were not covering the content or not clearly covering the content. The students would face assessment tools that we created, based on the content we covered. The best practices clearly mean to create the objectives from the start and we should have done that. But in the academic arena, one can always count on the students to be a bellwether on how one is doing. One learning objective Janet introduced to my teaching technique was the idea of reflective or interpretive discussion forums. Janet comes from a literature based background where questions about response and interpretation are significant. I can honestly say I don't think I ever asked students how they felt about a particular search, for example. I would expect them to evaluate the search by mathematical precision (how many of the retrieved documents were useful), recall (how many of the total number of relevant documents were retrieved), and percentages. For the first time, my students were asked questions about how they felt regarding the success of their searching efforts and I think I will continue with that type of question, not in place of, but along with, the more concise, precise forums.*

*J . The one change that I definitely made was to the discussion board forums. Lynn 's forums usually called for very precise information. Mine was more for discussing, for expressing feelings, for answering questions. I would post some general discussion threads and leave it wide open. I do all my courses this way and I'm most comfortable with it. The first time I taught the class, this may not have been to my students' advantage but the second time, I was able to adapt my style to fit the course better.*

### **Administrative Support**

The mentoring relationship will not succeed if it does not have administrative sanctions. Both partners are committing time and expertise to the mentoring relationship and this relationship needs to be seen as part of their jobs, not as something done after work, or before work, or extra-curricular-ly. This time commitment may take away from other job-related functions and the support of management will make this flow easily and appropriately. The administration should clearly articulate that mentoring is part of the senior professional's job assignment and equally part of the learning curve for the junior professionals.

*J . This is an interesting concept in that we have no formal mentoring program set up for our department. Generally, a junior faculty finds one or two senior faculty members they are comfortable with and informally “drafts” them as mentors. Since I semi-knew Lynn before I was hired (she was a PhD student when I was an MLS student and many of my fellow students had told me she was a great teacher) and she was still junior faculty when I was a visiting lecturer, I gravitated to her when I had questions about anything. Working together in a more formal relationship seemed a natural progression.*

### **Technical Support**

Technical support is vital. The mentored professor will need constant availability to the Internet, social networking sites, email sites, and more structured, online courseware such as BlackBoard. In the academic arena, this is generally not a problem. The technology should be appropriate to the type of e-mentoring program planned and for the participants. A careful evaluation should be done regarding any technology requirements and there should be an assessment of the roles and responsibilities of both the participants and the participating institutions. In addition, there will be technical questions that will need to be answered such as who will archive the mentoring communications? What policies are in place for privacy, security, ownership, and protection of any data? ( US quality, 2001).

There are three levels of online mentoring and the technical support should be adjusted to the nature of the mentoring in place. There is CMC (computer mediated communication) only, which is totally online; CMC Primary, where the online element is the main means of communication but can be supplemented with phone calls or meetings at annual conferences; and CMC Supplemental, where the primary relationship is face to face, supplemented by online mentoring (SJB Research Consulting, 2004).

### **Communication Tools**

Both synchronous and asynchronous tools will be necessary. Synchronous tools (both parties engaged at the same time) include the telephone,

instant messaging, web-based chat or virtual chat, and virtual meeting software (Wolfe 2005). With some of the virtual meeting software, the mentoring pair can both see the computer of the mentor. Certainly, video conferencing is an excellent tool as well, as both participants can engage in communication with the richness of body language and nuance, while both stay in their own geographic location.

Asynchronous tools (both parties engaged at differing times) include email, discussion forums, or blogs (Wolfe, 2005). The pair can set up an advising blog where both can go to share, teach, explain, and learn. "Teachers, and librarians, often work in isolation from their peers and are expected to develop a level of competency on their own. Online discussion groups assume an important mentoring role as an information exchange opportunity" (Bray, 2003).

*J. I did worry about the number of e-mails that I sent Lynn . I tried to keep it to a reasonable number. I found that if I waited, there was usually a student in the class who could come up with a clear explanation. If I knew that this explanation was correct, I would just leave it. If not or if the questions continued, then I would ask Lynn . I liked this approach because it allowed students to show their knowledge and gave me some "breathing room" to try to figure out the answer or to ask for help.*

*L . I never found the number of emails excessive, never. I find that interesting because sometimes I am drowning in email yet I always opened one of Janet's with anticipation. It was like being given a puzzle and hoping I had the skills to offer the solution.*

Alternative mentoring tools are also useful and these include sites that are somewhat removed from the immediacy of the mentoring relationship but still provide resources about the profession (Packard, 2003). These types of tools would include monitoring profession specific listservs, online journals that deal with teaching online, or frequenting sites about e-mentoring, such as mentor.net. These are additional means of socializing a new academic into the field.

### **Training, Coaching, and Support**

In a formalized mentoring program, both mentors and mentees should undergo some type of training so that expectations are clearly delineated and understood by both parties. A wide array of resources and strategies about mentoring should be presented. Mentors need to learn that they must maintain confidentiality and serve as a non-judgmental resource (Bicksler, 2004). Seminars and workshops that provide mutual support for mentors are a useful tool ( Denmark and Podsen, 2000). The junior professional needs to know the parameters of the relationship, what is expected of the mentee, and the mechanics of the relationship. Mentee training can be coordinated with the mentor training or it could be a separate entity. No matter what format is used, mentoring is a continuous learning experience, not an event or series of events (Free Management Library, 1997).

Another aspect of e-mentoring involves emotional intangibles. A positive e-mentoring relationship will provide a comfort zone with a built-in safety net but both participants will need to be able to manage vulnerability. *Holding your hand from a distance* is the apt title of an article about online mentoring and it captures some of the supportive nature of mentoring (Buchanan, Myers, and Hardin, 2005). Providing peer support, as suggested by Denmark and Podsen (2000) gives the new professional a place to ask questions freely without worry about censure.

*L. There is much written about the vulnerability of a mentoring relationship. The junior professional often has to ask many questions and worries about whether they have asked too many questions or too few. But that vulnerability also works with the established professional. It is not pleasant to find out you do not know the answer to a very reasonable question put to you by your colleague and having to say 'I don't know' offered regular helpings of humility.*

*J . Trust and respect are definitely key elements of the relationship. This type of e-mentoring would not work with someone you feel would be judgmental or disparaging*

There are varying findings in the literature about the actual nature of the mentor pairing. Generally, formal mentoring implies there is a structure in place from the top down, but there is a wide variety of whether, in a formal mentoring situation, the mentor can be assigned to the junior member, or the pair self-select. Informal mentoring usually means no formal structure was in place and the pair did self-select.

Regarding self-selection, some findings indicate that the current trend is to have a formal program with self-selection of pairs or at least have the parties be engaged in the selection process (Fisher 2004). A 2004 study on faculty mentoring revealed that 63.5 percent of the surveyed faculty (n=96) preferred a voluntary program where mentees selected their own mentor (Faculty Senate Task Force 2004). In Read's 1997 study, the majority of air force school instructors preferred formal mentoring but stated that "a mentorship program (formal or informal) was very important in any instructor environment (Read 1997) while more current research found that it was the attitude of mentoring and the willingness on the part of faculty that seemed to be the most beneficial (Cawyer, Simonds, and Davis 2002) and that accessibility was such a large factor in successful mentoring that it militated against assigning mentors but rather worked for self-selected pairing. A survey of 1,162 employees found that formal (assigned) mentors are more likely than informal mentors to be marginal (Ragins, Cotton and Miller 2000).

In light of the experiences related in this article, it seems the ideal situation would be a formal program with self-selection of pairs or at least a voice in the pairings. Administrators of distance education programs will probably want to first work on creating a structure for mentoring and let informal pairing be the norm in creating the mentoring dyads.

### **Assessment**

Formative evaluations should be implemented in order to obtain regular feedback. Such assessment can be at any regular interval determined by the participants and should reflect on the learning objectives previously determined (Bicksler, 2004; Mihram, 2004; Villar and Alegre, 2006; Denmark and Podsen, 2000). Assessments are, of necessity, determined by the proposed length of the mentoring relationship. Assessment methods can consist of reflective journals, checklists, rubrics based on the objectives, face-to-face meetings, site visits, job performance ratings, exit interviews, and informal discussions (Bicksler, 2004; Denmark and Podsen, 2000, USQuality 2001). In the case of

the informal e-mentoring described here, the assessment came in the form of the tests and quizzes administered to our students.

*J. The only time we actually met face-to-face was after quiz two which required the students to do a building block, specific facet, successive fractions, and a citation pearl growing search. I was as lost as some of my students were. Not only did Lynn walk me through each of these, but she also let me see how she graded some of her quizzes. By the time I taught the class the second time, I was much more comfortable and felt much better about it.*

*L. Quizzes were a time of concern for both of us. Teachers always worry whether the students 'got' the concepts and understood what was taught. With online classes, the worry is even more intense because feedback is not immediate, like with a f2f class. But this time, I worried about both of our quizzes. Would Janet do okay? Would her students perform well? Would my students do okay? Would I perform well?*

### *Our Feelings*

*J. All in all, this was a very good experience. I gained confidence in a safe environment about a subject I was not very comfortable with teaching. The students received the benefit of an experienced teacher's knowledge without her having to actually be responsible for the class. While I may have lacked some of the knowledge it would have nice to have, I was able to empathize with the students and freely admitted to them that this was not my area of expertise and that I was relearning much of what they were learning. Therefore, areas that I was having trouble with understanding meant that I was more patient and perhaps more lenient than I might have been if I were more comfortable with the subject. Course evaluations were good and students did as well as Lynn 's students on most quizzes and the final project. I have since taught the course a second time during a semester when Lynn was not teaching it but I still felt free to e-mail her questions and did so more than once. We are both teaching the course this semester and the e-mentoring continues although on a much more infrequent basis.*

*When Lynn and I began our collaboration, it never entered my mind that we might be doing something groundbreaking. From the very beginning, I had considered her a mentor and we had a good working relationship. Still, asking questions about procedures and policies in the department is much different—and much “safer”—than letting a colleague know that you are lacking knowledge in an academic area. Therefore, it seems to me that for e-mentoring to really work, there must be an element of trust between the two people involved.*

*L. In researching the literature on e-mentoring, our e-mentoring relationship, if graded by the best practices, would fail. The structure and the time period were accidental, the assessment was not aimed at us, and we did not have specific learning objectives. While the best practices can guide another pair or another program, somehow our relationship worked out. Not every department has a formal e-mentoring program, and we offer our experience to show that even informally, this relationship can work. I would do this again in a heartbeat. It is so rewarding to see someone succeed and know you helped them on the way. But it was enriching to my teaching and my expertise to learn new ways of seeing an idea and new ways of doing a lesson.*

### **Conclusion**

According to the literature, a successful e-mentoring program will have an overt structure which will include an established time period, a statement of purpose, and regular, scheduled communication. Within that structure one should find established learning objectives, designed specifically to the purpose at hand. External requirements are support from administration and technical support, particularly with respect to a wide variety of e-communication tools. Training and support of e-mentoring pairs keeps the relationship useful and refreshed. Finally built-in assessment allows the e-mentoring program to change and adapt to best practices, and to regularly improve.

E-mentoring puts a new face on a common practice. It takes a proven way of imparting knowledge from one practitioner to another and put in a different framework. Those who administer distance learning programs can easily implement e-mentoring with the anticipated result of improving teaching success of junior faculty and ensuring that course content delivery is consistent between experienced and inexperienced instructors.

There is some debate as to which works better, whether to have formal, institutional structure for mentoring or allow for serendipitous mentoring situations or how effective e-mentoring can actually be. However, research from the Free Management Library (1997) offers five foundation assumptions about mentoring situations: 1) Deliberate learning is the cornerstone; 2) Both failure and success are powerful teachers; 3) Leaders need to tell their stories because they offer valuable insight 4) Mentoring develops over time—it is a synthesis of ongoing events, experiences, observations, and thoughtful analysis and 5) Mentoring is a joint venture (Free Management Library 1997).

*J and L: In our experience, all five of these assumptions guided our relationship. The deliberate purpose was for the junior faculty member to learn to teach a difficult course. We both experienced some failures in imparting knowledge—Janet, to her classes, and Lynn, to Janet. We worked through these failures until they became successes. Our mentoring, informal as it was, had developed over time and we became comfortable working together. Mentoring is definitely a joint venture. It would not have worked if we were not both committed to the school, the course, the students, and each other. E-mentoring was the vehicle that made our journey easier.*

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