

Virtual Community Mentoring in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

This article 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 article will explore the characteristics of both community and mentoring within the framework of a technology-supported virtual community.

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 of diverse potential mentors. Mentors can easily provide advice, guidance, and support while sitting at their computers anywhere in the world (Single & Muller, 1999).

The Internet and multimedia technologies enable "the larger community to help educate the next generation" (Riel & Fulton, 2001, p. 520). With this thought in mind, what follows is a discussion of some of the qualities of a university level virtual community created and sustained via a technology-supported mentoring program. Technology-supported mentoring is designed for current and former students to be able to interact with not only alumni from a university, but also other people who are working professionals in specific fields.

There is a considerable amount of literature regarding mediated mentoring programs at elementary and secondary school levels. Programs at those levels tend to be extremely structured and formal, with interaction and progress supervised by a teacher or other authority figure. There is virtually no research on mentoring programs in higher education; indeed, there is very little evidence of their existence. This is most likely due to the difficulty of creating and sustaining a formally structured mentoring arrangement in a more informal and unstructured (to the degree students are not watched over by a single teacher all day, every day) university setting.

A mediated mentoring program at the university level is more likely to be an informal one in the sense that there is no strict structure and no set standard or protocol. It is left to the students and the mentors to determine the type of relationship, amount of interaction, nature of the interaction, multimedia technologies utilized during the interaction, and the length of the relationship. A mediated mentoring program should be designed so all communication can take place asynchronously; yet that does not preclude face-to-face meetings or synchronous interaction using interactive multimedia technologies if so desired by both parties.

The goal of a mediated mentoring program is to create a technology-supported virtual community that provides students with the opportunity to acquire real-world knowledge of their chosen field by interacting with working professionals. The ability to choose one's own mentor is also important. Research has shown that students' highest satisfaction ratings for mentoring relationships are usually found in relationships where the mentor and mentee select one another out of mutual respect (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003).

As a mentoring program expands and more and more students and mentors join the virtual community, many new opportunities will be created for everyone to interact using multimedia technologies. This includes student-to-student and mentor-to-mentor networking. The virtual community will support different ways for both novices and experts to work in the same environment to accomplish similar goals (Jin, 2002) and pursue common objectives by communicating and cooperating via mediated means in the process (Seufert, Lechner, & Stanoevska, 2002).

A mediated mentoring program possesses many of the characteristics that define a virtual community

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