Online Mentoring in Education

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INTRODUCTION

Mentorship between new and experienced education professionals is a laborious task. Senior educators assume the responsibility of teaching rules, codes of conduct, relevant information, content knowledge and skills, and so forth to newer colleagues as a way to help them transition into the new role of an educa-tor. This form of mentorship can also exist between professionals and students who are learning about their fields of study. Finally, older students can mentor younger students to help them progress academically, personally, physically, and psychologically. Hence, mentoring is one of the more effective processes for supporting and improving professional development in education (McCampbell, 2002). Because mentor-ship can be arduous in terms of time and commitment, other mentoring alternatives are available such as using online communications. This overview discusses the importance of using online modes of communication as a form of mentorship between educators and students. When distance and time are factors impeding effective mentorship, online tools can help improve the teaching and learning processes.

BACKGROUND

Definition

Mentoring is a one-on-one relationship that requires mutual trust, openness, encouragement, respect, and a willingness to learn and share ideas, advice, and con-structive criticism between an experienced individual and a novice (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2000). A mentor is a wise and trusted advisor and as-sistant to someone who is inexperienced. The structured one-on-one relationship concentrates on the needs of the mentored participant that is generally sustained over a long period of time (Educational Technology Center, 2004). Thus, mentorship is commonly used for self-development, career/academic development, and knowledge/skills development. Furthermore, in most cases the mentor has voluntarily committed time toward mentoring inexperienced individuals. In education, mentorship is primarily used as a tool for teachers to obtain professional development. For students, mentor-ing is mainly provided as career development to help students prepare for graduation and provide them with an understanding of the workplace and the challenges that come along with the profession (Career Mentor Scheme, 2005).

Characteristics

A good mentor embodies several characteristics that makes the mentor an effective adviser. Because mentors teach through sharing, modeling, guiding, advising, supporting, and networking, certain qualities need to be present. According to James Rowley (1999), a good mentor for entry-year programs in K-12 schools should possess six basic, but essential qualities: (1) committed to the role of mentoring, (2) accepting of the beginning teacher, (3) skilled at providing instructional support, (4) effective in different interpersonal contexts, (5) a model of a continuous learner, and (6) communicates hope and optimism. Other general characteristics that distinguish good mentors include (Education Technol-ogy Services, 2004; Soaring to Excellence, 2004):

- High standards and proven experience
- Trustworthiness, care, and empathy
- Dedication toward the commitment
- Self-confidence and the ability to affirm others
- Strong people and communication skills
- Positive outlook and possessing a sense of hu-mor
- Ethical standards and behaviors
- Flexibility and being open to new ideas, methods, and so forth
- Willingness to be an advocate and supporter
- Good management of time and resources
- Life-long learning with an aptitude for teaching

Benefits

A mentoring relationship fosters caring and supportive contacts that encourage individuals to develop toward their full-potential and produce a vision for the future. With this in mind, mentoring has several benefits to the mentors themselves, to the students/mentees, and to the community/school.

Mentors can experience many benefits as they serve as mentors to those who are less experienced. A few of these include increased involvement within the community, realizing that they can make a difference in someone's life, discover a new friend that would later provide support, and gain new experience and knowledge about the environment in which the mentee/student is coming from (Dubuque Community School District, 2003). In addition, mentors can experience news ways of thinking that may prompt reflection upon one's own career (Staff & Educational Development Unit, 2005). Finally, mentoring can help the person develop leadership skills as part of the experience (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2000).

To students, mentoring helps increase self-motivation, critical thinking, and more independence as they acquire life-skills. Often times, students who are mentored become mentors themselves in the future after experiencing the benefits that they have gained (Education Technology Services, 2004). Furthermore, mentoring increases personal knowledge and an understanding of one's role in the organization/school. Mentorship helps develop an environment that supports constructive criticism that includes wisdom, advice, assistance, and encouragement. In addition, the relationship itself provides an effective learning tool that cannot be obtained through written documents and allows networking opportunities to occur that may help future employment options (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2000). If mentoring is performed as part of a school mentorship program, K-12 students can benefit by receiving support from a caring adult and assistance with academic endeavors, experiencing encouragement to stay in school and to refrain from drugs and alcohol, and increasing students' self-esteem and their interpersonal relationships with teachers and family (Dubuque Community School District, 2003).

School and organizations can also benefit from mentorship programs. In the professional workplace, mentorship enhances service delivery and professional development, networking opportunities, better communication, and identifies a pool of qualified candidates to meet future recruitment needs (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2000). In addition, mentorship within an organization can ensure that all employees have acquired the same set of knowledge and skills, that includes an understanding of the organization's shared goals and vision. In schools, mentorship can help improve student performance, attendance, and retention (Dubuque Community School District, 2003).

Strategies for Effective Mentoring

Once a mentor has been identified, there are certain tasks or steps that should be undertaken to create an effective relationship between the mentor and mentee (Johnson, 2000). The first task that should be performed is to establish a relationship. The mentor should create a safe environment in which the teaching can take place. In addition, clarifying expectations and goals of the relationship can help set the boundaries for matters such as meeting length and frequency, time, place, purpose, and level of accountability. Once the mentoring sessions begin, the mentor should ask probing questions that stimulate self-reflection among the mentee. The mentor is not the "answer station" for all questions, but can help promote thought and self-contemplation when the mentee experiences complications. Furthermore, the mentor should push the mentee towards paths that are unfamiliar or that the mentee does not feel competent in pursuing. The idea is to encourage the mentee to develop and prepare for unexpected turns in an academic career.

Other strategies for ensuring effective mentor relationships include the following principles that involve monitoring and encouraging progress (Office of Mentoring and Service Learning, 1995). First, mentors should demonstrate their true-selves and encourage the mentees to do the same. Being a good listener and not betraying confidential information are important to establish trust. Goals and accountability should be encouraged throughout the mentor process and mentors should follow-up on commitments that have been made. Availability of the mentor during times of difficulty is also important. When situations arise in which the mentor is not qualified to handle the matter, the mentor should not assume responsibility. Instead, the mentor should refer the mentee to a qualified expert that can resolve the problem.

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