

Telementoring: Mentoring Beyond the Constraints of Time and Space

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of online mentoring, known as telementoring, provides a powerful tool to facilitate meaningful learning. It is based upon the traditional roles of mentoring, yet, it goes beyond temporal and spatial boundaries. The majority of telementoring models involve subject matter experts and students who engage in projects to further learning. Successful telementoring projects involve both content-centered processes as well as effective telecommunication processes. When these elements combine, students engage in opportunities for inquiry and deep learning and telementors experience satisfaction for sharing their knowledge and facilitating the growth of student learning.

BACKGROUND

The concept of mentoring has its roots in Homer's *Odyssey*. Mentoring was introduced to the world when Odysseus entrusted his son, Telemachus, to the tutelage of his trusted and wise friend Mentor (Heller & Sindelar, 1991; Odell, 1990; O'Neill, Wagner, & Gomez, 1996; Tsikalas, 1997; Wighton, 1993). A mentoring relationship traditionally has been defined as a more experienced person helping a less experienced person grow in personal development ("Enhancing youth achievement," 2001; Hamilton, 1992; Heller & Sindelar, 1991; McPartland & Nettles, 1991; Odell, 1990; White-Hood, 1993).

Mentoring programs exist that bring adults into classrooms in person but these have not been widespread. Face-to-face mentoring causes disruptions in the adult's work environment that poses a hindrance for many potential mentors. Perhaps more mentors would be willing if it were made more convenient (Amill, 2002; O'Neill, 1996).

Telementoring takes the traditional concept of mentoring and applies today's technology to mentor

students through online text-based interchanges or through video-conferencing. Telementoring is online or virtual mentoring. Telementoring facilitates the mentoring relationship when time and place would make face-to-face interaction impractical (Harris, O'Bryan, & Rotenberg, 1996; McGee, 1997; O'Neill, 1996; O'Neill & Harris, 2004/2005).

In addition to the facilitation of a mentoring relationship, research has shown that there is a need for educators to find meaningful uses of technology (Campoy, 1992; Male, 1997; Tomei, 2001). Telementoring offers a rich opportunity to integrate technology and learning. O'Neill and Harris (2004/2005) note that curriculum-based telementoring has the capability to change the way that cultural institutions work for the better. O'Neill and Harris state that telementoring provides the potential to serve students by providing opportunities for them to engage in challenging, long-term inquiry and to serve adults who wish to volunteer to work in schools but who cannot otherwise do so because of their work schedules.

Telementoring is largely accomplished through text-based media, such as e-mail. Videoconferencing can be used, although this method of communication is used to a lesser extent. There are software programs available that both support and facilitate the development and implementation of telementoring partnerships (O'Neill, Weiler, & Sha, 2005).

Communication can be synchronous or asynchronous. This capacity for asynchronous communication is one of the most appealing features of telementoring. This capability permits the participants to engage in communication at their convenience instead of a prescribed time.

Telementoring has been implemented with adult learners. Teachers have found that virtual mentoring helps them to further their learning and to collaborate with each other, thus solving the problem of not having enough time to engage in these endeavors (Doyle, 1995; McGee, 1997). Corporations find telementoring

to be a cost-effective means of ongoing training (“New research,” 1998; Stokes, 2001).

The predominant use of telementoring is between adult experts and students in the K-12 setting. Kerka (1998) describes telementoring as a way to connect teachers and students with subject matter experts (SMEs) who give advice, feedback, and guidance with learning projects. The SMEs were noted to facilitate learning by modeling and acting as guides. In this capacity as experts, telementors were found to provide authentic learning opportunities and interpersonal relationships.

SUCCESSFUL TELEMENTORING PROJECTS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Learning projects are essential to a successful telementoring experience. The literature on telementoring has suggested that telementoring works best when it is combined with a specific task or project (Cobb, 1997; Donker, 1993; Doyle, 1995; Far West Lab., 1995; Harris et al., 1996; Harris & Jones, 1999; Lenert & Harris, 1994; McGee, 1997; O’Neill, 1996; O’Neill & Harris, 2004/2005; O’Neill et al., 1996; Sanchez & Harris, 1996; Wighton, 1993).

One of the most widely-used subject areas for telementoring has been science (Amill, 2002; Dimock, 1996; Far West Lab., 1995; O’Neill, 2001, 2004; O’Neill & Harris, 2004/2005; O’Neill et al., 1996; Weir, 1992). The inquiry-based nature of telementoring lends itself well to the sciences. The arts and humanities provide a rich forum as well and have been used successfully in creating telementoring projects (Sanchez & Harris, 1996; Scigliano, 1999).

There are a number of models that are used in telementoring partnerships. These include one-to-one, small group to one telementor, and whole class to one telementor. The nature of the project and the age of the mentee guide the selection of the model.

Middle grade students and secondary students benefit from the small group or one-to-one telementoring relationship. Younger students work better with the whole class model. The whole class model allows for more teacher guidance and supervision. It should be noted that teacher supervision and monitoring of all students engaged in telementoring partnerships should be ongoing. Online safety needs to be a paramount

concern even within a sanctioned telementoring relationship.

One method that can provide a measure of safety is the use of code names for students (Scigliano, 1999). The students’ identities are protected, yet the individuality of each student can be expressed. These pseudonyms can provide an added element of excitement and creativity for the students.

Regardless of the form that the telementoring partnership takes, there are practices that are indicated to promote a dynamic and robust learning experience. Perhaps one of the most essential ingredients to a successful telementoring partnership is the concept of relationship.

The lack of nonverbal interactions can lead to mechanomorphism which is a term used by Caporael (as cited in Lenert & Harris, 1994). This term refers to attributing machine characteristics to people engaged in online text-based communications, such as e-mail.

Shamp (1991) found that when personal content was absent, perceptions of computer-mediated communication partners were similar to computer characteristics. This can be offset by the sharing of personal information.

Sharing information that portrays a personal presence is a vital component that helps to build relationships among the participants. This is an essential ingredient for a successful telementoring experience (Cobb, 1997; Dimock, 1996; Harris et al., 1996; Lenert & Harris, 1994; O’Neill, 1996; Tsikalas, 1997). Harris and Figg (2000) discuss creating electronic personalities that may or may not take the form of a person’s face-to-face personality.

Telementoring does hold the potential to create strong relationships that are conducive to learning. Lenert and Harris (1994) note that one of the greatest benefits to telementoring was developing interpersonal relationships. This connectivity was viewed as a “powerful experience and a natural motivator for learning” (p. 16).

TOP TEN TELEMENTORING TIPS

There are a number of best practices that should be employed in order to promote successful telementoring partnerships. The following suggestions offer guidance to make the most of the telementoring venture.

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