Chapter XLVII
E–Mentoring:
An Extended Practice, an Emerging Discipline

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ABSTRACT

This chapter integrates existing literature and developments on electronic mentoring to build a constructive view of this modality of mentoring as a qualitatively different concept from its traditional face-to-face version. The concept of e-mentoring is introduced by looking first into the evasive notion of mentoring. Next, some salient e-mentoring experiences are identified. The chapter goes on to note the differences between electronic and face-to-face mentoring, and how the relationship between mentor and mentee is modified by technology in unique and definitive ways. Readers are also presented with a collection of best practices on design, implementation, and evaluation of e-mentoring programs. Finally, some practice and research trends are proposed. In conclusion, the author draws an elemental distinction between both modalities of mentoring, which defines e-mentoring as more than the defective alternative to face-to-face contact.

INTRODUCTION

The technology revolution has changed the way we live in our world, including what we understand about mentoring and how it happens. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been made central given their potential for democratization of the access to knowledge, their incorporation to professional competences, and the improvement of learning possibilities (Gisbert, 2004). During the last two decades, ICTs have offered new and exciting opportunities for transcending the physical and psychological distance between people. Accounts of the potential of ICT for mentoring relationships started appearing in the literature in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Moore, 1991), and have extended to become a phenomenon emerging on a world wide scale. The first online

version of the original contribution to UNESCO's World Communication and Information Report (Blurton, 1999) notes the potential of ICT to enable mentoring programs to provide guidance to individuals by well-established members of a particular community. Blurton (1999) notes that "such virtual collaborations between individuals are an effective way for senior member of a community to teach, inspire and support newcomers" (p.12).

A simple Web search using the terms "electronic mentoring," "e-mentoring," "online mentoring," or "telementoring" identifies a large number of programs initiated by educational institutions, corporations, and communities around the globe, in which support to individuals is facilitated by the use of ICT. This chapter presents to the reader the developments of the last decade in computer mediated mentoring, starting first with a consideration of the general concept of mentoring.

BACKGROUND

A Multifaceted and Elusive Concept

The term "mentoring" was coined based on Homer's Odyssey, where the young Telemachus was assigned Mentor as his companion and advisor during the long absence of his father. Since the late 1970s, the term was adopted to promote the value of institution or organization-based relationships to an individual's personal and professional development. Much emphasis is placed on empathy and trust (Eby, 1997); and most authors agree on the idea that the benefits of mentoring tend to emerge only over a relatively long period of time (Rhodes, 2002). Mentoring is a growing practice that has been extensively documented in Anglo-Saxon literature as a means to facilitate transitional adjustment and personal or professional development (Allen, McManus, & Russell, 1999; Eby, 1997; Gray & Gray, 1990; Kram, 1985; McMahon, Limerick, & Gillies, 2002; Smith &

Ingersoll, 2004). Miller (2004) refers to "transition mentoring" to describe those programs that target individuals during times of transition at any moment in life, for example, educational and career transitions. In transition mentoring, a paired relationship is established between a more senior individual or mentor and a lesser experienced individual or mentee, in order to develop competences and orientations towards survival that the newcomer might otherwise only have acquired slowly and with at least some difficulty.

Literature also suggests that effective mentoring relationships should be trust based and power free (P. B. Single & R. M. Single, 2005a). This is often refereed to as "the value of impartiality," the benefit associated with being mentored by someone who has no a vested interest in your choices or ulterior motives for mentoring. Basically it is useful to find a mentor who doesn't have an interest in your performance, and with whom the newcomer can share common experiences. Peer to peer relationships offer useful orientations to a mentoring system, involving a degree of social responsibility to the community in ways that attempt to confront and reverse an ever-increasing individualistic, competitive approach to career, education, and life development (Allen et al., 1999; McLean, 2004; O'Regan, 2006). In addition to these benefits, peer mentors may be in a better position to share information, offer credible advice, listen to the mentees' concerns, and serve as a role model than traditional mentors. Allen et al. (1999) demonstrated the effectiveness of psychosocial and career-related peer mentoring showing that there are different dimensions of socialization of newcomers that peers can facilitate (politics, performance, and establishment of relationships with organizational members). The authors underscore the valuable role that more experienced peers can serve in enhancing socialization (in abstract). Arguably, peer mentors may have training and support needs that program organizers must take careful consideration of.

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