



Connecting in distance mentoring: Communication practices that work



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SUMMARY

Background: As nursing and healthcare become more global, supported by technology, the opportunities for distance mentoring increase. Mentorship is critical to nurse educator recruitment and retention.

Study Objective: The purpose of this study was to identify communication practices of nurse educators involved in mentoring at a distance.

Design/Settings: A qualitative design, utilizing in-person or telephone interviews was used. Participants were twenty-three protégés or mentors who were part of a yearlong distance mentoring program.

Analysis Method: An iterative process of hermeneutic analysis identified three themes; this paper focuses on the theme of connectedness.

Results: Participant narratives illuminate practices of connecting at a distance: meeting face-to-face, sharing personal information, experiencing reciprocity, journaling, being vulnerable, establishing one's presence, and appreciating different perspectives.

Conclusion: Distance does not appear to limit the connecting potential leading to a meaningful mentoring relationship; rather, it offers possibilities that local mentoring relationships may not. Nurse educators in under-resourced countries, those in small programs without a cadre of senior faculty, and students in distance programs are among those who stand to benefit from distance mentoring relationships.

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Introduction

Mentoring enhances the recruitment and retention of qualified nurse faculty and their ongoing career development (Dunham-Taylor et al., 2008; National League for Nursing, 2006). However, given the increasing shortage of experienced and doctorally prepared nurse educators due to high numbers of retirements and the lure of higher-paying positions outside academe, nurse educators may be challenged to find mentors in their academic communities. Global partnering (Lasater et al., 2012) and inclusivity of the global learning community (Garrett and Cutting, 2012) are not simply provocative ideas but essential as nurse educators seek to prepare nurses to address healthcare needs around the world.

Distance mentoring is an emerging phenomenon enabled by technology to allow links with others around the world for faculty guidance. For example, nurse educators in under-resourced countries may benefit from mentorship. New educational delivery models or curricular reform may prompt distance mentorship (Benner et al., 2010). Technology also

provides opportunities for advisors in online graduate programs to mentor distance students. Moreover, 19% of 198 nursing programs in the U.S. reported having at least one member undertaking the faculty role wholly from a distance (Pearsall et al., 2012). However, there is a paucity of literature about establishing and maintaining distance mentoring relationships. How does one establish and sustain a working relationship with someone when there is little face-to-face interaction?

Background

From 2007 to 2011, the National League for Nursing, a U.S. organization of nurse faculty and leaders in nursing education, partnered with Johnson & Johnson (NLN/J&J) to sponsor an annual mentoring program for nurse educators. Each year, five mentors were matched with five protégés; protégés were mentored for leadership development (Young, 2009). Each protégé produced an individual project to develop as a leader while the group of ten worked with the program director on a group project to transform nursing education. The group projects included the first cohort's study on becoming a nurse faculty leader (Horton-Deutsch et al., 2010; Pearsall et al., in press; Stiles et al., 2011; Young et al., 2011); the second cohort's explication of the clinical

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nurse educator as leader (Adelman-Mullally et al., 2013); the third cohort's development of a portrait of a leader (NLN/Johnson & Johnson Faculty Leadership and Mentoring Program Cohort III and Project Director, 2011); and the fourth cohort's creation of a model for excellence in mentoring novice faculty (Nick et al., 2012).

Over the course of a year, each cohort and the program director met in-person two or three times, the first being a two-day orientation to the program, and by telephone conference calls monthly to work on the group project. Each mentor–protégé dyad negotiated when and how they would communicate to sustain their relationship. The dyads were also encouraged but not required to engage in reflective journaling about their leadership development. Dyads chose their own method of sharing and frequency of journaling. Matching of individuals was based on the needs of the protégé and the experience and expertise of the mentor, not by proximity. Thus, it was not uncommon for the dyad to communicate across multiple time zones and at times, across international boundaries. In the 4-year project timeframe, 20 mentor–protégé dyads communicated for a year or longer. The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify communication practices of these nurse educators, guided by the question, what are effective communication practices of nurse educators involved in mentoring at a distance?

Design and Method

This interpretive phenomenological study was approved for human subject research by Minnesota State University, Mankato, and Oregon Health & Science University. In interpretive phenomenological research, researchers start with the experience of the participants, interpret it for what it means, and describe the experience using themes. In this instance, the phenomenon was the communication practices of nurse educators involved in mentoring at a distance, and exemplars of this phenomenon are provided to illuminate the themes.

The researchers sent an email invitation to all 20 mentors and 20 protégés, who participated in the NLN/[J&J] distance mentoring program, to participate in the study. Twenty-three participants (12 mentors and 11 protégés) responded and were subsequently interviewed. No effort was made to link protégés with mentors during the interviews.

Responding to semi-structured interview questions, the participants described their experiences of communicating at a distance. Three members of a six-member research team conducted interviews, either by telephone or in-person; the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and de-identified. The transcribed texts constituted the data for hermeneutic (interpretive) analysis. The team engaged in cycles of interpretation, meeting every two weeks for six months by telephone conference calls. Prior to the conference calls, half of the team read and generated written interpretations of two of the interview texts. Everyone read both the texts and all of the interpretations before the phone discussion. Two weeks later, the other half of the research team wrote the interpretations. During the biweekly phone conversations, the whole team clarified interpretations by returning to the texts when disagreements arose, allowing for multiple members to confirm and validate the findings. This process ensured that the interpretations were warranted and the findings dependable, thereby enhancing the rigor of the study. After all texts were analyzed in depth once, the team reread them to identify themes that threaded across the narratives. During the final cycle of interpretation, the extant literature was brought to bear on the interpretations to extend, challenge, or refine them. To assure the credibility of the findings, one protégé participant as well as a faculty-at-a-distance mentor who were likely to be interested in the study were asked to review the final interpretations and exemplars for coherence, agreement, contextuality, and comprehensiveness (Plager, 1994).

Findings: Connecting at a Distance

The findings comprise three major themes including: connecting at a distance, committing to the relationship, and the evolving nature of the communication. The purpose of this paper is to report the findings related to connecting at a distance. Excerpts of the narratives are provided with explication of the practices in order for readers to determine whether it makes sense in terms of their own experience and allows them to validate the findings.

Experiencing connectedness to a mentor or protégé was a common theme for successful distance mentoring relationships. From the study's findings, connecting was enhanced by meeting face-to-face, sharing personal information, experiencing reciprocity, journaling, being vulnerable or open, establishing one's presence, and appreciating different perspectives.

Meeting Face-to-Face

Many participants spoke of the value of an initial in-person meeting to jump-start the relationship, to acknowledge nonverbal communication styles, and provide an opportunity to exchange a bit of personal information. Mentor Tina described how meeting “face-to-face” gave her a “vision” of her protégé:

Somehow meeting face-to-face, knowing who one another was, having a chance to just get to know one another as people not necessarily as mentor/protégé, I think was really important. Once that was in place and as I communicated with my protégé through email or on the phone, I kind of had a vision of who she was and how she might be responding, and that really helps, I think, with the relationship and the kinds of things we were able to talk about. I hope it also gave her an opportunity to see me as ... sometimes I think we think about mentors as these people who walk on water and ... you're so “graced” to have the chance to talk to them. But when you meet in-person, I think it gives you a chance to see that both people are real human beings who laugh and make jokes and just enjoy life and are not just all serious about their work.

Tina's story shows how meeting face-to-face established a more personal relationship that allowed her to read her protégé in subsequent conversations and, she believed, helped her protégé to see her as a “real” person. While in-person meetings may not be possible in distance mentoring relationships, their significance for facilitating a personal connection to enhance the distance communication was illuminated repeatedly by the narratives in this study. Sometimes face-to-face meetings, using technology, were a reasonable substitute. While some nurse educators might see a mentoring relationship as strictly professional in nature, these participants commonly found that fostering a personal connection enhanced the professional relationship.

Tina's story also illustrates what she saw as the potential hierarchical nature of a mentoring relationship—with the mentor as expert and the protégé as novice who might tend to defer to the expert. For Tina, meeting in-person influenced, as she said, “the kinds of things we were able to talk about.” It enabled her to know and connect with her protégé in a way that would encourage a more collaborative or reciprocal approach to their work. The implication for mentors involved in distance mentoring is to attend to the perceived power differential and address it. Eifler and Veltri (2010) noted that power differentials perceived between novice and experienced nurse faculty members diminish when the faculty members are not in the same department—so being a mentor at a distance might be an advantage. Wilson et al. (2010) supported this notion when they found that one challenge of a mentoring relationship between colleagues was maintaining the power balance. Giving up power in a relationship may be perceived as making oneself vulnerable, which as these findings show, facilitates connecting.

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