Discipline specific online mentoring for secondary pre-service teachers

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an online mentoring project which involved building online mentoring learning communities to support secondary pre-service teachers, and to provide them with the opportunity to interact and engage in professional learning dialogue with teaching professionals in their teaching disciplines. The practicing teachers took on the role of online mentors to the pre-service teachers who were personally, professionally and geographically isolated due to being located in regional, rural or remote areas. The goal was to develop discipline specific knowledge, skills and confidence in the pre-service teachers through ongoing electronic interaction with a discipline specific mentor. This paper describes enablers and inhibitors to online mentoring and identifies implications for implementation and suggestions for improvement.

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1. Introduction

In their review of teacher education and school induction in Queensland, Australia, Caldwell and Sutton (August, 2010) stated that "induction is a process that commences from the time a student enters a pre-service program and continues for at least a year after he or she enters the profession" (p. 93). They also recommended that "[t]eachers entering the profession have at least one trained mentor for at least the first year of their employment" (p. xxi).

The leading reason for teachers leaving the profession is the lack of support (Buchanan, 2010; Roberts, 2004; Scheopner, 2010; Schuck et al., 2011). The lack of support is heightened for those located in rural or remote locations where there are fewer experienced teachers in their geographical location. For secondary discipline specialist teachers, access to teachers with knowledge in their discipline area is even more problematic. In order to compensate for the "decreased contact and networking with teachers in the same subject area from other schools" (Roberts, 2004, p. 10) a one-to-many secondary discipline specific online mentoring program was established.

The research questions for the project were:

- How do pre-service teachers and teachers respond to online mentoring?
- What types of cognitive processes do pre-service teachers' exhibit within online mentoring?
- What types of communication do the mentors and mentees have in the online community mentoring space?

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Established definitions of mentoring espouse a mentor who is older and more experienced and works in the same field as the mentee, or it "generally denotes a supportive relationship between an older, more experienced person and a younger protégé that serves to initiate her into a new profession, organization, or stage in life" (O'Neil, 2002, p. 35). In a literature review of group mentoring, Huizing (2012) synthesised that "[m]entoring provides the capacity to learn wisdom and experience from another who has *been there and done that*" (p. 27). This traditional hierarchical form of mentoring has now been overtaken by more contemporary views of mentoring, including peer, collaborative, and collegial relationships rather than being limited to a senior person (Hew & Knapczyk, 2007).

Online mentoring, also referred to as E-mentoring, tele-mentoring, cyber-mentoring or virtual mentoring (O'Neil, 2002; Stewart & McLoughlin, 2007), has been defined as the "use of e-mail or computer conferencing systems to support a mentoring relationship when a face-to-face relationship would be impractical" (O'Neil, Wagner, & Gomez, 1996, p. 39). The primary contact is through electronic communication as the medium for dialogue for the purposes of developing the skills, knowledge and confidence of the mentee (Single & Single, 2005). Having the mentoring occur asynchronously online provides the participants with "time to structure and organise their thoughts" (Cheng, Paré, Collimore, & Joordens, 2011, p. 253) and it also provides opportunities for participants to reflect on and share their past experiences, knowledge developed within course work, and their experiences during their professional experience placement. An online group mentoring space provided exposure to multiple perspectives and by articulating their thoughts and stories the participants actively construct and reconstruct meaning (Liu & Yang, 2012) at the individual and group levels.

A number of different forms of mentoring were introduced by Eby (1997). These included lateral or peer mentoring with the participants being at similar levels in the same or different organizations; and internal or external manager/sponsor mentoring where the mentor is at a more senior level than the mentee. Traditionally mentoring has been enacted and researched from a hierarchical dyadic perspective. However, as suggested by Huizing (2012) "[i]f one of the goals of mentoring is to secure the wisdom and experience of others" (p. 27) alternative types of group mentoring should be explored. The Transforming Teacher Education Through Clinical Practice report suggested that pre-service teachers would benefit from participation in a virtual and interactive professional community and that there is a "shared responsibility for teacher preparation" (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010, p. ii).

Group mentoring can be defined as having multiple mentors and mentees in the same setting where "learning is individual and each mentee works on his or her own unique learning needs and development goals" (Carvin, 2011, p. 50). Carvin (2011) further suggested that the "group is a safe and confidential environment for both mentees and mentors to explore and share personal challenges" (p. 50). Dansky (1996) identified that "group-level mentoring emerges from the dynamics of the group as a whole, rather than from a relationship with one specific person" (p. 7). This is affirmed by Kopcha and Alger (2014) who suggested that "[d]ialog helps learners better understand the meaning of knowledge and its relationship with the social and cultural norms" (p. 49) and that while supervising teachers find it difficult to provide meaningful feedback to pre-service teachers; timely feedback and coaching can be provided through group online discussion. They also revealed that pre-service teachers and practicing teachers who contribute to online discussions have better teaching and learning outcomes due to the increased "exposure to expert feedback and thinking" (Kopcha & Alger, 2014, p. 55).

Where work teams are used in workplaces, intra-team mentoring has become popular, as is group professional association mentoring (Eby, 1997). Other types of group mentoring which have been introduced by Huizing (2012) include peer group mentoring, one-to-many mentoring, many-to-one mentoring, and many-to-many mentoring. Limbert (1995) has identified a number of advantages of group mentoring including: (a) flexibility, (b) inclusiveness, (c) shared knowledge, (d) interdependence, (e) broader vision of the organization, (f) widened external networks, (g) provided a safe place, (h) developed team spirit and skills, (i) personal growth, and (j) friendships.

In addition, contemporary researchers have identified numerous opportunities and challenges for online mentoring (Eby, 1997; Ensher, Heun, & Blanchard, 2003; Gutke & Albion, 2008; Headlam-Wells, Gosland, & Craig, 2005; Kasprisin, Single, Single, & Muller, 2003; McLoughlin, Brady, Lee, & Russell, 2007; Mueller, 2004; Stoeger, Duan, Schirner, Greindl, & Ziegler, 2013). These researchers have indicated that opportunities provided by online mentoring include:

- Enhanced access to mentoring opportunities because participants are not bounded by geographical constraints;
- Convenient access as most people now have their communication device in their pocket/handbag in the form of a smart phone;
- Reduced costs in time and money, no travel required or time away from job;
- A written record of interactions to be viewed/reviewed over time;
- Flexible access at time convenient to participants and minimizing disruption to their daily commitments;
- Reduced impact of status in the mentoring relationship, less threatening, anonymity encourages mentee to ask questions not likely to ask in person;
- Enriched opportunity for open and supportive relationships and friendships across boundaries of space and time;
- Decreased pressure of an immediate response, asynchronous interactions provide time for the response to be more reflective;
- Enhanced opportunity for mentees to take responsibility for initiating contact and to play an active role in the discussion;
- Improved benefits to those skilled written communicators or those who are shy in person; and
- Increased awareness of issues of privacy and confidentiality when online.