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Mentoring student teachers from a distance: An action research project

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At a large public university in the south eastern United States, prospective middle and high school social studies teachers complete a four semester undergraduate program that prepares them for the classrooms of America. Like many programs, this one begins with an introductory course that provides students an opportunity to explore questions about the nature, purpose, and practices of social studies in the modern school curriculum. As a part of this course, students also develop a rationale for teaching social studies which is used as a part of admission into the Social Studies Education program. Once they have been admitted to the program, students typically complete one or more semesters of discipline specific courses prior to their final two semesters at the institution.

During their second to last semester in the program, students complete social studies methods and curriculum courses along with an initial field experience that is designed to provide them with some experience designing and delivering lessons. For their final semester in the program, the students complete a student teaching experience, along with a bi-weekly seminar. This twelve week field experience is conducted under the supervision of a co-operating teacher, as well as a field instructor from the university who is tasked with observing the student while they are engaged in the teaching experience. The purpose of these observation visits by the field instructor is to help the student teachers structure their reflection about these specific lessons, as a way of modeling an effective process for them to become reflective practitioners.

At the conclusion of their twelve weeks of student teaching, the students return for twice weekly seminar meetings for the final three weeks of the semester with the goal of finalizing their teaching rationale as a part of a larger electronic portfolio that is based upon the state's teaching standards. This e-portfolio contains their overarching rationale along with reflection papers on each of the state standards, and artifacts that illustrate the student teacher's competence in those particular areas.

One of the difficulties with the arrangement between the student teacher and their field instructor is that there are only four scheduled opportunities for field instructors to interact and provide meaningful guidance and mentoring to their student teachers. With this in mind, two field instructors within this program undertook a project to provide additional opportunities for mentoring student teachers through a computer-mediated process.

At the beginning of the project, it was hoped that this tele-mentoring environment would allow for a closer professional relationship to develop between field instructors and student

teachers and also to increase the opportunity for field instructors to interact with the student teachers about their development as professionals. In addition to these desires, the authors of this article were interested in answering the following research question:

1. Do student teachers find tele-mentoring helpful in their development as professionals during their student teaching experience?

In this article, the authors describe the actual tele-mentoring system that was utilized with the student teachers, along with their reactions to this effort.

Literature Review

Although some instances of the use of listserves (Singer, 2005) and discussion boards (Merseeth, 1991) were described for tele-mentoring relationships, e-mail was the most predominant form of communication that we saw within the literature (e.g., Abbott, 2003; Duff, 2000; Ensher, Heun & Blanchard, 2003; O'Neill & Harris, 2004; Sanchez & Harris, 1996). The focus on e-mail within research may be based in part on the obliquity and growth of e-mail usage (Flanagin, 2005). In addition, Duff (2000) found that mentors liked the flexibility that e-mail provided in light of the busy schedules that mentors often have.

The amount of time mentors and protégés invest in the relationship is a key factor to determining the success of the mentoring relationship. For instance, the mentor and protégé must devote time to building trust within their relationship (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004) as well as developing an understanding of shared common professional interests (Ensher & Murphy, 1997). In addition, the amount of time mentors and protégés perceive they have for the tele-mentoring relationships impacts their choice in engaging in these relationships. Lynch (2003) explored the impact of a tele-mentoring training class on the views of potential tele-mentors. One finding from her study was a significant decrease in the interest in participating in the tele-mentoring program after the training class was complete occurred because of the increased workload (e.g., completing end-of-semester projects and final exams) the potential mentors had at the end of the class.

Research has also considered the important ingredients within a tele-mentoring relationship. Social exchange theory posits that both the mentor and protégé must obtain benefits in order to engage in the relationship and for the relationship to last over an extended period of time (Ensher et al., 2003; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; Schrum, Skeelee & Grant, 2002-2003). One chief benefit of tele-mentoring programs for teachers is the emotional support beginning teachers receive in ways not possible in local settings. Abbott (2003) found that beginning teachers felt they could be much more candid with tele-mentors than they could with teachers in their own school system because tele-mentors had no control over their appraisal. Although many beginning teachers initially sought an online mentoring to strengthen their teacher skills, Merseeth (1991) found that these same teachers described the emotional support they received as the most important feature at the end of the relationship. Singer (2005) also found that emotional support and empathy were key elements between peer pre-service teachers.

Although providing emotional support is an important element within tele-mentoring

relationships, Wang and Odell (2002) noted that teacher-mentoring programs provide little emphasis on preparing beginning teachers to teach around standards-based reform. They stated that mentors should help beginning teachers understand the link between educational theory that beginning teachers see in their coursework and practice. They argued that lack of mentoring support in learning to teach in accordance with the standards is one source of the problem of the poor academic performance of American students at the international level.

Methodology

Over a period of three separate semesters, the student teachers of one field instructor were engaged in this tele-mentoring project and for the final semester the student teachers of a second field instructor were also involved. This meant a total of fourteen students over the three semesters (i.e., three during the first two semesters and eight during the final semester) were involved with this tele-mentoring. The actual tele-mentoring itself was conducted within one of two course management systems, Livetext during the first and final semester and WebCT during the second semester.

From a student perspective, the tele-mentoring began with introduction of themselves to their field instructors and each other, along with descriptions of the context of the student teaching environment. This began a relationship where student teachers were given weekly tasks, such as posting their current teaching rationale for feedback, completing an online version of the Ohio State Teacher Efficacy Scale, discussing case studies dealing with specific issues in Social Studies and integrating technology into their classrooms, posting their field instructor's and peer observation reports, and generally discussing issues that they were having in the classroom. In theory, students were given one or two weeks (depending on the task) to post their own ideas on the topic and were either encouraged or required to comment on other student's entries as well. Along with these tasks, there were also a series of resources provided for the student teachers to use during their student teacher – such as lesson plan sites, webquest archives, strategies for classroom management, etc.

The reality of the situation for many student teachers was that they would be late in completing their tasks and in some instances these tasks did not get completed at all. In most of these cases there was little interaction between the student teacher and their colleagues. There were exceptions to this, typically with older student teachers who engaged in their tasks and the interaction with other student teachers and the field instructors on a fairly regular basis.

At the completion of their final semester in the Social Studies Education program, these student teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire. This questionnaire asked the student teachers to describe their use of the tele-mentoring system, along with their perceived usefulness of the various tasks towards their development as a teaching professional and an opportunity to provide feedback and suggestions on the project. Thirteen of the fourteen student teachers completed this questionnaire.

Findings and Discussion

While the students were often not active in completing their tasks and interacting with

their colleagues and their field instructors, the vast majority reported to using the tele-mentoring system at least once a week with about a third of those students using it multiple times per week. In their comments, the student teachers mentioned that they “really liked the resources – the webpages that gave ideas for class” or “the Teaching Resources section was extremely helpful to me” and suggested that “more resources could have been added.” However, even with this level of usage, almost all of the students indicated that it was a lack of time or the fact that the tele-mentoring project was not a requirement that caused their low level of participation in the actual assigned tasks and desired interaction.

Even with this lack of participation, the students typically found most aspects of the tele-mentoring project useful. When asked to rate the usefulness of each of the tasks and the resources in the tele-mentoring project using a Likert scale, with the exception of the initial introductions, the students found the tasks rather useful as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Usefulness of each portion of the tele-mentoring project

Task or Resource	Average Score (1-5)
Introduction	2.83
Teaching Rationale	3.40
Self-Efficacy	3.67
Powerful Social Studies	3.29
Case Study - Social Studies	3.62
Peer Observations	4.08
Basic Technology Skills	2.86
Case Study - Technology Integration	3.08
Teaching Issues	3.70
Observation Visit Reports	3.78
Teaching Resources	3.69

As this table illustrates, even though the students did not actively participate in many of the components of the tele-mentoring, the students generally found value in the activities and what they were being asked to complete.

The view that the tele-mentoring activity was not a required activity was an interesting finding. During their final semester, student teachers receive two grades: one for their student teaching seminar on the A-F scale and one for their student teaching experience of pass or fail. The grade that students receive for their student teaching experience is actually assigned by the program co-ordinator, based upon the mid-term and final evaluations of both the co-operating teacher and the field instructor, along with the field instructor’s post-observation reports. While this tele-mentoring project was in place, there had been a push by the Social Studies Education program for field instructors to become more involved with the “instruction” of their student teachers. For many field instructors, this included weekly or bi-weekly meetings where students would have readings and/or reflections to complete which would be discussed during these face to face meetings. For the field instructors involved in this project, tele-mentoring was how they became more involved. This increased involvement was presented to the student teachers as a requirement of field instruction and that each field instructor would decide how that instruction would occur. Based upon this feedback, the reality of the grading situation – where there was no

penalty for non-participation – the tele-mentoring project became an optional activity, something which did not occur with field instructors who were conducting face to face instruction.

This mindset of an optional activity was best exemplified in the comments of one student: “Initially I was excited about the project, but went into survival mode which was topped by the priorities of teaching and the seminar. Unfortunately the tele-mentoring project was at the bottom of the totem pole.” From the standpoint of the field instructors involved in this action research, they indicated that at times it was as difficult for them as it was the students in finding time to adequately interact with the material that the student teachers were posting. As the field instructors’ main responsibility was the formal observations and the lengthy post-observation reports that accompanied those visits, their participation in the tele-mentoring was also often relegated to that of an optional activity that was completed when time permitted. Jacobi (1991) noted the importance of social exchange theory as “the mentor as well as the protégé derives benefits from the relationship, and these benefits may be either emotional or tangible” (p. 513). Incorporating desired outcomes within the tele-mentoring program (e.g., class grade) to the participants is essential to the success of the program.

Conclusion

While the students tended to find the tele-mentoring content and activities useful, the demands placed on their time by student teaching, the bi-weekly seminar, and other activities associated with being a college senior meant that their participation was usually limited to the items that would directly assist them in planning and delivering lessons for their classroom. The desire by the field instructors to build a stronger relationship through increased interaction failed with most students and the increase in tension created by asking for and not receiving participation may have even hindered the development of that mentor relationship.

In the end, there appeared to be little difference in the student teachers involved in the tele-mentoring and student teachers who had field instructors that conducted face to face sessions, both in terms of the relationships that they had with their field instructors and in terms of their growth as beginning teachers. The exceptions to this may have been two students who were older than the average student teacher (i.e., non-traditional students) who approached the tele-mentoring as a required activity and two students who were teaching at school outside of the university’s normal in-take area. For these distance students, traveling to campus for a face to face session would have either taken more time than participating in the tele-mentoring or impossible because they were participating in a study abroad situation for their study teaching. These findings were similar to propositions made by Ensher et al. (2003) that tele-mentoring relationships generally demand less time than face-to-face mentoring relationships.

Unless the content and activities of the tele-mentoring project were to become part of a larger programmatic change that both required all student teachers to participate and placed a grading value in either their student teaching or their student teaching seminar for their participation, there was little or no advantage to using a computer-mediated form of mentoring than the face to face methods traditionally associated with student teaching.

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