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Citation: LaPointe, D., Richmond, C., VanBerschot, J. A. Gunawardena, L., Barrett, K., Cardiff, M., & Skinner, J. (2008). E-mentoring strategies for cross-cultural learning and community building. *Proceedings of the 2008 Mentoring Conference: Fostering a Mentoring Culture in the 21st Century* (pp.107-114). Albuquerque, NM: The University of New Mexico, Mentoring Institute.

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Paper presented at the 2008 Mentoring Conference organized by the Mentoring Institute at the University of New Mexico

Conference goal: Share effective mentoring strategies and best practices, which support students, faculty and staff in their journey in today's and tomorrow's higher educational activities.

Mentoring Institute at the University of New Mexico

2008 Mentoring Conference

E-Mentoring Strategies for Cross-Cultural Learning and Community Building

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Overview of Paper

This paper builds on mentoring practices by describing the strategies and results of cross-cultural group e-mentoring in an inquiry-based online course activity that supported Sri-Lankan faculty as online learners or protégés and higher-education students in their quest for knowledge and community. It focuses on the online e-mentoring experience of eight e-mentors in the United States (master's and doctoral students at the University of New Mexico) who engaged in a three-week-long, cross-cultural problem-solving learning activity using Moodle.

The definition of mentoring developed by Daloz (1999) framed the basic role for the mentors. According to Daloz (1999), a mentor supports the development of a protégé, a newcomer, by helping the protégé gain the necessary skills and knowledge to function effectively in a particular environment. However, this study required refinements to Daloz's definition as the mentoring/protégé relationship was facilitated through technology, on a group basis rather than on an individual basis, and involved mentors and protégés from two different cultures.

E-mentor as defined by Single and Single (2005) more closely matches this research study in that mentors located in the USA and protégés located in Sri Lanka communicated through asynchronous technology. E-mentoring is "a relationship that is established between a more senior individual (mentor) and a lesser skilled or experienced individual (protégé), primarily using electronic communications, and that is intended to develop and grow the skills, knowledge, confidence, and cultural understanding of the protégé to help him or her succeed, while also assisting in the development of the mentor" (Single & Muller, 2001, 108). Chang's (2007) and Bierema and Merriam's (2002) research suggests that online mentors help protégés by encouraging more frequent interaction, facilitating effective communication by eroding some of the traditional power dynamics of mentoring relationships, and supporting safe places for collaboration to enhance online learning.

E-mentoring implies that text-based electronic communication such as e-mail or web-mail is the primary medium used to support the mentor/protégé relationship. Single and Single (2005) also recognized that e-mentoring may occur through other electronic

communication such as telephone calls, videoconferencing, and listservs. Bierema and Merriam (2002) add that e-mentoring lowers barriers to forming mentoring relationships, which need not be bound by local or national culture.

As Single and Single (2005) suggest, sometimes individual mentoring is not possible or does not meet the needs of the participants. Another form of mentoring that may be less resource intensive is group mentoring. In this particular study with mentors located in the USA and small groups of protégés located in Sri Lanka, the group mentoring involved participants from two cultures located on two different continents engaged in a three-week activity. Group e-mentoring thereby enabled a mentoring relationship to protégés that otherwise would not have been possible. Cross-cultural group mentoring as defined for this study applies to situations wherein the mentor and groups of protégés perceive themselves as being from different cultures.

Therefore, the definition of a cross-cultural e-mentor developed out of this study refers to a mentoring relationship between a mentor (experienced person in a field) and a protégé (newcomer to the field) with two essential attributes. First, the relationship between mentor and protégés occurs the majority of the time through the use of technology such as e-mail, list serves, teleconferencing, discussion boards, videoconferencing, and Web conferencing. Second, the mentor and protégé perceive themselves as being from different cultures.

Background

The online faculty development course conducted in Sri Lanka provided opportunities for faculty protégés to experience learning about (a) tutoring and mentoring online by being online students, (b) online community building, and (c) interactive teaching methods and techniques by collaborating with colleagues on designing and conducting these activities. For a majority of the protégés, online learning was a new experience. None of them had previously taught or taken a course online.

The USA e-mentors selected from the UNM Organizational Learning and Instructional Technology Program had varying degrees of experience with mentoring and e mentoring. Some e-mentors had been working as mentors in a face-to-face situation, one regularly used mentors in her online courses, while others had no prior mentoring experience. E-mentors used their expertise in conducting interactive learning activities online to help organize the inquiry-based learning task, move the group toward the goal, share resources and perspectives from a different cultural context, and ask questions that helped to frame and reframe the problem.

The goals for the protégés were to learn using critical inquiry in an online environment and to develop skills in knowledge construction, community building, and cross-cultural learning and communication. The goals for the e-mentors were to tutor, mentor, and facilitate an interactive online learning format through the interplay of diverse cultural perspectives leading to a resolution of the assigned problems.

The protégés' final expected product was a paper outlining the process used to resolve the assigned problem and the proposed resolution. The e-mail instructions sent by the

instructor of the course to the e-mentors regarding their roles and responsibilities are listed below:

“Your role is to be a mentor to a group of 7-8 participants who will be participating in an interactive learning experience using either a role play, problem solving, or case-based reasoning format. The purpose is to get them to plan and try out an interactive learning format. Each activity will be based on a social issue very familiar to the participants such as traffic congestion, disposing of garbage, street children, vehicle pollution, sea and land erosion, and the like. This activity takes place over a period of about 10 days. The group members will design the activity, participate in conducting the activity, and evaluate it. Your role is to help your group design the activity, and help them with facilitating the activity. This may include coaching them on how to set up the activity, how to go about the task at hand, and how to conduct the activity. You don’t have to participate in the activity, unless you want to do so.

Your role as a mentor is to be a guide and coach. Not to do the activity for them. We will use an adaptation of the definition of mentoring that Daloz (1999) put forth for your role: ‘An e-mentor supports the development of a learner, which includes helping the learner gain the necessary skills and knowledge to function effectively in a given environment through the use of electronic communications.’

In this case, you will help them design and execute an interactive learning activity. Your mentoring support will take the form of expert-to-novice transfer of professional information or life lessons. (Vygotsky's scaffolding & ZPD). You are the expert in interactive online learning. When they start this activity, they would have had experience participating in a discussion forum. I am sure it will be a learning experience for you too.”

The e-mentors’ expected results were both the successful completion of the activity by the protégés and the modeling and active demonstration of the attitudes and behaviors of effective cross-cultural e-mentoring in online activities. These attitudes and behaviors were observed by the protégés during the three-week period.

The faculty development course was already underway when the e-mentors joined the protégés for the inquiry-based learning activities. The protégés had been working together for several weeks face-to-face. The three-week activity with the e-mentors introduced online technology and cross-cultural e-mentors, whom the protégés had never met. The e-mentors, the new members to the course, had to establish an environment where protégés would trust them, the technology, and the process. The mentors had to make protégés feel comfortable with, and trust, them quickly as there were only three weeks to conduct and complete the activity. While the complex task to be accomplished in a short amount of time could have been a reason for failure, in this case, it caused the e-mentors and protégés to get to work immediately. Ensuring everyone understood the goal to be met within three weeks and ensuring all understood the importance of meeting the goal was the e-mentors’ first task toward helping the protégés get to work right away.

All protégé groups met the course requirement to produce a professional paper outlining the process used to resolve the assigned problem and the proposed resolution. All groups received high marks on their papers. Protégés expressed their opinions about online learning had changed by virtue of their experiences in the course with the international e-mentors. They came to view online learning “as good as f2f.” Also their attitude toward the societal problems they addressed during the three-week activity changed. They were able to reflect and discover why past attempts to solve societal problems had proved unsuccessful. They realized the key is getting people involved and committed to doing something. They felt more concern about the societal problems and felt the country must address the problems.

At the completion of the course, protégés expressed their desire to learn more from the e-mentors about the e-mentoring process. Protégés requested a debriefing session with the e-mentors, so they could learn firsthand from the e-mentors about their experiences in the inquiry-based activity rather than imagine what the experience was like for the e-mentors. Participating in the inquiry-based learning activity online helped the protégés become familiar with the strategies of e-mentors. They wanted to know more about the attitudes, values, and beliefs behind the e-mentor strategies they observed. The interest in the metacognitive dimension reflects the proteges’ interest and growth into the e-learning community of practice.

Research Design and Description

The research design for this study was qualitative, employing content analysis of computer transcripts of the problem-solving activities generated by eight Sri Lankan protégé groups and e-mentors as they solved a complex problem. Participant evaluations were analyzed and coded to identify learner perceptions. In addition to the content analysis, feedback from an e-mentor focus group was analyzed to identify assumptions and strategies. Transcript analysis was used to answer the research questions:

1. What are the features of cross-cultural e-mentoring?
2. To what extent does cross-cultural e-mentoring expand on mentoring and local e-mentoring models?

Three frameworks were adapted and used to address the different components of the research questions. The first framework, the Social Construction of Knowledge Model, by Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson (1997) was used to code knowledge building in online environments. Single and Single's (2005) list of e-mentoring features was used to code for e-mentoring, and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder's (2002) model of three components of a community of practice was used to code for communities of practice.

Findings

The following section discusses the findings for each of the two research questions.

What Are the Features of Cross-Cultural E-mentoring? Question 1

The features of cross-cultural e-mentoring developed out of the theoretical framework, the instructional design, the instructor's directions to the e-mentors for the inquiry-based learning activity, as described above, and the assumptions of the cross-cultural e-mentors.

As described in the faculty instructions above, the e-mentors received basic instructions regarding their roles facilitating the three-week inquiry based learning assignments. The instructions provided a general framework of expected mentor behaviors from the instructor's perspective.

All mentors had studied distance education at the same program in the same university and shared a cognitive schema of the behaviors used when facilitating learning at a distance. According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder's (2002) community of practice model, the mentors followed a shared practice, a common approach and shared standards for facilitating learning at a distance. In addition, e-mentors held their individual beliefs and values about learning, knowledge building, and community building. As well, they generated a belief model of the protégés' views of learning at a distance after getting to know the protégés by reviewing their profiles and interacting through the virtual canteen forum, where topics such as cricket, vacations, and music, food, and gender roles were discussed.

All these assumptions, beliefs, and values underlay and influenced the features and the resulting strategies and practices employed by the e-mentors. Some e-mentors were more prescriptive and directive in their approach, setting out tasks, timelines, and assignments. Other mentors played the role of a guide on the side, making suggestions, offering resources, giving approval, and being available when needed by individuals or the group. Mentors using either style based their behaviors and strategies on their perceptions of learning, knowledge building, and community building and their perceptions of the protégés' views of the same.

The study identified three major features of e-mentoring across cultures that occurred. The three features are (1) knowledge building, (2) community building, and (3) cultural appreciation. Figure 1 presents a model of cross-cultural e-mentoring, which emerged from the qualitative research. The model in Figure 1 below also shows the inter-relationship between the three features with knowledge and community building as the base or foundation and cultural appreciation as the overriding feature. Cross-cultural e-mentors had to consider each feature in order to be effective e-mentors.

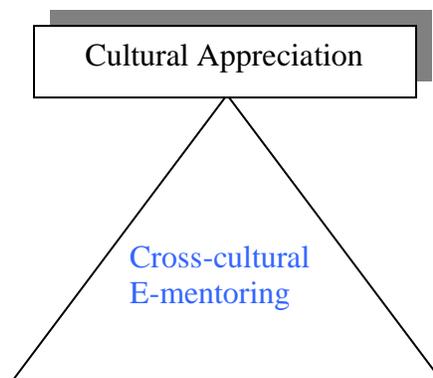




Figure 1: The Model of Cross-Cultural E-Mentoring

Therefore, the study proposes a new model of mentoring--a cross-cultural e-mentoring model, which includes Knowledge Building, Community Building, and Cultural Appreciation. The model helped to push the mentors to develop mentoring strategies that would address the situations in which they found themselves. These strategies expanded on the general mentoring processes and roles.

No one factor influenced the identification of the features. However, the features served as guideposts to the e-mentors as they developed and implemented their strategies.

Expansion on Mentoring and Local E-mentoring Models, Question 2.

The extent to which cross-cultural e-mentoring expands on mentoring and local e-mentoring models, must be looked at in light of the three categories of mentoring descriptions that were found in the literature. They are (1) mentoring processes, (2) e-mentor attributes, and (3) e-mentor characteristics.

Mentoring Processes and Attributes

The first category of mentoring descriptions found in the literature was the mentoring processes or attributes. Roberts (2000) identified the following eight key attributes of the mentoring process:

- A process form
- An active relationship
- A helping process
- A teaching learning process
- A reflective practice
- A career and personal development process
- A formalized process, and
- A role constructed by and for a mentor

E-Mentor Characteristics

The second category identifies the e-mentor characteristics and roles. The attributes of e-mentors in a web-based course, identified by Alsharf (2006), include the following.

- Sincere interest in educating students
- Fundamental commitment to the educational process and student relationships
- Effective communication skills (verbal and nonverbal)

- Technologic proficiency
- Accomplished educator or practitioner
- Pride in and commitment to the profession
- Professional integrity
- Personal characteristics: knowledgeable; responsible available and flexible, patient, concerned, considerate and respectful of others

Single & Single (2005) also identified the attributes of the e-mentor. They contend that e-mentors show impartiality and provide interorganizational resources. Their model, which was used during the transcript analysis for this study, included the following elements:

- Topic-based
- Critical mass of participation
- Facilitation
- Safe and supportive

Cross-Cultural E-Mentor Strategies for Knowledge and Community Building

The third and newest descriptive category of mentoring offers cross-cultural e-mentoring strategies. This study not only found the three major features to e-mentoring across cultures of knowledge building, community building, and cultural appreciation, but cross-cultural e-mentoring strategies emerged in each of the features. The research findings from the qualitative analysis of the eight sets of computer transcripts from the inquiry-based learning activity revealed the following strategies were used by the cross-cultural e-mentors when facilitating.

Knowledge Building:

- Setting the context and expectations and reminding the small group of the purpose of its work
- Introducing different points of view and dissonance to move students to higher intellectual stages
- Providing resources previously unknown or unavailable to the protégés for planning their work and investigating their problems
- Promoting reflection and higher-order thinking through summarizing, questioning, reposing statements as well as asking metacognitive questions such as “What did you learn about yourself as a participant in a problem-solving group like this?”
- Facilitating social construction of knowledge by modeling how to analyze a problem, achieve a goal collaboratively, offer a variety of solutions, debate a topic, and evaluate and recognize successes as well as problems
- Providing momentum as the due date for the problem solution drew near
- Providing just-in-time facilitation to help individuals and groups move forward when they felt lost or stuck

In addition to knowledge building, the researchers identified the following specific e-mentoring skills encouraged participants in community building.

Community Building:

- Creating a safe and supportive community by being respectful, allowing protégés to “listen in” for a while, acknowledging protégé contributions to the discussions, and “giving confidence” to protégés
- Facilitating discussion by asking if everyone had an opportunity to participate and contribute and encouraging protégés to bring cultural expertise to the learning task
- Ensuring a critical mass of participants
- Bringing in outlier members by supporting late-arriving members, inviting diverse members, and using tools outside of Moodle such as Yahoo! Messenger or e-mail to communicate with protégés
- Providing support/encouragement without judgment
- Using emoticons as a tool to enhance the sense of social presence and classroom context and encourage absent members to participate

In addition to knowledge and community building strategies, the researchers identified e-mentors used the following specific strategies of cultural appreciation.

Cultural Appreciation:

- Using informal communication to bridge the communication gap
- Showing respect to all participants to make them feel more safe and sure they would not be picked out or chastised
- Maintaining a positive impression to reassure protégés who were anxious or negative about their experiences
- Maintaining a consistent e-mentor presence to show the protégés that the e-mentors cared about them
- Using direct or indirect facilitation as appropriate to give the participants the type of guidance they needed when they needed it
- Being cognizant of protégés’ using English as a second language or third language to make protégés feel more secure that they could make mistakes without penalty
- Seeking their own mentoring to help the e-mentors share ideas and think more clearly about how to help the learners

Finally, as a result of the e-mentor focus group analysis and the participant evaluation results, this paper expands further on the attributes of mentoring and attributes of mentors to suggest the following best practice principles for international e-mentoring.

Best Practices

- Cross-cultural e-mentor’s work ethic and communication style should be informal, respectful, and courteous to mirror the participants’ communication style.
- Cross-cultural e-mentors need to offer indirect facilitation while local e-mentors can offer direct facilitation based on cultural norms.

- Cross-cultural e-mentors need to appreciate the differences presented and challenges faced by protégés communicating in their second language.
- Cross-cultural e-mentor need to be cultural helpers for learners.

These findings were consistent with Single & Single's (2005) group e-mentoring important features. It became clear that knowledge building in a group and community building were closely linked. The e-mentors encouraged all protégés to participate in sharing ideas, resources, and plans, which served two purposes. First, more protégés participated, which brought an increased diversity of ideas and approaches, creating a more elaborate and enhanced final product. Second, the community of devoted participants grew. Through this process, the protégés became part of the members of the growing community of practice of online learning facilitators. E-mentors learned effective facilitation strategies and interventions to help the protégés uncover the knowledge that existed in their connections with each other as well as with their mentors.

Further Research

While group e-mentoring makes mentoring relationships possible that otherwise would have been impossible by removing time and place barriers, group mentoring does change the traditional model of one mentor devoting time, interest, and attention to one protégé in several ways. Rather than the mentor's sharing information designed to help a specific protégé learn and develop, the mentor shares information designed to meet a group's overall learning needs. While the e-mentoring activity was conducted through group mentoring, often the group interaction actually occurred by the mentor's communicating with one protégé at a time in a public discussion space for the purpose of supporting all the protégés. All group members could benefit by reading, referring to, and using discussions between the mentor and individual protégés to complete the problem solving activity. We were intrigued by the change in the mentoring relationship when the situation changes from one mentor with one protégé to one mentor with many protégés. As language and learning are situated, questions for further study include investigating how the language, relationships, and learning change when using group e-mentoring.

Summary

The research design for this study was qualitative, employing content analysis of computer transcripts of the problem-solving activities generated by eight Sri Lankan protégé groups as they solved a complex problem. This paper's best practice focus built on mentoring strategies with cross-cultural e-mentoring for an inquiry-based online course activity and describes how e-mentoring supported Sri-Lanka protégés and higher-education students in their quest for knowledge and community. E-mentors' beliefs about learning and strategies supported the social construction of knowledge and helped establish an online community of practice.

Many of the skills identified above were similar to the attributes of face-to-face mentoring. However, there were three distance features in the cross-cultural e-mentoring findings, which built upon the usual mentoring activities taking mentoring to a new level of meaning and practice. The three major features of e-mentoring across cultures were knowledge building, community building, and cultural appreciation.

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