Building Relationship-Rich Opportunities Online

Shirley P. O'Brien
Eastern Kentucky University, shirley.obrien@eku.edu

Kelli Spayd
Eastern Kentucky University, Kelli.spayd@gmail.com

Author Biography

Dr. Shirley O'Brien is a Foundation Professor in the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at Eastern Kentucky University and Coordinator of the Post-Professional Occupational Therapy Doctoral Program. She is recognized for her expertise in online teaching and learning.

Kelli Spayd is an Occupational Therapist, currently pursuing a post-professional doctoral at Eastern Kentucky University with a focus on leadership. She has been a practicing occupational therapist since 2003 with clinical expertise in adult rehab and long term care as well as management and supervision.

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Shirley O'Brien and Kelli Spayd
Eastern Kentucky University

Mentoring is an important process in building rich relationships in learning. The use of e-mentoring as an innovative strategy to promote a relationship rich experience for faculty and students is described. Data collected reinforces learner-centered professional value in the promotion of student engagement.

Introduction

Mentoring is a concept included in professional socialization within the academy. As an interactive process, mentoring is a valued relationship that offers guidance, sponsorship and opportunities (Chopra et al., 2019; Johnson & Ridley, 2008; Marcdante & Simpson, 2018; Seehusen et al., 2021; Williams & Kim, 2011). Mentoring allows for higher order application of content and professional experiences in real world settings and professional career guidance. With the growth of online programming, virtual mentoring, often called e-mentoring, has grown (Jacobs et al., 2015). Virtual mentoring provides an online opportunity for students and faculty to connect, building a relationship-rich opportunity for learning. Yet, e-mentoring has underlying pedagogical practices that shape sessions for quality enhancement. Use of a theoretical model as an underlying premise, such as Tisdale and Shekhawat's (2019) model – Discuss; Archive; Reflect; Prepare (DARP), which is grounded in Kolb's experiential learning cycle – provides a foundation for active engagement. The deliberate manner used for e-mentoring affords both the learner and the faculty member opportunities for shared development, reinforcing critical thinking and strategic reasoning. This article describes the process of structuring an e-mentoring (virtual) pedagogical practice within a series of capstone courses at one institution.

Institutional program context and overview of the strategy

The post-professional online occupational therapy doctoral program recruits students from across the country. The program is 40 credit hours, of which seven hours are dedicated to the capstone project. Students are assigned a

capstone mentor, who then guides the development of the project, along with input from another faculty member. The following describes the process used in the three sequential Occupational Therapy Doctoral (OTD) Capstone courses. Students enroll in a series of Capstone courses over two semesters. In the first course, Capstone I, the students develop the capstone project with guidance from a faculty mentor and committee member. During this course, the focus is on scholarly writing, developing the background and need, purpose, and methodology to be used. Literature review provides the opportunity of situating the project within context. Within this course students also prepare and submit their project to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for human subjects approval. The second course, Capstone II, is where the students implement the capstone project and continue to revise writing of the capstone project, with the addition of project results. In the final course, Capstone III, the students synthesize project results and integrate them into the discussion along with providing suggestions for the profession. They also formally present their capstone project and write it up for dissemination through the Encompass Open Educational Resource (https://encompass.eku.edu/ot/) housed at Eastern Kentucky University.

E-mentoring takes place weekly in each of the capstone courses via a video conferencing software, such as Zoom. Zoom is one of the preferred video conferencing tools as it allows for recording if needed, and it is user friendly. Phone and email communication is used to support the learner's needs. Within the scheduled weekly session, students plan the agenda for the session, based upon weekly content expectations as posted in the learning management system. Additional one-on-one time is scheduled if needed.

Within each capstone course, students participate in a weekly e-mentoring session with their faculty mentor. This session is considered as a major course assignment for participation. The weekly mentoring sessions are evaluated by how the students prepare for each session, through agenda setting. There is an expectation that the students will be ready to discuss components of the writing assignment and have questions. They are also graded on being professional, prompt, and respectful, as well as using appropriate language. Lastly, they are rated on how they participate in the mentoring session. They are expected to be engaged, show interest in the conversation, and develop a plan for the next session, thus demonstrating ownership in the capstone process.

Analysis/Assessment of the DARP Strategy for e-mentoring

The e-mentoring program is shaped by the DARP model (Tisdale & Shekhawat, 2019). The DARP model consists of four steps: discuss/engage, archive, reflect, and prepare. The first step, discuss, is the conversation/discussion that occurs during the meeting between the mentee and mentor. Archive is the use of an artifact to capture and record the discussion. This artifact can be in the form of notes, diagrams, audio or video recordings, for example. The reflection step consists of using the artifact to develop meaningful reflection by both the mentee and mentor. The last step, "prepare", is the work completed in preparation for the next meeting .

During the "Discuss/Engage" phase, a preset agenda for the session was developed by the student. This phase is also known as reflection in action, and allows for a recap of activities from the previous week, along with needs for the current session. The faculty member also may add to the agenda at this point. In the second phase, "Archive," an artifact is created, which is served by both the agenda as posted in the learning management system, and the submission of scholarly writing. This phase is also known as reflecting on experience and actions. The capstone process scholarly writing assignment will have feedback from the faculty mentor, posted in track changes and/or with video comments to assist the student to move to the next phase. The third and fourth phases, "Reflect/ Prepare," are the time for the student to digest the faculty feedback, reflect and make appropriate changes, and prepare the next meeting agenda.   This process reiterates Kolb's Cycle of Learning through active engagement and exploration (Kolb, 1984). The DARP model is presented in Figure 1.
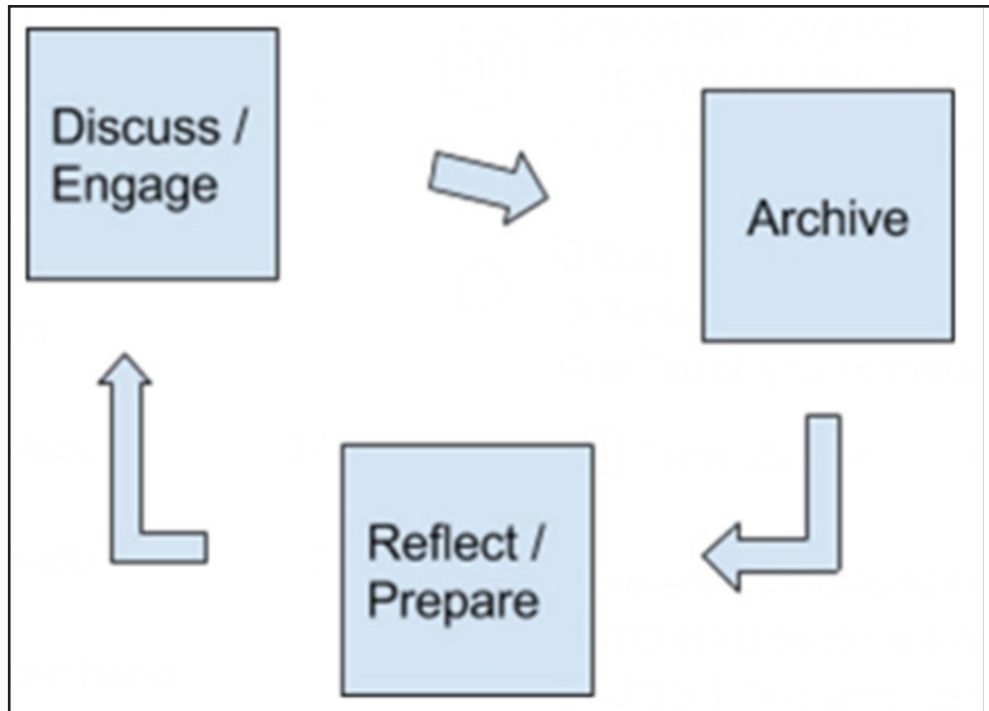
Figure 1: DARP Model
Source: Tisdale & Shekhawat, 2019

Data Collection

Student feedback was gathered through alumni program evaluation surveys and additional student comments. This feedback generated five key points that reinforce a relationship-rich experience. They are as follows:

- Structured e-mentoring adds support and connection with mentor
- Mutual preparation and commitment between student and faculty mentor
- Open communication for feedback is vital
- Engagement reinforces learning
- Connectors for professional development

Results indicated the importance of relationships to promote communication and collaboration in the mentorship process. Each of these key points will be elaborated upon in the next section.

Discussion and Implications

Overall, the findings about e-mentoring validate the literature about the importance of the mentoring process (Chopra et al., 2019; Creta & Gross, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2015; Johnson & Ridley, 2008; Marcdante & Simpson, 2018; Williams & Kim, 2011). Student comments included five key points that reinforce a relationship-rich opportunity for learning. These points reiterated the importance of the relationship to promote critical thinking and strategic reasoning needed within the capstone project.

 The structured e-mentoring process adds support and connection with the mentor/committee chair, in addition to accountability. Use of visual conferencing allows for both parties to observe the nuances in explanations, and the give and take that may not be available through text-based communication. It allows immediate feedback for improved planning for actions before the next meeting. Feedback validates and shapes problem solving needed within the capstone process.

Participating in open discourse for learning takes both preparation and commitment on the part of the faculty member and student. Students found after the initial meeting, they improved their ability to lead the discussion, demonstrating their commitment and investment in their own learning. Accountability and trust were outcomes frequently expressed from student feedback. As the leader in this relationship, the student realizes they are responsible for their own learning and takes ownership. Thus, students would demonstrate higher-order thinking about the content for success in the capstone process.

Open communication is vital for the feedback process. The student actively learns how to develop comfort in both giving and receiving feedback within the scholarly writing process. Scholarly writing is a process that requires breadth and depth in sharing ideas in the written format. Students learn to ask questions to advance their critical thinking and writing skills. Through the discussions about their work, communication is enhanced and the outcome of producing a successful capstone project is supported.

Active engagement of students is well documented in the literature (Bain, 2021; Brame, 2016; Lang, 2016; Michel, 2006) to promote ownership of course content, valuing contributions, exploring problem solving strategies, and enhancing commitment to learning. The e-mentoring process helped the students to better understand the purpose of the capstone project and reinforced how they were

contributing to evidence in the profession. The ability to ask questions and partner with their mentor helps the student to not be afraid to explore ideas, and further facilitates learning.

Facilitating student professional development was mentioned by many of our students as one of the best "connectors" for individual development. The mutual support helped students to explore additional leadership options and/or sponsorship activities, often discussed in the literature (Chopra et al., 2019; Creta & Gross, 2020; Seehusen et al., 2021). Sponsorship, as a mentoring tool, is critical for helping new professionals to gain support in career advancement. Sponsors use their influence to open doors and opportunities for mentees, often within the profession by inviting mentees to meetings, using the political capital of the mentor (Chopra et al., 2019; Creta & Gross, 2020). Additionally, students gained confidence through mentorship in learning, communication, and professional relationships.

Faculty often use these sessions to guide and direct students through the organization and implementation of the capstone project. With professional support, the students are able to grow in their abilities as post-professional graduate students, adopting leadership skills in their profession. The hope is that through this rich experience, students will "pass the torch forward" and use the skills gained to mentor and sponsor future professionals in the field of study.

Conclusions

E-mentoring takes time and commitment on the part of both students and faculty. Intentionality in time frame commitments is critical. E-mentoring, that reinforces the need for preparation, active discussion, post reflection and learning through application and planning for the next session helps to develop ownership and leadership for online students within the capstone project. Building relationship-rich opportunities for learners fosters a climate for discourse and professional leadership.

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