

## THE ROLE OF THE MENTOR IN ONLINE LEARNING

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What is a “mentor” in the world of online learning? The mentor has been in Greek mythology and in practice an older guide to a younger protégé, usually both male persons. Catherine Hansman cites two recent authors’ characterizations of the mentor role as follows, “interpreters of the environment” (Daloz, 1986) and as experienced persons “work[ing] with less experienced persons to promote both professional and personal development” (Caffarella, 1993).<sup>1</sup>

These latter day interpretations are more appropriate descriptions of the role of mentor in online learning as it is conceptualized and practiced at Florida State University (FSU). When entire degree completion<sup>2</sup> programs were designated for online development and implementation, staff in FSU’s Center for Academic Support and Distance Learning, now known as the Office for Distributed and Distance Learning (ODDL, sought models of success in distance learning practice. The institution with the greatest longevity in exclusively distance learning programs was and is the Open University of Great Britain. Two aspects of that very successful institution’s practice influenced the design and development of FSU’s programs. These are: 1) materials-based courseware developed by a team comprised of a subject matter expert, instructional designer, project manager, web developer, and technical editor, and 2) the tutor--prototype for FSU’s “mentor.”

The OU model provides that a tutor has a cohort of students that are geographically organized, usually around a Study Center. The opportunity to meet with the tutor and other coursemates is afforded on a somewhat regular schedule. Telephone contact with the tutor is also an option that is frequently employed by students. Course materials are developed and packaged for independent study within a given timeframe. Exam days are designated thus providing another opportunity for students to gather in one location. The role of the tutor is to help students progress through their course materials, mark assignments, and provide feedback, i.e., “tutoring.”

In a virtual environment, such as that developed at FSU to support degree completion programs in Computer Science, Information Studies, Software Engineering, and Interdisciplinary Social Science, the face-to-face meeting opportunity among students as well as between students and their mentor or instructor is assumed, for the most part, to be nil. Therefore, the role of the mentor is more demanding in terms of developing rapport and instilling trust in his or her online student group. Cohen in writing about the role of the mentor in adult learning cites four phases of the relationship between mentor and protégé:<sup>3</sup>

- The early phase in which trust is earned by the mentor

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<sup>1</sup> Hansman, Catherine, “Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education,” Arthur L. Wilson and Elisabeth R. Hayes, Eds. Jossey-Bass, 2000, p. 493.

<sup>2</sup> The last two years of the baccalaureate degree in which all major coursework is completed.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, N.H. “Mentoring Adult Learners: A Guide for Educators and Trainers. Malabar, FL; Kreiger Publishing Company, 1995.

- The middle phase in which rapport is established and goals can be focused upon
- The later phase when mentors provide guidance and feedback
- The final phase, where mentors challenge their protégés to apply what they have learned

These phases can be also applied to the relationship that mentors establish with students in online courses. The efficacy of the mentor relies upon successful accomplishment of the first phase, establishing trust. In the online environment, the mentor is the student's safety net. FSU's mentors are trained to communicate early and often with students and to respond quickly, in all events within 48 hours. The goal is to provide a zone of familiarity and consistency that the student can rely upon in an otherwise remote and unfamiliar environment. When this is accomplished, the challenges a student faces in a new learning format that is physically remote from coursemates, devoid of a rigid schedule and academically demanding can be met confidently. The establishment of trust is basic to the goal of facilitating learning. The mentor provides a psychosocial contact as well as a content guide. He or she is truly a learning coach and is trained to be aware of the challenges to success that a remote learner faces in addition to mastery of discipline content. In other words, the mentor is encouraging.

The next three phases are ongoing throughout the relationship and apply to gaining competencies in both the technical (online) environment and in the academic content. For example, the course management system, Blackboard (Bb), is a tool to be mastered and, while well designed, it is not purely intuitive. Learning how to participate in threaded discussion, how to use an assignment drop box, or how to use the various modes of email each presents the need to identify goals (middle phase) or "troubleshoot", to interact (later phase) with the mentor who provides guidance and feedback, and then to demonstrate (final phase) competence in employing the tools effectively. Clearly, this is a process that recurs with each new learning opportunity in the course, as well.

The FSU mentor also serves a very valuable role in supporting the lead faculty. Courses are developed for asynchronous delivery by a team consisting of the subject matter expert (faculty), a project manager, web developer, instructional designer, technical editor, and graduate assistant. When the course is ready for deployment, the faculty member knows that he or she will have mentor support for remote students. The mentor serves as the first point of contact, thus reducing the amount of time that the lead faculty member must spend online or on the phone with remote students. Mentors also grade assignments and examinations at the discretion of the lead faculty member. The pivotal function served by the mentor results in more effective communication to the lead faculty since the number of contact points is reduced from 20+/- to one. Instructors report that mentors serve this communication function extremely well, thereby markedly reducing the necessity for repetitive interactions.

Mentors are recruited from community college faculty and adjuncts, advanced graduate students, professional organizations, word of mouth, the FSU web site, and by referral from other mentors. They have advanced degrees in the discipline they will support and must come to FSU for a three-day workshop. The purpose of the workshop is to begin the collegial relationship between mentors and their lead faculty, to train mentors in the use of the Bb course management system, to complete necessary paperwork (they are appointed as Courtesy Faculty in their department), and to train them in online communications skills that will result in the effective online student management described earlier. Mentors also meet the student support staff at ODDL and become familiar with resources available to them for problem solving and referral. Continuing education resources available to mentors following the 3-day workshop include a Mentor Handbook and an online Mentor Resource Website that is in Bb and dedicated to mentor issues, communications, and resources. The mentor coordinator (MC), a full time staff person in ODDL, manages this site and the workshop. The MC initiates and maintains communication with mentors throughout their association with FSU and models student online management behaviors and techniques by way of the Mentor Resource Website. The MC may also have focus group meetings of mentors in various regions of the state during the term, audio conferences, and online training and updates.

Mentors are evaluated by their lead faculty, by students in online surveys and random telephone interviews, and by the MC. Student performance during the first four terms of mentor-supported courses indicates an 87% completion rate and an 85% success rate (success is defined as a grade of C- or higher). An analysis by the author of free responses made during telephone interviews with randomly selected students who had completed courses supported by mentors showed that of 66 comments about mentors, 42 were positive comments, 14 were neutral, and 10 were negative. The preponderance of positive comments (52%) was directly related to the value of the role and *particularly* in terms of encouragement and clarification. The neutral comments were simply acknowledgement of a mentor role. The negative comments were predominantly (57%) about one mentor who had personality conflicts with a few students (no longer mentoring FSU students, as you can imagine). The comments were categorized as General Role, Encouragement, Engagement, Course Content, and Individual Personality. Following the first semester of mentor-supported courses, the teaching faculty were asked, "how valuable do you rate the use of mentors in your online course?" All chose Very Valuable on a scale of Very Valuable, Somewhat Valuable, Slightly Valuable, and No Value.

In conclusion, the mentor role as conceptualized and practiced in support of FSU's students in online programs serves to facilitate both student success and faculty satisfaction in an innovative degree design and delivery mode. It is, however, very early in the implementation and bears careful scrutiny and much more formal study.

