Mentoring in Online Learning Communities

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Abstract

Learners in university-level communication or technical communication web-enhanced classes should benefit from an online mentoring program. Mentors from several disciplines, geographic locations, and companies should be selected. An online mentoring program should provide learners with practical experience in communicating online with professionals, as well as provide learners with new perspectives and accurate information. Learners, mentors, and teachers should benefit from the program.

Because Internet resources are often general, and anyone can put anything on the web without peer review or content editing, information gathered by online learners may be false, misleading, outdated, incomplete or insightful, current, and effectively researched. However, learners, on their own, may not be able to tell the difference between a legitimate argument or high-quality research and biased or inaccurate data that support their or their peers’ preconceptions about a subject. Problems in evaluating Internet resources and expanding learners’ views beyond their preconceptions may be exacerbated when learners take online or web-enhanced courses. Adult learners tend to be highly focused on career preparation and have little time to examine alternative perspectives about each topic that they encounter in a class. In-class or online discussions may be limited; if the discussion isn’t required, many adults won’t take time just to chat with others or debate topics of mutual interest, especially online.

How, then, can online learning communities foster true education and expose learners to a wider range of resources and ideas that are more likely to represent current theory and practice? How can learners be lured into more active participation in learning communities?

One way that university-level learners may gain more correct information, as well as access to a wider range of resources and perspectives, is through mentors who are subject matter experts. Online mentors who share professional insights, examples, and project critiques help learners better understand the complexity of a subject. These mentors can guide discussions, provide “outside” opinions, and introduce learners and teachers to Internet resources that they may not have previously discovered. When several subject experts are actively involved in the course, learners are exposed to perspectives that most likely are different from their peers’ in the classroom.

Career-oriented learners more often value learning communities when the members include not only their peers or teacher, but also professionals who can provide insights into what learners need to know and must be able to do in order to be successful. Learners can expand their network of contacts, and mentors often are willing to help learners outside of the established parameters of the class.

Online communities allow teachers to involve mentors outside regular business hours and from a variety of locations. Online mentoring is an ideal way for teachers to bring more mentors from different technical/scientific specializations into learning communities and give learners practical experience in writing communication that will be evaluated by professionals, a requirement for learners planning to enter communication professions.

Online mentoring is not a new process, but it hasn’t been widely used throughout technical or general communication classrooms. The benefits described in previous studies of high school and university students [1, 2] also should be found when mentoring is introduced in web-enhanced classes. Online learning communities can help nurture learners and build their self-esteem through online learning communities [3]. Learners may ask more questions of mentors, who don’t give them a grade and can’t see them through print e-mail. Visual anonymity and synchronous communication that can be edited before it is sent can encourage learners to work more often and more closely with mentors. Formal online mentoring has seldom been used to create a “real world” atmosphere, although teachers agree that simulating the workplace is important [4, 5, 6]. My plan for fall 2002 classes includes the following steps: 1. Establish a group of online mentors, representing different subject areas, job titles, and companies, who have agreed to respond to learners’ e-mail messages throughout the course; 2. Set up rules and expectations for myself (the teacher), mentors, and learners; 3. Facilitate online messaging and assignments; 4. Monitor the mentoring process; 5. Solicit feedback from learners and mentors.
Some steps were completed several months before the classes’ scheduled starting date. For example, early on I requested help from possible mentors at conferences and professional associations’ meetings, as well as from advisory board members and colleagues. I hope to establish a group of potential mentors, from which I may request assistance for different classes throughout the year. The guidelines and expectations for mentors were agreed upon before learners were introduced to the mentoring plan. Mentoring activities were incorporated into required web-based assignments. Because computer requirements currently need to be low tech, e-mail and posted website information initially have been established as the methods of communication. Netiquette, mentoring procedures, and e-resources for technical communicators [7] should be covered within the first two weeks of class. Mentoring and learning-community activities should take place during 12 of the 15 weeks of the course, with the last week of class given to feedback.

In the past year, I’ve linked some learners with mentors for professional advice about careers and specific writing projects. Mentors and learners exchanged email, and both groups benefited from the association. For my web-enhanced classes during fall 2002, I set up a program to expand and formalize mentoring with whole classes of communication and technical writing students. Mentors and small groups of learners should create online learning communities for the duration of the course.

Learners should benefit by exposure to ideas directly from the workplace and professionals’ comments, resources, and advice. They gain practical communication experience in working with mentors from different companies and cultures, as well as receive feedback about their course projects.

Mentors gain information from learners who plan to enter their profession and are studying the latest theories and practices. Learners’ questions, expectations, and biases can provide new insights to mentors who are familiar with their areas of expertise, but may also need a fresh perspective about the subject area and its perceived relevance to learners. Mentors support teachers and serve as colleagues; teachers and mentors should learn from each other.

Mentoring helps teachers update materials and supplement course links and textbooks. It helps teachers offer learners a wider range of relevant ideas and practices. It also allows teachers to keep up with changing technology and information available throughout business and industry but perhaps not as readily in academia. The benefits to the web-enhanced classes should increase as the use of online mentors is expanded, both technically and in the number of mentors, in future semesters.

As the mentoring program is expanded and additional technology used in web-enhanced classes, chat sessions, mailing lists, bulletin board posts, whiteboard examples, and videoconferencing should be incorporated, along with e-mail and website information. Ideally, both synchronous and asynchronous mentoring activities should be used by online learning communities. Asynchronous activities help connect learners and mentors who have busy schedules or work from widely separated locations, and synchronous communication provides the immediacy of a “real” classroom or workplace experience. Learning communities can then be created by a series of exchanges, asynchronous or synchronous, throughout the course. The learning becomes more personal, as mentors take the time to correct misinformation, share additional links or resources to supplement course materials, and provide feedback about learners’ ideas and class projects.

The benefits of using mentors with individual learners for brief periods of time have encouraged me to set up the framework for an expanded mentoring program in communication classes. As I learn from setting up a low-tech mentoring system, I hope to expand the program to involve more learners and mentors and more synchronous forms of communication.

References


