

What Successful Distance Mentors Do: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: As distance education programs continue to grow in popularity and use in K-12 and higher education institutions, an increased need exists to train new distance instructors in how to effectively design and deliver online courses so they meet the diverse and varying needs of students. This paper identifies the specific types of behaviors exhibited by successful distance mentors based upon a review of the literature and interviews with experienced distance administrators, mentors, and mentees. In addition, it reveals the impact distance mentors have on the training and development of new distance instructors as perceived and observed by the participants.

Introduction

With increased student demands for more convenient and flexible class schedules for professional development and degree seeking purposes coupled with the growing use of the internet, distance education programs have become increasingly available during the past ten to fifteen years. According to Johnson (2003), the distance education movement is the most significant phenomenon that has occurred in higher education to date. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2003) concurred that distance education has played a strong role in today's education. The report revealed the 2000–2001 academic year had 56% of all 2 year and 4 year Title IV-eligible, degree-granting institutions offering distance education courses for a variety of candidates. Within the next 3 years 12% of those institutions indicated they intended to start a distance program to better meet the varying needs of students.

To successfully prepare the traditional classroom instructor to teach distance courses, training and development must first take place. New instructors must be provided with the knowledge and skills to effectively design an online class, use the appropriate types of technology to deliver the information, provide timely feedback to students, and assess the degree to which the course is meeting students' educational needs before the course is delivered (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003). Face-to-face classes cannot automatically be placed online as they stand. The course and its content must be rethought and carefully planned for the electronic environment and delivered using a wide variety of technology and interactive instructional techniques to keep the distance student engaged in learning and highly interested in the course (Yang & Cornelius, 2005). Factors such as faculty training and support, student services, student training and support, copyright and intellectual property must be taken into account (Levy, 2003, McKenzie, Mims, Bennett & Waugh, 2000; Thompson, 2006).

Training for new distance instructors has taken place using a wide variety of methods in K-12 and higher education to ensure instructors are adequately prepared to teach online. These have included formal or informal

meetings with distance experts; attending faculty development workshops and/or conferences in or outside of the building; reading professional journals and/or books; enrolling in online training programs with business and industry or higher education institutions; online mentoring with an experienced distance instructor in the work place; group mentoring; and peer-to-peer mentoring (Ferronato, 2005; Kosak, Manning, Dobson, Rogerson, Cotnam, Colaric & McFadden, 2004). Yang and Cornelious (2005) reported that because the effective preparation of online instructors is so crucial to the delivery of quality online courses, those who teach online courses should have a good understanding of their role and have a positive attitude towards distance learning; develop strong course design, delivery, and teaching techniques; and have good technical and financial support from their institution.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the types of behaviors exhibited by successful distance mentors who work with new distance instructors. The data generated can then be used by trainers to update and improve existing distance training programs.

The predominant research questions addressed in this study included the following:

1. What does an effective mentor do?
2. What are the characteristics of successful distance mentees?
3. What factors cause faculty members to become interested in teaching online?
4. What factors deter faculty from teaching online?
5. What should be done to support and encourage new distance instructors?
6. What is the impact of the mentoring program on new and experienced distance instructors?

Literature Review

Mentor Behaviors

Several handbooks were located that addressed the behaviors of effective mentors in general. The Correia and McHenry handbook (2002) identified six behaviors. They stated a good mentor is (1) someone who shares his/her thoughts, ideas, material, and expertise with a mentee, (2) an individual who is collaborative, keeps an open mind, and has a nonjudgmental view, (3) one who listens patiently and confers privately, (4) an objective observer who maintains confidentiality, (5) a reflective practitioner who analyzes his/her teaching, and (6) a friend.

In the area of distance mentoring two sources of information were retrieved that identified the types of behaviors needed for effective distance mentoring to take place. Ridout (2006) advocated twelve distance mentoring behaviors should be utilized by effective distance mentors but agreed that there was not one formula that could be applied due to the diverse backgrounds and varying needs of individuals working in the online environment placing classes online. What is important, however, is the development of new distance instructors' thinking and assessment skills in order to evaluate the degree to which their courses meet the curriculum standards and needs of the distance students. The twelve behaviors Ridout felt an effective distance mentor should exhibit were (1) responsive to their mentee's needs, (2) a good listener, (3) open and of honest character, (4) non-judgmental and ethical in nature, (5) approachable and available to mentees, (6) good at problem solving, (7) a good observer, (8) patient, (9) sets expectations for the mentee, (10) communicates effectively, (11) has a genuine interest in helping the mentee, and (12) has the time and expertise to do the job. According to Puzifferro-Schnitzer and Kissinger (2005), who examined a virtual mentoring program for online adjunct faculty members, seven specific duties are required of distance mentors. These include the following: (1) acting as a liaison between the administration and the new distance instructor, the mentee, (2) developing professional relationships with the mentees, (3) providing help, sharing resources, ideas, and opportunities with the new distance instructor, (4) facilitating the required online orientation course with the mentee to familiarize him/her with basic distance information before teaching online, (5) communicating the process and monitoring the compliance with administrative processes, (6) answering questions, providing advice about online teaching, pedagogy, and the use of the learning management systems, and (7) creating courseware and knowledge modules as needed.

Mentee Characteristics

Hunter and Kiernan (2005) examined the types of characteristics exhibited by mentees. They found effective mentees were open to learning from their mentor, good listeners, good observers, and realized that learning is ongoing and they should reflect and continue to enhance their skills over time.

Distance mentees, protégés, were studied by Ridout (2006). He found many of their behaviors the same as those identified by Hunter and Kierman. To effectively learn the types of skills and knowledge needed to become an effective online course designer and instructor, distance mentees must have a positive learning attitude towards distance education; be interested in obtaining help from a mentor to advance their skills and knowledge; have the potential as well as the time needed to be proactive in learning distance information; be non-judgmental, trustworthy, and ethical; and be a good listener. In addition, a good distance mentee takes the initiative to be a mentee; asks for feedback from the distance mentor; acknowledges the mentor's expertise in distance education and the value of distance education; provides feedback to the mentor on outcomes and what has taken place as a result of course developments; and is aware of the mentor's possible time constraints.

Methodology

Participants in the study consisted of 20 selected individuals: 11 distance mentors, 7 distance mentees, and 2 distance administrators who served as mentors in a Southeastern university. The University was in its second year of providing a mentoring program for new distance instructors in the College of Education and in its tenth year of offering a mentoring program from the Distance and Distributed Education Office which serves the entire campus community.

In collecting the data the investigators used interview and questionnaire techniques. The following 11 questions were sent via email to the participants for consideration.

1. What has occurred in your mentoring relationship to effectively meet the needs of the mentee in the following areas:
 - a. planning an online class
 - b. implementing an online class
 - c. assessing and evaluating an online class
 - d. revising and improving an online class
 - e. selecting and using effective educational technologies for online education
2. What are some of the behaviors that should be exhibited by the mentors to serve as good role models for the mentees?
3. Based on your observations, what are the characteristics of successful distance mentees who want to become successful distance instructors?
4. Which mentoring practices mentioned in question 1 above have you implemented? (mentor only)
5. What steps should be taken to provide the necessary support for new distance instructors so they will continue to teach online?
6. What factors caused you to be interested in teaching online and working with a distance mentee (mentor)?
7. What factors cause faculty members to stay away from teaching online courses?
8. What effective face-to-face teaching practices can be extended or adapted to the online format?
9. What specific online teaching practices are essential for you in your discipline?
10. What is the impact of the mentoring program on new and experienced distance instructors?
11. What are the barriers in providing the necessary support to distance instructors?

All participants were asked to respond verbally to the first five questions during an interview which was audio-taped. The participants were asked to type their responses to the other six questions and submit the responses electronically to the investigators.

The coordinator of the mentoring program approached the participants based on their experience as a distance mentee or mentor and asked them to participate in this research study. Therefore, all the participants were volunteers and stated they had time for the interview and written report. Selected demographic information about the participants is shown in Table 1 below.

Gender	• 14 Females, 4 Males
Participants	• Mentors = 11 participants, Mentees = 7 participants, Administrators = 2 participants
Departments	• Media & Instructional Technology = 8 participants; Special Education & Speech Pathology = 4 participants; Counseling & Educational Psychology = 3 participants; Distance Learning Office = 3 participants; Educational Leadership & Policy Studies = 2 participants

Table 1: Demographic data on the participants in the study

The investigators developed the interview questions after a careful review of the distance mentoring literature and pilot tested them. Needed revisions were made before it was administered. Each interview lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. The interviews were audio taped with the consent of the participants and then transcribed in order to be analyzed by the investigators. The e-mailed questionnaires were collected and distributed to the investigators for analysis purposes.

Analysis of the Data

The researchers read the reports multiple times to look for patterns across the data. The preliminary findings for the study's questions and the frequency of occurrence for the statements are summarized below. The responses are rank ordered from highest to lowest frequencies. Only those statements that were reported two times or more are listed.

1. What does an effective mentor do?

- Patience (N=6),
- Communicates effectively (N=5),
- Listens (N=4),
- Meets the distance mentee as needed, Models the effective use of technology, Guides in the mentee's selection of technology, Provides support as needed (N=3),
- Understands that glitches happen with distance learning and remains calm, Problem solves, Uses technology effectively, Passionate about distance learning, Good instructional designer, Has a fearless let's try it attitude, Honest, Provides feedback to mentee (N=2).

2. What are the characteristics of successful distance mentees?

- Willing to learn online teaching and learning techniques in order to be an effective instructor (N=9),
- Organized, Willing to devote the time needed to teach online, Interested in learning online teaching practices (N=6),
- Asks for help and ideas in the development on their online course, Persistent (N=5),
- Patient, Open to ideas, Plans ahead (N=4),
- Desires to do what is best for students, Flexible (N=3).

3. What factors cause faculty members to become interested in teaching online?

- Enjoys improving their technology and/or online teaching and design skills (N=6),
- Wants to share their ideas in distance education with others (N=5),
- Faculty have seen the positive impact of distance education, Enjoy helping other teachers learn, Believe that distance education classes enable students to obtain an education that would not otherwise be possible (N=4),
- Students requested online classes delivered from faculty member (N=3),
- Serving as a distance mentor provides an opportunity to get to know peers better, Has a vested interest in the distance program, Funding from the mentor/mentee program has enabled the faculty member to attend conferences and purchase needed technology, Wants to provide support to other faculty members (N=2).

4. What factors deter faculty from teaching online?

- The fear of technology (N=11),
- The amount of time it takes to develop an online course (N=8),
- The perception by some faculty members that online courses are not quality educational courses (N=5),
- Work load issues, Faculty are not familiar with the new developments in technology (N=4),
- Faculty need to be trained on how to design and teach online courses, Fear of change, Not having enough face to face contact with students (N=3).

5. What should be done to support and encourage new distance instructors?

- Provide time for faculty to explore new technologies, Provide money for online training and development, View distance education pursuits as legitimate scholarly work, Report to administrators the work of mentors and mentees and their positive impact on distance learning (N=4),
- Continue to provide a quality mentor to interested mentees, Continue to provide software and hardware to explore the technologies, recognize mentors and mentees, Provide small group meetings for collaboration (N=3),
- Give reassigned time for substantial online work so the necessary time is available for course development (N=2).

6. What is the impact of the mentoring program on new and experienced distance instructors?

- The program helps to improve the quality of online courses (N=12),
- Provides a forum for experienced distance instructors to share some of their past problems and mistakes with other distance instructors so they learn from their past experiences and reduce their problem solving (N=5)
- This program is a good start for faculty who wish to teach online classes, Participants have an opportunity to share their ideas with others, The program provides a beneficial professional development opportunity for distance mentors and mentees in the program (N=3),
- Distance mentees enhance their technology and distance skills (N=2).

Results and Discussion

In this exploratory qualitative study, the authors investigated successful mentor behaviors and mentee characteristics in addition to the factors that impact quality distance mentoring. Some of the early data show the following points:

- All the participants in the study were highly supportive of the mentor/mentee program and reported it had a positive impact on both distance instructors and our students. The most frequently mentioned statements were the following: the program helped to improve the quality of online courses; experienced online instructors were able to share their past “bad experiences” in teaching online with others in order to prevent other faculty from experiencing the same types of stress and frustration; and the mentoring program was very effective in teaching new faculty how to teach online classes by starting small and having them slowly place a few class meetings online and then progressing to placing more classes online each semester.
- Successful distance mentors tended to be patient instructors who communicate and listen effectively to their mentees in order to meet their diverse and varying distance training needs.
- Faculty members who are successful distance mentees are highly interested in learning the necessary content and willing to invest the time to learn. They also are organized, ask for help and ideas when needed to develop their online courses, are patient, and open to ideas that might be of value to their courses and/or students.
- This exploratory study revealed the fear of technology and the amount of time it takes to learn how to design, deliver, and evaluate an online class and time to implement the online class itself are the reasons most faculty members stay away from this teaching format. Strategies must be developed to reduce these fears and more supportive measures must be provided to faculty who wish to become online instructors so this becomes a more appealing teaching format.
- Many useful supportive approaches were identified by the participants as ways to provide support to online instructors in an effort to keep them online and to draw in others. These included providing more time for faculty to learn new and emerging technologies on the job, funding online training and development, taking steps to have the academic community view online work as a scholarly endeavor, informing administrators when faculty members are involved in a mentoring program so they are given appropriate credit for their active participation, giving recognition to distance mentors and mentees for their contributions to distance education (i.e., monetary incentives, certificates, letters), providing a distance mentoring program to enhance the distance knowledge and skills of interested distance teachers, and giving reassigned time to faculty to plan to design a distance class. These and other strategies must be put into place to keep distance instructors motivated and feeling they are appreciated for the substantial time they put into their work.

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