

Online Mentoring

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Online

Mentor

Collaborative Learning

Mentoring

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Online mentoring is “a computer mediated, mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a protege which provides learning, advising, encouraging, promoting, and modeling that is often boundaryless, egalitarian, and qualitatively different than traditional face-to-face mentoring” (Bierema & Merriam, 2002, p. 219). While online mentoring has been available since the advent of internet access, it is evolving to become a transformative educational and professional development strategy. By creating collaborative learning experiences between mentees and mentors, online mentoring advances a learning vision where mentorship transcends cultural, geographical, and physical barriers, enhances inclusivity, and fosters holistic development within an increasingly interconnected global community. The democratization of mentorship also encourages belonging and engagement and provides new opportunities for self-directed learning (DeWaard & Chavhan, 2020; Olivier & Trivedi, 2021).

Online mentoring elevates the classic art of mentoring (Shandley, 1989; Jacobi, 1991; Ehrich et al., 2004) into the modern world of technology and innovation. While foundational mentoring principles still apply to online mentoring, definitions are also evolving. In early online mentoring research, traditional mentoring models were adjusted to be successfully implemented online (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003; Whiting & de Jansz, 2004), but foundational research focused specifically upon online mentoring was missing (Sanyal & Rigby, 2017). More contemporary definitions offer a simplified explanation that online mentoring provides a “process in which electronic media are used as the main channel of communication between the mentor and mentee” (Argento-Linares et al., 2017, p. 401).

Online mentoring has increasingly become more valuable as advancements in technology have facilitated and streamlined accessibility and connectivity (Collier, 2022; Tetzlaff et al., 2022). Recent challenges of remote work and mandated online education have also provided new opportunities and the necessity for creating trust between employees or students and instructors, building support for the sponsoring organization, and improving inclusion through online mentoring (Tu & Li, 2021). Currently, online mentoring is evolving to surpass previous paradigms, acquiring heightened prominence in the form of transformative educational and professional development strategies (Mullen, 2021). This evolution is characterized by the merging of technology with pedagogical methodologies resulting

in a dynamic platform that leverages digital connectivity to foster mentor-mentee relationships (Tinoco-Giraldo et al., 2020). In this context, online mentoring encompasses a mentor's guidance, knowledge dissemination, and personal development for the mentee through virtual channels. It also draws on online mentors' intentional use of strategies including personal competence, availability, career planning and networking, communication, feedback, and emotional connection (Byrnes et al., 2019, p. 239). This reframing process for online mentoring capitalizes on the digital landscape's potential for immersive and collaborative learning experiences.

Advantages

In comparison to classical mentoring, online mentoring benefits from potentials of being “boundaryless” and more “egalitarian” (Bierema & Merriam, 2002, p. 419). First, physical and logistical constraints to mentoring can be removed as mentors and mentees meet in a wider variety of locations and at a wider variety of times than might be available in a traditional office setting, such as outside, in moving vehicles, and with backdrops to hide locations or during early morning, late evening, and between other meetings.

Online mentoring also transcends geographical and cultural constraints (Bierema & Merriam, 2002; Pollard & Kumar, 2021) by providing opportunities for long-distance and international mentoring, ensuring access for students and employees worldwide that would not be possible in person with mentees and mentors in separate offices, locations, and countries. It may also help remove psychological barriers between mentees and mentors due to professional position, stature, or age, and may help improve mentoring relationships where there are potential biases of race, culture, gender, first-generation status, etc. that may cause feelings of estrangement or lack of inclusivity among professionals and students (Termini et al., 2021). Online mentoring can help level the conversational landscape for the mentee, allowing them to ask questions with more confidence and facilitating deeper engagement and active listening (Andersen & West, 2021). Working toward this goal of greater equality in mentorship fosters a sense of belonging and enhances an institution's commitment to inclusivity.

Moreover, online mentoring can encourage self-guided learning as mentees actively use online resources and flexible interactions to explore topics they are curious about. This approach promotes independence, critical thinking, and the skill to research on one's own—all in line with modern learner-focused methods. Furthermore, online mentoring breaks down barriers and nurtures self-directed learning, making it a powerful tool for modern education (Olivier & Trivedi, 2021). Online mentoring's focus on autonomy can enrich not only academic or workplace success for the mentee but also personal development, shaping a dynamic and vibrant learning environment.

Constraints

There continue to be challenges to overcome in online mentoring requiring careful consideration and strategic management. Connectivity and access to reliable data remain persistent hurdles. If a mentor and mentee cannot have an uninterrupted mentoring conversation, such as via video conference or messaging due to insufficient data coverage, even the best attempts at mentoring will fail. In many countries, access to high-speed internet is an ongoing difficulty. Even with remote work and online higher education becoming more mainstream, there may also still be obstacles to virtual communication perception between mentee and mentor. Visual and auditory cues that facilitate effective interpersonal interactions in face-to-face settings may not be as readily discernible, leading to miscommunication. The efficacy of online mentoring is contingent on the technological fluency and comfort of both mentors and mentees and requires vigilant attention by both to ensure up-to-date technology skills and coherent dialogue. Individuals who are apprehensive or ill at ease with online communication platforms may struggle to derive optimal benefits from online mentoring.

Online mentoring may also require more direction from mentors regarding online dialogue and etiquette, especially for students who are accustomed to informality in personal online communication (O'Dowd et al., 2020). Mentors may also need to connect with their mentees through multiple modalities to be most effective, which requires time and planning

and is essential for cultivating robust and meaningful online mentoring relationships (Sanyal & Rigby, 2017). Cybersecurity is also an issue with online mentoring, as the possibility that interactions may not be secure might influence comfort and openness (Jan & Mahboob, 2022). In response to these challenges, mentors must assume an essential role in guiding and shaping effective online mentoring interactions. As the realm of online mentoring continues to evolve and expand, the development of comprehensive strategies to address these challenges will be integral to realizing its full potential as an impactful learning modality.

The Future of Online Mentoring

Online mentoring seems positioned to become more critical to higher education and business as technology improves and as professionals, students, and society become more engaged in online learning opportunities. This trajectory underscores the growing significance of using online mentoring to foster a diversified spectrum of skills and cultural insights through global mentoring. In this growing trend of global mentoring, mentors and mentees can move beyond cultural boundaries in pursuit of enriched learning experiences and the cultivation of intercultural competence (Domer et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2021). Mentors and mentees may reach out for mentoring across cultures to improve learning and connection. Benefits include finding global solutions to common challenges, developing a more diverse perspective, building global community and collaboration, especially where participants share common fields, and working together on international projects and programs (Rosser et al., 2020). Mentors and mentees must show resolve for working around barriers such as time differences, language and communication constraints, and cultural differences to achieve “intentionally global” mentoring opportunities. (Rosser et al., 2020, p. 8). More opportunities for global mentoring in business, education, and medicine are promising to enhance academic and professional proficiencies while also fostering a heightened cultural acumen that resonates with the evolving international landscape.

Artificial intelligence methods may also impact online mentoring. While a chatbot may not be able to replace the role of a skilled mentor, AI could help improve online mentoring relationships by managing administrative details such as (a) scheduling and providing resources to mentees, thus minimizing the time commitment for mentors, (b) providing learner analytics to improve how the mentor guides the mentee, and (c) helping to match mentors and mentees together (Murray et al., 2022). AI-assisted online mentoring may also offer increased access to mentoring and provide more effective mentoring to large populations and diverse, underrepresented groups (Neumann et al., 2021; Ocado et al., 2023).

As the landscape of online education continues to evolve, a collaborative relationship with online mentoring may strengthen its impact as a transformative educational modality. Connections between technological innovation, pedagogical adaptation, and cross-cultural interaction show the potential for creating a generation of students and professionals adept in both their chosen fields and global perspectives. The nexus of online mentoring thus stands ready to shape the trajectory of education, business, and other disciplines, ushering in a new era of dynamic, interconnected, and culturally astute learning and educational experiences.

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Steven Thomas, a native of Jackson, Mississippi, possesses extensive expertise as a seasoned industry leader in mentoring, success coaching, enrollment counseling, student wellness, and working with global at-risk populations, complemented by a diverse professional background spanning education, sports, and executive leadership. He has acquired academic credentials from Brigham Young University-Idaho, Belhaven University, Jackson State University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Steven has garnered notable achievements, including coaching and securing consecutive State Championship basketball titles, attaining recognition as a five-time bodybuilding champion, and achieving eight-time National Qualifier status as an athlete. In acknowledgment of his contributions to education, he was honored with the Global Forum for Education and Learning's 2020-2021 Top 100 Leaders in Education award. As an entrepreneur, Steven is the founder of NXT LVL Empire, LLC, and Steven Thomas Global, where he serves as a mentor and coach to a diverse clientele spanning across the globe. Recognized for his eloquence and motivational prowess, Steven is highly regarded as a public and motivational speaker. Presently, he holds the position of Director of Enrollment Counseling, Mentoring, and Student Wellness at BYU-Pathway Worldwide, serving 70,000+ students from 188 countries. Through his multifaceted professional roles, Steven is committed to empowering individuals globally, facilitating the realization of their fullest potential.

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