

# Learning to Mentor: Assessing an Online Mentor Education Course

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**Abstract:** Although the literature reflects the need for teacher collaboration in order to support technology integration, it is often difficult for these kinds of activities to occur on a regular basis. One strategy identified as effective in facilitating these kinds of interactions is mentoring. The authors developed an 8-module, online professional development program in collaboration with a local school district designed to teach effective instructional practices for integrating technology. The model linked teacher learners with district mentor teachers identified for their expertise in technology integration. Concurrent with the development of the online program, the researchers designed a companion course to prepare perspective mentors. Given the newness of this university/school collaborative and its dependence on quality mentoring, it was appropriate to study the impact of the mentor course. This paper/presentation will present results of that research.

## Introduction

The unprecedented infusion of technology into schools is in response to the widely held view that today's students must be skilled users of technology in order to make sense of the information with which they will interact. This puts tremendous demands on teachers to provide opportunities for technology use and integration into the curriculum. In order for teachers to become fluent in the use of technology in the classroom, it is incumbent on school systems to provide opportunities for teachers to learn how to integrate technology into classroom practice. This mandate requires that strategies and models be explored for providing education related to technology use.

Traditional models of staff development have proved inadequate for providing teachers with guidance and confidence in using technology tools. Time constraints, the lack of teacher retention, and low teacher retention are barriers to successful technology integration (Polselli, 2002). To provide meaningful instruction in the use of technology, professional development must help teachers "move beyond 'mechanical use' of curriculum and technology to become facilitators of inquiry" (Grant, 1996, p. 1). The focus of staff development must move from learning 'about' the technology to learning to 'use' the technology to enhance student learning. Teachers must have ample opportunity to discuss and collaborate with their peers and instructors (Fulton, 1996; Grant, 1996; Wiburg, 1997; Yocam, 1996).

Even though the literature reflects the need for and power of teacher collaboration and discussion, it is often difficult, for these kinds of activities to occur on a regular basis. One strategy identified as effective in facilitating these kinds of interactions is mentoring. The one-on-one aspect of mentoring provides the opportunity for novices to observe and imitate mentors as role models. Role modeling has been positively associated with skill development (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Those who grow to admire mentors are likely to try behaviors that they observe (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Polselli (2002) found that an educational model incorporating mentoring serves a variety of needs including teacher motivation, clarity of expectations, and human contact that is necessary for bridging the learning differences inherent with varying levels of technology proficiency.

In order to successfully implement a mentor program, mentors must be identified and educated. Giebelhaus and Boman (2002) found that those teachers who have been prepared in the general principals and practices of mentoring were far more successful as cooperating teachers than those who received no preparation. Perspective mentors need opportunities to experience the same interactive communication and they need

opportunities to talk about their experiences with others and to discuss and role play mentoring activities before they are able to internalize these practices (Clinard & Ariav).

## The Study

In the Spring of 2002, the researchers developed an online professional development program in collaboration with a local school district. The modules were designed to teach effective instructional practices for integrating technology. The model was designed to link teacher learners, hereafter referred to as protégés, with district teachers identified for their expertise in technology integration, hereafter referred to as mentors. Thus, when protégés begin a module, they are paired with a mentor of similar content and grade level experience. Protégés access online learning modules, complete readings, tutorials, activities, and lesson design challenges and then email completed assignments, questions, and curricular ideas to their online mentor. Online mentors review submissions, make comments and suggestions, and engage protégés in a discussion regarding the content of the assignment and its links to practice within the classroom.

Concurrent with the development of the online program, the researchers were faced with the necessity of developing a companion course to prepare perspective mentors. A four module course was developed. The modules were self-paced but designed to be completed within a five-week time frame. Prospective mentors were assigned an online mentor. Prospective mentors completed each activity and emailed it to their mentor. The mentors reviewed each assignment, made comments and suggestions, and initiated a dialogue regarding the content of the assignment as it related to effective mentoring. The activities in the mentor course were designed as constructivist activities that mimicked mentoring activities and roles that would be assumed by prospective mentors.

Prior to beginning the online course for perspective mentors, the researchers formulated a research design to assess the impact of the mentor course. For those identified to be in the first cadre of mentors, the idea of mentoring in an online learning environment was unfamiliar. Because of the newness of the model, it was appropriate to study the process from its inception. Therefore, the problem of this study was to assess the impact of the mentor course on prospective mentors. Thus, perspective mentors were asked to complete the Stages of Concern Questionnaire (Hall, George, & Rutherford, 1979) and six qualitative questions prior to and immediately after participating in the mentoring course. Follow up email questions completed the data collection phase of the research.

## Results

The goal of interpreting the SoC Questionnaire is the development of an overall perspective of the relative intensity of the stages of concern about a particular innovation for the respondents (Hall, George, & Rutherford, 1979). Thus, the goal of interpreting the results is to develop a gestalt based on all the stages of concern scores.

The first question of this study was: Will there be a change in the participants' level of concern after completion of the mentor training? In order to answer this question, student responses to the Stages of Concern Questionnaire were tallied. Using the table in the SoCQ manual, raw scores for each stage were converted to percentiles. The individual data were aggregated and means were computed for the group (n=8). Results of the analysis are presented in Figure 1. The results of the individual percentile scores are indicated in Table 1.

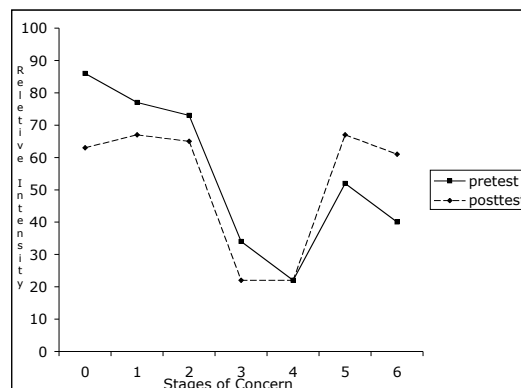


Figure 1. Group mean scores taken prior to treatment and immediately after treatment.

Examination of Figure 1 reveals that prior to the treatment, the stages of concern with the highest intensity were those at the 'lower' end. Stages 0 (86%), 1 (77%), and 2 (73%) had the highest relative intensity.

The same process was followed at the end of the treatment. Figure 1 shows the group means for the survey given after participation in the mentor course. Following the treatment, the peak stages of concern shift towards the stages with stage 5 (65%), and 6 (61%). A review of individual high and second high scores for the post-treatment survey indicates that all are in one of these three stages.

The second question of this study was, how will participants feelings about their effectiveness as mentors change as a result of taking this course? To answer this question the researchers asked one Likert Scale question and one open-ended question. In order to answer the Likert Scale question, participants were asked to rate their confidence to mentor other teachers about the integration of technology in teaching and learning as either "Very Confident", "Confident", "Unconfident", or "Very Unconfident". The pretest survey reports that 5 out of 8 participants (62%) answered, "Very Confident" while 3 out of 8 (38%) answered, "Confident", while the posttest survey reports that all 8 participants (100%) answered, "Very Confident".

In response to the second open-ended question asking, do you think you will be a good online mentor, the pretest survey reports that 6 out of 8 participants (75%) replied yes, they thought they would be good online mentor, while the other 2 (25%) responded that they "hoped" so. In the posttest survey, all 8 participants (100%) responded yes, they thought they would be good online mentors.

The third question of this study was, will participation in the mentor course affect the participants' attitudes, beliefs and understandings towards mentoring? To answer this question the researchers asked two open-ended questions. In response to the open-ended question asking, what do you know about mentoring, the pretest survey reported that two of the participants' responses (50%) matched the researchers operational definition of mentoring, three participants (38%) did not match the definition and the final participant (12%) did not know what mentoring was. In the posttest survey, all eight participants (100%) matched the researchers operational definition of mentoring.

In response to the second open ended question asking, do you feel that being an online mentor is a leadership activity, the pretest survey reported that seven out of the eight participants (88%) responded, yes, they felt being an online mentor was indeed a leadership activity while the final participant (12%) did not know enough about mentor responsibilities to answer. The posttest survey reported that all 8 participants (100%) believed that being an online mentor was a leadership activity because they felt that being in a position to help facilitate change fell within leadership criteria.

## Discussion

The authors of the Concerns Based Adoption model have found concerns about change to be an important dimension of the process. They state that there appears to be a predictable pattern to the movement of the intensity of concern across various identified types of concern. Thus, as early concerns regarding information and personal issues are resolved, latter concerns related to the consequences of the innovation and become paramount.

The data suggest that the first hypothesis, that there would be a shift in the concerns of the participants as a result of the treatment, was supported. The initial group and individual profiles of the participants in this study showed that, without exception, the highest level of concern was in stages 0, 1, and 2. This fits the typical nonuser profile according to the SoCQ manual. This profile stands out most clearly and consistently. The concerns of nonusers are typically highest on Stages 0, 1, and 2. This indicates an interest in the innovation and a desire to learn more from a positive, proactive perspective. This is not at all surprising given that many of the participants had little or no experience as mentors, and none of them had experience mentoring in an online environment.

Subsequent to the treatment, the group profile showed a marked shift away from the personal concerns of Stages 0, 1, and 2 and towards Stages 4, 5, and 6. These stages are indicative of concerns related to consequence, collaboration, and refocusing. This area of concern is marked by fewer personal concerns and more concern related to the consequences of the innovation for the teacher's students within their sphere of influence. It can be concluded that, as a result of the treatment, many, if not all, of the personal concerns of the participants were addressed and that they have progressed, or moved towards concerns related to the innovation's influence on students and teaching practice.

Research supports the second question stating that there will be a positive increase in the participants' beliefs about their own effectiveness as mentors. After the treatment, all eight participants stated that they feel "Very Confident" in their new role as an online mentor as opposed to only five before the treatment. The positive

change in the remaining three participants would suggest that the knowledge and understanding they gained while participating in the mentor training course affected their attitude towards mentoring. Secondly, the open-ended question pertaining to whether the participants felt as though they would be a good online mentor indicated that two of the participants, “hoped so”. In the post survey, those two participants changed their answers to, “yes”, indicating that the questions they had about the responsibilities of mentoring were answered and accepted as they completed the mentor training course. This supports Gansers’s notion that mentor training is critical in the development of mentor-protégé relationships and in the development of mentors’ beliefs about their own skills.

Research supports the third hypothesis stating that there will be a positive change in the participants’ attitudes, beliefs and direction towards mentoring. When asked about the overall knowledge the participants had about mentoring, only 50% could verbalize that they understood what mentoring was in the same context as the researchers. After the treatment, 100% shared the same knowledge and views about mentoring, thus suggesting that the expectations and definitions of mentoring were understood by all eight participants after receiving the treatment.

It should be noted that among the limitations of this study is the small sample. The sample was one of convenience in that the participants were those teachers who were chosen to become mentors and take the course. It can be assumed that the trends in movement from lower level concerns to higher concerns would be more pronounced with a larger sample.

The authors of the SoCQ reiterate that the most important limitation regarding the questionnaire relates to the intended use. It should be remembered that the stages of concern are value-neutral, that is to say that a person who’s peak score is at stage 4 is not somehow ‘better’ than a person who’s peak score is at stage 3. Attempts to rate or rank participants on the basis of their scores would be misguided. The SoCQ is used here to identify mean profiles before and after the treatment to develop and understanding of the effects of the mentoring course. This study used the SoCQ only to develop profiles of individuals and of the sample. None of the demographic data was used to discern correlations between other variables and SoCQ scores. It would be interesting for future researchers to repeat the study to reinforce the findings and then correlate with other data. In doing so, it would be expected that variables might be identified as predictors, or influences on the shifting of concerns

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