

Epilogue: unresolved questions about mentoring and technology

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As we embrace the concept of e-mentorship, we not only wonder whether face-to-face mentoring can be replaced by an electronic *doppelganger* (i.e. a phantom twin), but also encounter questions that deal with the fundamental nature of mentoring. What does it mean, for example, to have a 'personal' relationship with a mentor or role model? Conceivably, such questions may only have importance from the perspective of a naïve and overly sentimental view of mentorship. As e-mentoring supplants the 'old fashioned' way of mentoring, we may be in danger of idealising the latter and, as a result, missing opportunities offered by the former.

While it seems defensible that technology can support the goals and processes of mentoring, it remains unresolved as to whether the in-person experience can ever be fully substituted. Should the two forms of mentoring even be compared? Jonathan Swift's (1726/1993) classic, *Gulliver's Travels*, reminds us about the follies of perspective: 'nothing is great or little otherwise than by Comparison' (II, p. 1). Accordingly, the complexities, ambiguities, and gaps evident from such comparisons elude us when we microscopically scrutinise the connection between mentorship and technology.

Throughout the current issue, technology has been predictably defined as the hardware and software that enable telecomputing and other solutions for making distant partnerships viable. Yet, it is revealing to know that 'technology' comes from the Greek word *technologia*, meaning 'systematic treatment'. The view that technology includes know-how and technique raises the question of whether mentoring practice can benefit from the same type of systems approach as instructional design (Gagné, 1988). In short, is it possible to systematise the process of mentoring? Can both the practice of mentoring and the acquisition of mentoring skills be prescribed as a set of predetermined learning sequences?

One attempt at a systematic approach to mentoring (Kealy, 2000), for example, involved a formalised structure in which new doctoral students were assigned to work with relatively senior students on research experiments. Apprentices worked in one area of research activity, such as the development of experimental materials, for a month or so and were then transferred to another area until, over a period of time, they acquired expertise in all facets of experimental research. However, while such organisational schemes can be efficient in mentoring large numbers of people, they require the right combination of circumstances and people to operate successfully. Also, the notion of a mentoring system may be more amenable to some disciplines and academic programmes than others.

Finally, an unresolved issue about mentoring and technology deals with the fact that technology is itself constantly changing, sometimes into a form that is surprising and unpredictable. Ironically, when new technologies appear, they often look in the past to define themselves. For example, the automobile was initially called the horseless carriage, reflecting the 'technology' it was meant to replace. In a similar manner, instead of viewing e-mentoring with an eye toward its predecessor (e.g. face-to-face mentoring), perhaps it should be understood on the basis of its unique qualities. Perhaps the two cannot be compared at all. This raises the question, how might mentoring with technology be evolving to a new form that will be as unrecognisable to us in the future as automobiles are to the horse and buggy?

Traditional mentoring is clearly neither dead nor in danger of being made obsolete by its technologically based counterpart. Rather, as swamps become meadows that in turn become forests, the landscape of mentoring is evolving. It is both important and exciting for us to look forward, anticipating the ways in which mentorship may be growing.

References

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