

An In-Depth Look at Strategies for Mentoring Online Adult Learners

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This paper presents results of a qualitative analysis of mentor support for distant adult learners in a web-based learning environment. It combines two sources of data: emails mentors sent to their students and mentors' reflections about mentoring students in a Master of Arts of Learning and Technology program at Western Governors University (WGU). By examining the data from these sources, we gained insights into our mentoring practices and hoped to find useful strategies for helping students progress in a timely and successful manner through our program.

Western Governors University implements a model that separates assessment from instruction, which means that its faculty, the mentors, do not directly deliver instruction. Students take online courses offered by other universities, known as Education Providers. The responsibilities of the WGU mentors are to provide academic guidance, advising, and tutoring to WGU students throughout their programs. Mentoring activities range from designing a preferred path, preparing students for assessments, reviewing portfolio projects, and serving as Chair for students' Capstone Committees. Mentoring is conducted via email, listserv, and telephone. The main communication channel between students and mentors is email.

The MLT program at WGU consists of five domains and 17 assessments. Students' progress is measured by the number of assessments they have passed. Therefore, it is important for a mentor to motivate students to take assessments after the students have completed the recommended learning opportunities. Our experience tells us that the first 4 to 6 months of a student's program are crucial for retention and eventual graduation. However, students enter our program on a monthly basis, while most of our online courses are semester-based. In addition, students begin with different skill levels, necessitating individualized learning. Thus, we were particularly interested in finding out what activities our most rapidly progressing students were engaged in during the first few months of their programs. Emails provided the best window through which we could view those activities.

Mentoring students at a distance in a competency-based online environment is new and there are few models to rely on for support. Mentors employ their own strategies to help students progress. After more than two years' practice, each mentor has accumulated some thoughts and tips for mentoring adult learners at a distance. This reflective part of the paper will identify and share our best practices for helping future students progress. Results may be valuable for educators engaged in research on, or the practice of, mentoring in a distance-learning environment.

Methodology

Participants

There were two types of participants for this analysis: the three researchers/mentors as direct participants and 30 students as indirect participants. The students were included only because they were the email recipients and correspondents of the participating mentors. Each mentor's students were ranked by their speed of progress based on the number of assessments completed and number of months a student had been in the program. The top ten from each group were selected. Two students were removed from the list due to the loss of their first six months' emails. Therefore, only emails sent to 28 students were selected for analysis.

Collection of Data

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1. Each of the researchers/mentors collected her/his own emails from Microsoft Outlook Sent Box. Five to six months of emails sent at the beginning of each student's program were chosen for analysis.
2. The researchers wrote separate reflections about their mentoring practices in response to four guiding questions (see Results section below).

Data Analysis

Through a rough check of emails sent to students, a tentative set of categories was developed. The set was further discussed and revised. The initial set of 26 categories was detailed and specific for easy coding and control of reliability. The categories were entered in a spreadsheet for coding. During the coding process, categories were added or deleted as necessary. The initial categories were grouped into 14 major categories in the analysis process. The final set of categories was summarized in Figure 1 below.

The reflections of the researchers/mentors were synthesized and summarized in the Results section, below.

Results

The three coding sheets were merged and summarized in Figure 1.

As Figure 1 shows, mentors sent more emails that were related to assessments and portfolio projects. It seems that early in their programs, these students were already engaged in these activities. Our initial set of categories shows that mentors were either announcing assessment results, providing feedback on portfolio activities, scheduling for competency review, or answering questions regarding assessments or portfolio activities.

The next largest group of emails fell into the categories of resources, encouragement, and phone calls. *Resources* here means mentors were sending students various resources for their domain assessments or domain projects. *Phone calls* here means scheduling phone calls. Mentors always review competencies with students on the phone when they are ready for a domain assessment and scheduling of those phone calls is usually via email. Thus, these categories further point to the fact that the selected students had dived right into the core activities of the Master's program early in their WGU studies.

The comparatively large volume of encouraging emails from mentors indicates that encouragement or praise was a good motivator, as discussed in the following Mentoring Strategies section.

Although it is too early to draw any conclusions from this preliminary email analysis, results seem to suggest that it might make a difference if a mentor encourages students to attempt at least one assessment early in their program. The experience of taking an assessment could reduce testing anxiety and/or increase self-esteem and confidence.

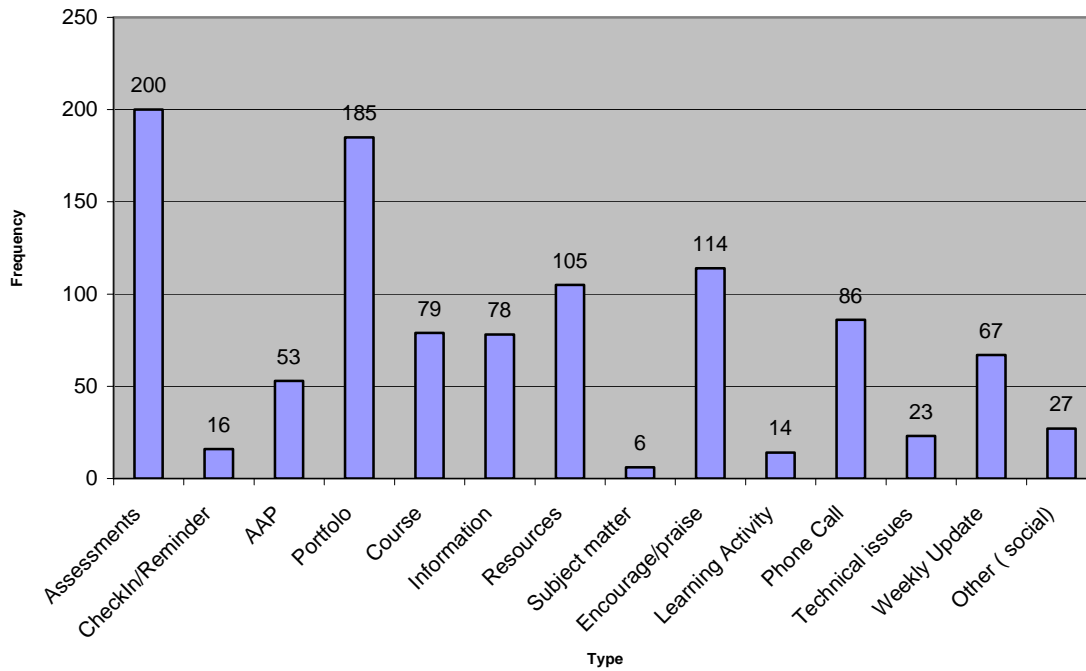


Figure 1. Emails sent to students

Mentoring Strategies

The researchers’/mentors’ reflections reveal similarities and differences in mentoring practice. Results are summarized based on four guiding questions, included below.

1. *What challenges have we faced in moving our adult learners through a competency-based, online learning model?*

The first challenge was to help students see the importance of structuring their learning time and setting aside a specific number of hours per week for their studies. An additional challenge was helping students realize their own ability to pass our domain assessments or helping them cope with failure in an assessment.

Another challenge was to help students, who entered the program with inadequate writing and/or technology skills. Unlike traditional universities, WGU hires outside graders to score students’ portfolio projects using rubrics for consistent quality control. As a result, the writing requirement is rigorous and daunting, causing some students to tend to procrastinate rather than to revise their portfolio projects and move forward. Occasionally, we find students who desire to learn how to integrate technology into their teaching curriculum, but who come with limited technology skills and understanding. These students may become very frustrated when they encounter technical difficulties in their first online courses. As a result, their frustration easily builds and their progress wanes.

2. *How do we motivate students to progress in this web-based and non-traditional learning environment?*

Students enjoy the freedom of the “any time and any place” feature of online classes, but they tend to get frustrated without face-to-face interaction, as well as examples and models to rely on. They feel online learning is similar to independent study and much harder than learning in a traditional classroom. Mentors try to build strong rapport via email and phone calls with their students so that learning in online courses is less lonely and intimidating, or frustrating. While providing the necessary academic support, the bars of registry of the University of Wisconsin system and The Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning

learning naturally entails multiple attempts at assessments to reach the competencies. Students soon learn that they can turn to their mentors at any time for academic and emotional support, and for solving problems, thus giving them the courage to progress (Brookfield, 1986).

3. *What strategies do we use to help new students have a good start in the competency-based program?*

Mentors have learned from experience that a good understanding of the program ensures student success. Before a student starts her/his program, a mentor makes a detailed analysis of the student's background knowledge, expectations of the program, and future career interests. Based on the information obtained from the skill survey and the pre-assessment that a new student takes as required items for admission, the mentor gains a good understanding of a student before the first extended phone interview with her/him for structuring the Academic Action Plan. During this phone interview, mentors use the strategy of an advance organizer (Ausubel, 1968) to give the student a good overview of the program, detailing how each domain project can be integrated into the final capstone. Most important of all, the mentor tries to relate the program projects to the student's career interest, and help the student identify some instructional and learning needs in the student's environment as topics on which to build the capstone. This initial discussion of the final project and the possible relation of the capstone to their work environment is so crucial that students immediately see the meaning and the benefit of pursuing the program. This discussion also coincides with many students' expectation that they will be able to work on a project in a competency-based program to solve practical problems using a variety of technologies.

4. *What strategies do we use to keep them progressing smoothly in the program?*

In a distance-learning environment, we found that students really need immediate feedback to motivate them to progress. We tried to provide feedback within 24 hours or at least 48 hours. Praising students is also a great motivator; some students really need that encouragement according to the Learning Orientation Model (discussed below) and androgical principles (Islam, 2002), which advocate placing learners in situations that promote their positive self esteem and show respect for the individual learner.

Understanding students' learning orientations has made mentoring more effective. According to the Learning Orientation Questionnaire (The Training Place, 2001), learners range through a continuum of transforming, performing, or conforming learners to resistant learners at the far end of the scale. An important role of a WGU mentor is to adjust her/his level of guidance and support to accommodate different learning orientations. We noticed that learners could move in and out of one orientation in response to negative or positive responses, conditions, results, and experiences (The Training Place, 2001). Thus, we tried to create a conducive environment for students at the very beginning of their program in an attempt to help them move more toward the performing or transforming end of the continuum of learning orientations to take more control of their learning.

We also tried to build strong relations with students through flexible availability for phone appointments and demonstrations of caring. A strategy adopted by an individual mentor is to require weekly reports from students in an attempt to make students set their own goals and deadlines. This strategy, which is used in addition to a monthly phone call, has proven effective by the mentor.

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Biographical Sketches

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