Telementoring and WebCT: Supporting students at a distance

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There is a widespread recognition that mentoring programs aimed at first year students will help to reduce student attrition rates and improve academic performance amongst this group. This paper will look at a mentoring program developed to support distance education students enrolled at Central Queensland University. The history of this program and factors that affect its success are discussed. The recent adoption of online technologies provided by the learning management system, WebCT, has provided new opportunities for communication and community building for volunteer mentors in this program. Issues raised and the potential to extend the use of WebCT to other aspects of support for distance education students are discussed.

Mentoring at CQU

McInnis, James, & McNaught's (1995) influential report highlighted the importance of the first year experience in predicting the long term success of higher education students. It was suggested that the development of a positive academic and social environment extending beyond the classroom could help address high attrition rates and failure rates amongst first year students. In 1997, Central Queensland University (CQU) established a student mentoring program for on-campus students following a successful pilot program the previous year. This program was based on students in the later years of their studies providing non-academic support for first year students and was considered to be successful in building a positive learning environment for these students (Connor & McKavanagh, 1997). Mentoring is provided on a one-to-many basis, rather than the traditional one-to-one model, to deal with the huge imbalance between applications from first year students and potential mentors. In 2003, this program linked 2000 first year students with 200 mentors on CQU's five regional campuses. However, CQU also has over 6000 students studying off-campus who do not have access to this program.

DE Mentor program

Long (1994) reported that off-campus students had even higher rates of withdrawal from their study programs and lower academic performance than on-campus students. The geographical isolation that puts this group at greater risk, also makes it more difficult to include them in intervention programs. However, using the on-campus mentoring program as a model, a program to extend the mentoring program to the distance education students was piloted in 1997 by the university's Counselling, Careers and Health Service (Connor & McKavanagh, 1997). This was followed by the establishment of an ongoing DE Mentor program in 1999 (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2002). Again, each mentor was assigned up to ten mentees to deal with the high

demand from potential mentees. Because the program is advertised in a general mail out to all enrolling students, both new and continuing, the program receives requests for mentoring from postgraduate students and students who have already completed some study, as well as the new undergraduate students that are the main target. All these requests are considered and prioritised based on the perceived risk of each particular applicant. The number of students involved in this program has increased from 21 mentors supporting 82 first year students in 1999 to 47 mentors supporting 314 mentees in 2003 (see Table 1).

The management of the DE Mentor program is based on Simpson's (2000) stages of a mentor scheme. The program coordinator, with clerical assistance, manages the initial stages of recruiting, sifting and linking students prior to the commencement of the teaching year. He then continues to monitor and evaluate the mentoring activity throughout the year. Ongoing supporting for the mentors in their activities is an important part of this job.

Table 1 - Growth of DE Mentor program

	Applications	Linked Applicants	Mentors
1999	100	82	21
2001	333	195	35
2003	323	314	47

The mode of mentoring activity adopted in the program is telementoring, as described by O'Neill, Abeygunawardena, Perris, & Punja (2000). Telementoring is defined as the use of telecommunications technology, such as email, telephone and conferencing systems, to develop and sustain a mentoring relationship in situations where face-to-face contacts are impractical, as is the case for CQU distance education students. A key issue for supporting the telementor process is the identification and support of an appropriate set of telecommunications options for use by the mentors, their mentees and the institutional supporters of the program. In identifying appropriate communication strategies, it is important to be aware of the situation of the participants, both the common characteristics of the majority of participants and the special circumstances of individuals. While the majority of students involved in the program have access to email (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2002), some students either do not have access to a computer, or have limited and inefficient access due to geographical isolation. These very isolated students are arguably the most at risk, and strategies for supporting them must be part of the mentor program.

The mentors

Although distance education students present special challenges for the organisers of a mentor program, they also have characteristics that are beneficial to such a program. Experience shows that distance education students are usually more mature with a diversity of life experience, including paid work and family commitments. This maturity tends to make them suitable candidates to act as mentors. They also tend to be studying part-time, so they are students for a longer period and eligible to continue as mentors for a longer period of time. In addition to helping to maintain the numbers of mentors, this also creates an opportunity for experienced mentors to support new mentors. This leads to an extended sense of community for those involved in the program.

O'Neill et al. (2000) believe that if telementoring is to succeed it must provide opportunities for the mentors to learn and grow from the experience, as well as the

mentees. Boyle & Boice (1998) also suggest that both mentors and mentees will benefit from the increased opportunities for interaction and the enhanced sense of involvement in the learning community. The wish to continue as part of this community may account for an increasing number of applications from mentees in the program wishing to continue their involvement by becoming mentors. Support for the mentor has a high priority in the DE Mentor program. Just as first year students benefit from interaction with other students, so mentors can benefit from interaction with other mentors, with the program coordinator and with their mentees. Mentees are strongly encouraged to contact their mentors regularly, rather than always waiting for the mentor to initiate contact, but this does not occur as often as desirable. Mentors regularly report disappointment in this and those mentors who are contacted by their mentees report a greater sense of satisfaction in their role.

Using online technologies

CQU's highly distributed teaching operation, supporting 13 on and off-shore campuses in addition to distance education students, makes extensive use of online technologies to support teaching and learning. A factor that has been identified as making a significant contribution to the success of the DE Mentor program has been the growth of computer usage amongst CQU students, with its attendant communications technologies (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2002). Initially the main form of communication between mentors and mentees was telephone. However, this imposed a considerable cost on the mentor, particularly if the mentee lived at some distance and the phone calls were timed long distance calls. The rapid increase in email usage since 2001 has seen email become the most popular method of communication between mentors and their mentees. There has also been a steadily increasing use of other computer mediated forms of communication which has had an effect on the nature of the program, as discussed below. While there is considerable literature examining the effectiveness of using online communications technologies to support learning in higher education (for example, Motteram, 2001; O'Reilly & Newton, 2002) there is less information about the effectiveness of these technologies for student support activities. The much stronger emphasis on the social aspects of the interaction and the more informal nature of the interactions raise different issues for consideration.

Email

Email used for both individual and group communication has been a central component in the operation of the DE Mentor program. As the main method of communication between mentors and mentees, it is low cost and allows one-to-many communications, further reducing the time and money required to maintain contact with a group of mentees. Group emails and other group communications also provide the opportunity for communications between mentees, further building the sense of community.

The program coordinator also makes widespread use of institutional group mailing lists to disseminate information and allow social interactions. There is a general mailing list available to all distance education students and a more limited list for DE mentors. Because of the organisational benefits of using email communication, access to email is a prerequisite for becoming a mentor in the program and the DE Mentor mailing list has been the primary means of communication with this group. Individual email is also used to advise new mentors of their acceptance into the scheme, to provide an initial briefing and in situations that require the program coordinator to intervene at an individual level.

The mailing list also provides a forum for discussion between mentors. This ranges from the purely social, to discussions of the experience of being a mentor, to the

posting of problems or requests for information to help their mentees. The social aspect of this interaction provides the same sort of support and community building as the mentors provide for their mentee students. The coordinator also uses this forum to share institutional information with the mentors group in advance of general release, in recognition of their semi-official status and as a small reward for their involvement.

Although use of email is widespread amongst distance education students in general, it is not universal. To ensure maximum coverage, other methods of communication, such as a regular print newsletter, are used for information that is targeted at this group. Comparing these two groups highlights the financial and time benefits of using group email where possible.

WebCT

Since the widespread adoption of the learning management system, WebCT, by CQU, new opportunities for using Internet based technologies have been available. WebCT, and similar learning management systems, provide access to a wide range of sophisticated technology without requiring the developer to possess high level computing skills. The use of a wide range of communications tools can be a disadvantage if the end users need to continually learn how to use a new tool. However, many of the mentors were already familiar with WebCT through its widespread use in online courses taught at CQU, so this effect was diminished.

In early 2003, the program coordinator developed a WebCT site for use by the mentors in the program. This was viewed as a pilot to help assess the suitability of this approach for wider use with distance education students. Tools that were included in this online site were online chat rooms, a threaded discussion board, the facility for students to create their own homepages, and an online survey to determine the most popular time to conduct chat sessions. These tools were chosen for inclusion because of their potential to promote a sense of community. The mentors' involvement with the WebCT site, and its elements, was not mandatory. The usage was moderately high but not high enough to use this as the primary mode of communication (see Table 2). The DE Mentor mailing list continued as the primary communication channel and WebCT was used as a complementary resource, providing opportunities for additional social interactions. For example, the WebCT discussion board and student homepages were used as a forum for mentors to introduce themselves to each other, by posting photos of themselves and other personal information in a permanent display, an opportunity which was not otherwise available.

Table 2 - Usage of DE Mentor WebCT site (Term 1, 2003)

Activity	Number of users (of 47 mentors in the program)
Access WebCT site	37
Read discussion board postings	37
Posted messages to discussion board	20
Created student home page	21
Participated in one or more chat session	19

There are both advantages and disadvantages in using WebCT in this way. The DE Mentor program receives no additional institutional funding and must be supported within the workload of the program coordinator in addition to his other student support roles. These workload issues mean that the ability to create and maintain a highly functional site with very little time and effort, and with a minimum of technical

support, makes WebCT a very useful tool. The great majority of the coordinator's time commitment to the WebCT site was in participation in online communications, rather than site development or maintenance. The flexibility of the system also meant that changes to the site, such as the inclusion of new tools, could be made at any time, even when the site was live. This allowed for ongoing development in quick response to identified needs. The ability of the coordinator to manage the course and its contents was seen as a major benefit of using this system.

As with many learning management systems, WebCT limits course access to specified users. This process is automated for standard teaching courses at CQU, but requires manual enrolment of identified users for non-standard courses, such as the DE Mentor site. The specific configuration of the WebCT installation at CQU precludes the course owner from enrolling students. Although the WebCT administration team handled enrolment requests quickly, there were inevitable delays and occasional confusion about enrolment because of the unusual nature of the DE Mentor course. It would be preferable for the program coordinator to have direct control of access to the course and it is hoped that the imminent change to an alternate learning management system, Blackboard, will allow this.

The nature of WebCT, and other websites, is that the user must actively choose to go to the site in order to access any content on the site. This is described as a 'pull' technology because the users pulls the content from the web (Weinstein, 1998). This requires some commitment from the user to continue checking the site for new information on a regular basis. This can result in reduced activity in the site if regular access is not mandatory, or at times when there are other demands on the users' time. This may have contributed to a reduction in the amount of activity in the WebCT site as the term went on and assessment demands on students increased. There may also have been a reduced desire for regular contact with other mentors as new mentors became more confident in their new role.

Email, on the other hand is a low level 'push' technology in which the information is pushed to the user without requiring any explicit action from the user. Push technologies, are more effective for the distribution of essential information because there is greater certainty that all intended recipients have received the information. However, as Franklin & Zdonik (1998) point out, there can be concerns with an excess of unwanted mail on mailing lists causing annoyance and interfering with important emails. By providing a second avenue for non-essential social interactions that the mentors can choose to participate in or not, it is possible to provide a rich social environment without increasing the volume of traffic on the mailing list.

Online chat

Online chat in the WebCT site is an additional form of social contact that has not previously been available to the mentor group. Chat sessions have a stronger social presence because of their immediacy, but the speed and confusion of the communication can be daunting for new participants (Motteram, 2001). They also require a continued online presence for the duration of the session, which can be expensive and technically difficult for some users. The program coordinator initiated the mentor chats on a regular weekly basis and advertised this to the mentors both in the WebCT site and in the mailing list. The program coordinator nominated a topic for the discussion based on some aspect of the mentoring process and this was advertised in advance. This topic was used as a conversation starter, but the discussions were not restricted to the topic. The program coordinator sees his role as enabling communication between the mentors rather than controlling it. Although the conversation was not restricted to the nominated topic, the focus was generally related to the mentor program. This included system issues such as ways to recruit new mentors, mentoring issues such as effective ways to begin an email to the mentees,

and specific situations that had arisen. The majority of the discussion came from the mentors with the coordinator's input mainly relating to facilitating the conversation. The level of involvement (see Table 2) and the enthusiasm of the participants indicate that this form of communication is worth continuing.

Although a range of communications options was available, simply providing access to various forms of electronic communication will not ensure effective communications. As part of their briefing, mentors receive a copy of the DE Mentor Handbook (Kennedy & McKavanagh, 2003), which discusses the roles and responsibilities of both mentors and mentees. It also provides guidelines for appropriate and effective communication using email. This is currently being expanded to included guidelines for chat room communications. An equally important guide to desirable online behaviour is the behaviour modelled by the program coordinator in his interactions with mentors and mentees. As someone who has been a mature aged, distance education student himself, the coordinator responds to the mentors and mentees informally, but with the respect due to equals. This attitude is reflected in the communications between mentors in the mailing list, the discussion board and the chat rooms. Several of the mentors were quite experienced in the use of chat rooms and had initiated informal chat sessions with their mentees using public web based chat rooms. These users were also able to advise the program coordinator and other inexperienced participants on effective chat techniques.

In addition to the individual use of the various communications options that were available, these technologies were also used in combination, providing an even richer environment. The discussion board was used in conjunction with student homepages for self-introductions. A copy of the log of each chat room session was sent (with the permission of the participants) to the mailing list for the benefit of those who could not attend the scheduled chat session. Initially the reason for this was to advertise the chat session and encourage others to participate. However, on several occasions, others on the mailing list picked up on issues that were discussed in the chat session and further discussion occurred on the mailing list in the following days. This system takes advantage of the strong points of both synchronous (chat room) and asynchronous (mailing list) forms of communication.

Future directions

WebCT has initially been used to support the community of mentors, and the level and type of activity suggests that this has been successful. The suitability of this form of website for other community building activities, such as mentor – mentee communications or use by all distance education students, has yet to be tested. An extension of the current WebCT tools can be envisioned, such as using the homepage tool to allow mentees to see what their mentor looks like, or chat rooms available for a group of mentees with a common mentor. WebCT may also be useful as a repository of information and links to other support services. However, the mentor-mentee relationship requires a more individualised and more immediate mode of communication than can be supported by WebCT's discussion board. The 'push' technology of email may be a more effective tool for asynchronous communication between mentors and mentees. The possible usage of WebCT for providing a more informal virtual community for all distance education students should also be investigated.

In 2004, CQU will be changing from WebCT to Blackboard as the institutional learning management system. Although there are differences between these two systems, they have much the same functionality and offer a similar range of tools, particularly communications tools. While the change will entail some retraining for course developers and managers, such as the DE Mentor coordinator, there may also be some long term benefits. The organisational implementation of the system will

allow the course owner greater control of the course administration. There is also greater integration of the learning management system with the university's student management system, which may offer opportunities for streamlining the enrolment of distance education students into the website. The current experience with WebCT will provide a useful background for site development in Blackboard.

While there has been a significant increase in the use of computer based communications technologies, both as a mentoring tool and in the institutional support of mentors, it is not envisioned that this will become the only mode of communication. Telephone communications have benefits that will ensure it remains a valuable tool for the mentor program. For some mentees, Internet access is still slow and expensive if it exists at all. For these students, the phone may still be the only feasible method of contact. There are also sensitive situations where the extra dimension of voice communication is important to avoid misunderstandings. Phone conferences are used at the beginning of the year to brief the new mentors, and are considered important to develop interpersonal relationships and a sense of community amongst mentors. The program must ensure that these benefits are not lost in a rush to embrace newer technologies.

Conclusion

Computer based technologies have provided a range of communications tools to support flexible teaching and learning in distributed universities such as CQU. Learning management systems such as WebCT have provided even more options in a convenient package that is easy for the unskilled developer to use. The experience of the DE Mentor program is that these technologies can be successfully used to support non-teaching activities such as telementoring of distance education students. However, an important aspect of integrating these tools into any program is careful selection of appropriate tools, and an awareness of the limitations of these technologies, particularly for isolated students. Investigation into the effective use of these communications options will continue as part of the drive to develop a sense of community amongst off-campus students.

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