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Participatory Telementoring: Beyond the One-to-One Model

"Mentoring" is a term much in use both in professions and in education. Classically, it refers to a relationship between a more senior and a less senior person in the same field of work, in which the less senior person is able to profit from the informal, tacit knowledge that develops through long experience. Thus it is intended to supplement and enrich rather than take the place of knowledge gained through instruction. "Telementoring" refers to mentoring carried out on-line. Typically it is carried out via e-mail exchanges. Telementoring has obvious advantages in terms of making possible mentoring relationships that would be difficult to establish or maintain because of physical distance, time constraints, and so on.

Telementoring has become popular in schools, particularly in connection with inquiry-based learning. Students working on a project dealing with climate, for instance, may be linked with a volunteer meteorologist or climatologist. Many business and professional people have volunteered their time as telementors, some corporations even promoting it among their employees as a form of public service. Despite generally favorable reports, however, a number of difficulties have been reported. Perhaps the most common is that the students call on the telementor to answer questions for them that they could have found answers to themselves. thus treating the telementor as a labor-saving device. Telementors themselves may err in being too controlling, too laissez-faire, too

remote or too chummy, or they may simply not hit it off with the students to whom they have been assigned. Students, for their part, may not know how to make optimal use of their telementors and may not see value in the relationship. A common reaction to these difficulties is to call for the training of telementors, but for obvious reasons this idea has not gotten very far in practice.

An alternative to the conventional e-mail approach to telementoring has been under development by the CSILE/Knowledge Forum team at the University of Toronto, working in collaboration with Kevin O'Neill who joined the team for his post-doctoral work. Taking advantage of the collaborative knowledge building capabilities of Knowledge Forum (see Chapter 3), this approach involves telementors as participants in the work going on in a Knowledge Forum database. The possibilities for mentoring relationships can expand considerably under such conditions. For example, instead of having designated "mentees," the telementors enter into the work as collaborative knowledge builders. They "build-on" students' notes, enter notes of their own in views, construct new views, reference different notes, or create synthesizing "rise-above" notes. This approach has been tested in a variety of settings, including high school science (O'Neill & Scardamalia, 2000), health care (Russell & Perris, 2002) and preservice teacher-education settings (Hewitt, et al., 2002). Work directed by O'Neill provides an example of this different approach to telementoring. In one of his studies students' worked with their telementors as part of a 10-week "Independent Study Unit" — a mandated part of the curriculum for these courses in which students traditionally write library research essays on their own time. The students divided into groups to undertake joint research. Each group had its own Knowledge Forum "view" and one mentor was assigned to each view. All views were open to all students and

mentors, however, so that all could observe what was going on in the various inquiries.

Survey data collected on the 112 students indicated that 74% of the 112 students judged Knowledge Forum to be moderately to very helpful to them in their work. Not only did the students monitor each others' work, but the telementors also monitored what other telementors were doing, so that there was learning on their part as well. One mentor reported:

> ...I started, I guess, peeking in on some of the other discussions to see what level of assistance was going on, and how harsh you should be about certain things. Because you want to be encouraging, but you also want to say, you know, you're really out of line there, way off in left field. And maybe you should think about this (laughs). Where are you going?

It could be argued that this represents a more effective—and far less costly—approach to developing mentors' skills than would training workshops. Problems that appear with e-mail telementoring are also more easily avoided: Telementors are not put into a question-answering role; students can benefit from the contributions of more than one telementor; and mentors are able to get a much clearer picture of the work in progress and thus find relevant ways to be of assistance. Perhaps most importantly, however, this "participatory telementoring" is more consistent with the principles of knowledge building. It moves telementors out of the role of experts transmitting knowledge and into the kind of collaborative role that characterizes the working relationships of more senior and less senior researchers, designers, and professionals in the real world.

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