Chapter 8

E-Mentoring as a Professional Teacher Development Tool

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ABSTRACT

This action research study was aimed at exploring how a collaborative e-mentoring platform can be used as a supplemental tool for professional teacher development, specifically on the issue of formative assessment practices. The platform consisted of a group of eight volunteer teachers working in locationally disadvantaged areas and the mentors. Five modules were prepared and implemented based on the needs of the teachers, and the data were collected constantly from various sources throughout the study. The analysis of data revealed two basic themes: Positive aspects and challenges of e-mentoring. Overall, the study revealed that most of the teachers believed in the importance of having professional development support through e-mentoring because it could break down the locational barriers between teachers. Although there were some difficulties such as the unique problems or heavy workloads of the teachers, it still had implications for broader expressions for professional development.

INTRODUCTION

The World Education Report published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1998 pointed out the importance of the teacher as an agent of change in the 21st century, as reflected in the following lines:

The need for change, from narrow nationalism to universalism, from ethnic and cultural prejudice to tolerance, understanding and pluralism, from autocracy to democracy in its various manifestations, and from a technologically divided world where high technology is the privilege of the few to a technologically united world, places enormous responsibilities on teachers who participate in the moulding of the characters and minds of the new generation. (UNESCO, 1998, p. 16)
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Since then, the world has witnessed more changes than ever, both in terms of societal conditions and technological progress, which affect one another. Technological innovations have generated social changes, whereas changes in “sociological actions and thoughts” have triggered technological leaps forward (Spearman, 2000, p. 153). This dual effect makes it almost impossible for teachers to rely only on what they have learned in pre-service education programs; they need to constantly follow the innovations and apply them in their classrooms. Perhaps, for that reason, the need for teacher professional development programs that can cope well with the social and technological dynamism has never been that important.

Then what kinds of teacher professional development programs are needed? How can the optimum number of teachers, even the ones working in locationally disadvantaged places, be reached? How can the teachers who physically cannot attend the programs get assistance when they need it? With these questions in mind, the authors of this chapter investigated whether and how an e-mentoring program for English language teachers working for state schools in locationally-disadvantaged areas could be designed and implemented in a Turkish context. Because this was the first attempt by the researchers to design and implement such a program, the e-mentoring program did not focus on all aspects of the language teaching, but was limited to formative assessment (FA) only. Thus, the study dealt with the individual developments of teachers of English in relation to formative assessment practices in their everyday teaching via online platforms.

BACKGROUND

As Johnson and Golombek (2011, xi) point out, teacher professional development is “a complicated, prolonged, highly situated, and deeply personal process that has no start or end point.” Within this journey, mentoring, which is generally defined as guidance of a more experienced person to a less experienced one, is highly important. In sharing similar experiences, there is a kind of partnership between the mentor and the mentee. As Halai (2006, p. 703) states, the role of the mentor is multifaceted: coaching, planning, observing, giving feedback, and reflecting on the mentor’s and the mentee’s experience. Accordingly, a constructive and non-evaluative environment for learning and professional growth is fundamental for mentoring relationships.

Teachers help each other within mentoring relations to become more knowledgeable and effective professionals. However, face-to-face mentoring programs are not always likely to meet teachers’ needs for immediate support. In such a case, e-mentoring may be used as an alternative. E-mentoring is “a means for leveraging electronic communications to provide mentoring opportunities to wider and more diverse groups of people” (Single and Single, 2005a, p. 7). Teachers from diverse backgrounds and locations are likely to be united through electronic communications, and the ones who participate in online development programs may have valuable instant interactions to develop professionally. Masullo and Tsantis (2004) describe an e-mentoring system “as a technology platform to support all aspects of automatic, personalized, sustained and longitudinally tractable online mentoring” that supports “the delivery of just-in-time, just-enough, and just-for-you asynchronous and synchronous distance tutoring” (p. 2). As Single and Muller (2001) mention, e-mentoring has a revolutionary future that will continue and expand through the 21st century by affecting the development of information technology.