Chapter 1

Facilitated Telementoring for
K–12 Students and Teachers

Judi Harris
College of William & Mary, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Electronic Emissary is a Web-based service and resource center that helps teachers and students with Internet access locate mentors who are experts in various disciplines, then plan and engage in curriculum-based learning. In this way, the interaction that occurs among teachers and students face-to-face in the classroom is supplemented and extended by electronic mail, Web forum, chat, and audio/videoconferencing exchanges that occur among participating teachers, students, and volunteer mentors. These project-based online conversations typically range in length from six weeks to a full academic year, as students’ needs and interests dictate. The Electronic Emissary has been online since February 1993 and on the World Wide Web since December 1995. It serves students and teachers globally, but the majority of its participants to date have been in North America. Emissary-related research has focused upon the nature of telementoring interactions in which K-12 students are active inquirers, the motivations and perceptions of their volunteer subject matter mentors, why some teachers choose to persist in integrating telementoring into curricula despite considerable hindrances, effective telementoring facilitation techniques, and what teachers learn as they help their students to participate in curriculum-oriented telementoring projects. Students exploring complex curriculum-based topics need to actively build deep and sophisticated understanding. One of the most effective ways to do this is by engaging in ongoing dialogue with knowledgeable others, as the students form, refine, and expand their knowledge. Classroom teachers typically serve as the subject matter experts with whom students interact in curriculum-based areas of inquiry. Yet when the issues being explored are multi-disciplinary, technically and conceptually sophisticated, or dependent upon current and highly specialized research and theory, additional expertise must be made directly available to students and teachers longitudinally, and on an as-needed basis. This is what telementoring offers to learners and educators today, and what the Electronic Emissary brings to students and teachers worldwide.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-876-5.ch001
BACKGROUND

Telecommunication tools and resources are providing teachers with new ways to engage their students in learning experiences that reflect how knowledge is built and used in the world outside the school. Today, a teacher no longer needs to be the sole content matter expert in the classroom. It is possible, for example, for students to learn about global warming from researchers studying ecological phenomena in the Antarctic, or to discuss the historical implications of a recently discovered primary source document with a historiographer, using simple telecomputing tools such as electronic mail and Web-based discussion groups. Volunteer subject matter experts, such as the ecological biologists and historians referenced above, can work virtually with students over an extended period of time, developing and sustaining mentor-protégé relationships that contribute to the richness and relevance of curriculum-based learning in elementary, middle-level, and secondary classrooms.

E-Mentoring

Such online mentoring, also called “e-mentoring” and “telementoring,” holds great potential for both learners and teachers. When it is implemented to benefit elementary, middle-school, or high school-aged students, it “is a caring, structured relationship [that] focuses on the needs of the mentored participants, adds value to the lives of those involved, [and] uses technology to connect people across time and/or distance” (National Mentoring Partnership, 2002, as cited in Harris, 2003, p. 53). E-mentoring for K-12 students typically involves sustained exchanges between mentors and protégés who use electronic mail, discussion forums, chat, texting, and/or audio/video-conferencing to communicate. It differs from using ask-an-expert Web sites (e.g., the services indexed by the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education) to answer specific questions in that telementoring generally lasts longer and achieves greater depth than simple question-and-answer communication online. E-mentoring for pre-college students can involve one or more mentors and protégés, and can be used as an integral part of school curricula or for an extracurricular exploration of career interests, hobbies, or personal issues.

E-Mentoring Support

Support for online mentoring for K-12 students takes several forms, distinguished primarily by when and about what mentors and their student protégés communicate. Some e-mentoring services—such as Achievement Advocate and iMentor—support students’ interactions with mentors without teachers’ direct involvement. These one-to-one mentoring services involve individual students interacting with one mentor each, often discussing topics that are not explored as deeply (or at all) in school. Others, such as the International Telementor Program and the Electronic Emissary, are designed to assist students’ curriculum-based learning during the school day, typically requiring direct involvement by participating students’ teachers. As such, they can support either individual students or groups in ongoing communication online with one or more mentors.

E-Mentoring Facilitation

The ways and degrees to which students’ communications with their mentors are monitored and/or actively facilitated is another important aspect of online mentoring for K-12 students. The time- and labor-intensive nature of this feature of telementoring has caused many services to decide against providing personalized facilitation of e-mentoring exchanges. Several, such as icouldbe.org, use text filters to screen for inappropriate language or topics addressed. Others, such as Connecting to Success, require participating stu-