Chapter 6
Implementation of an Online Distance Mentoring System

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The individualized mentoring is a process unexploited and problematic in Greece because of its high operational cost and the lack of specialized scientists. In general practice though, it is considered as the most effective means in order to support a person and guide him/her at the crucial and important decisions of his/her life. More than ever, through the immense technological advancements, online distance mentoring has evolved as a clearly anthropocentric method, having that is, as center of its interest, the person and his/her personal needs as opposed to the mere execution of a predetermined training program. The present study explores and analyses the issues related to electronic distance mentoring of young persons in the framework of professional orientation, business spirit development, personal training and psychological support. The particularity of this project stems from the application of advanced videoconference systems that eliminated the need for people transfer, bridged geographical distances, improved interaction considerably and reduced the response time of intervention.

BACKGROUND

The educational system of a country co-operates with and is co-formulated by the social, political, technological and economic system, affecting the quality and the level of life of each citizen. A school unit, as the structural module of most educational systems, constitutes the field of expression of fundamental educational policy; moreover, it represents the primary receiver of the tendencies, the target of the priorities and the mirror of the contemporary needs reflected by societies.

In this theoretical framework, if someone attempts to determine the role of contemporary school, s/he is forced to deal with subjects such as: What is the role of a school operating within a rapidly changing environment that is affected by global economy? To what extent does it collaborate with
social structures or run in a parallel mode or away from the social body evolution? Is school effective? (and what could this mean?) Which would be the criteria employed in order to measure the quality of the educational services?

Regarding the institutional role of school as one forming active and sophisticated citizens, one needs to presuppose an educational reality where school, adopting an attentive attitude, is capable of absorbing and feeling the needs of its surrounding environment, and mainly, those expressed by/in the neighborhood itself; this information must be analyzed, transformed and instilled to knowledge which could aid the timely response of the educational unit towards its adaptation to general educational policy. In simple words, contemporary school has to be open to the society, able to connect the knowledge with its applications, to handle technology as a necessary tool of everyday practice, to facilitate cooperation, group thinking and communication, factors that contribute to successful human co-existence and development.

The present case study describes the action of an urban Greek high-school willing to approach the Greek periphery, thus making an extroverted step in order to meet local communities and transfer pieces of valuable expertise. Its philosophy, that changes result primarily from proper use of human capital and that constant specialized training and personal growth are key notions in education, led to the designing and implementation on behalf of the school, of an electronic distance mentoring system, suitable for young people residing in the rural area. Our involvement in this project as coordinators provided us with certain experience, the parameters of which, the problems encountered and the benefits acquired, we expose in the following sections.

Online Distance Mentoring

Mentoring is a learning procedure, mainly interactive, consisting in a series of sessions (often including dialogic transactions) involving at least two agents: the mentor and the mentee/s (protégé/s). The concept of mentoring is met in ancient Greek literature (Homer) and is associated with activities such as teaching, counseling, guidance, training, coaching, all providing orientation, while focusing on the personal needs of a single (individualized attendance) or more persons (group session). In education, Heller and Sindelar (1991) describe a mentor as an experienced teacher who acts as a guide, role model, counselor and friend. Space and time are two determinants critical in identifying and distinguishing distance mentoring from conventional face-to-face approach. Recent advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) permits the conduction of a mentoring session in cases where the participants are situated in different locations (continents, countries, cities, buildings, rooms), in synchronous mode (distant meeting at the same time) or asynchronous mode (requests and responses run at different moments).

Browsing the literature, we realize that electronic mail is widely presented as the most predominant form of distant communication (Abbott, 2004; Ensher et al., 2003; O’Neill & Harris, 2004). Besides serving everyday or professional communication, electronic mail has been recorded as a preferred type of distance mentoring, based in part on the obliquity and growth of e-mail usage (Flanagan, 2005). Other commonly opted paths also follow the world-wide web service, such as content management platforms and data-on-demand electronic environments (the data could be video files, documents, presentations, etc), and video-conference technology (online mentoring). An important clarification to be made is that authors, scientists and practitioners employ various terms to characterize the same concept: the terms electronic mentoring (e-mentoring), virtual mentoring, remote mentoring and tele-mentoring are all equivalent to the concept of distance mentoring.