Chapter 1

Designs for Curriculum-Based Telementoring

Judi Harris

College of William and Mary, USA

ABSTRACT

Telementoring for K-12 students is done primarily outside of school, typically addressing topics that are extrinsic to school curricula. As beneficial as extracurricular telementoring can be, bringing mentors virtually into classrooms to interact with students and teachers over time holds great potential—and considerable challenge—for both. How can telementoring be integrated effectively into content-based curricula taught in face-to-face educational contexts like classrooms? What is key to the success of this type of curriculum-based telementoring? Answers to these questions appear below, illustrated by examples from an informal taxonomy of curriculum-based telementoring projects that were facilitated by the Electronic Emissary (http://Emissary.wm.edu/), the longest-running formal telementoring program for K-12 students and their teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Summarizing the emerging field of social neuroscience, journalist Daniel Goleman (2006, p. 4) asserts that “we are wired to connect.” Our brains are designed to be social, and we benefit in measurable ways intellectually, emotionally, and even physically from ongoing, nurturing connections with each other. Given our biological “wiring” and the ever-increasing capabilities and availabilities of social networking tools, is it any wonder that our students are drawn so powerfully to multiple forms of networked communication?

Most of the social networking that so many students enjoy (e.g., texting and cell phone use) is done extracurricularly (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Purcell, 2010). Educational technologists are experimenting with “educational networking,” seeking to capitalize upon students’ attractions to social networking by integrating tool use such as text messaging, microblogging, collaborative document-writing, handheld videoconferencing,
and wireless phone calls into learning and teaching in K-12 classrooms (Hargadon, 2009). This is challenging work, since more than half of U.S. districts prohibit social networking in school (Deubel, 2009).

Yet one of the oldest and most educationally beneficial forms of social/educational networking — telementoring — has been used formally in elementary, middle-level, and secondary classrooms since at least 1992, long before blogs, wikis, wireless networks and even the multimedia Web found their way into most schools. Indeed, informal e-mentoring among adults emerged in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, when university-based researchers began communicating using networks that had been reserved previously for U.S. government projects (Single & Single, 2005). Informal online mentoring for K-12 students probably emerged at about the same time, since the first published evidence of email-based educational networking appeared in 1978 (Harris, 2005), and the Free Educational Mail (FrEdMail) network connected schools internationally starting in 1985 (“FrEdWriter and FrEdMail,” n.d.).

Telementoring—also called “e-mentoring” and “online mentoring”—is mentoring that happens via educational networking. E-mentoring for K-12 students typically involves sustained exchanges between mentors and protégés, who use electronic mail, discussion forums, texting, and/or video-conferencing to communicate individually or in groups. It differs from using ask-an-expert Web sites (e.g., AllExperts.com) to answer specific questions, because telementoring interactions are much longer and deeper in duration and focus. Curriculum-based telementoring can be an integral part of organized learning for elementary, middle-school, or high school students. It is less common than extracurricular telementoring, however, which typically supports individual students’ explorations of career interests, hobbies, and/or personal issues.

When telementoring is designed to function within school-based curricula, rather than extracurricularly, it can help to bring subject matter alive in ways not possible locally, increasing the depth, breadth, and/or authenticity of students’ curriculum-based learning. Communicating regularly with content specialists who share active interest, experience, and expertise in curriculum-based topics can increase students’ engagement and connection with standards-based learning, due to the interactive, emergent, and personalized nature of telementoring discussions. Integrating regular e-mentoring into students’ classroom activities, however, presents pedagogical challenges for teachers who are unfamiliar with planning for and implementing educational networking within classroom-based instruction (Harris, 2010).

Like social networking, much telementoring happens informally and outside of the school day, with an extracurricular focus. Curriculum-based telementoring—the focus of this chapter—is e-mentoring that is a planned part of students’ learning that happens in the classroom. Though this type of mentoring has been used episodically for nearly two decades and with considerable success, its potential is still largely untapped. What is curriculum-based telementoring? How is it similar to and different from other types of educational networking? How can it be structured and used to assist and enhance students’ curriculum-related learning? Pragmatic answers to these questions begin with teachers’ planning for students’ learning, the reasons for which can be understood with a metaphor.

BACKGROUND

Eh! Je suis leur chef, il fallait bien les suivre. (Ah well! I am their leader, so I must follow them.)

—Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin
(Aphids Communications, ¶ 33)