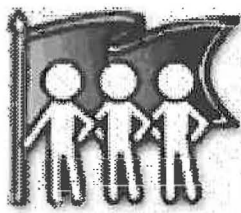


MENTORING IN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE ON-LINE

www.yourenglishmentor.com



Your English Mentor

Paper for the Ed Media 2000 World Conference on Educational Multimedia,
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Mentoring In Language And Culture On-Line, Paper for the Ed Media 2000 World
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ABSTRACT

Friere (1998) states that a mentor can 'stimulate the construction of the student's autonomy'. McKenzie (1995) and Jeruchin and Shapiro (1992) write that in order to empower people they must be given the opportunity to think more positively about themselves and increase their network of contacts.

In New Zealand few professional or non-qualified migrants with English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) have a mentor who can support and guide them into work, assist in extending their network or help them improve their English language skills. There is often a delay, sometimes of many years, in migrants communicating confidently in English and finding fulfilling employment. This may be exacerbated by the fact that many are unable to enrol in classroom based English language course for a variety of reasons such as cost.

One possible solution is the World Wide Web where a virtual mentor can be established to support migrants to fulfil their social and employment aspirations. This paper reports on an internet site that mentors, and teaches language and culture, to ESOL members on-line.

MIGRANTS' QUOTES

- 'I am keen that my mentor helps me to overcome my barriers to employment. One of these is to improve my English language skills. I think a good mentor is an important thing in my life'
(35 year old, male student 1999).
- 'A mentor is important to me wherever and whenever because she can give me good ideas when I lose my career path'
(28 year old, female student 1999)

KEY SECTIONS

1: Membership joining form

2: Aims of the site

3: A discussion board where mentees post questions e.g.:

For those looking for a job questions about:

- How to find job vacancies
- How to talk at an interview
- How to increase your network
- Places that you could do voluntary work
- Words you do not understand
- The New Zealand culture related to finding work

For those already working questions about:

- Problems at work
- An employment contract
- Social language
- Ways to talk with a boss
- Asking for time off work
- Asking for a pay rise
- New words (particularly those related to employment)
- The New Zealand culture related to the workplace

4: Texts that focus on language and employment issues

(e.g. English for an interview, Improving your English, Cultural aspects of finding a job, Barriers, Networking, Vocabulary of job search)

5: Case studies of students (e.g. what they have learnt from a mentor, how they found a job, how they have overcome their barriers)

6: Weekly / fortnightly language quizzes

7: Links to employment sites

8: Frequently asked questions

GOALS FOR THE MENTEES:

- think more positively about themselves
- find a job
- be more confident
- improve their English language skills
- increase their network of contacts
- learn about the culture of working in New Zealand
- cope with issues in their lives
- overcome some of their barriers
- improve their English language skills (e.g. vocabulary)
- be independent (autonomous) in their language learning
- be successful
- advance in their career
- increase their networks

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Abstract

A mentor can 'stimulate the construction of the student's autonomy' (Freire 1998), empower people to think more positively about themselves and increase their network of contacts (McKenzie 1995, Jeruchin and Shapiro 1992). But few professional or non-qualified migrants with English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) have a mentor who can support and guide them into work, assist in extending their network or help them improve their English language skills. Many also are not unable to enrol in classroom based English language course for a variety of reasons. Therefore there is often a delay, sometimes of many years, in their communicating in English and finding fulfilling employment.

One possible solution is the World Wide Web where a virtual mentor can be established to support migrants to fulfil their social and employment aspirations. This paper reports on an internet site that mentors, and teaches language and culture, to ESOL members on-line. Issues of design heuristics are also raised.

1. Introduction

This paper describes an online internet mentoring site that has been designed for migrants who have English as a second or other language (ESOL). The paper demonstrates how the internet is a possible resource and tool to assist migrants to learn language and find employment through the benefits of a personal virtual mentor. The paper concludes with some future plans for this site and research into its uses and benefits.

2. Mentoring Migrants Off and On-Line

The virtual mentor proposed in this paper ideally is working towards Friere's goal of a mentor:

'The fundamental task of the mentor is a liberatory task. It is not to encourage the mentor's goals and aspirations and dreams to be reproduced in the mentees, the students, but to give rise to the possibility that the students

become the owners of their own history. This is how I understand the need that teachers have to transcend their merely instructive task and to assume the ethical posture of a mentor who truly believes in the total autonomy, freedom, and development of those he or she mentors' (Friere 1997: 324)

Ideally also the virtual mentor will be:

'nurturing, supportive, and protective as well as aggressive, assertive, and risk taking' (Jeruchin and Shapiro 1992: 23-24)

Mentoring is used in management to assist with change and in supporting new staff (McDougall and Beattie 1997). The benefits of offline mentoring for the mentee, the mentor and the institution are well documented (Goodlad 1999, Carmeli 1999, Hansen 1999). Offline mentoring takes a wide range of forms. For example:

- face-to-face or by telephone or a combination of these
- differing meeting times and lengths such as two hours twice a week, once a fortnight or once a month
- meetings between mentors and mentees are at a set time or they meet irregularly when the mentee asks for assistance
- the mentor and/or the mentee record the discussion with actions to be taken before the next meeting
- there may be a financial reward for the mentor and in others it is voluntary
- the mentor and the mentee meet in the student's house so that a bond is formed between the mentor and other family members (e.g. Perach Scheme)
- mentors and mentees meet on campus (e.g. peer tutoring scheme in the School of English and Applied Linguistics, UNITEC).

The effectiveness of mentors in an educational context is demonstrated by the findings of the Perach Project (Carmeli 1999) in Israel. Responses to anonymous questionnaires showed that 75 % of the school children felt that their mentors had contributed highly to improving their academic achievement and 25% said their mentor's help had been of medium use. No student said that their

meeting with their mentor had been of no use (Carmeli 1999).

More recent developments in mentoring have led to online peer tutoring or telementoring. Telementoring is:

‘mentoring through the use of telecommunication, which may include telephoning, e-mail, on-line forums, online groups and targeted listservs (Lawrence and Worsfold 1999).

Online mentoring includes many of the aspects that are part of offline mentoring such as the mentor giving advice to the mentee, being a listener to the difficulties encountered by the mentee and providing emotional support for the mentee to reach their goals.

Based on the success of real mentors for migrant students looking for work (Brown 2000) the virtual mentor www.yourenglishmentor.com site involves both peer discussion and mentoring via the internet. It is of particular use to those students who have trouble finding a mentor in New Zealand and who have only few local contacts outside of their own familiar circles of friends and family. It is designed to compensate for skills which an offline mentor doesn't have. Few offline mentors have developed skills in cross-cultural communication issues and skills in explaining or facilitating language learning development. Family or friends or an untrained mentor may have a lack of knowledge specific to a particular job and may have problems providing objective and critical feedback.

Language students need to be encouraged to find ways of using the language that expresses their individual needs and desires (Pennycook 1994: 318) and be provided opportunities to look at ways that can extend their learning into the community so that their learning addresses their personal life in the ‘wider social context of intercultural behavior outside the institution’ (Candlin 1989: 22). The virtual mentor provides an interface between the community and the student. The site encourages practice through weekly quizzes, provides individualised feedback, maintains classroom gains made while on an English language course and points students to new resources to further their learning.

This site challenges the traditional classroom based teaching and learning model. The mentees are being guided and learning together through collaboration. The site is pointedly transforming the work of the teacher from ‘sage-on-stage’ (Robleyer, Edwards and Havriluk 1997: 220) to guide-on-line or on-the-side.

3. An Overview of the Site

The site creates a learning and knowledge community (de Vries, S. and Castelein, J. 1999). The migrants who come online are either unemployed or employed can interact with content, media, audio, the virtual mentor AND each other (other mentees) to achieve their own outcomes.

It is both an academic support and a peer support site. The site replicates a real mentor and provides language learning activities that aim to develop their understanding of the culture of finding work and develop their vocabulary. Being available through the internet, and so very accessible, is its most distinct difference from a real mentor.

The site gives the members an opportunity to discuss their language and cultural difficulties and strategies for overcoming obstacles either through participation in an open discussion board or one-to-one with the online mentor. They can learn about the culture of finding work in Aotearoa New Zealand and use resources to assist them to develop their English language skills. In brief the aims for the site are for the mentees to:

- think more positively about themselves
- find a job
- be more confident
- improve their English language skills
- increase their network of contacts
- learn about the culture of working in New Zealand
- cope with issues in their lives
- overcome some of their barriers
- improve their English language skills (e.g. vocabulary)
- be independent (autonomous) in their language learning
- be successful

For the members who have a job the site will help them to:

- advance in their career
- cope with issues in their lives
- overcome more of their barriers
- improve their English language skills (e.g. vocabulary)
- be more confident
- be independent (autonomous) in their language learning
- be successful
- increase their networks

The key sections to the site are:

- 1: Membership joining form
- 2: Aims of the site
- 3: How the site operates
- 4: A discussion board where mentees post questions
e.g.: For those looking for a job questions about:

- How to find job vacancies
- How to talk at an interview
- How to increase your network
- Places that you could do voluntary work
- Words you do not understand
- The New Zealand culture related to finding work

For those already working questions about:

- Problems at work
- An employment contract
- Social language
- Ways to talk with a boss
- Asking for time off work
- Asking for a pay rise
- New words (particularly those related to employment)
- The New Zealand culture related to the workplace

4: Texts that focus on language and employment issues to read and listen to (e.g. English for an interview, Improving your English, Cultural aspects of finding a job, Barriers, Networking, Vocabulary of job search)

5: Case studies of students (e.g. what they have learnt from a mentor, how they found a job, how they have overcome their barriers)

- 6: Weekly / fortnightly language quizzes
- 7: Links to employment sites
- 8: Frequently asked questions

A crucial factor in the success of the site is the role of the virtual mentor. His or her task is to:

- Answer their email questions to the best of their ability
- Be confidential
- Respect mentees opinions
- Respect mentees culture
- Make suggestion of ways to solve any difficulties that mentees have
- Design online language learning activities that achieve the goals of the site
- Be well trained so as to be a competent mentor

Two areas of study for the members that are integrated on this site are techniques of finding employment and English language learning, particularly vocabulary development. Vocabulary development is a key area of language learning that is crucial for the success of migrants in mastering a new language (Nation 1990).

4. The Future

One major problem may be that some migrants do not have computer or internet access at home. In a survey of 100 mature age students on English language courses in early 1999, 40% of the students from a range of countries including Russia, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Iran and Tonga said that they had ready access to the internet.

This number will continue to increase as personal computers and internet prices become cheaper. Learning styles may also be a barrier for migrants in understanding and accepting this type of medium for learning language.

However, I believe this site will be successful particularly if the mentors online are skilled in mentoring and have relevant and useful experiences that they can pass on to the mentees. Cultures other than English speaking ones often respect and even revere their lecturer or an elderly person. This will be capitalized upon by approaching seniornet and having retired experts from their previous professional spheres become online mentors.

As Goodlad warns us there is much still that we do not know about tutoring and mentoring work and we need to be careful not to claim too much (1999: 2). The members will be asked to provide feedback that will be used to improve the site. An online evaluation form is part of the site and mentees are asked to complete it every three months. It is important above all that the virtual mentor site:

‘challenges the student’s creative freedom and that he or she stimulate the construction of the student’s autonomy’ (Friere 1997: 324).

Research will be done to evaluate the benefits of the site for the mentees, the mentors and the institution that it is attached to and the ‘opportunity benefits’ (Lawrence and Worsfold 1999: 6), for each group.

5. Conclusion

Having a virtual mentor gives an added learning resource to those students who are learning English in a classroom situation and to those who are unable to enrol in a community or polytechnic English language courses. This site also provides a base to research the benefits of online mentoring.

The site is aimed at two groups of migrants. Those not employed and those already employed. It will be a challenge to cater to both these groups as their needs and language learning goals may differ. The virtual mentor helps mentees break through the barriers that are holding them back from improved proficiency in English, finding employment or getting a promotion from their present position. Online mentoring is providing a link for the mentee into an ever expanding global cyberspace.

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