

IDEAL

IMPROVING DISTANCE EDUCATION
FOR ADULT LEARNERS

The Missouri Distance Learning Mentoring Program

An Evaluation Prepared by
The Project IDEAL Support Center, May, 2005

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Executive Summary

Missouri implemented a Mentoring Program to support new distance teachers; the program drew on the knowledge and strengths of experienced distance educators. Mentoring groups were composed of a mix of new, intermediate and experienced distance teachers. The program began with a face-to-face training and was followed by virtual support. Both mentors and mentees reacted favorably to the program. Mentors thought they were effective in a variety of support roles and that they were adequately compensated for their efforts. They are interested in continuing to mentor, either the same group of teachers or new groups. Mentees appreciated the support and information available from their mentors and the ability to learn from others' experience. The initial face-to-face meeting was seen as having set the stage for successful virtual communications. A majority of participants reported that this was more valuable than other professional development approaches in helping them accomplish specific tasks. Continuation of the program is recommended.

Introduction

As the scope of Missouri's distance learning efforts expanded, the state decided that it was important to provide support and on-going professional development for new distance teachers. The Mentoring Program was developed to meet these goals. Teachers were put into small groups composed of an experienced distance education teacher (who served as the mentor), intermediate distance teachers (who assumed both mentor and mentee roles) and novice distance teachers (the mentees). The mentor program began with a face-to-face training and was conducted at a distance after the initial meeting.

At the completion of the program, mentors and mentees were asked to complete a survey exploring their experiences in the program. This report highlights the key findings of that survey. Because of the small number of respondents, particularly of mentors, findings should be interpreted cautiously. A PDF file with the complete data printout is attached as a separate document.

Respondents

A total of 30 respondents completed the survey. All were experienced adult education teachers, with almost three-fourths (73.3%) having five or more years of experience. The distance teaching experience of the respondents was what would be expected given the composition of the mentoring groups: 50% were first year distance teachers, 30% were second year distance teachers and 20% had three or more years experience teaching at a distance (the mentors).

The respondents were experienced with the various distance education curricula used within the state. All taught the Missouri GED curriculum at a distance, with 90% also teaching SkillsTutor and 53.3% teaching BLS Tutor system at a distance.

Contacts and Communication

Mentoring groups first came together as part of a larger two-day face-to-face training session. Both mentors and mentees felt that this face-to-face interaction was an important element in establishing group rapport and setting the stage for on-going communication.

Importance of Initial Face-to-Face Training:

*In your opinion, how important was that (two-day) face-to-face contact in establishing contacts with your mentees/your mentor and other group members? **

	Mentors (N= 6)	Mentees (N = 22)
Very important	100% (6)	86.4% (19)
Somewhat important	0% (0)	13.6% (3)

*Percentage of respondents selecting each response option. N's are shown in parentheses.

Mentors were also asked if they thought additional face-to-face interactions would make a difference in how the group functions. A majority (83.3%) responded affirmatively. When asked to explain their response, mentors offered comments including:

When you have established a relationship with your mentees through face-to-face contact, they are more apt to come to you with questions, listen to suggestions, and turn to other mentees when they need some advice. There is much more sharing during and after a face-to-face than any distance meeting could create.

It makes a big difference when you have had some one-on-one conversations with each of the mentees. It is easier to deal with them, on a long distance basis. You also understand a little more about their personalities and maybe how to deal with each individual's needs.

The one mentor who did not feel that an additional meeting would be helpful commented:

We all rely on emails. I think meeting once a year is sufficient. Mentees knew they could call or email me. I do think it is critical for us to meet once where we can put a face with the name.

Mentors and mentees were asked about the frequency of their use of different communication modalities and the usefulness of each approach. Both groups report that email was the most frequent mode of communication, with half also reporting “frequently” or “sometimes” having telephone contact.

Frequency of Use of Communication Approaches:
*How often did you use each of the following approaches for communicating with teachers in your group/your mentor?**

	Mentors		Mentees	
	Frequently/ Sometimes	Rarely/Never	Frequently/ Sometimes	Rarely/Never
Face-to-face	0% (0)	100% (6)	17.3% (4)	82.6% (19)
Telephone	50% (3)	50% (3)	50% (10)	50% (10)
Email	100% (6)	0% (0)	95.6% (22)	4.3% (1)
Discussion Board	0% (0)	100% (6)	15.8% (3)	84.2% (16)
Instant Messaging	0% (0)	100% (6)	0% (0)	100% (19)
Chat Room	0% (0)	100% (6)	0% (0)	100% (19)
List Serv	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	100% (18)
Other	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	100% (17)

*Percentage of respondents selecting each response option. N’s are shown in parentheses. N’s may vary as not all respondents answered all questions.

Respondents were also asked how useful each of the communication approaches was. Their responses indicate that they were comfortable with the distance approach to mentoring. Email was perceived as the most useful communication modality, with 100%

of the mentors and 96% of the mentees indicating it was “very useful.” About half of both the mentors and mentees reported that telephone was “very useful” as a way to communicate with each other. In addition, 55% of the mentees, but only 33% of the mentors, reported that face-to-face communication was “very useful.”

Mentees were asked additional questions about communicating with their mentors. Their responses suggest that there was frequent, timely and open communication between the two. Almost two-thirds of them (65.2%) contacted their mentor once a week, with the rest having more frequent contact. Mentors responded promptly to contacts from the teachers in their group. The majority of mentees (69.6%) report that their mentor responded the same day that they initiated the contact and the others reported receiving responses within one to two days. All of the mentees indicated that they were comfortable contacting their mentor, offering reasons that reflected both the design of the mentoring program and the personalities and skills of those selected as mentors:

I felt very comfortable contacting my mentor. She was always very informative, friendly, encouraging, and supportive. She told me to never hesitate to ask questions and said she wanted to help me in any way she could. Her directions were easy to understand.

I felt comfortable because of the face-to-face meeting and that is what we were told to do.

She was always very nice about responding and never made me feel that my questions were something I should have known. She was very helpful, usually knew the answer or found the answer, and very promptly answered.

Most communication appears to have occurred between a mentee and his or her mentor, with little communication between the members of a mentoring group. More than half of the mentees reported that they “rarely” had communication with other group members and 21.7% reported that this “never” occurred. When these interactions did occur, they were likely to be via email.

Mentors’ Roles

The mentoring program established three primary roles that mentors were expected to fill:

- Reinforcing the goals and key information covered at a two-day training
- Serving as a “first response” contact to provide answers to logistical and technical questions (e.g., how to do something, when an assignment is due, etc.), and
- Providing on-going support and long-term interaction about distance teaching and learning concerns that arose after the two-day training.

A majority of mentors reported that they “frequently” engaged in all three types of support and that they felt effective in all of the roles. More than three-fourths of the mentees reported that they “frequently” or “sometimes” interacted with their mentor in each of those roles. Almost all mentees indicated that their mentor was “very” or “somewhat” effective” in all three roles (95% - 96% for each role).

The Mentoring Program as a Professional Development Approach

The mentoring program was designed to provide ongoing professional development and support to new distance education teachers. Almost three-fourths (74%) of the mentees reported that the program was “very” effective as a way for them to learn about distance teaching and learning and as a support system for new distance teachers. A majority (82%) also reported that the mentoring program was “very” effective as a way for them to communicate with their mentor and the other new teachers in their group. Mentees were asked how valuable the mentoring program was compared to other forms of professional development. As shown in the table below, more than half of the mentees reported that this approach was more valuable than other forms of professional development in helping them accomplish specific tasks.

Value of the Mentoring Program as a Professional Development Option:
*Compared to other forms of professional development, how valuable was the mentoring program in helping you to do the following? *[†]*

	More Valuable	About the Same	Less Valuable
Identify resources and gain new information	73% (16)	18%(4)	9% (2)
Improve communication skills as a distance teacher	59% (13)	32% (7)	9% (2)
Improve technology skills needed for distance teaching	57% (13)	30% (7)	13% (3)
Build confidence in teaching adult learners at a distance	64% (14)	32% (7)	5% (1)

*Asked of mentees only, N=22. Percent of respondents selecting each response. N’s for individual cells are given in parentheses and may vary for each item because not all respondents answered all questions.

[†]Row totals may be >100% due to rounding.

Mentors’ Time and Compensation

The mentors varied in the amount of time that they spent in their role as a mentor in this program. Four of the mentors spent six or fewer hours a week in their role, while two spent ten or more hours a week. The amount of time mentors spent on their roles was similar in the first three months following the face-to-face training and in the later stage of the program. Two-thirds of the mentors (66.7%) felt that they received adequate compensation for the time they worked in this program. Only one of the two mentors

who felt that compensation was not adequate provided additional information about what she thought mentors should be paid, suggesting that \$50 be added to the mentors' stipend.

Interest in Continuing to Mentor

The mentors responded positively to their role: all expressed interest in continuing to mentor the same group of teachers and most (83.3%) were open to mentoring another group of teachers. When asked why they were interested in continuing to mentor their existing groups, mentors commented:

I've gotten to know my group, so I'd want the same ones. I like my group.

I am a teacher because I enjoy both interacting with others and helping others learn new skills. Mentoring involves both.

Teachers who were interested in mentoring *another* group were interested in continuing to grow and build on their mentoring role:

I love to get knowledge from other people and when you work with others you get more ideas.

I have learned my role as a mentor and feel comfortable and capable in it.

The one mentor who was not interested in a new group expressed concerns about the impact that changing groups might have on her current mentoring group:

I don't want to short change my group.

Dual Role

A small number of teachers played a dual role in this program. Two teachers who identified themselves as primarily mentors, and 10 teachers who perceived their roles as primarily mentees, acted as both mentors and mentees. All were "very" or "somewhat" comfortable with their dual roles. The two mentors felt it was easy to play both roles in their groups. While most of the mentees shared that perception, two of them indicated that it was "somewhat difficult" for them to be both a mentor and a mentee in the same group. This suggests that while most teachers are comfortable assuming multiple roles, it may be useful to provide some guidance on what the expectations are for each role they will play in the group.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Mentoring Program

Both mentors and mentees were asked to reflect on the most and least valuable aspects of the mentoring program. They were also asked to offer suggestions for improving the program in the following year. Overall, participants were pleased with the program and found little to criticize.

Mentors and mentees identified the availability of support, working with other teachers, the collegiality of those involved in the project and the face-to-face training as valuable components of the program:

*Getting to know the other teachers and sharing ideas on how to make things.
(from a mentor)*

Consistency of program applications. Belonging to a group even though we work individually. Having a first response person who knows what the new teacher is going through. (from a mentor)

Direct teaching allows mentors to address any issues immediately before online teaching begins and builds a bridge that can easily be crossed if problems develop after the mentee gets started on his/her own. Being face-to-face, mentors can give tips, answer questions, emphasize certain aspects of the program, and let mentees know they are not alone even when they return to their home programs. (from a mentor)

Having the ability to contact the mentor frequently and, virtually, instantly with direct personal feedback. (from a mentee)

1. "Safety net": knowing that someone was provided to help get me get started in my new job. 2. Practical advice: instructions about the database, TutorSystems, SkillsTutor, etc. 3. Help with the "soft skills:" dealing with students in certain situations. 4. Friendship: having someone to listen and offer encouragement and support. (from a mentee)

It was incredibly valuable to have an experienced teacher available. I asked her everything I was unsure of, and she answered promptly. The job would have been so much more difficult, at the beginning, without the help of my mentor. (from a mentee)

I enjoyed seeing the different mentor/speakers in October that had succeeded at working on the project in MO. Jerri, Kim, Phyllis, and Linda seemed to be so accessible. None gave the impression that they knew it all and we were peons to work underneath them. I felt that the state of Missouri's patrons seeking the GED via the internet was the utmost goal of the group. (from a mentee)

Participants found very few elements of the mentoring program that had not been valuable to them. Some individual responses suggested that it might have been helpful to have more contact between group members, while others noted some problems that occurred in the face-to-face training.

One minus to this approach is that we don't have early face-to-face follow-up. It could be valuable to meet a second time to work out any problems mentees may have discovered. (from a mentor)

We are busy, but I would have like to have kept up the discussion board. (from a mentee)

When I watched the procedures on the computers--it seemed to be easily understood. But, I did not take enough notes. The menus seemed to have many

areas that I did not know to use. I still have many menus that I don't even go to-- as I know of no need to be there. I think it would have been nicer to have given each of us a prospective enrollee sheet and some TABE scores---and one-on-one shown us how to enter them in the system. Show us the need to email answers to students and show us the many menus that the student database has that must be filled in. I think that some of the overview areas that were covered by Phyllis and Linda were difficult to remember because the noise level was too great in those sessions. The reason being that the ones with experience decided to visit too loudly for those not sure of where the software was leading. (from a mentee)

Suggestions for improvement for next year included some minor adjustments to the face-to-face training, additional meetings and requests to focus more specifically on particular areas:

I would have liked to have had a mid-year meeting to discuss what we had learned and tips to make the job easier. I feel at the beginning we didn't have much to share other than anxiety. (from a mentee)

About 6-7 months after initial training, have a conference, whether online or in person, of the mentor groups or everyone, to address issues such as motivation, retention, what works, etc. I realize that if I had used the Discussion Board more, that could address some of these questions. And I just might do it now! Maybe just sending out a questionnaire as to what people need, and then addressing those questions that broadly apply with info provided online, would work, too. (from a mentee)

A little bit more individual training; make everyone stay a little bit quieter; and make certain everyone stays a little bit more together on the computers during the actual instruction with more opportunities for a little bit more question asking along the way. (from a mentee)

Be specific about the mentor's responsibilities. (from a mentor)

Maybe after the trainees have been shown the full program, mentees could spend time in a group with the mentor watching how he/she works. (from a mentor)

I would like to know more on communicating with the students for retention. (from a mentee)

I will try to remember the processes. I will promote the on line program more aggressively. (from a mentee)

Conclusions

The Missouri Mentoring Program for distance education teachers had a very successful pilot implementation. Mentors felt they were able to fulfill their roles effectively and are interested in continuing to mentor other teachers. Mentees valued the program for the support it provided as they ventured into new teaching arenas. Both the structure of the

program and the people selected as mentors effectively met the needs of new distance education teachers. This program should be continued to be offered as a professional development opportunity for teachers new to distance teaching and for more experienced teachers seeking to expand their knowledge.