E-Mentoring Novice Teachers to Fill the Gap

By Kirsten Koetje

Working for a private university’s teacher education program, I know it can be somewhat of a Sudoku puzzle assigning field supervisors to student teacher interns. Endorsement background and geography play large roles in assignments. One year, I was asked to supervise an orchestra teacher who lived on the Olympic Peninsula. As a former high school French and English teacher, I had never formally played an instrument in my life, and I lived in Tacoma which is very far from the Olympic Peninsula. What could I offer this accomplished, symphony-playing intern? Due to my online skills and the building up of our online program, I accepted this student and off we went. In addition to my support as her field supervisor, she also had a veteran orchestra teacher assigned as her mentor. However, my intern and her mentor were not at the same school as even her own teaching position split between two different school buildings. Thus, the three of us pieced together a mentorship arrangement for this accomplished musician to support her teaching and learning that year.

This scenario is not entirely unique. How do we offer relevant mentorship and guidance to novice or pre-service teachers spread out over geography and specialty areas? My orchestra intern happened to be both teacher candidate and teacher of record, which is considered Route 4 in the alternative certificate landscape of Washington. Strong mentorship programs have shown to help novice teachers increase knowledge of curriculum, building policies, and student behaviors; provide emotional resilience, improve knowledge of disciplinary standards, and heighten feelings of professionalism (Hunt et al., 2013). Additionally, strong mentor programs have been modestly correlated to teacher retention (Hunt et al., 2013; Plecki, Elfers, & Windeken, 2017). In particular, limited certificate teachers who are both pre-service and novice teachers of record, covet expert guidance and suggestions as well as a safe place to ask questions as they navigate their first year teaching (Gareis & Nussbaum, 2007; Dorner & Kumar, 2017). Novice teachers are particularly vulnerable to leaving. Plecki, Elfers, and Windken (2017) estimated that approximately 7% of teachers leave the workforce from year to year in Washington, but new teachers exit at a rate closer to 12%.

However, districts that implemented a full-fledged mentoring and induction system had an exit rate for new teachers nearer to 6% (Plecki, Elfers, & Windeken, 2017).

Online mentoring, or e-mentoring, has seen a boom in the last couple of decades with the emergence of online technologies. Educators generally consider mentoring an effective practice for both pre-service and novice teachers within their first three years of teaching. The Revised Code of Washington requires pre-service teachers to be assigned certificated mentor teachers with a minimum of three years relevant experience. Mentoring has shown to deliver benefits with technical, instructional, emotional, and social support (Dorner & Kumar, 2017; Lipton & Wellman, 2018). For instance, a mentor teacher can offer technical support in how to operate a school’s grading software or how to use a Smartboard, and they can also provide instructional support by sharing lesson plans, or lending insight as to common student misconceptions. For example, a middle school science teacher may share specific activities with a mentee that they have found to be effective with students who come

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in resistant to the idea of human-caused global warming, a topic covered by Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). Mentors also provide emotional and social support, giving encouragement and a listening ear when a mentee feels overwhelmed. In addition to support, mentors also provide cognitive challenge and cast professional vision (Lipton & Wellman, 2018). The question becomes: How can we provide quality mentoring support to geographically isolated teachers or low incidence teaching areas?

Online or E-mentoring Advantages

Some locales, particularly rural and remote areas, have limited access to qualified content mentors. Online mentoring, or e-mentoring, provides a possible way to leverage content and veteran expertise from geographically distant places (Ceven McNally, 2015; Knapcyzk, Hew, & Frey, 2005). Even in similar geographic locations, online mentoring affords mentors and mentees a platform for flexible scheduling when teaching schedules prohibit live meetings (Gareis & Nussbaum, 2007; Knapcyzk et al., 2005). In addition to flexibility and wide geographic reach, e-mentoring provides other advantages. Online mentoring can deepen the requirement for content expertise and better match mentees’ teaching contexts with respect to content and age level (NCIPP, 2010; Sherman & Camilli, 2014). Preparation and induction programs can recruit from a wider pool of eligible mentors in an online model, striving to provide more congruent pairings of mentors’ experiences with mentees’ placement regarding content and context. Induction programs with a discipline-specific approach for novice science teachers have found to have better results than non-discipline-specific programs (Ceven McNally, 2015). Additionally, special education teachers have reported strong preference for mentors who can relate to their teaching context in both content and age level, which can be difficult to secure under geographic limitations (NCIPP, 2010). Online mentoring also inserts a certain level of distance that can enhance mentees’ feelings of independence, safety, and confidentiality, so that they are more willing to be honest about struggles at their local site (Gareis & Nussbaum, 2007). School politics can hinder a mentee from bringing up genuine scenarios on how to handle a workplace difficulty (Knapcyzk et al., 2005). The digital nature of e-mentoring activities, such as emails, discussion boards, and video observations, offers easy archival for future reference and program improvement purposes (NCIPP, 2010). Kahraman and Kuzu (2014) emphasize the situational and personal aspects of e-mentoring and refer to it as “just in time, just enough, and just for you.” Most e-mentoring structures allow mentees to ask specific questions or receive specific feedback on particular teaching scenarios or work artifacts.

Potential E-mentoring Pitfalls

Online mentoring falls susceptible to similar concerns as face-to-face mentoring. Mentoring relationships can suffer from a poor match between the mentor and the mentee. This mis-match might be due to professional reasons such as differing subject matter expertise or for more personal reasons, such as personality clashes (Knapcyzk et al., 2005; NCIPP, 2010; Sherman & Camilli, 2014; Yayli, 2018). On the mentee side, other concerns include unmet expectations, such as mentees desiring more specific feedback from their mentors (Knapcyzk et al., 2005). In Knapcyzk’s (2005) study of university pre-service students, some students reported frustration by having one set of instructions laid out by the program, with an additional set of questions and expectations laid out by their assigned mentors. On the mentor side, they report a higher sense of motivation when they feel efficacious. Mentors often feel unsure if what they are doing is helpful (Knapcyzk et al., 2005). Yayli (2018) reported that some mentors felt pressured into their role and experienced teacher candidates as a burden, relegating mentoring to a secondary role after their primary role of classroom teaching. Another issue that commonly arises is the mentor’s lack of recent knowledge, either content or pedagogical (Yayli, 2018). Both mentees and mentors dislike a sense of confusion and non-adherence to program expectations or timelines (Knapcyzk et al., 2005). Ceven McNally (2015) reported lack of structure to observations as a common pitfall, which often leads to a mess of notes without any implication for actionable follow-up goals. Lastly, but particularly salient to e-mentoring, lack of technology competence can hinder the effectiveness of e-mentoring programs (Dorner & Kumar, 2017).
The addition of e-mentoring options expands the benefits of mentoring to locations and novice teachers who may otherwise not have access. In order to provide quality mentors, the program must consider matching, mentor training, technology platforms, and mentoring structure. While one mentor may not have all of the expertise a mentee desires, such as subject matter expertise and experience in an urban setting, a skilled mentor can help the mentee develop a network of resources to fill the gaps. This was the case with my orchestra intern. I did not have the subject matter expertise, but I could provide some support, such as emotional support and general instructional guidance like how to conduct performance assessments; French and orchestra both involve performance aspects not captured by written assignments. Her content mentor provided excellent subject matter expertise for organizing an orchestra and all those bodies and instruments in one room. The mentor should have some recognizable expertise to match the mentee’s need and circumstance. The program must decide upon technical logistics for the program, such as which online communication platform to use, and leaders must train everyone in the technical components of those programs (NCIPP, 2010; Knapczyk, Hew, & Frey, 2005). Clear expectations must be laid out and relayed to all stakeholders such as roles, timelines, frequencies, and goals of mentorship (Knapczyk, Hew, & Frey, 2005; NCIPP, 2010; Yayli, 2018). One role of the mentor should include data collection and driving goal-oriented conversations so that mentees are setting actionable and measurable goals for themselves (CEven McNally, 2015; Lipton & Wellman, 2018).

**Promising E-Mentoring Strategies—Video Analysis with Focus**

Online e-mentoring, just as face-to-face mentoring, can use a variety of models for different purposes. The following list provides options for the e-mentoring menu:

- **Content-expert mentors** provide focused lesson plan feedback in an online forum (Sherman & Camilli, 2014).
- **Mentors and mentees** analyze a sequence of video recorded observations that include a three-part protocol of a) a pre-observation focus chosen by the mentee, b) mentee records and reviews lesson separately, and c) mentor and mentee discuss lesson in a post-observation conference. This strategy has a goal of educative mentoring. It refrains from evaluative feedback or role modeling. In educative mentoring, the mentor aims to collect data, highlight evidence, and use an investigative stance with inquiry-based questions. (CEven McNally, 2015)

- **Mentees** post a behavior intervention plan for their own classroom to an online forum where they receive feedback and advice for particular problems of practice (Knapczyk et al., 2005).
- **Mentees** post weekly online discussion board comments specifically around instances in the classroom where they see a gap between theory and practice. This model uses group e-mentoring with a cohort of novice teachers assigned to the same mentor in a discussion forum. (Yayli, 2018)
- A trained mentor facilitates an online collaborative learning group of subject-specific novice teachers using an online communication platform (Dorner & Kumar, 2017).
- In *Mentoring Matters* by Lipton and Wellman (2018), they advocate for e-mentoring strategies as an accompaniment to face-to-face mentoring when scheduling and other factors hinder live meetings. Tools for e-mentoring include structured written communication tools, such as double entry journals where the mentee writes in one column a particular question or problem, and the mentor responds at a later time in another column in digital format.

When considering e-mentoring design, andragogy literature suggests that adults direct their own learning (Zepeda, 2012). Adults are more motivated when they can select an authentic area of development that pertains to their particular context (Zepeda, 2012). In *Focus on Teaching: Using Video for High-Impact Instruction*, Knight (2014) explains that teachers are more inclined to be defensive regarding feedback on more artful or complex
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practices, such as teaching. Thus, the strategy chosen for e-mentoring relationships depends upon the customized goal of the e-mentees, which stems from their understanding of the classroom and their identified needs. Otherwise, mentees may dismiss e-mentors’ feedback as irrelevant. For instance, a special education teacher may have an urgent self-identified need in behavior management, which aligns well with the behavior intervention plan e-mentoring strategy where the mentee asks for specific advice on the plan. Elsewhere, other novice teachers may desire more targeted feedback on their daily instructional opener and benefit from the e-mentoring focused video observation structure.

I coordinate online supervision for a private university teacher education program. While supervisors have an evaluative role not usually present in a mentor relationship, they do perform a similar role as mentors in preparing future teachers. Supervisors provide support, cognitive challenge, and cast professional vision. Our online supervision program runs very similarly to the Ceven-McNally (2015) qualitative study of the e-Mentoring for Student Success (eMSS) program for novice science teachers, which relied on video observations. In that study, the mentor-mentee pairings conducted four video observation cycles. The mentee’s chosen focus set the agenda for a post-observation conversation. Comments from the mentees and mentors in that study echo our own video supervision program.

- So, rather than skimming on top of everything that was going on, we could go deeper into that one aspect and focus more on why she thinks she was at one location more than others. We could talk about ability levels and group dynamics, and really focus on that, instead of trying to cover everything. Mentor (Ceven McNally, 2015)
- ...what I hear the mentees tell me in theory, in emails, in conversations and so forth, is often very different from what I see happen in the classroom. Mentor (Ceven McNally, 2015)
- I could get specific insight into how students were interacting in POGIL groups and whether they were actually collaborating and sharing ideas, or just going along with what others were saying. I also had a better idea of where students were struggling as I went through the video of class discussions. It’s hard to see some things in the moment, but afterwards it is helpful to reflect. Mentee (Author’s university)
- Honestly, I was able to see myself improve over a period of time with the video recordings. I could see how I began to change and relax with my students, [sic] this was great to see with my own eyes. Mentee (Author’s university)

After realizing the many benefits of video self-analysis, our university program now requires that teacher candidates choose a focus question to guide their viewing of at least 10 minutes of each of their classroom recordings and self-assess before discussing with their supervisor. In addition to adding open-ended comments to the video analysis software, observers can time-stamp markers aligned to each of the university’s eight teaching program standards, which align to Washington’s “state eight” teaching standards, so interns can become familiar with looking for standards-based evidence.

When developing an e-mentoring program, designers need to thoughtfully consider mentor professional development, and, ideally, embed the trainings into their regular work (Ceven McNally, 2015; Heiney-Smith, 2018; NCIPP, 2010; Zepeda, 2012). States such as Washington have put much effort into identifying key mentoring standards and creating a thoughtful mentor training curriculum. Washington’s Beginning Educator Support Team (BEST) program uses Lipton and Wellman’s (2018) Mentoring Matters workbook and accompanying resources. Dorner and Kumar’s (2017) study found perception of online communication to be the most important factor impacting e-mentee satisfaction. Designers can set out clear expectations for technology use, frequency of contact, and response time. Lastly, programs can equip e-mentors to focus on specific aspects of novice teacher development and collect relevant data on that topic. For instance, if culturally responsive teaching (CRT) emerges as a topic of interest, programs will provide e-mentors with tools such as rubrics and checklists to promote CRT-targeted conversations with
their e-mentees. While e-mentoring programs certainly want to provide emotional support and impact teacher retention, by supporting teacher effectiveness, both instructional and employment goals can be positively influenced. When I mentored my orchestra teacher years ago, we used video analysis and lesson plan feedback strategies paired with online conferencing for debrief and reflection. We also created a network of resources for her to use including various websites and her content orchestra mentor. No one mentor can provide all of the support for another teacher, in either an online model or a face-to-face situation; however, e-mentors can fill a role that may not otherwise have been filled had it never been an option and even offers certain advantages.

References


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Kirsten Koetje brings 10 years of teaching high school English and French to her teacher educator roles at Seattle Pacific University (SPU). During that time, she served public and private students in brick and mortar schools and online. Additionally, she taught in the Peace Corps with her husband in rural Mozambique. Kirsten feels privileged to have such a wide perspective on education today and has a passion for championing teachers. Kirsten has been preparing teachers at SPU since 2013. She currently coordinates the Alternative Routes to Certification program and facilitates the online supervision program. In 2017, Kirsten won the Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges of Teacher Education (AILACTE) Graduate Scholar Award. Presently, Kirsten is working on her PhD dissertation on video analysis in teacher preparation.

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