How to Train Working Life Experts to Online Mentoring?

Riina Helenius & Irja Leppisaari
riina.helenius@cop.fi, irja.leppisaari@cop.fi

Central Ostrobothnia Polytechnic / AVERKO – Open Polytechnic Learning Network

Background

- The challenges set by the changing society for continuing development of professional skills and knowledge
  
  • Expertise is best developed in a group of experts with different levels of knowledge where the members can jointly construct knowledge and reciprocally develop each other’s thinking

- The analysis and renewal of current teaching-studying-learning (TSL) practices
  
  • New pedagogical models which support the expertise and cognitive development of different parties must be developed

- The key questions in terms of the development of education
  
  • What kinds of learning environments can best support the development of shared expertise and the birth of dynamic learning communities?
  
  • How can the culture of learning be brought closer to expert cultures with the help of new information and communication technology (ICT)?
Online Mentoring as a Pedagogical Model

- Working life
- Online learning environment
- Sharing of expertise
- Working life expert
- Higher education students
- Higher education teacher
- Sharing of expertise
- Higher education

- Humanism
- Social constructivism
Orientation Training Programme Organised for Online Mentors

– **Pedagogical background**
  
  • emphasis on the following adult learning principles →

– **Objectives**
  
  • provide the online mentors with tools to guide the students in issues of working life
  
  • enhance the mentors’ commitment and orientation to their role and to the whole mentoring process
  
  • describe the processes, tools, methods and example cases related to mentoring
  
  • enhance the mentors’ peer support and promote the sharing of expertise
  
  • facilitate the mentors’ comprehensive development and professional growth

→ the success of orientation training is essential for the success of mentoring
The orientation training programme in the Online Mentor Project was implemented as a blended approach comprising different training methods and tools. The combination of training methods to be used depends mostly on what things are considered important and what is expected from the online mentors and online mentoring (cf. goals).

Methods and contents of the orientation training programme (1 cr. ≈ 50 h)

- **Two contact meetings at the beginning of the programme; 10 h**
  - introducing the concept of higher education and online education
  - reflecting on the online mentor’s tasks and roles
  - getting acquainted with the WebCT online environment
  - discussing the professional experience as a tool of guidance and support
  - reflecting on the mentor’s position as a supporter of the learning group
  - familiarizing with different learning tasks, feedback tools and reflection methods
Practical Methods of the Orientation Training Programme

• **Online networking in the WebCT learning environment; 16 h**
  - guided online networking based on the learning material; (10 h)
    • studying the online learning material (themes: meaningful learning and dialogic online interaction)
    • taking part in thematic online discussions which aim to promote reflective thinking and joint knowledge construction
  - independent online networking in the courses they were to mentor; (6 h)
    • observing the teachers’ and students’ work
    • getting acquainted with the subject matter, contents and learning materials
    • understanding the teaching–studying–learning (TSL) process
Practical Methods of the Orientation Training Programme

• Three contact meetings in the midway of the programme; 5 h
  – enhancing the collective reflection and analysis of the experiences gained from online mentoring
  – facilitating the mentors’ exchange of ideas and views
  – promoting the evaluation and development of practices during the process

• Individual guidance and mutual peer guidance of the mentor group (contact/online); 2 h
  – guiding via e-mail and over the telephone
  – supporting the mentors’ peer guidance through a ‘questions and comments’ forum in the online environment
  – sharing the experiences, best practices and problematic situations in the contact meetings and WebCT online environment
Practical Methods of the Orientation Training Programme

• Keeping a mentor journal throughout the programme; 8 h
  – promoting the online mentors’ self-reflection
  – strengthening the mentors’ own learning process and outlining the ”big picture”
  – giving feedback to the trainers about the training programme and its relevance

• Final seminar at the end of the programme; 6 h
  – sharing, collecting and evaluating the overall experiences and feedback
  – developing the online mentoring model further
Research as a Tool for Development

- **Qualitative action research / case study**
  - the research focus in the insights and meanings of the phenomenon rather than in the measurement of predetermined hypothesis
  - no systematic research available on the orientation training organised for online mentors
    → The case study conducted in AVERKO can therefore be seen as innovative and pioneering

- **Research stages**
  - planning, acting, observing and reflecting

- **Research objectives**
  - analyse the online mentors’ experiences gained from the orientation training programme organised as a blended training
  - identify the key aspects to consider when developing the orientation training programme
Research as a Tool for Development

- **Research questions**
  - How did the online mentors experience the orientation training programme organised for them?
  - How should the orientation training programme be further developed in order to support the development of core mentoring competencies in an efficient way?

- **Data gathering methods**
  - qualitative online questionnaires sent to the online mentors (n=7)
  - the participatory observations of the trainers/researchers
  - the online mentors’ journals

- **Data analysis method**
  - qualitative thematic coding
Towards Successful Training Practices with Blended Solutions

– The diversity of training methods and tools as a critical success factor
  • Contact meetings advanced the online mentors’ reflection, shared expertise, motivation and communal learning in an efficient way
  • Online networking strengthened mentors’ ICT skills and introduced the practical WebCT tools to be used

– The importance of finding a balance between contact meetings and online networking → cf. the structure of training
  • Contact meetings are crucially important especially before the actual mentoring process and right after it → motivate and give a chance to discuss the expectations, hopes, experiences and feelings
  • Online networking is relevant especially during the actual online mentoring process → enables flexible study opportunities and contextual learning

– The overall challenges of the orientation training
  • Contact meetings: finding a common time, having efficient time management skills
  • Online networking: increasing interactivity between the online mentors as well as between the online mentors and trainers
Relevance of the Training Contents and Structure

- **The contents introduced to the basic of online mentoring efficiently**
  - The orientation training programme (1 cr. ≈ 50 hrs) and its contents were seen as extensive enough → More extensive training might have caused difficulties to balance the online mentors’ actual day job and the orientation training
  - The orientation training programme could have been even more profound in some of its study contents → It could have given more detailed instructions on how to mentor online and how to collaborate with the student and the teacher

- **The structure of the training integrated both theory and practice**
  - The current structure was mostly experienced as functional and meaningful (cf. the practical methods of orientation training programme)
  - Some online mentors, however, wished for more practical examples of different working methods, good mentoring practices as well as real-time (face-to-face) discussions
  - Some mentors also wanted a more detailed introduction to the practical tools of online environment and theoretical information about studying and learning
Discussions and Online Interactions to Support the Sharing of Expertise

- The discussions (online/face-to-face) enabled flexible peer support
  - offered a chance to learn from the experiences of others
  - promoted online mentors’ commitment to the task
- Online environment as a forum of interactions and shared expertise was interesting but also challenging
  - The online discussions during the orientation training were quite slow to start with and mainly monological in their nature
    → The themes of online discussions were seen as irrelevant for some parts and did not motivate all the mentors to participate
    → The (other) mentors were experienced as “faceless” in the online environment, and the interaction did not feel natural at first
    → The asynchronous nature of online discussions made it difficult for some mentors to take part in the online discussions actively

One of the difficulties in participating in the online discussion was some sort of “slowness” of interaction. I mean that I understand the discussion perhaps simply as a real-time discussion. On the other hand, in a more slower discussion like this you have more time to think, you don’t have to react the right away. (Online Mentor 6.)
Discussions and Online Interactions to Support the Sharing of Expertise

- temptation to visit and work in the online environment only as a "lurker"
  - *I must admit that I quite often visit the online environment to monitor the situation, but I have stayed in the background (Online Mentor 5).*
- learning a new technology (the use of online environment) was emphasised perhaps too much → took time from the actual subject matter
- changes in the lives and other responsibilities
- the strangeness and low number of online mentors
  - the feeling of strangeness yet subsided when the mentors got to know each other and familiarised themselves with the use of the online environment.
  - *At first it was awkward to use, but through training it became familiar. Joint message posting was useful and this way we got to know each other as well. (Online Mentor 6.)*

- "Development discussions” with experts
  - the reflection of issues in a dialogical interaction process with other experts in the fields → "mentoring the mentors”
Reflections to Promote Online Mentors’ Personal Growth and Development

– Continuous reflection as an essential element in the orientation training
  • identifying, acquiring and adapting new skills and knowledge

– Mentor journal as a tool of reflection and development
  • keeping the mentor journal was experienced useful but also rather time consuming
  • the mentor journal served the goals set especially in the following areas:
    – advanced the reflection during the training process
      → thoughts and feelings before – during – after
    – documented the mentoring process: experiences, situations and cases
    – followed the online mentors’ own development and professional growth
    – conceptualized the orientation training as a process
    – reflected the success of the orientation training programme and mentoring process
  • the journal should be better connected with other mentoring activities
  • integrating the journal in the online environment
Conclusions

– The orientation training programme should be “basic” enough but also rich in content to support the learning process comprehensively
  
  • in the programme of this study, the theoretical part before the actual mentoring was seen as too compact

– Meaningful orientation training programme includes:
  
  • blended training solutions → methods, tools, learning tasks, cases, trainers etc. → ‘blend-all’ approach
  
  • a clear structure → balance between contact meetings and online networking
  
  • in-depth study contents → practical cases and examples, theoretical concepts and information
  
  • opportunities for sharing of expertise, experiences and knowledge → both online and face-to-face
  
  • support for the development online mentors’ core competencies and personal growth
Conclusions

– Attention in the orientation training programme should be paid especially on the following key aspects:

• committing the online mentors to their task
• highlighting the importance of efficient time management skills
• integrating the mentoring model more tightly as a part of the mentor’s own professional growth and development → also the mentor’s employer could see the additional value and commit to the process more easily
• supporting the mentors’ self-reflection during the process and promoting general and personal development goals → taking steps in these directions
• a need for personal support and guidance
• ”mentoring the mentors” → a chance to consult and interact with a number of experienced experts
• promoting the birth of dialogue and supporting joint knowledge construction → enhancing experiential and communal learning

At its best, the orientation training programme is a dialogical process which promotes mentors’ joint development and growth and leads to a better understanding of one’s own individual competencies, abilities and limitations.
References