Online mentoring has taken off in recent years—often as an adjunct to face-to-face meetings, but sometimes as the primary means of connecting caring adults with youth. Many online programs are now in place, some of which are integrated into classrooms or after-school settings. Some focus on career or school outcomes, while others seek broader developmental goals.

Similarly, the format and duration of online programs can vary widely. Whereas one program might involve individual mentor/mentee matches that last for years, other programs pair groups of mentors with entire classrooms for specific, time-limited activities. Depending on the type of mentoring program, the mentors and mentees will have varying degrees of contact online. Some relationships might entail exchanging one e-mail per week; in others, mentors and mentees will spend several hours a week exchanging e-mails in order to review the mentees’ class projects; or, a program might have mentors and mentees exchange e-mails as a bridge between face-to-face meetings.

Today, despite this expanding array of programs and venues (e.g., e-mail, chatrooms, instant messaging) and the general "buzz" surrounding the topic of online mentoring, precious little is known about its effectiveness. Much of the discussion around online mentoring has been speculative or based on research that involves very small samples and cross-sectional data. Few peer-reviewed articles have been published on the topic, and most of the information that is available through Web sites is limited to program descriptions. When success is measured, it is often in terms of the number of new matches that have been made, as opposed to their intensity, duration or effects on youth outcomes.

Despite this dearth of information, people tend to hold strong opinions about online mentoring, debating whether the Internet promotes or undercuts social connections and whether online relationships can ever be as influential as those sustained through face-to-face interaction. The goal of this month’s column is to help bring some perspective to online mentoring—to explain what we currently know about the effectiveness, challenges and advantages of online mentoring.

The Scope of online mentoring
A survey of the many Web sites connecting mentors and mentees indicates that the practice of on-line mentoring is alive and well. See Appendix 1 for some examples of the range of programs that now exist.

**Evaluation**

The most comprehensive evaluation of online mentoring with youth to date is the recent study of the Digital Heroes Campaign (DHC). Between 2000 and 2002, DHS matched nearly 250 youth with adults in exclusively on-line relationships. The evaluation is based on pre- and post-test surveys of youth, post-test surveys mentors, interviews with a subset of mentors and supervisors, site visits, focus groups with a subset of youth and an extensive content analysis of e-mail correspondence. Among other things, the evaluators found that:

**Conversations between mentors and youth fell into three broad categories.**

- "It was a rough day..." Youth and mentors talked about important and personal issues, ranging from difficulties with relationships or decisions to issues like racism, religion, and politics.
- "Hey, how's it going?" Mentors and mentees had friendly, warm, reciprocal relationships, but did not normally discuss serious personal issues.
- "How's the weather?" The mentee was uncomfortable or unfamiliar with making personal disclosure and mentors struggled to engage their mentees.

Although mentors made six-month commitments, only about half of the relationships lasted six or more months. This is cause for concern, as there is evidence that shorter-than-expected relationships can be detrimental.

Pre- and post-comparisons, based on 68 mentees who completed both the pre- and post-tests (61% of the sample) revealed that, over time, mentees reported:

- Receiving more emotional support from adults;
- Feeling more detached from school; and
- Expressing a greater willingness to consult with adults about college and jobs.

In interviews, mentors and mentees reported a range of benefits, including:

- Bolstering mentees' self-esteem, literacy and future orientation; and
- Bolstering mentors' sense of pride and understanding of young people.

Evidence from related fields provides grounds for cautious optimism about the potential of online mentoring. For example, researchers evaluated an online mutual-help group for people suffering from depression and found that participants communicated in ways that were characteristic of face-to-face groups (high levels of support, acceptance and positive feelings) and that group involvement led to improvements in well-being.

Research on e-therapy is also relevant. There are an over 200 online therapy sites providing access to hundreds of online counselors. Preliminary observations indicate that online counseling has the potential to address many of the difficulties that clients bring to therapy.
A recent study also suggests that the Internet can aid in the supervision of mentors. Although counselors generally rate face-to-face supervision as more effective than online supervision, the latter proved to be a convenient way to obtain guidance on a range of issues.\(^6\)

**Advantages of Online Mentoring**

It appears that online mentoring offers important opportunities that are not afforded by exclusively face-to-face mentoring, while presenting several practical and ethical challenges.\(^7\)

**Access**

By far, the biggest advantage of online mentoring is the freedom that it affords from the conventions of geography and time.

**Geography:** One of the biggest challenges of face-to-face mentoring is the physical distance that often separates mentor and mentees. Stretched to their limits by their jobs and families, many volunteers find it difficult to consistently navigate their way to their mentees' schools or homes. By mentoring online, mentors eliminate this commute and have more time to focus on communicating with their mentees.

Lifting this constraint also enables mentors and mentees to connect with a much wider array of volunteers-freeing up mentoring coordinators to match mentors and mentees who share interests (a key factor in building relationships) as opposed to making matches by reason of physical proximity.

Programs largely based on e-mail do make it possible to involve a wider array of mentors (e.g., corporate executives, busy parents, adults who travel a lot or are physically disabled) and mentees (incarcerated, in residential treatment facilities, rural) who would not otherwise participate.

**Time:** By not constraining children and teens to pre-determined times to meet with their mentors each week, online mentoring can encourage the kinds of spontaneous disclosures that can build intimacy and trust in a relationship. Moreover, an e-mail, which delivers the message almost instantly, can be more gratifying than waiting for a weekly meeting or a returned phone call.

Online communication also removes time constraints, enabling mentees and mentors to connect more spontaneously. A teen's willingness to disclose is unpredictable-they may have very little to say during a face-to-face meeting with their mentor (who just traveled across town to meet with them) yet feel compelled to make important disclosures late at night over e-mail.

Instant messaging offers a potentially promising frontier for bridging weekly face-to-face relationships between weeks or over the summer. Indeed, researchers have recommended that programs seek ways to provide real-time communication opportunities.\(^3\)

**An alternative mode of communicating**
The Internet might be particularly appealing to youth who are too shy or withdrawn to reach out to the people around them. Youth who are less socially at ease, and have grown up with computers and the Internet, might feel more comfortable obtaining emotional support from the privacy of their computer terminal than in face-to-face interactions.\(^8\)

The DHC evaluation revealed many youth who preferred the semi-anonymous nature of e-mail, particularly in the beginning stages of the relationship.\(^3\)

This point is exemplified in a Michael Lewis' New York Times Magazine article\(^9\) about Jonathan Lebed, a 15-year-old boy who struck it rich through an online stock scam and was sued by the S.E.C. Soon after he agreed to defend Jonathan Lebed, Kevin Marino, his lawyer, discovered he had a problem. No matter how he tried, he was unable to get Jonathan Lebed to say what he really thought. "In a conversation with Jonathan, I was supplying way too many of the ideas," Marino says. "You can't get them out of him." Finally, he asked Jonathan to write a few paragraphs in e-mail describing his feelings about how the S.E.C. was treating him. Jonathan's statement - a four-page e-mail message dashed off the night that Marino asked for it.

**Decreased emphasis on demographics**

An absence of social cues can sometimes be an advantage in relationship formation. People tend to form first impressions based on others' age, race, physical appearance, disabilities, etc. and these impressions can shape the rest of the relationship.\(^10\) By removing access to these superficial (but salient) characteristics, mentors and mentees can focus on other commonalities that might draw them together.

As Lewis went on to explain of Jonathan, The Internet had taught him how hazy the line was between perception and reality. When people could see him, they treated him as they would treat a 14-year-old boy…. On the Internet, where no one could see who he was, he became who he was. Preliminary evaluations of the New York City Mentoring Program suggest that student participants benefit in terms of both career and academic outcomes.

**Reduced costs**

Because online mentoring requires no travel costs and fewer administrative amenities, it can connect volunteers and mentees at a fraction of the cost of face-to-face programs. Nonetheless, mentoring expert Judi Harris\(^10\) warns against underestimating the cost of online mentoring. Planning and promoting an online program, obtaining consultation, conducting evaluations, troubleshooting, etc., all cost money.

**Written record**

There are many advantages to having a written record of the correspondence between mentors and mentees. These include providing a convenient way to supervise and monitor the relationship and creating a rich archive of data from which to conduct evaluations of mentoring process and outcome.

**Challenges**
Although the vast majority of the information about online mentoring (in news articles, on Web sites, etc.) focuses on the positive aspects, this strategy does pose some key challenges.

**Miscommunication**

Online communication is considered by some to be a "cold" or "emotionally spare" medium that cannot support close relationships.\(^{12}\) Indeed, because it does not permit for voice tone or nonverbal forms of communication (e.g., smiles, pauses, body language), there appear to be missed opportunities for forging closer ties. Enshe\(^{9}\) has noted other complications that can result in miscommunication:

Youth and mentors can misinterpret attempts at humor and sarcasm, misread the tone of the message as negative, or to fail to clarify misunderstandings;

Emoticons, such as J or ;), can sometimes soften the tone of a harsh or sarcastic remark, but research suggests that the negative content of message outweighs and negates the effects of emoticons;\(^{13}\)

The lack of personal contact can sometimes lower a youth's or mentor's inhibitions-leading them to say angry and hurtful things that they would never say in person; and

Neglectful e-mail behavior can also be interpreted negatively. Whereas a busy adult might think nothing of postponing a response for a few days, mentees might see such delays as signs of anger or rejection. As Saito & Sipe concluded, authentic relationships cannot develop via e-mail if there are long lapses between correspondences...\(^{3}\)

**Lack of program development**

A recent, large-scale survey by researchers at the University of Texas (Virtual Volunteers Project) pointed to a lack of expertise, materials and training to support the development and maintenance of online volunteering efforts. Site coordinators especially (e.g., the teachers, who were working onsite with mentees) rarely had sufficient training.

**Site coordinators:**

Tended to have little experience working with people online and more training in how to use the software than in how to implement and evaluate online activities; and

Had insufficient knowledge of the best practices that have been identified in traditional mentoring programs.

The researchers observed that, There seemed to be a sense when programs were launched that, as long as all mentors and [mentees] had computer and Internet access, positive and sustained mentoring relationships would naturally evolve.

**Issues of privacy, confidentiality and safety**
E-mail and other forms of online mentoring create written records, which may inhibit mentors or mentees from making authentic disclosures. In many business cultures, where lawsuits and subpoenas are all too likely, adults are discouraged from making even benign statements that could be misinterpreted in the court of law.

Similarly, they might be less willing to self-disclose a mistake that they might have made in life (an important strategy for building trust with youth) because it creates a written record.

Perhaps the worst fear that any organization has is the recruitment of mentors who will exploit children. This risk is small, and programs that recruit volunteers through careful, face-to-face contact greatly reduce those risks.15

Trading strong ties for weak ties

There is some evidence that exclusively online relationships can compete with, and ultimately supplant, closer ties.3

A recent study demonstrated that e-mail-only relationships were characteristic of what sociologists16 call weak ties (i.e., less contact and a more narrow focus, more superficial and easily broken bonds) as contrasted with strong ties (those characterized by frequent contact across many life areas, deep affection and mutual obligation). Strong ties are associated with better social and psychological outcomes.2

The researchers surmised that, because individuals who meet online don’t have access to the broader context of each other’s lives, discussions and support are less applicable.

The researchers found that the time spent on Internet use often replaced social activities and that, on balance, Internet use among a diverse sample led to less social engagement and poorer psychological outcomes.

Of course, ongoing e-mail exchanges can eventually lead to stronger ties, as evidenced by the caring, supportive and youth-centered relationships that emerged in the DHC evaluation.

Slower Progression

There is some evidence that online relationships are slower to progress than face-to-face relationships. This is because, in face-to-face relationships, individuals are able to draw on a wealth of information (e.g., race, age, physical appearance) to form impressions.

Perceived similarities can lead to positive first impressions and the perception of greater closeness—which forms the basis of subsequent encounters.

People are less inclined to make personal disclosures and share emotions over the Internet, tending to use e-mail for informational or more superficial communication, but then phoning or meeting others when they want to discuss something important.2
Interestingly, compared to males, females tend to be more expressive over e-mail, filling their message with more personal information and using the medium to build and maintain friendships.\(^{14}\)

**Additional skill and resource requirements**

Online communication requires that both parties have access to a computer and the Internet.

Computers and network breakdowns can prevent contact, reducing momentum in relationship building.\(^{4}\)

Particularly in low-income communities, there is less access to, and familiarity and comfort with, computers than in higher-income communities. This "digital divide," creates barriers to launching programs in neighborhoods or schools that need it most. Such youth depend on computer labs or other public settings that are often closed on nights, weekends and throughout the summer and holidays.

Even with adequate hardware and software, online mentoring requires that both partners are literate, have the competency to express themselves in writing and the technical skills to navigate basic computer applications.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

Whether online mentoring is used alone or as an adjunct to face-to-face meetings, one thing is certain—the building of a caring relationship is at the core of this endeavor. When programs are well-conceived, supported and structured, relationships stand a better chance of thriving. This includes:

- Making and sustaining strong relationships
- Making appropriate matches

Particularly when e-mail is the only form of communication, matches should be made on the basis of shared interest and/or background; and Mentors, mentees, and even site supervisors are clear about the commitment they are making to each other.

**Providing adequate training and support to site managers**

The Virtual Volunteering Project found that sustained site manager involvement (i.e., those adults who are onsite with the mentees) was a critical element to sustainable online mentoring programs, if not the primary element.

Therefore, site managers need training in how to assess the progress of each relationship and how to help if a relationship is faltering.

**Training mentors and mentees in communicating effectively via e-mail**
For mentees, this entails a willingness to write more than a few sentences. For adults, this could mean refraining from overwhelming their mentees with too much information. For both, it would mean being willing to correspond regularly and openly.

Indeed, in the DHC, some mentors complained that their mentees responded with "one-liners." A meaningful relationship cannot develop if either the mentor or mentee is unwilling or unable to write more than a few sentences.\(^3\)

In this sense, the program can become a means of improving youth's writing communication skills.

Incidences of misunderstanding are decreased when participants are provided with information about: warning signs of communication problems prior to engaging in a relationship, appropriate e-mail correspondence behavior, and the importance of confidentiality.\(^6\)

**Ongoing quality control**

**Program coordinators need to:**

Establish a systematic method for checking in with the mentors to ensure that the e-mails are proceeding well;

Provide ongoing information about the practices and policies of the program (e.g., when/where to meet -- if the program includes face-to-face contact -- and handling termination);

Follow the Elements of Effective Practice for E-mentoring, which can be accessed through the E-mentoring Clearinghouse of MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership

**Program evaluation**

There is an urgent need for empirically sound research and evaluations in this area. Researchers should:

Systematically compare programs that vary in type, intensity, supervision, training, matching and length in order to provide a sound basis for decision-making in the field; and

Devise new ways to evaluate online mentoring programs because such programs are often components of face-to-face mentoring and/or a broad array of services.

**Bottom Line**

Carefully conducted evaluations can help us to determine whether e-mail mentoring relationships can effectively substitute for face-to-face mentoring. At present, most experts seem to agree that exclusively online relationships are preferable only when face-to-face connections are unavailable, unfeasible or inappropriate. A more hybrid approach appears to offer the best of both worlds: online mentoring can reinforce and bridge face-to-face meetings.\(^{10}\) Indeed, researchers have surmised that many of the problems cited above are more likely to
occur when mentors and mentees interact only online. Online mentoring could, for example, be a particularly important means of bridging face-to-face, school-based mentoring relationships during the summer months.

As online mentoring expands, we need to better understand its complexities and the circumstances under which such programs are most effective. This includes a better understanding of the predictors of good outcomes and the ways in which ongoing mentoring varies across different program models. At this stage, we can safely say that online mentoring, particularly when combined with face-to-face interactions, may represent an effective approach to helping youth. In some cases, online mentoring can lead to misunderstandings and even isolation; in others it can act as a convenient and powerful means of connecting caring adults with today's youth. The balance can, and should, be tipped toward the latter. A deeper understanding of such relationships, combined with high quality programs that incorporate the best practices of youth mentoring, will better position us to harness the full potential of online mentoring.

Notes


