

MENTORING NEWS

Following on from the article in the Winter 2000 Mentoring News Jane Field reports on the developments of the e-mentoring community on think.com (web-based software developed and built by Oracle) for teachers using ICT and building online education communities. The ten e-mentors met at the end of March to review and learn from the e-mentoring activity to date.

The e-mentoring community on think.com went live in December 2000. Since then there has been a slow but steady buzz on the e-mentoring community. The group of ten e-mentors (including classroom teachers, a special needs teacher, a head and a deputy head, LEA representatives and others with experience across lifelong learning) all enter into the mentoring conversations. Originally this group approach had been agreed to prevent any one mentor being overloaded; but in practice the group approach has defined the way in which the community works. The range of experience ensures that the input from the e-mentors offers a wide perspective and range of ideas in response to all the contributions made on the e-mentoring community. Furthermore, evidence shows that the e-mentors not only offer new ideas to the contributors (mentees), but that they 'spark-off' each other, encouraging further reflection and suggestions.

Contributions have come from teachers across the UK. On occasion, before the contribution has been put onto the community the contributor is asked for clarification. Follow-up emails, sent a few weeks after the e-mentoring conversation has ended, show that the contributors have tried out new ideas, looked at the web-sites suggested and thought more about some of the implications of using ICT for teaching and learning.

During the development of the e-mentoring community some considerable time was spent in addressing how to encourage "contributions" rather than "questions"; however, in practice there is still a tendency for teachers to ask specific questions, rather than a contribution opening debate. This maybe due to the prevalence of much online activity that encourages questions with the expectation of a "quick-fix" answer. The e-mentoring conversations are summarised (anonymously) and posted onto the MirandaNet website (www.mirandanet.ac.uk) the Compaq UK website and on the public e-mentoring community on think.com; which cascades ideas out to more teachers. Perhaps the summaries, showing the range and depth of the e-mentoring dialogue, will encourage teachers to make contributions in future, rather than refined questions.

Of greater concern is the fact that there have been few responses online from contributors, inferring some hesitation about entering into the dialogue. This finding is in line with research that shows reluctance by many to enter into online debates. The e-mentors agreed to use more phrases that might encourage people to respond (eg "have you thought about / tried / seen / looked at"; "try and see ..."; "let us know").

In the earlier article for *Mentoring News* a number of questions were identified that the e-mentors intended to debate and review during the first year of the e-mentoring community. During the review meeting in March these questions were "brainstormed", providing the opportunity to comment and reflect on some of the issues around e-mentoring.

Will the “anonymity” of the virtual environment aid or hinder online mentoring?

By and large the fact that there is not a personal, face-to-face relationship does not seem to affect the e-mentoring process. Perhaps, as there is a lack of signals (such as body language) the e-mentors are careful to explain what they mean, and avoid making contentious remarks, although none of the e-mentors felt constrained by the medium. Not all the contributions are anonymous – sometimes those making contributions are known to some of the e-mentors. It was agreed that on the rare occasion where one or more of the e-mentors does know the individual that everyone should avoid personal comments, bearing in mind that others will enter the community. Furthermore, it was agreed that even if a contributor is known that assumptions should not be made, and all relevant information should be included.

Is it appropriate for a mentoring team to mentor as a group?

The benefits of mentoring as a group have already been mentioned. This is one way in which e-mentoring has an advantage over the face-to-face mentoring partnership, as a group of mentors in the flesh could be intimidating. As it is, the collective approach and the mix of the mentors expertise and various experiences provides a more rounded contribution from a number of different perspectives. This also links into the question of What value can be gained from “cross-fertilisation”? The wider viewpoint and the broad discussions ensure that the contributor is not locked into the view of any one individual. This approach provides teachers with the chance to look at issues relating to ICT more widely; which, due to staffing pressures and the need to be in the classroom, many are unable to do (eg through personal networking or conference attendance) at the present time.

Are some issues more “mentorable” than others?

The skills base of the e-mentors, and their knowledge and expertise, has meant that to date the e-mentoring team have been able to respond effectively to all contributions posted onto the site. Prior to the launch of the community some time had been spent debating whether contributions should be channelled within certain subject areas. In the event it was agreed to keep the contribution box open-ended; and in practice there are no indications that either focused or unfocused questions work better. The information on the websites and communities clearly state that the remit of the e-mentors is to respond to contributions about ICT within the classroom and in the wider context of education, and online education communities; all the contributions have kept within this brief.

Finally, the e-mentors have all felt that the involvement in the e-mentoring community has had added value for their own professional and personal development. Amongst other things they have gained from having their own thoughts challenged, the need to reflect on certain issues and a general increase and broadening of their own perspectives on ICT. The e-mentoring team will continue to work together for another year. Future plans include working with newly qualified teachers and also exploring peer-pupil e-mentoring in schools using think.com.