

Main Components of Blended Mentoring Programmes for English Language Instructors to Teach Online: a Content Analysis

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Abstract

Distance education requires introduction of “online instructional strategies that create an environment that supports and encourages inquiry, broaden the learner's experience of the subject matter, and elicit active and critical reflection by learners on their growing experience base” [Kim & Bonk, 2006]. Therefore, as Çoklar and Odabaşı [2010] state, the biggest responsibility for the use of educational technologies falls on the teachers, being the core of the educational process, which urge formal or informal professional development for these recent digital pedagogies. Yet, one-day events such as seminars are not effective enough in bringing change to the teaching practice [McConnell, 2013 cited in Becuwe et. al., 2016], so teachers’ professional learning arrangements are shifting towards demand-driven models with teachers as active participants [Lim & Lee, 2014 cited in Becuwe et. al., 2016]] which nominate blended mentoring as an effective approach in order to help teachers’ adoption with online teaching environments and effective continuity of them. This study aims to describe main components of an efficient blended mentoring programme for faculty development to teach online. Based on a content analysis of studies about faculty mentoring published in ISI Web of Knowledge, based on theories for online learning, Knowles’ adult learning theory (1968), Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovation Theory, and the Technology Acceptance Model, this research analyses main components of a blended mentoring programme for language instructors to adapt themselves into online learning environments. Findings from this study will be useful in establishing fundamentals of an efficient blended mentoring programme for language instructors to help them adopt online learning technologies in learning-teaching environments effectively.

Keywords: blended mentoring, distance learning, professional development, digital pedagogies

1. Introduction

The rise of technology has reshaped educational tools and delivery of education. Online learning is defined by Ally [2004] as “the use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience” (p.7). This new concept requires introduction of “online instructional strategies that create an environment that supports and encourages inquiry, broaden the learner's experience of the subject matter, and elicit active and critical reflection by learners on their growing experience base” [Kim & Bonk, 2006]. Therefore, as Çoklar and Odabaşı [2010] state, the biggest responsibility for the use of educational technologies falls on the teachers, being the core of the educational process. Teachers who have been traditionally trained for face-to-face education are now required to adopt new roles and competencies for online teaching, which also results in a change in their titles, “online instructor”, or as Wozniak [2007, cited in Arah, 2012] depicts “a ghost in the wings”.

Teaching languages online necessitates skills that are not only different from those of traditional teaching but also different from other subjects [Hampel & Stickler, 2005]. The part of the instructors’ online responsibility is to come-up with clearly stated learning goals and course objectives, and decide on the instructional methods with which to enable students achieve the desired ends [Arah, 2012]. Only competent and skilled online instructors, who can adapt themselves to the new learning environments, can facilitate this process. Hence, this period shifting from traditional face-to-face to online teaching is of great importance. Baran [2015] states that challenges explaining faculty members’ slow adoption of technology integration practices have been frequently noted in the literature, such as lack of time, resources, technology infrastructure, and support, as well as limited understanding about technology [i.e. Al-Senaidi et al., 2009; Xu and Meyer, 2009].

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An online instructor is expected to carefully plan the course considering the students' needs and course objectives, and to hold the role of a facilitator through effective teaching strategies giving students chance to have a learner-centered, autonomous and collaborative learning experience. No matter how experienced in teaching in traditional settings, instructors need training to improve fundamental skills or competences. In-service training programmes, certificate programmes or support programs may help instructors deal with the challenges they may encounter. However, Baran [2015] claims these are likely not to become as successful as expected to help convert faculty teaching since they do not go beyond teaching about technology instead of focusing on teaching with technology. For Baran [2015] faculty technology mentoring (FTM) seems as the best to meet the needs of teachers to integrate technology in their teaching compared to other forms of faculty support and training programs.

Technology is increasingly used in the mentoring process because of its widespread accessibility and potential to overcome the barriers of time and geographical location between mentors and mentees [Wong & Premkumar, 2007]. This model is called online mentoring, virtual mentoring, tele-mentoring, cyber-mentoring or e-mentoring. Since mentoring in virtual medium is based on mentoring structured within traditional organizations [Colky & Young, 2006 as cited in Rowland, 2012], there are increasing number of blended mentoring programmes combining advantages of face-to-face activities with affordances of online medium. It is possible to consider online and/or blended mentoring as a useful supplement for structured faculty development programs or workshops or seminars for teaching online so as to ensure motivation, encouragement, awareness and positive attitude of online instructors.

This study stems from a need in a Turkish public university. Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University has started delivering common core courses online to campus-based students, including core foreign language courses that are provided in blended classes. All instructors were provided with a structured online faculty development programme (*E-tutor*) providing them with essential knowledge and skills required to teach online. An assessment study conducted after the programme completion indicated a need for further support in the form of refreshers' training, workshops, or in the form of coaching or mentoring to clarify and adopt their changing roles and competencies in online learning environments [Adnan & Üstünel, 2015].

Engaging in effective professional development is critical to the process of improving one's teaching practice, whether one is a novice or veteran teacher [Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; National Academy of Education, 2005; Stronge, 2007 cited in Porter, 2011]. No matter what kind of professional development is provided, it is highly important that it results in in-depth understanding and improvement of practice [Broad & Evans, 2006]. However, one-day events such as seminars are not effective enough in bringing change to the teaching practice [McConnell, 2013 cited in Becuwe et. al., 2016], so teachers' professional learning arrangements are shifting towards demand-driven models with teachers as active participants [Lim & Lee, 2014 cited in Becuwe et. al., 2016].

Considering the challenges instructors encounter implementation, and based on their suggestions, mentoring has been considered as a good approach to help their adaptation to online teaching environments. To form basis for a potential mentoring programme for online instructors, this study aims to find out main components of an efficient online/blended mentoring programme for faculty development to teach online. It is hoped findings from this study will help identifying fundamental elements for establishing an online/blended mentoring programmes for language instructors to help them adopt online learning technologies in learning-teaching environments effectively.

2. Methodology

This study adopts qualitative content analysis approach. The data were collected from relevant studies indexed in ISI Web of Knowledge on mentoring, blended mentoring, online mentoring, particularly in higher education, targeted to faculty members using the following keywords: teacher mentoring, faculty mentoring, language instructors' mentoring, mentoring in education, higher education mentoring. More than 150 studies initially accessed were examined based on research context, and all studies conducted in primary or secondary education settings were eliminated since this study focuses on mentoring in higher education context. Final 80 documents were taken into this study based on the following criteria:

1. Indexed in ISI Web of Science
2. Published within last 10 years (2006-2016)
3. Conducted within an educational framework



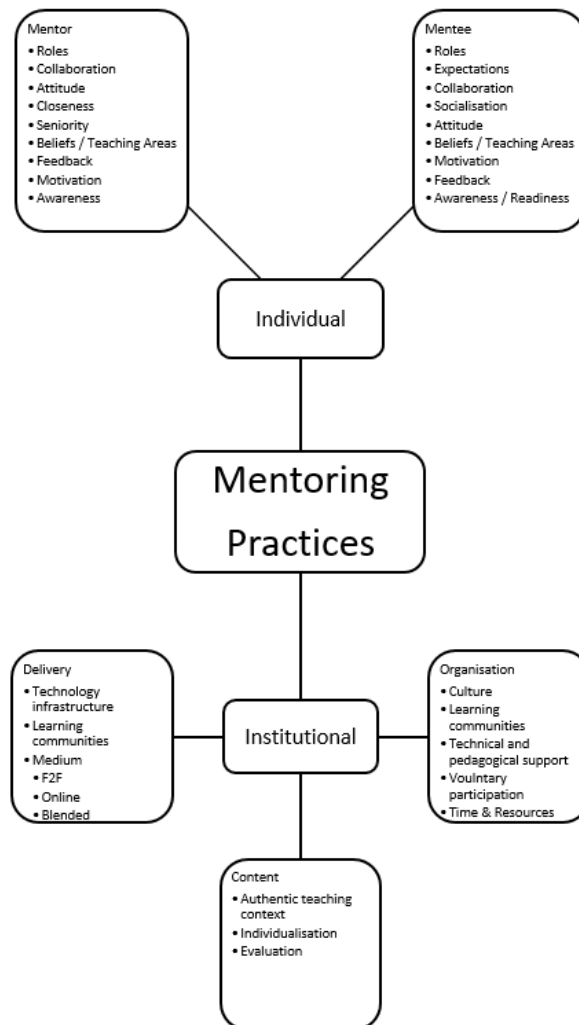
4. Taken the followings as a theoretical framework: a) Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1968), b) Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Roger, 2003), c) Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989).

3. Findings

The following criteria were taken as basis for content analysis of the selected 80 studies:

- Theoretical basis
- Mentoring model
- Participants
- Data Collection and Analysis
- Components of Mentoring Practice

Initial findings from analysis of the selected 80 studies have resulted in 28 codes classified under five sub-themes for individual and institutional levels (Figure 1). Preliminary findings indicate that elements of mentoring can be categorized under two domains: individual and institutional. At the individual level, there are two perspectives: mentor and mentee. At this level, we have mentors' and mentees' roles, their expectations, collaboration, socialization, attitude, closeness, seniority, similarities between their personalities, beliefs and teaching areas, feedback, motivation, and awareness. Institutional domain has three perspectives: organisation, content and delivery. All operations, transformation, evaluation, time and resources, voluntary participation, organizational culture, technology infrastructure, technical and pedagogical support, authentic teaching context, learning communities, individualization, communication channels are listed under the institutional category.



There are strong link between the initial findings and principles of Roger's Diffusion of Innovations and Technology Acceptance Model for establishment of a mentoring relationship at higher education as well as elements Adult Learning Theory. Once the data analysis process is completed, it will be possible to see the map connecting findings from 80 studies conducted in online/blended mentoring programmes at higher education with main theoretical principles, which will lead to identification of main components of effective online/blended faculty mentoring programmes to serve a guideline for higher education institutions in their efforts to facilitate adaptation of instructors to online learning and teaching environments.

4. Discussion

Based on content analysis of 80 research studies conducted on faculty mentoring at higher education level, this study has aimed to see what main components should be considered in establishing a faculty mentoring programme for language instructors to adapt to online learning technologies if blended mentoring programmes can be complementary to professional development tools. Increasing number of studies in literature focus on faculty mentoring programmes as part of professional development efforts along with one-on-one mentoring, group mentoring and peer mentoring to provide faculty with the support and resources that will contribute to their career advancement [Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001, cited in Zambrana et. al., 2015]. Limitations of face-to-face mentoring activities such as lack of time, balance between life and academia or logistics lead institutions to offer e-mentoring or blended mentoring programmes through the use of online technologies. Since mentors and mentees feel more confident in face-to-face interaction, blended mentoring may be considered as a better and more efficient solution for survival of mentor-mentee relationship.

Common elements of faculty mentoring programmes, as extracted from the literature, provide a valuable guideline for higher education institutions in their efforts to commence similar initiatives to support online instructors. Preliminary findings of this study indicates that faculty mentoring programmes should be handled at two domains, individual and institutional, as a compact system. Although common practices provide important policy advice, an institution's organisational culture, mentor/mentee attitudes, mentor competencies, beliefs, motivation, readiness (both institutional and individual), and preferred medium are important in establishing basis for a successful faculty mentoring programme. Next stage of this study will be a comparison of the extracted main components of the faculty mentoring programmes in the literature with accepted and established mentoring principles and components to see similarities and differences.

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