Abstract

Building on the different components of effective mentoring, MentorTokou has been developed to complement face-to-face mentoring. MentorTokou is designed to foster and provide mentoring support for students in a local university in Malaysia. This portal provides the opportunity for mentors and mentees to interact online. Two major features are public discussions and private chat. The purpose of this study is to investigate the preliminary outcomes of the MentorTokou portal that was implemented during the practicum. A qualitative case study was employed to explore the experiences of two mentors and twenty three mentees who participated in the preliminary study using focus group discussions and individual interviews. The preliminary results indicated that the impact of using the e-mentoring MentorTokou was generally positive, however, there were some constraints faced during the implementation. The final emerging themes were mentoring support covering both instructional and personal social support. The instructional support were benefits of e-mentoring in terms of accessibility and availability, peer coaching, communication, scaffolding provided by mentor for enhancement of current progress and practices in teaching and learning strategies and outcomes. The personal and social support indicated motivation and building and establishing rapport. A higher preference of utilization the ‘public discussion’ feature was dominant in this study. The constraints highlighted were the lack of accessibility to the internet connection and a preference for personal contact and communication. The initial outcomes of this study implied that e-mentoring is an alternative way to compliment face-to-face mentoring during the practicum.

Keywords: E-Mentoring; mentors; mentees; instructional support; personal social support

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1. Introduction

With the availability and widespread of the internet and the ongoing changing of the information age, the dynamics of many relationships including mentoring (Smith-Jentch et al., 2008; Ensher et al., 2003) is an avenue for continuous enhancement for effective mentoring. E-mentoring is gaining popularity in education and other professional development programs (McLoughlin et al., 2009). With the introduction of e-mentoring in many different settings, there are many different definitions. E-mentoring is also referred or used interchangeably as telementoring, cybermentoring, or virtual mentoring (Mueller, 2004). Typically, e-mentoring is defined as using ICT, building on the internet’s capability such as interactive websites, e-mail, electronic newsletter and discussion groups to connect and affiliate people who live and work in remote places (Mueller, 2004). In the same note, Woodd (1999) defines “telementoring” as “a mentoring relationship or program in which the primary form of contact between mentor and mentee is made through the use of telecommunications media such as e-mail, list servers, etc” (p. 140). Similarly, Single & Muller (2001) stated e-mentoring as “a naturally occurring relationship or paired relationship within a program that is set up between a more senior/experienced individual (the mentor) and a lesser skilled individual (the mentee), primarily using electronic communications, and is intended to develop to grow the skills, knowledge and confidence of the lesser skilled individual to help him or her succeed” (p. 108). In the same vein, Bierema & Merriam (2002), further elaborate that e-mentoring provides a platform for “opens the possibility for relationships that cross boundaries of time, geography, and culture unlikely to happen under the classical [face-to-face] model. Thus, this could perpetuate the development of open and supportive relationships and greater cohesiveness within the learning group. Likewise, Bang and Luft (2013) indicate that a supportive ongoing practice of building a teaching community through discussing new ideas encourage open communication and foster trust (Marshall et al., 2013) among mentors and mentees. In doing so, a virtual network and online community provides similar ongoing experiences where a “win-win” situation could be a source of motivation to facilitate and enhance the mentoring process (Williams & Warren, 2007).

E-mentoring could compliment face-to-face mentoring where psychosocial support is provided through virtual technologies such as electronic chat, email, or instant messaging and this was supported by (Single & Muller, 1999) further state that “communicating using email allows for the construction of thoughtfully written messages without the pressure of immediately responding such as in communicating orally” (p. 237). Marshall et al. (2013) identify a further advantage in that e-mentoring provides greater opportunities for participants to connect and interact with colleagues in and across a variety of settings. Interactions such as this could create a sense of belonging which further enhance effective socialization thus enhancing self-confidence among mentors and mentees (Anthony et al., 2001). Hence, such contributions provides avenues to also maintain close ties with mentors in the university (Williams & Warren, 2007).

In addition, unlike face-to-face mentoring, it does not need any concrete meeting space, does not require scheduling regular meetings, thereby eliminating travel costs and reducing the time commitment required from both mentors and mentees (McCall, 2011). As Boyle Single & Muller (2001) suggest e-mentoring should also assist in the development of the mentors and mentees through thus building on collaboration (Lopez, 2013). Single & Muller (2001) advocate the use of a structured approach to e-mentoring when operating within a formalized program environment, providing systematically designed training, guidance and scaffolding to promote engagement and enhance the experience of participants in the e-mentoring process. Research has shown that e-mentoring leads to enhanced academic performance and job opportunities for students (De Janazs et al., 2008). Schichtel (2009, p.362) indicates that e-mentoring facilitates both synchronous (same-time) and asynchronous or delayed communication. The asynchronous aspects of online mentoring can subsequently facilitate a more reflective, task-oriented interaction than face-to-face discussion by allowing more time to think rather than to respond immediate (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). This gives more time to internalize information and practise good reflections when discussions are done. With the positive experiences of mentors and mentees, it seems that e-mentoring offers an alternative way to compliment the traditional face-to-face mentoring.

2. The context of ‘MentorTokou’ framework
“MentorTokou” is an e-mentoring portal developed to be conducted in a one of the faculties at a local university in Malaysia. The aims are to assist mentors and mentees online during the practicum in schools both in town and the interior districts. In order to achieve this, the portal provides a friendly ‘sounding-board’ for both mentors and mentees. ‘MentorTokou’ provides professional learning and psychological/personal social support to mentees. It provides a platform for mentors to provide knowledge, resources, advice and guidance, to their mentees. At the same time, ‘MentorTokou’ also provides an environment where both mentors and mentees can engage collaboratively in discussions, feedback and reflections with the objective of building and fostering supportive and collegial relationships and communications between mentors and mentees, and peers (amongst mentors and mentees). In addition, it provides an avenue for mentors and mentees to develop interactive connections although they are located at different places. This mentoring system is only open for private communities that are invited by the administrator who will manually create the accounts for the communities. Mentors and mentees will be given a unique username and password to login to the website. After login, users can choose to edit their password and profile information. There are 3 types of mentoring group provided by the system which are:

Public group – This group is opened for all registered users. Users can post in the public forum to share and discuss ideas, ask questions, share concerns, and listen to what other mentors and mentees shared.

Private mentor group – This is a private group between all the mentors.

Private mentor and mentee group – This is a private mentoring group between particular mentor and mentees. This group can be created by mentor. Mentor can then invite his/her mentees to join the group.

The system consists of two modules which are mentor’s module and mentee’s module. In mentor’s module, mentor can interact with other mentors or mentees via private messaging, or in the public forum. All mentors are enrolled in the private mentor group so that they can share knowledge and experiences among each other. In addition, mentor can create/edit mentoring group and invites mentees or other mentors to join the group. Mentor can view and give feedback to mentee’s reflection in this group.

In the mentee’s module, mentee can interact with other mentees or mentors via private messaging, or in the public forum. Mentees are restricted to create or edit a mentoring group. However, they can join a particular mentoring group by the invitation from mentors. In the private mentoring group with their mentor, mentee can send their reflection through the reflection forum provided within the group.

3. Research methodology

This preliminary study is framed within a qualitative paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003); The major reason for employing a qualitative approach is to allow the researchers to understand the world from the perspective of the participants (Lanshear & Knobel, 2004). After reviewing the literature on different approaches to research and giving careful consideration to the purpose of this study, a qualitative methodology using case study was deemed appropriate to explore the experiences of two mentors and twenty three mentees who consented to take part in the preliminary study. Data were collected through individual interviews, focus groups discussions and document reviews (weekly journals). The data was collected during twice during a period of three months. All mentees handed in their journals once a fortnight. Data were transcribed and coded. A preliminary data exploration from the transcript was employed to enable the researcher to become more familiar with ideas that were formulated. The data were coded, which involved the “process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data” (Creswell, 2002, p.266) to finally come up with the final themes. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, triangulation of data sources were employed.

4. Research Results

The thematic content analysis of the preliminary data indicates that the impact of using the e-mentoring ‘MentorTokou’ portal was generally positive, however, there were some constraints faced during the implementation. The final emerging themes revealed were mentoring support covering both instructional and personal social support. The instructional support were more focus on the accessibility and availability, peer coaching, communication and scaffolding provided by mentor for enhancement of current progress and practices in teaching and learning strategies and outcomes while the focus of the personal and social support indicated
motivation and building and establishing rapport.

4.1 Instructional support

Overall, the mentees in this preliminary study believed that the online ‘MentorTokou’ had provided the instructional support which involved providing assistance needed in enhancing teaching and learning including teaching ideas, general information or instructional strategies and lesson planning. Majority of the mentees agreed they were happy and gained a lot from this support with more positive outcomes for their teaching and motivation. Mentees were impressed with mentors who empathized with mentees’ instructional support needs and went out of their way to provide, by spending a lot of time interacting with them online. Majority of the mentees agreed that interacting using this portal provided them the assistance they needed during the practicum as it was not often they had the time and opportunity to see their mentors. Reasons given were long distance to travel, time and packed schedules in teaching. However, some mentees were expressed happy and relief as they do have to rush to the university to meet their mentors personally. Mentees also indicated that it saves time, cost and energy. They looked at using ‘MentorTokou’ online as a convenient arrangement or mode in the mentoring process.

Mentees were generally satisfied with their access to the pedagogical knowledge and skills of their mentors. The instructional support had provided and assisted them in sharing their experiences, ideas, knowledge with other mentees related to teaching and learning process of their students. Sharing publicly in the public forum proved beneficial for all the mentees. Not only do they gain new ideas to improve teaching and learning but it the portal had provided an alternative mode to maximize the mentoring process during the practicum. The public forum in ‘MentorTokou’ and private chat provided the platform as well as sounding board for all the mentees and mentors for productive engagement in discussions and reflection. One positive remark made was “it is also a platform where mentees could post anything on ideas and also to get feedback from the rest of the mentees to enhance their teaching skills or how to make teaching the learning process more interesting and joyful for all students to learn”. Posting anything on the public forum and private chats created a non-intimidating environment as it made the mentees more self-confident and reduced their anxieties when meeting their mentors face-to-face. It also provided the mentees the feeling of sense of belonging and thus created an atmosphere of a face-to-face mentoring. As nicely reflected by one of the mentees “The public forum gives out the vibe of us sitting in a meeting room with our mentors and the rest of the mentees. Thus, giving us the chance to share ideas and experiences among ourselves and the mentor”.

Getting immediate feedback is also crucial from mentors and also mentees to improve their teaching strategies. At the same time, mentees learned from each other. As stated by one of the mentees “I get ideas and learn from other’s success or mistakes”. In addition, the productive discussions provided avenues to get the current progress of other mentees during the practicum in terms to seek knowledge, sharing of ideas and problem solving skills. Some of the positive experiences shared by the mentees are: “As for me the public forum which elicit discussion between my mentor and other mentees are both very beneficial in terms of communication and providing guidelines teaching during the practicum” and “sharing of ideas publicly with the other counterparts provide support in terms of gaining new ideas on how to improve teachings skills and to assist in the learning process of their students”. Mentees also referred the portal as a source of reference where they could access any time to go back to previous discussions and tips provided by mentors and other mentees.

By interacting with other mentees, most of the mentees found that additional help and support from peers was a significant contribution to enhance and assist them in providing the instructional support. By participating in the public forum, peer mentoring appears to have played an important role in supporting most mentees. The mentees learned to look to their peers as a source of ideas and advice, to get personal support and reassurance in an environment that was intentionally created where mentees could cooperate, interacts and communicates with one another. Mentors also found that mentors shared their experiences, in mentoring practices and their own teaching, and provided mutual support. Interactions in this group also appeared, incidentally, to strengthen mentor motivation.

As much as the preference on using the public forum in ‘MentorTokou’, the private chat equally was also preferred by more than half of the mentees. The mentors, however, found both modes very useful and effective in providing the mentoring online support for both instructional and personal social during the practicum. Most of the mentees discussed more personal details of their progress, their weaknesses and strengths. Some were not too keen to use the public forum to do these other than just engaging in following the group discussions and getting to know
other mentees. Most mentees found that the quality time with their mentors encouraged them to self-reflect in their teaching and the learning process during their discussions. As one of the mentees pointed out “I prefer the private chat because it is more organize. It is easy to notice the replies from my mentor. Sharing and discussions activities are more focused. We don’t have to scroll the long conversation just to search for the replies or comments for us”. Time seems to be a factor here too as well topics and tips that are more focused to be discussed gave most mentees the specific help and assistance needed during the practicum. Another mentee further added and shared her experience. She pointed out “Such benefits included the feeling of freedom to express myself especially when I am hesitant to talk openly to my mentor. Basically, it’s an important means of self-analysis, to be able to think critically and creatively about my own teaching and classroom practices”. In other situations, some mentees admitted that there were times they only wanted to use the private chat as they were not in favour of sharing their ideas with the other mentees, hence, only discussed with their respective mentors. In the same vein, most mentees admitted they were shy to meet their mentors. This mode seems to be effective to approach their mentors. The accessibility and availability are found to be in general positive and effective for most of the mentees and mentors. Mentees found that mentors were always available for consultations. There were also times when mentors made a schedule as guidelines to provide the availability for effective supervision. Prior arrangements were made with mentors and mentees contacting through private chat as well as phone calls and emails.

4.2 Personal and social support

It is also apparent that the mentees and mentors were able to communicate effectively during the practicum. In the process, mentees and mentors also indicate that they were able to build good rapport and establish good relationships with their mentors. However, some mentees agreed that establishing mentoring relationships needed more time to exchange positive interactions easily. Despite this, most of the mentees found that mentors who were pleasant, caring, friendly, open, approachable, cooperative, warm, kind, empathy, and were generous, concerned, interested, committed, and dedicated were viewed as some of the important attributions in effective communication and relationships in e-mentoring ‘MentorTokou’. With these attributions, mentees experienced a sense of belonging, motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically, increased self-esteem, and increased their self-efficacy to perform in the practicum. The productive engagement incorporated in on-going discussions and personal guide and advice provided between mentors and mentees and peers also are added contribution in providing this support.

4.3 Constraint

While it implies that the preliminary stage the e-mentoring ‘MentorTokou’ have benefitted the mentees and mentors, there were also some constraints faced during the mentoring process. Some mentees teaching in rural schools experienced difficulties in internet connection. Even when they were able to access to the portal, they were not able to use the portal fully because of the slow connection. Due to this, it has caused anxieties amongst the mentees to fully optimize the portal and failure to involve in discussions with their mentors. Another constraint is the competency and skill to use the e-mentoring ‘MentorTokou’ portal. One of the mentees shared her disappointment “I am not familiar with using ICT. When there were too many icons, I did not know which one to click. Sometimes, I am confused. I belonged to the blackboard generation and not ICT savvy”. Another mentee commented “I was a little confused at first when the reply was under other mentee’s name, but after the name had been given, then it is easier to understand and be able to be answer and joined the discussions. Scrolling the screen in the public forum was also raised as by some mentees as it takes time to follow the discussions.

5. Conclusion

E-mentoring offers a contemporary method of facilitating learning and mentoring in this technological age as well as it could be seen as an integral part of e-learning. The use of technology at this age as a medium to promote and act as an alternative mode from this preliminary study implies some emerging benefits to meet the needs of an alternative mode to facilitate the traditional mentoring. Mentors and mentees seem to have benefitted using the e-mentoring ‘MentorTokou’ at the initial stage. However, to meet the constraints, a restructure of some features in the
portal need to be improved for optimal utilization. As Bierema & Merriam (2006) pointed out “the possibilities for e-mentoring are as endless as the Internet. The extent to which this medium will be used for mentoring is unknown as are the best ways to maximize the nature of this medium for this purpose” (p.23).

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