e-Mentoring in Undergraduate Programs using blogs

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Abstract

This document presents the results of an analysis of the ways for using *Blogs* as a support tool for *e-mentoring* in higher education programs. It presents the identified advantages and disadvantages, especially in blended learning environments where mentoring is a very important task to maintain the student's commitment and to facilitate a process that consume higher level resources. In addition, this paper examines the danger of repeating old practices with new media, and even more, analyses the specific characteristics of the activity of mentoring online from different points of view including the tutor, the protégé and even the entire group.

Introduction

Online mentoring is one of the best options to facilitate personalized attention to students, especially in educative institutions where there is an everyday concern to copy with the important government's pressure for develop a wider educative covertures and for increment the number of students attended, as usually happens in Mexican public universities and colleges. Under these circumstances *e-mentoring* permits an integral formation of the students and perhaps, lends to a transformation of the educative system in countries as the Mexican Republic. Strategies based on give a better attention to the student, and to provide him useful tools to enhance learning, helps to decrement drop-out rates, delays and under achievement scores (ANUIES, 1998).

Online mentoring programs or *e-mentoring* are designed to give support to students in an integral way, along all the process of formation at school, looking help to students to finish their studies accordingly with their own possibilities and competences, achieving the learning objectives that were established in the study programs with the quality's higher level as possible.

Nevertheless, which seems simple in beginning, becomes very complex in the practice: the tutorship is a complex work and highly claimant because the teacher who offers it not only has to dedicate big part of his weekly time to it, but it needs to be active participant in a process of constant training and updating, as well it needs a wider knowledge of the institution and of the teaching programs where his protégé are inscribed. That's why it is advised that this activity should leave to full or half time teachers with certain experience in the institution. Additional, to achieve a good program for tutoring, the activity needs suitable spaces, a sufficient number of tutors and high availability of schedules of the existing tutors, all of this, in order to be able to see effective results and significant impacts in student's learning indicators (Jacobi, 1991).

Due to the difficulties that the task implies, strategies have been designed to be able to implement it, even in educative institutions where there's not available all the necessary resources. It is under these circumstances, where we emphasize the use of Blogs, as tools that although initially they were dedicated to the personal publication of information, have been implemented later in a big variety of environments that go from the journalistic one, up to the informal recreation, including education at all levels.

Along a life that counts with almost twenty years (Herring et al, 2005), the use of Blogs has stood out, between other ambiences in the educational one, precisely due to the facility that people finds for publish their own materials immediately, and due also to this tools represents an effective way for free expression that becomes this way, in an incentive for those who use it in the expression of opinions and the interaction with the other's opinions (Ponce, 2008; Ponce & Hernandez, 2008). These characteristics turn the Blogs into a very useful tool for it's use into higher education mentoring, where there are demanded means that offer facilities for the students to express freely their own opinions and doubts, and review the other's ones.

The objectives of the mentoring in Higher education

According with Alcántara (1990) mentoring is a special kind of educational attention in which one of the teachers gives support to a student or a small group of students, in a systematical way, he use structured targets and specific area organized work programs, and he looks for develop appropriate skills for integrating and working in groups, all of that followed with certain criteria and mechanisms of monitoring and control. In higher education programs, especially in the undergraduate ones, Mentoring Programs looks for: a) Drop-out rates decreased b) to contribute principally with a model student centered, attending in a special way to the intellectual behind-lefted, and focusing on skills related with: reading and writing, logic and mathematics, aesthetic appreciation, as well as the social conscience and awareness of the biodiversity, c) to achieve the student's harmonic development, considering his familiar, emotional, physical, intellectual, economic, ethical and social world; and finally, d) encourage the students to finish his own studies in the required time by the academic programs. The last one is one of the more common indicators of quality when the educational programs are to be evaluated. The challenge consists of being able to give these contributions mentioned, to all the students in the educational system, despite the problems identified: a) We don't have enough mentors, b) Several students assigned to each mentor, especially in the public Mexican Institutions of Higher Education, c) We don't have enough spaces for work in mentoring, and d) Teachers with one on academic load who prevents from dedicating sufficient time to the individual attention of pupils.

E-mentoring

Whereas the electronic mentorship seems to be an activity little known out of the ambiences of virtual education, its multiple advantages have led it to a rapid adoption, due to the advantages that it offers. *E-mentorship* can be defined based on the interaction of four basic elements: Mentor, protégé, electronic means, and, very important, the existence of a principal interest for to guide the protégé:

> [An *e-mentorship* is] " …a relation that is established between an individual with more experience and knowledge and other at minor level of skills, using principally electronic media to communicate, where the main purpose is the development of the least qualified individual … " (Single & Muller, 2001, p. 108).

Although in the last years, the image of the mentor has been modified little by little, there's a need for a deeper transform of the system, based on the incursion of the pairs most advanced in the process itself, as a way to achieve in a better way the objectives planned in the educative system. These kinds of initiatives have reached even in some cases, with major success than the traditional experiences (McLoughlin, *et al*, 2007 and Carmit-Noa, *et al*, 2008). In the beginning, due to technological limitations, the *e-mentoring* efforts were based almost exclusively on asynchronous communications, but with the advance of telecommunications and more speed for data transmissions, the electronic mentorships can happen now in real-time, in a synchronous way (Kaprisin, *et al*, 2003).

In accordance with Ensher *et al* (2003) the mentors performs three principal activities with his protégés: " … they provide vocational and instrumental support that directly improves the trajectory of his protégés, […] they offer psychosocial support […], and third, work as a models impliedly or explicitly …" (Ensher, 2003, p. 267).

The *e-mentorship* begin now to go out of the spaces of the virtual education to be considered to be an alternative of work in face-to-face modalities, which forces then to look for new tools that make possible the achievement of the task in a simplest way. In the rest of this paper we will present information related to the viability of the use of the Blogs as a tool for this innovative form of mentorship in support to the face-to-face education, and information related too with some dangers that are implied in the use of new technologies for repeating old traditional practices.

The danger of the replicate old practices with new media: the vices in the tutorships

A common practice in education is to try to replicate old practices with the new means (i.e., some teachers insist on using a list of assistance in virtual ambiences, or are concerned looking for new ways to avoid students copy to others during an online examination!). This is one of the most corrupt forms of the use of the technologies with educational pretentions, and the Blogs, as part of this set of technological means, do not escape to this danger that appears, even in special form, because Blogs are part of Web 2.0 technologies (Glenn, 2003).

The use of Blogs in academic mentorships must think, too, about how to separate from the vices of the academic traditional mentorship: a) Because mentorship usually it's an obligatory activity for the teachers, both the mentors and the protégés can fall down in the simulation; b) The participation, commitment and effective use of the service of academic mentorships can be affected by questions related with the interpersonal relations; c) The

mentors can lose of sight, due to shortcomings in his formation and essential aspects in the process; and d) The mentors can fall down in the misunderstanding, thinking that they must solve each and every problem of the pupils.

Advantages of the use of the Blogs in Mentorship

Using the advantages of Blogs in mentorship in an effective way, it would take the detachment of these old practices, and therefore, implies the implementation of new ways of performs mentorship. There are advantages and disadvantages that can be identified in the use of Blogs as a tool for mentorship; it is necessary to highlight the Administrative and Academic ones.

Administrative advantages

Blogs share many of the advantages that offer the educational Web pages in general. These advantages are related to the service hours for mentorships (that are wider and flexible), to the spaces of mentorships (that leaves off the traditional space for mentoring), with the depth, and finally, with the automation of the administrative processes that take place concerning the educational work; such as: record, pursuit and notification of results of evaluation, quantification of the interventions performed in a time, record of times that has been gained access to the resources arranged in the Blog and pursuit of the times of access to each of them, users' administration of the Blog and control of the levels of access to the available resources (Kennedy, 2003). In this category, the most important issues to consider are:

a) *Administration of time and space*. Blogs gives wide opening hours to perform mentorship, students can access to them in any moment and from any place. This advantage results in a minor investment in physical infrastructure for this activity and allows performing the activity even when there are not the physical conditions to achieve it in a traditional way;

b) *Administration for the assessment*. The first group of administrative advantages is related to the support for the evaluation of the pursuit of requests of intervention made by students. Although the assessment is an academic - administrative activity, it is necessary to be provided with a support for the same one, the consistent one specifically in information for the evaluation, especially, from quantitative character, to be using, independently if the evaluation is realized under a quantitative, qualitative or mixed approach. The most important sources of information needed to perform an effective assessment are: To recording the number of accesses and the time of access (Target, 2009); Accounting of shares (Britton, 2009); and, Record, pursuit and notification of results of the orientation, mentorship and consultancy (Ali, 2007);

c) *Administration for the organization*. The organization of the orientation, mentorships and consultancies also needs an administrative support that can be facilitated when Blogs are used to enhance it. Here, are very important the next issues: Registry of participants; Level establishment of access; Distinction of rights on the information concerning the levels of access; and, Record of antiquity of the resources placed in the Blog.

Academic advantages

Next we will examine the advantages of academic nature that can be identified in the use of the Blogs as a tool for e-mentorship. It begins with the point of view of the teacher and later examines the points of view of student's and even the whole group.

From the teacher point of view point of view, the Blogs principally provides advantages in two different ways:

a) *The development of top skills in the pupils*. The Blogs can be used as a tool for the development of top skills in the pupils imbued in a mentoring process, we can speak principally of these ones (Huffaker, 2005): Discursive skills; Skills of writing; Skills of argumentation (Ruiz & Foundling, 2007); Skills for the free and creative expression of ideas; and, Responsibility.

b) *The program's development of mentorships in a most effective way*. When we use Blogs as a tool for effective management of a mentorship activity, we have to consider the next list of identified benefits of implementation:

- The use of this type of tools propitiates a major level of responsibility when the teacher entrusts certain activities related to the handling of the information to the pupils, for example, as moderators in some discussion or as managers of some thread or topic to develop in a forum.

- It is necessary to consider the optimization of the time available, since the blog allows us to publish a section with frequent asked questions (FAQ's), orientation, mentorship and consultancy that will be offered according with the situation exhibited by the pupil, and even request of support for academic or administrative dependencies that could have direct relation with the student.

c) *Advantages inherited from old fashion educative web pages*. Moreover, there is a set of advantages that Blogs for mentorship inherits from the old fashion educational Web pages, that is to say, to be an effective support for the program's framing, to be the space that propitiates the definition of the politics of the mentorships and the forms of pursuit and assessment to help, as well as being an effective way so that the mentor performs a process of analysis and systematization of the contents that it will have to give during the mentoring, as well as a scheduling of those activities that they go away to realize; or on the part of the pupil, the opportunity of shares with a process of reflection behind them, and the possibility of directing in a more effective form the interventions. Nevertheless, it improves many of the advantages inherited from the educational Web pages, as the definition and establishment of better channels of communication between the mentor and the pupils and between the pupils themselves, or even, between the group and the mentor or external agents to the same one.

From the pupil's point of view

Considering the pupil's point of view, we must to recall that it becomes very attractive having access to mentorships in any moment and any place; as part of the résumé concealed, the development of the skills earlier said are included with the work as a team and the development of major levels of responsibility when one speaks about initiatives proposed by the proper pupils. Blogs propitiates the development of bigger levels of responsibility considering that the essential part of the mentorships is the pupil by himself and his needs. Multidisciplinary support can request of specialized people in charge for the orientation, the mentorship and the consultancies, and Blogs are natural tools for the interactive work of several specialists dedicated to the student attention.

From the group's point of view

If we consider the use of Blogs as a mentoring tool, we must to review the group's point of view. The skills that predominantly are developed are those related with the work and the coordination of groups and pairs. Nevertheless, in this case, they are related with the personal interests in a creative discussion, with the establishment of targets together, the clear definition of tasks and the work's division, the schedulizing and systematizing of a planned work of mentorships and the sharing of the responsibilities for the individual work or team work, the possibility of being provided with orientation, mentorships and consultancies between pairs, under the supervision of the mentor.

Disadvantages in the use of the Blogs as tool to provide mentorships

Many of the disadvantages that the Blogs present in education, they have been inherited from the disadvantages of the use of the technologies applied to the education in general. Two of the main disadvantages are: a) Absence in confidence in the technological resource applied to the education (Walker, 2005) and Absence in confidence in the use of Blogs (Eckstein, 2007).

The use of virtual mentorships in technologically poor ambiences

Generally when one speaks about the use of Blogs to perform mentorships in education, it is assumed that a set of given conditions exists, especially of technological nature. Nevertheless, there is not deep knowledge about the use of this kind of tool in places with conditions that are not the most favorable, for example, in places where the access to Internet is reduced; there is a poor availability of bandwidth to be able to extract the biggest profit to the available resources in the network. Additional to this technological lack, also we must consider the absence of a technological culture that supports the use of technology. This absence of culture can happen even in places where the technology is not scarce or where at least, it is moderately available.

In addition, to the advantages and disadvantages already described in advance, the technologically poor ambiences can have their own set of characteristics that make them only. Following of them are listed.

Advantages
a) The experience of the freedom of expression is usually seen in a different way. In this type of ambiences, the freedom of expression becomes experienced in a more intense way, thanks to the conscience of the possibility that Internet offers access to any part of the world; b) In blended education, the interaction becomes stronger because we have two ways for interact with the others. Frequently we observed that students comment again in class things that were published before in the mentoring Blog, c) Students who come from technologically poor enviroment, they usually show a major level of appreciation for the developed skills. When a pupil at a rich ambience is employed for the first time with Blogs it develops skills for the use of an already well-known tool, in a new domain, since it is the educational one; on the other hand, when a pupil at technologically poor ambiences is employed with Blogs he has learned the basic things in computation up to the interaction advanced in Internet using Blogs or even skills for design this type of places; d) furthermore, in this ambience the orientation, mentorship and consultancy can develop between pairs, which corrects one of the shortcomings and common problems which most face the Institutions of Higher education: the lack of sufficient mentors who could cover the totality of the pupils.

Disadvantages
a) The lacks of technological workmanship must be attended by mentors who manage the Blogs or are leaders in these initiatives (usually they are known as technological pioneers); b) It is necessary a big effort to break inertias against the use of this type of tools in higher education systems. The more lack of technological culture, the more inertia we have to break; and c) The local feedback is usually poor, precisely because there are few members on the community with full access to technology. The absence of work's experience with Internet seems to be a limit for many of the skills of expression that is demonstrated in the interaction in Blogs.

Conclusions
To conclude, even answering practical old women of the traditional education, the teacher finds advantages in the use of Blogs that facilitate his work as mentor. It is common to listen that the teachers say that to work a program of mentorships in line needs from the double of work that is needed to work that with a traditional program of mentorships and that the complexity increases when it is a question of working with mixed forms.

The Mentorships in Blogs can offer excellent opportunities to the educators, without importing the level about which we are speaking, to improve educational old practices and to propitiate the development of personal abilities, skills for group work and even, to favor a good administration of the program of mentorships, this as part of the secret résumé.

This hardware propitiates personal spaces in which the league with communities in line can happen in a natural way, and the means to create an excellent communication come up by computer, allowing the personal free and creative expression, as well as propitiating spaces of production as a whole.

Still in technologically poor ambiences, the advantages that the use of mentorships offers in Blogs lead to thinking that it is worth while trying it. Although this type of ambiences presents specific peculiarities, the possibilities of implementation multiply, considering the innovation of the stimuli to those who are exhibited to the pupils.

Finally, the use of Blogs, it offers also, the possibility of being provided with an ambience of learning and mentorships that does not limit itself to, in addition to that it represents one of the most useful hardware when we speak about educational mixed forms.

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