E-FUNDI AS A VIABLE WAY TO DO E-MENTORING

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes E-fundi as a learning management system developed for the now more than 65 000 students of by the North-West University in South Africa. In this paper, it will be proposed that e-mentoring as a recent development of traditional mentoring, may be pursued by way of E-fundi to the enrichment and growth of students wherever they are. The advantages and disadvantages of e-mentoring will also be discussed.
The paper will end by recommending ways the use of E-fundi for e-mentoring purposes may be implemented.

KEYWORDS

E-Fundi, E-mentoring, Mentoring, Learning Management Systems

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper argues for the use of a home-grown African developed learning management system called E-fundi to be used as an effective way to do e-mentoring. Applying E-fundi may be to the academic and personal advancement of the more that 65 000 students of the North-West University, 2th largest university in South Africa and where the majority of these students are off-campus. A short history and description of E-fundi will be undertaken, followed by a thorough discussion of e-mentoring and how that may be implemented towards students of the North-West University and other universities in Africa and globally. Reference will be made to similar recent research on e-mentoring which may be available as a further dynamic development of the age-old practice of mentoring. Advantages and disadvantages of e-mentoring will also be discussed.

Finally recommendations how this may be introduced in other learning management systems starting from the available and existing E-fundi developed program and infrastructure.

The contribution of this paper may lie in showing the possibilities of the extension and maximization of existing learning management systems to the holistic development of students in a university context, complementing the educational use thereof.

2. BODY OF PAPER

2.1 Background and Naming of E-Fundi

Most universities have their own learning management systems which are named differently and may be developed locally or in co-operation with other institutions and/or organizations, often in a globalized context. The focus of this paper will be on the program being called E-fundi which is used by the North-West University in South Africa, where the author has been involved for nearly thirty years and the last few years have been exposed to the use of E-fundi. This involvement made one realize the possibilities of the system and how it may be applied even further and that something like implementing e-mentoring has been under-utilized totally. No specific research had as yet been done to show the *possibilities of using E-fundi* for the purposes of mentoring, but many faculty members use E-fundi as an indirect (and direct) way to mentor students with which they are in contact via E-fundi. The way it operates is where the lecturer pastes some information on E-fundi, immediately creates the opportunity to do mentoring via this communication system

where students are compelled to check into in a regular basis. Mentoring can then be done (in groups or with individual students), and the lecturer can decide which way the mentoring should go, while the students have access to it all along. Privacy with regard to mentoring of individual students is of course a matter of concern and caution should be taken about it.

The development of E-fundi as the local learning management systems of the North-West University started in 2004 as per the following announcement (NWU, 2004 http://www.nwu.ac.za/content/new-online-learning-and-collaboration-tool-nwu):

> Education at the North-West University (NWU) will soon receive a new lease of life with the introduction of an online collaboration and learning tool, called e-Fundi. The tool, powered by Sakai (an online collaborative and learning project), is aimed at supporting teaching, collaboration, learning and research in higher education cycles.
>
> Joseph Hardin, director of Collaborative Technologies Laboratory at the University of Michigan and Board Chairperson of the Sakai foundation, was recently invited to the NWU to present a workshop on best ways to implement the tool.
>
> However, according to NWU project coordinator, Boeta Pretorius, the process of putting the tool in place is already underway at the university. "We intend to start with the implementation early next year, if all goes according to plan," he said.

The name E-fundi is derived from the addition of the e- (for electronic) and the South African word *fundi* which means **expert, authority, specialist, professional, master, pro** (informal), **ace** (informal), **genius, guru, pundit** or **buff** (informal) (http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-thesaurus/fundi).

2.2 Mentoring

In introducing e-mentoring it is imperative to first explain what may be called **traditional mentoring** where mentoring actually started with. This has been done by people throughout the ages and the concept may have originated in Greek mythology some 3500 years back when Odysseus, the king of Ithaca asked Mentor, his friend, to take care of and teach his son, Telemachus when he went off fighting the Trojan war (Lotter, 2007:1).

Traditional mentoring always had the following components: someone who is the "senior, older partner" taking the lead and training or guiding the younger, less experienced person who follows the mentor's lead. The mentor is the more experienced person and the one being mentored, is called the "mentee". As Tucker (2007:iii, vi) aptly states:

"Mentoring is a supportive, learning relationship between an individual-the mentor-who shares his or her knowledge, experience and insights with another less experienced person-the learning associate-who is willing and ready to benefit from his exchange".

According to Lotter (2010:6) some different forms of mentoring can be used in circumstances: whatever the *situation* requires be it *informal*, *formal* or in *other spheres* of life, like in a family context. Mentoring may be *voluntary* or it may be within a *very rigid*, tough structured business environment where it is enforced by "from above".

2.3 E-Mentoring

As with many developments in the "digital age", e-mentoring also grew from traditional mentoring and has a life of its own, separate from the origin of traditional mentoring.

Law, Ireland & Hussain (2007:16) explained:

"Another area where the Internet has developed our thinking is in matching pairs of people for collaboration….One of the biggest challenges is in matching learners at a distance and across cultures. The interpersonal relationship between mentees and mentors in which a safe place exists for the mentee to grow is important." When writing about *E-Mentoring as virtual replacement of traditional mentoring,* Lotter 2008:8 also states: E-mentoring started to gain popularity in the nineties when teachers realized that e-mails may be an easier and better way to connect with students around *inter alia* curricular projects, research and preparing students for business.

According to Williams & Kim (2011:80) e-mentoring may either be a relationship, a method or perhaps a process and/or an organizational approached which may be practiced in relationships.

A preliminary definition of Lotter (2008:7) on e-mentoring reads as follows: *E-mentoring is some kind of a relationship that exists between a mentor and someone who is less skilled or experienced, called a mentee, where* **electronic communications** *are used, and this interaction is focused on developing the mentee* (see also the more comprehensive definition of Single and Muller, 2001).

If one only checked the amount of postings using the word e-mentoring on the internet, one realizes how vast this "new" field is and constantly growing as the technology advances.

Where e-mentoring has been used at certain schools as a helpful tool, excellent results followed as is reported in the following quote where Heynes already back in 2007 describes e-mentoring as follows:

> E-Mentoring is a viable and useful additional tool to add to the armoury of all schools who seek to raise achievement. There are significant academic and social benefits of involving older students, PGCE students and staff in e-Mentoring. The costs of e-Mentoring are not prohibitive and the technology is robust and user friendly.

As with many developments in the "techno" – world, all new inventions are not necessary a blessing (*cf* the paper by Lotter [2006] titled *Dehumanization by cyberfication*), and one realizes that with e-mentoring there are advantages and disadvantages as will be discussed below.

2.4 Advantages and Disadvantages of E-Mentoring

The following advantages and disadvantages may be applicable in the use of e-mentoring:

Table 1

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Mentor and mentee may be connected most of the time • Accessibility • Immediacy • Useful tool without taking too much time • Everywhere available, even globally • Availability since via cell phone one can be reached anywhere • Different forms of communication: e-mail, text messages (SMS) or MXit (South African), WhatsApp and skype • Psychological and other support a click away	• One-sided withdrawal by one of the parties (especially the mentor) may let the other feel rejected • Not personal • No connection possible without some kind of electronic apparatus • Co-dependency can develop, where both parties are in permanent contact with each other and cannot cope without this contact • Boundaries may be crossed • Invasion of privacy on both sides is a real danger

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Definite boundaries and mutual agreement should be set by the mentor and the mentee in the e-mentoring process keeping the following in mind. Recommendations regarding these issues may be the following:

- It should be determined that the learning management system is geared towards the dealing of e-mentoring traffic
- To be successful it will be an advantage if the institution supports the system of e-mentoring
- There should be a mutual agreement about the contents of the e-mentoring being followed
- Boundaries should be set by both parties
- An imperative of respect for privacy and hours should be maintained
- The possibility of a personal meeting (if viable) should always be open to get feed-back on the success of this specific way of mentoring
- Any problems or outstanding issues which may exist, should be ironed out directly and immediately
- It is crucial to agree on the duration of e-mentoring regarding the years, project, equipping and other relevant matters
- There should be the freedom to move out of an e-mentoring situation and relationship at any time one of the parties would choose to do so

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper it was shown how E-fundi as a locally developed learning management system (in co-operation with Sakai) was created and now serves more than 65 000 students of the North-West University in South Africa. It was explained where traditional mentoring came from and how e-mentoring developed within the parameters of the digital enhancement. This rapid development also opens the possibility to use E-fundi for the enrichment and growth of students within a mentoring program anywhere they may be reached in the cyber world. The advantages and disadvantages of e-mentoring had also been discussed.

The paper ends by recommending ways the use of E-fundi for e-mentoring purposes may be implemented.

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