Information *Brief*

Addressing Trends and Developments in Secondary Education and Transition

Creating an E-Mentoring Community

by Sheryl Burgstahler

This brief provides an example of how to create and sustain an e-mentoring community to promote the success of youth with disabilities in school, careers, and other life experiences.

Established in 1992, the DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) e-mentoring community may have been the first intentional Internet-based mentoring community for teenagers with disabilities. DO-IT's e-mentoring program received the National Information Infrastructure Award in 1996 and the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mentoring in 1997. Its value has been documented in research (Burgstahler & Cronheim, 2001; Kim-Rupnow & Burgstahler, 2004) and reflected in the successful lives of its participants and the willingness of those who were once protégés in the program to become e-mentors themselves.

Research Basis

Success, Self-Determination, and Transition

Many students with disabilities lack the self-determination, academic, and independent living skills necessary to successfully transition to adult life activities (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 1999), including careers (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). In addition, they have limited access to positive role models and relationships with peers and mentors with disabilities (Seymour & Hunter, 1998).

The Value of Mentor and Peer Support

Mentors can help protégés explore career options, set academic and career goals, develop professional contacts, identify resources, strengthen interpersonal skills, and develop a sense of identity (Saito & Blyth, 1992). They can also guide young people through the transition from the structured enivornment of high school to less structured postsecondary environments.

Peers can offer some of the same assistance as mentors—coaching, counseling, advice, information, encouragement, and role modeling (Byers-Lang & McCall, 1993; Kram & Isabella, 1985). Peers are sometimes easier for young people to approach than adults and offer a higher degree of mutual assistance. **Near-peers**, individuals who are a year or two older, can help high school students who are entering college learn to ask for accommodations, work with professors, live independently, and make friends. In addition, mentor, peer, and near-peer supporters can become empowered as

they come to see themselves as contributors in their supportive roles with young people.

Due, at least in part, to a shortage of available adult mentors, group mentoring programs have emerged. Typically, in this model one mentor is assigned to a small group of young people, but several mentors may work with a small group of protégés as well. In group mentoring, positive outcomes can result from participants' interactions with each other in addition to their interactions with the mentor(s). Group mentoring participants report improvements in social skills, relationships with individuals outside of the group, academic performance, and attitudes (Herrera, Vang, & Gale, 2002; Sipe & Roder, 1999).

CMC, E-Mentoring, and E-Mentoring Communities

In-person mentor, peer, and near-peer relationships can be limited by physical distance, time, and schedule constraints and, in some cases, disability-related communication barriers (e.g., speech impairments). These constraints do not apply to computer-mediated communication (CMC). The lack of social distinctions like gender, age, disability, race, and physical appearance in CMC can also promote interaction (Rheingold, 1993). With assistive technology, all individuals, regardless of disability, can participate in CMC. For example, a person with visual impairments can use text-to-speech software to read text on a computer screen, and an individual with no use of his hands can use a speech recognition system to control the computer. The terms "e-mentoring," "online mentoring," and "telementoring" refer to situations in which mentoring occurs using CMC (Wighton, 1993).

In e-mentoring communities, mentoring may occur in a group via CMC. Benefits of e-mentoring within a group rather than in pairs of a single mentor with a single protégé include the following:

- Participants can learn from the experience of many mentors, peers, and near-peers.

- Mentors can specialize in areas where their expertise is strongest.

- The program can be successful even when some mentors are less skilled than others.

- The program administrator can view all group conversations and thereby more easily manage the mentoring forum.

The DO-IT E-Mentoring Community

DO-IT, founded at the University of Washington in 1992, is a collection of projects and programs that promote the success of people with disabilities in postsecondary education and careers. One group of participants, DO-IT Scholars, are college-bound high school students with disabilities, including mobility impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments, learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder, speech impairments, and health impairments. DO-IT Scholars are members of a stimulating e-mentoring community. High school graduates who continue to participate as DO-IT Scholar alumni become DO-IT Ambassadors. As Ambassadors, they are near-peer mentors to the younger Scholars. In addition, college-bound teens with disabilities who are not in the DO-IT Scholars program can join the e-mentoring community as DO-IT Pals. The DO-IT e-mentoring community also includes DO-IT Mentors—college students, faculty, and professionals, many with disabilities themselves.

DO-IT has studied the nature and value of participation in its e-mentoring community. Thousands of electronic mail messages have been collected, coded, and analyzed; surveys have been distributed to Scholars and Mentors; and focus groups have been conducted (Burgstahler & Cronheim, 2001; Burgstahler & Doyle, 2005; Kim-Rupnow & Burgstahler, 2004). Findings confirm that CMC can be used to initiate and sustain both peer-peer and mentor-protégé relationships that provide psychosocial, academic, and career support. Participants noted that using email allowed them to communicate over great distances quickly, easily, conveniently, and inexpensively; eliminated the barriers of distance and schedule; enabled them to communicate with more than one person at a time; and provided them the opportunity to meet people from all over the world. Many reported the added value that others treated them equally, because they were not immediately aware of their disabilities.

DO-IT, Step by Step

Creating an e-mentoring community requires vision, a technological and administrative infrastructure, and ongoing facilitation. Following are steps for setting up an electronic mentoring community. Examples from the DO-IT e-mentoring community are shared at each step. Details can be found in *Creating an E-Mentoring Community for Teens with Disabili-*

ties: How DO-IT Does It and How You Can Do It Too (Burgstahler, 2006).

Establish goals for the e-mentoring community. The purpose of DO-IT's e-mentoring community is to promote the technology, academic, career, leadership, self-determination, and social skills of youth with disabilities. The ultimate goal is a successful transition to adult life for each youth participant.

Decide what technology to use. DO-IT uses electronic mail and distribution lists as primary communication tools, because this text-based asynchronous approach is fully accessible to everyone and results in messages appearing in participant email inboxes, making it difficult for participants to ignore the conversations that occur. In contrast, Web-based bulletin boards and chat both require that participants have the motivation and discipline to regularly enter the bulletin board or chat system to participate. In addition, chat systems are not accessible to all students, in particular those who are very slow typists, and require that participants be on the same schedule.

Establish the mentoring group structure. For example, DO-IT listservs include:

- *doitkids@u.washington.edu,* for the DO-IT Scholars;

- *mentors@u.washington.edu*, for the DO-IT Mentors, including the DO-IT Ambassadors;

- *doitpals@u.washington.edu*, for the DO-IT Pals, a group of teens with disabilities who are not part of the DO-IT Scholars program; and

- *doitchat@u.washington.edu*, for group e-mentoring discussions; this group includes all of the members of the e-community—*doitkids, mentors,* and *doitpals.*

As DO-IT has grown in size, individuals have expressed interest in establishing conversations in smaller groups between people with accommodation issues similar to their own. To address this need, DO-IT has set up specialized discussion lists. For example, *doithi@u.washington.edu* is for *doitkids*, *mentors*, and *doitpals* with hearing impairments (see Figure 1). Members of this list

discuss topics such as sign language interpreters, FM systems, and cochlear implants.

Select an e-mentoring administrator and make other staff and volunteer assignments. A DO-IT e-mentoring administrator obtains the informed consent of parents, distributes training and rules for participation in the community (including Internet safety guidelines), promotes communication in group discussions, and disseminates Internet resources of interest to community members. To assure that individual needs are met, each DO-IT Scholar, Pal, and Ambassador is assigned to a staff member, who sends messages to protégés who are not regularly communicating on the *doitchat* discussion list. Other staff assignments include technical support and mentoring leads for subgroups.

Establish roles and develop guidelines, orientation, and training for mentors. DO-IT disseminates simple, straightforward guidelines to help potential applicants understand mentor responsibilities. DO-IT also provides Internet-based training for mentors.

Standardize procedures for recruiting and screening mentor applicants. At DO-IT, mentoring opportunities are communicated by word of mouth through organizations with which DO-IT has relationships. This approach helps assure the quality of mentors and safety of student participants. Prospective mentors complete applications, provide references, and undergo criminal background checks.

Develop procedures to recruit protégés. Information about the DO-IT Scholars and DO-IT Pals programs is regularly distributed to schools, parent groups, and organizations. An advisory board selects DO-IT Scholars by reviewing their applications,

Figure 1. **How Individuals in the "doithi" Group are Drawn from Members of the Other Groups**
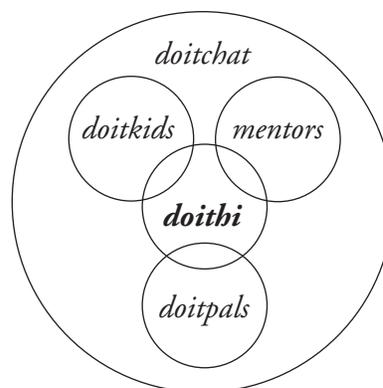
Example of the DO-IT discussion list structure for participants with hearing impairments in the *doithi* group.

teacher and parent recommendations, and school records. Teens interested in becoming DO-IT Pals submit a short online application; if they meet the basic criteria, they are included in the electronic community.

Provide guidance to parents. DO-IT encourages parents to put their Internet-connected computers in high-traffic areas of their homes and to talk to their children about Internet safety.

Establish a system whereby new mentors and protégés are introduced to community members. The electronic community administrator sends messages introducing new DO-IT mentors and protégés to the group and invites these individuals to send their own introductions.

Provide ongoing supervision and support for mentors. At DO-IT, the *mentors* discussion list is used by mentors to support one another and by the electronic community administrator to share resources and provide guidance.

Monitor and manage online discussions. At DO-IT, the e-mentoring administrator monitors discussions within the e-mentoring community. This person sends questions to focus discussions and encourages protégés and mentors to contribute questions or thoughts to the group. The administrator distributes weekly messages called "DO-IT Lessons" that point to interesting online resources. (These messages can be found online at *http://www.washington.edu/doit/Lessons*)

Employ strategies that promote personal development. The types of online activities DO-IT uses with youth include recognized strategies for self-development, including role modeling, affirmations, self-assessment, self-reflection, and visualization.

Monitor the workings of the community as it evolves; adjust procedures and forms accordingly. DO-IT regularly surveys participants in the e-mentoring community to assess their level of satisfaction and collect their suggestions for improvement.

Have fun! Communication between participants in DO-IT's e-mentoring community is enjoyable for everyone. Sharing humor and personal stories is encouraged.

Existing Online Mentoring Programs

Programs without the resources to develop and support their own e-mentoring community should search for an appropriate existing community for participants to join. For example, any youth with a disability who plans to attend college can apply to join DO-IT Pals (see *http://www.washington.edu/doit/Brochures/Programs/pals.html*). Another online mentoring option is available through *Connecting to Success* (see *http://ici.umn.edu/ementoring*). For students who are blind or visually impaired, the American Foundation for the Blind maintains an online mentoring network through *CareerConnect* (see *http://www.afb.org/section.asp?SectionID=7*).

Conclusion

Peer and mentor support can help students with disabilities reach their social, academic, and career potential. However, constraints imposed by time, distance, and disabilities can make such relationships difficult to initiate and sustain. Building on the success of existing e-mentoring programs like DO-IT's, practitioners can use the Internet as a vehicle for developing and supporting positive peer and mentor relationships.

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Resources

DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology)
http://www.washington.edu/doit

Family Village: A Global Community of Disability-Related Resources
https://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/index.htmlx

MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership
http://www.mentoring.org

MentorNet: The E-Mentoring Network for Diversity in Engineering and Science
http://www.MentorNet.net