On February 10, 2004, Alex Bick contacted Chris Dede, the
Timothy E. Wirth Professor of Learning Technologies at the
Harvard Graduate School of Education, seeking a mentor for
his work to determine whether handheld computers regularly
carried by high school students generally affect academic
achievement. At the time, Bick was a 10th grader enrolled in an
independent research program called “Science Research” that
allows students to complete individual and original research
based on a topic of interest. In his initial e-mail, he cited the
Handheld Devices for Ubiquitous Learning Project (HDUL), a
research project that seeks to determine how wireless hand-
held devices can enhance learning and teaching in which Dede
serves as principal investigator. As the doctoral research assis-
ant for HDUL, Dede forwarded Bick’s letter of introduction on to
me and asked if I had the time and interest in working with him.
After reading the letter, I was intrigued by Bick’s strong intrinsic
motivation to learn more about a phenomenon he observed in
his own education and his interest to determine if it was spe-
cific to him or if it was replicable in other students. Because
Bick lives in New Jersey, Dede lives in Massachusetts, and I
live in Washington, D.C., I was also interested in learning what
it would be like to mentor a high school student over distance.
Thus began a steady stream of e-mails, instant messages, and
videoconferences between Dede, Bick, and me to refine and
clarify the research questions, design, analysis, and findings.
After receiving text documents from Bick by e-mail, I embedded
comments, suggestions, and questions using Microsoft Word’s
track changes feature. This produced a chronological record
documenting how his work changed over time. As his work
moved from theory to implementation, the three of us began
using synchronous communication technologies (i.e., instant
messaging and videoconferencing software) to touch base and
discuss ongoing issues and puzzles.
Dede and I have been working with Bick for more than a year. I
am very impressed by how much his work has matured in such
a short period, and I look forward to our continued collabora-
tions. Although he started with a driving motivation to learn
more, I believe that it was his interactions with researchers that
helped transform his high school project into solid research val-
ued by the learning and technology community.