

# E-MENTORING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: CHALLENGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MODEL

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## **Abstract**

Initial and continuous support, such as mentoring (among peers), has been a strategy widely adopted by different distance higher education institutions, namely in the European context, in order to support new students in their academic integration, reduce isolation, facilitate collaboration and create a sense of belonging to a community; thus, this support is provided by students at more advanced levels of training.

Not being a new practice, it has evolved over time, inspiring various interpretations of its action and implementation. Assuming to be a crucial factor for student success in the context of distance education institutions, this subsystem of student support emerges as a central aspect in social and cognitive presence (Garrison & Anderson, 2003) and in the creation of knowledge and ties in and on the community.

It is in this sense that this presentation, based in a pilot e-mentoring project implemented in a department of an European Open University, framed in the paradigm of Virtual Learning Communities and within the framework of the Model of the Community of Inquiry (CoI), aims to present a set of assumptions for the construction of an e-mentoring model adapted to this teaching-learning modality and adapted to the students profile.

**Keywords:** E-mentoring, e-mentoring model, online higher education, community of inquiry.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Alongside the undeniable and ever-increasing openness to the world, in which ICT plays a key role, there is another recent factor crucial in adapting to nowadays demands: the expansion and proliferation of internationalization strategies by higher education institutions, in particular those which already provide distance learning.

In this context, and given the great heterogeneity of students attending distance learning universities, both in age and sociocultural terms, the demand to develop diverse skills and the consideration of psychosocial - motivational - factors for a successful learning process, it is important to create support mechanisms and structures that foster integration and promote equal opportunity and success for all.

In the European context, in order to meet the challenges of the 21st century, profound changes are needed in a wide range of LLL scenarios, especially in the emerging scenarios supported by technology that allow students to access higher education in more flexible ways.

In this sense, the recommendations of the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education ([1]) to the European Commission highlight: "equally important is the active involvement of students in the development of counselling, guidance and mentoring systems" (p.44), to the extent that these systems seem to promote more successful paths, strengthen the sense of belonging to the institution and help in the development of transversal skills.

The recommendation therefore reflects the need for higher education institutions in general, including distance learning institutions, to promote the development and provision of student support services that cover actions that promote the learning process while envisioning success along the learning path ([2]).

Regarding the context of distance learning institutions, several organizational trends and pedagogical models are observed. However, high retention and drop-out rates are often associated with this system ([3]; [4]), which are accentuated, according to the literature, in the models focused on content interaction ([5]; [6]).

However, in distance education, the student support system has a central character in the architecture of the system, assuming several features and constituting part of the global ecosystem in line with

what was proposed by [7]. Considered as the pulse of these institutions ([7]; [8]; [9]; [2];) using various strategies to support their students, nowadays it has become, according to [2], a quality issue. On the other hand, [7] and [10] advocate that these distance learning student support systems are a critical variable and it is necessary to create creative solutions adapted to the current student profile and that interpret the emerging trends of new generations of distance learning [11]

Also, the design and implementation of these solutions should be student-centered [12]. Although there are various types of support in the institutions implemented through the mediation of various technologies, [13]; [12]) identified four: administrative, academic, technical and tutorial counseling support while Simpson [4] and Thompson and Shilington [14] categorizes as academic (cognitive and intellectual) provided by teachers, tutors, facilitators and non-academic or guidance support in organizational and affective aspects [4] that is carried out through different media and tools and by various figures or departments depending on and can be provided as initial and ongoing support through advisory, accessibility and inclusion, integration, mentoring, mentoring, community building, technology-tailored services or other actions that constitute as factors of success promotion and student involvement.

These support systems can be implemented as initial and ongoing support, through departments of counselling, accessibility and inclusion, integration, mentoring services, tutoring, spaces for sociability and community building, tailored and personalized technology-based services, or any other actions that enable the promotion of student success and involvement.

However, for their adequacy, these support systems are based on the specific profile of the student at Open Universities in general, namely those whose teaching takes place entirely online. Usually referred to - in the literature- as "non-traditional student" or "mature student", this is an adult student, mature, with professional experience and who, for economic, professional or family reasons, did not continue its studies at the regular age. It can be described ([15]; [16]; [17]) as a student over 24 years of age, who works to pay for its studies and is financially independent, who attends part-time university or work full-time and who has dependents (children, parents, etc.), and sometimes is the only carer. These students are geographically dispersed across different continents and, increasingly, present themselves as a multicultural population.

The practice of mentoring is not recent and has evolved greatly, allowing for various interpretations. However, despite the diversity, it is a relationship of help and guidance between a more experienced individual and a less experienced one who is in a phase of adaptation. Peer support or peer mentoring is, therefore, a widely adopted strategy in the European context, aimed at supporting new students in their academic integration, reducing isolation and distance, facilitating collaboration and creating a sense of belonging to a community (among students). Such support is largely provided by students at more advanced levels of training.

In the context of online learning, such support is also necessary due to the specific characteristics, competences and challenges required by both the institutional pedagogical model and the learning process in virtual environments (e.g. interaction and communication, time management, autonomy...), not only when entering the institution but throughout the student's academic career ([18]).

This scaffolding relationship between peers can now be supported by technologies and in the case of distance education it has been reified in e-mentoring. For example, [19] define it this way: "E-mentoring adds a human element to computer-mediated learning" and [18] state that "E-mentoring, also known as telementoring, cybermentoring, virtual mentoring, online mentoring, Internet mentoring, computer-mediated mentoring, and email mentoring (...), is a process in which mentors help protégés via electronic channels of communication (...). In other words, it has the same goals and outcomes of traditional mentoring but is performed via technology-mediated communication." (pp. 221)

## **2 AN E-MENTORING MODEL FOR AN ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION INSTITUTION**

Observations resulting from some research ([20]; [21]) and participation in projects (e.g. e-mentoring pilot project) at this institution highlight the existence of critical points experienced by students during the development of their courses, such as: feeling of isolation/solidarity (lack of immediate feedback); incomprehension and cultural misunderstandings; overwhelming impression; difficulties in adapting to the role of online student (time management, asynchronous communication, participation in forums, etc.). Furthermore, the reference to collaborative learning and to virtual learning communities (Virtual Pedagogical Model® and distance learning, constructivist support and student-centered learning

model, pursued by the institution) also stands out as being relevant and supportive in overcoming of moments/points considered as discouraging and as affecting the good development and success of learning ([22]).

According to some authors [23] [24] [25] the change to the paradigm of communities, with the development of new architectures and educational cultures, becomes even more complex, not only because of the need for the actors to be able to master technology, but also to redefine their roles in the educational scene. Thus, "more than technologists, educational actors must become skilled managers of increasingly complex online social interactions, as well as scaffolders for individual and collective learning" ([23], pp. 93). On the other hand, the [26] Community of Inquiry (COI) framework has supported the creation and development of highly successful online learning communities and is based on three dimensions of presence: cognitive presence, teaching presence and social presence (Figure 1).

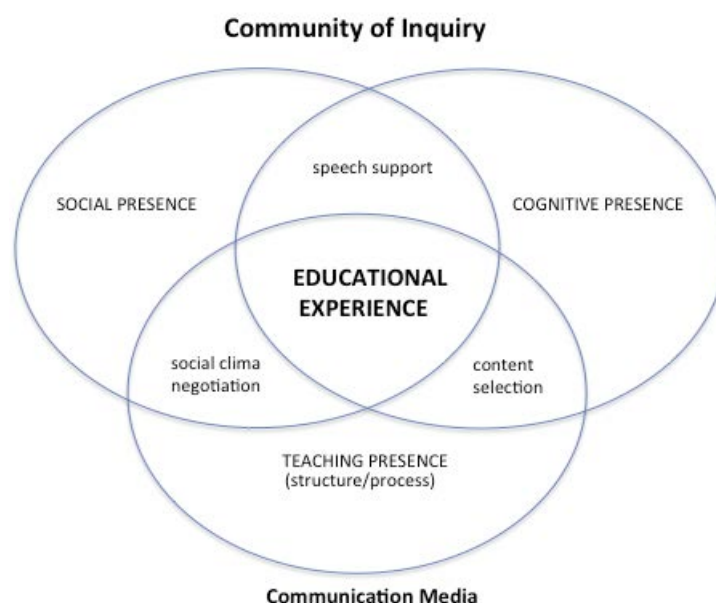


Figure 1: COI: Dimensions of Presence.

Cognitive Presence is the extent to which students are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. This "presence" is defined as a cycle of practical inquiry, where participants move deliberately from understanding the problem or issue to its exploration, integration and application. Teaching Presence consists in the conception, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes, aiming to achieve learning results with personal meaning and educational value and contributes to the degree of satisfaction of students, the perception of learning and the sense of community. Similar to the other dimensions, it is structured in 3 categories with key indicators: a) instructional design and organization; b) speech facilitation; c) direct instruction. And Social Presence is the ability of individuals to project themselves socially and emotionally as "real people" in online communication and, according to the model, the support of other presences.

Research has put into evidence that there is a strong relationship between social presence and learning outcomes ([27]; [28] [29]) but also that online contexts can be contexts of engagement ([30]) and in which communication is filled with psychological elements ([31]) and that activities that cultivate social presence also increase student satisfaction when learning online. Students can establish affective communication and develop social relationships from the moment the group feels safe to communicate openly. On the other hand, group cohesion requires intellectual focus, students' perception of what learning outcomes are expected and achieved. In an online learning community it takes time to develop a sense of trust and camaraderie.

### 3 RESULTS

The e-Mentoria project is an ongoing project within the WG Knowledge Transfer + Innovation (KT + I), Department of Education and Distance Learning of the Portuguese Open University, that started in 2016-2017 academic year, with the aim of developing a pilot experience for observation, reflection and

presentation of strategies and solutions for the creation and implementation of pedagogical and organizational innovation strategies within the courses offered by the department at various levels.

Among the actions of this program was the implementation of the mentoring project of 1st year students (e-Mentor) - a figure foreseen in the institutional Pedagogical Model, named "patron" ([22]) -, with a pilot experience with the purpose of observing, reflecting and presenting strategies and solutions for the creation and consolidation of an e-Mentoring structure at the institution.

The e-Mentor is a former student in the same cycle of studies than the current student, that provides support to the "new" student in his process of integration into the institution. Thus, it is a figure created to provide counselling and non-academic guidance, and personally support the student during his first year course. The e-Mentor is someone that has a history lived in the department and community of the course, and is also a successful individual both at personal and professional levels, and also integrated in the society. In this project, a group of specially trained e-Mentors (former undergraduate students) advises and mentors the Education online students.

The main objectives of this e-mentoring project are:

- 1 Integrate the student in the academic community of the department and the institution;
- 2 Create personalized information channels dedicated to first year students about the institution, the department community and the course;
- 3 Facilitate overcoming difficulties in the period of integration in the degree in Education, in particular, specific to distance learning;
- 4 Create communities of students supported by a support network based in relationships of fellowship and solidarity between students;
- 5 Encourage the establishment of close student relationships, mediated by more experienced students, based on the distance learning culture of the Uab (Open University);
- 6 Encourage students to engage senior students in non-academic support of new students;
- 7 Provide sustainability to academic "counseling" of teachers involved in tutoring and teaching;
- 8 Contact area professionals (e-Mentors) with successful courses in the department's courses.

The Project was structured as follows: a team of 3 teachers was responsible for the development and design of the model, and also for its supervision, thus adopting a small group based e-mentoring model where the e-mentor has the responsibility of more than one mentor [32].

This e-mentoring program was implemented with a proposed 3-phase structure [33], namely, planning, implementation and evaluation phase, on which we elaborate next:

- Planning Phase: lasted 6 weeks and consisted of goal setting, Training Model and Course Development, Training and Environment Design and Communication Devices in Moodle (common areas, group private areas), creation materials and content (OERS) for e-mentors, and study a model of e-mentor supervision, student selection, and the assignment of student groups to mentors,
- Implementation Phase: lasted a semester; and consisted of e-Mentor Community Support; Formation; e-Mentoria
- Evaluation Phase: design of a new e-Mentoring Cycle

The process was monitored - among others, in the form of a monthly questionnaire or report - but there was no direct interference by the teacher-monitors in the initiated and developed e-mentoring. This was developed on the Moodle platform (institutional) and involved 12 e-mentors, former students were invited from the courses and three supervising teacher-monitors. In the case of the masters courses the e-mentoring process focused, in a first phase, only on foreign students - students from Africa and Brazil - and we intended later to extended to other students, also those from the first year. Each e-mentor was assigned with a group of seven-eight students per mentor.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

It is, therefore, based on the observations and reflections on the above-mentioned pilot e-mentoring experience, supported by research conducted in recent [26] years at the research unit LE@D, and contextualized by the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework, a proposal is now presented having as

background the Community of Inquiry Model for the creation and consolidation of an online mentoring system (e-mentoring) aimed at establishing a support network to students from different study cycles, herein understood as an important valence of support in the academic path and for the success of online students.

Based on the assessment and information gathered during the process and at the end, for the new e-mentoring cycle we intend to make some changes. With regard to the project, create a public communication space where news about it can be opened and e-mentor applications can be opened.

In terms of the e-mentoring space, it is intended to evolve to a new platform distinct from the official platform of the courses by distinguishing the type of interaction. One of the other aspects to develop is the instantaneous interaction since in many situations the mentor needs almost immediate feedback to the requests for help, especially those of an emotional and emotional nature.

We would conclude it was possible to involve senior students in the integration and academic support of new students; support in overcoming difficulties of distance education; establish and promote relationships of proximity and also of intercultural integration among students; and contribute to facilitating collaboration and strengthening the sense of belonging to the community.

Furthermore, is intended with this ongoing project, promote the consolidation and expansion of the e-mentoring network based on the results of the experimental period - community of practice - using new communication interfaces.

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