

Reaching Beyond the Classroom to Virtual Mentors

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1. Abstract:

A unique mentoring project was implemented for a semester-long MBA course in business ethics. The assignment paired MBA students with local business leaders who were also members of a local chapter of an international civic organization. The collaboration between the business school and the civic club was quite innovative. Using only computer-mediated communications, student-mentor dyads discussed questions of civic responsibility, ethical dilemmas, and negotiation tactics. By communicating with experienced practitioners about course subject matter, students were encouraged to bridge ethical frameworks and negotiation theory with practical application. Assessment results indicate that the innovation was considered a success by the students, instructor, business school and civic organization.

Key Words:

Mentor, business ethics, computer-mediated communications, collaboration, practical application, MBA, innovation

2. Introduction

The innovation presented here is a confluence of synergies that resulted in a rewarding learning experience for all involved. The potential to achieve similar synergies is available for other students and instructors in other courses at other universities around the world.

The project was a virtual mentoring assignment that paired MBA students with local business leaders who were also members of a local chapter of an international civic organization. Using practitioners to enhance students' learning is not new. Using mentors in business education is not new. Using virtual mentors is not new, although it was novel for these particular students and mentors.

What really made this exercise so innovative was the extent to which an effort to extend course material with practical perspectives created synergies for the students, mentors, University and civic organization. As a result, beyond reinforcing the content in an effective way, the exercise also served to:

- Enhance students' professional development.
- Support the school's mission.
- Leverage a local civic organization.
- Engage community leaders and prospective employers.
- Promote the school's graduates and the civic organization.

Mentors and students also reported having fun with the assignment.

3. Mentors in Business and Business Education

The idea of mentors is not new. Mentoring, i.e., the process where an experienced person advises a less experienced one, dates back to ancient Greece (Schlee, R.P. 2000) and was continued through the ages in apprenticeship programs. In today's businesses, mentoring continues as an established practice whereby more senior individuals work with less experienced ones with the goal of increasing their current and future career success (Hunt and Michael, 1983). The mentoring relationship is clearly an important developmental relationship for a protégé, as research has shown (Ragins and Scandura, 1999), and companies are increasingly implementing formal mentoring programs as a result (Hegstad, 1999).

This increasing emphasis is mirrored in business education. It has long been acknowledged that practitioners can enhance the understanding of how theory and conceptual practices can be applied. Guest speakers, case studies, executives in residence at business school are common approaches to provide that practitioner perspective to course content. Mentoring is also an approach used in business schools, particularly for professional development.

In her study of how business schools have implemented mentoring programs, Schlee (2000) found that less than half of the 154 surveyed in 1996 had mentorship programs for their business students, that most mentoring programs targeted undergraduate, and that most mentors were alumni. As an alternative, MBA students have been used as mentors to undergraduate students (Randolph and Michael, 1997).

The idea of virtual or "online" mentors is a recent development in business schools (Whiting and deJanasz, 2004). Panelists at an Academy of Management meeting suggested that technology has enhanced the ability of college students to work with a mentor or coach, and as a result, mentoring in the business curriculum has developed greatly for both undergraduate and graduate students (Tyran, et.al. 2006). In a different online format, Ford and his colleagues (Ford, et.al. 2007) reported successfully using Web-based technologies to give students access to financial experts at large.

4. Course Overview

This particular virtual mentor experience was a required course component for the spring 2006 semester "Advanced Seminar in Business Ethics" course in a part-time MBA program at a comprehensive private university in the southeastern United States. See Appendix A for the syllabus description of the course and assignment. Worth 10% of the course grade, the assignment included guided discussion topics and a reflective report. All interactions between the students and their mentors were computer-mediated, i.e., only electronic mail was used. They were not permitted to meet face-to-face or speak by telephone. At the beginning of the course, each student was given the email address of an assigned mentor's email address, to be used for all communications. Using email was more convenient for the mentors, who had no experience with the WebCT® courseware and tools. At a minimum, the exchanges were to address questions related to civic responsibility, ethical dilemmas, and negotiation tactics. At the end of the semester, each student prepared a report. See Appendix B for the report guidelines.

4.1 Pedagogical Purposes

First and foremost, the purpose of the virtual mentor exercise was to deepen the students' understanding of "different ethical frameworks that can be applied to a given situation," and "various approaches to conflict resolution and negotiation." These were two of the official course objectives. By communicating with experienced practitioners about the subject matter, students were encouraged to bridge ethical frameworks and negotiation theory with practical application. Mentors were essential to achieving this purpose.

In addition, the course was generally designed to improve students' interpersonal skills using computer-mediated communications. Almost twenty years ago, Lengel and Daft (Lengel and Daft, 1988) noted that, "top managers have recently witnessed a startling increase in the channels of communication available to them (p. 225)." They asserted that it is important to understand that the selection of the communication medium affects the meaning of the message, and that "effective communication depends on the selection of a medium that has the capacity to engage both the sender and receiver in mutual understanding of the message at hand (p. 229)." When one considers the pace of technological change since then – and the call for educators to integrate Internet tools into management pedagogy (Bilimoria, 1997) – it only makes sense to apply online technologies for MBA communication skills development. It followed logically, then, that the mentors for this class should be "virtual" ones.

Furthermore, since research has shown that networking is a valuable skill in enhancing careers, by building social capital and creating relationships that can facilitate access to necessary resources, it was a good chance to give students the opportunity to develop or enhance their networking skills (Friar and Eddleston, 2007).

4.2 Instructional Design

Ethics classes can be extremely theoretical and philosophical, particularly in graduate programs. Professional schools (e.g., law, medicine) tend to emphasize the practical aspects of ethical dilemmas. MBA programs fall somewhere between the two ends of the continuum. Business ethics educators must "strive to inculcate students in an adroitness in moving between the two levels [of practical-conventional and abstract-philosophical]" (Jackson, 2006, p.84) . In addition to the case method, the virtual mentor program was used to balance the theoretical with the practical consideration of business ethics.

Beyond that, there were three guiding principles to the design of the virtual mentor program. It was important to:

- Be explicit about what was expected at the onset. The students had the guidelines for each interchange and the final report when they received the syllabus at the beginning of class.
- Make the process as frictionless as possible, i.e., use electronic mail and the class website to keep everyone informed and information documented in a way that could be referenced conveniently.
- Use metacognition to ensure students' understanding of the pedagogical purposes and to promote reflection and deeper learning from the exercise.

The emphasis on metacognition might be considered unique in this context, but should be an essential part of experiential learning; “learning from experience does not occur without reflection” (Huber, 2003, p.54) . By understanding the intentions of the experience, students are better prepared not only to complete the assignment, but also to be alert to the expected learning. This might have been viewed as “a couple of quick emails,” if the communications and networking skills development was not made explicit. The students were encouraged to carefully craft their messages and invest in the interchanges, to build a relationship.

4.3 Implementation Approach

Approximately two months before the class started, the instructor contacted the president of the local club to propose the program. It was referred to the club’s board of directors, who approved it at their monthly meeting. The instructor was then invited to speak to the club and distribute a flyer with program details. See Appendix C for the flyer’s details. By the time the course started, more than enough mentors had volunteered (two more than the class size).

The class contained 22 students, 20 of whom were enrolled in a part-time MBA program, one student in a five year undergraduate engineering/graduate technical management program (ETM) and one student in a graduate program in Technical Communications (MSTCO). This course is required for MBA students and elective for ETM and MSTCO students. Most of the students worked full-time in career-related employment; three were full-time students. This is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Student Employment Summary

Career Employment	Other Employment
RK (accountant)	
BN (project manager)	
KN (engineer)	
SS (teacher)	
JJ (IT manager)	
AJ (accountant)	
CG (project manager)	LE (student life)
HD (office manager)	MR (athletics)
RH (job shop manager)	
CG (claims adjuster)	
HZ (food service manager)	DN, JQ, JP (full-time students)
DC (project manager)	
DC (hospital administrator)	
DH (technical writer)	
DC (marketing manager)	
LJ (project manager)	
KH (accounting manager)	

Ages of the students ranged from young twenties to mid-fifties. Typically, the average age of an MBA student in this program is 27. The class was evenly divided between male/female, eleven of each. Three of the students were African-American; one was an Indian-American, one was a Pakistani national, and the remaining seventeen students were Caucasian.

The mentors were not as diverse a group. Of the 22 mentors, six were women, one of whom was also African-American. No other racial or ethnic minorities were represented in the mix of mentors. The youngest mentors were in their early forties. Occupationally, the group included general managers, business owners, marketing executives, accountants, and financial services professionals. One non-profit CEO, one physician and one hospital administrator also participated as mentors.

While age or gender are typically critical dimensions of mentor-protégé relationships (Hunt and Michael, 1983), this constraint was disregarded with the virtual approach. Research in computer-mediated communications and online instruction has documented the ways in which the technology eliminates cues about status, gender, race, and physical appearance (see for example (Sproul and Kiesler, 1991) and more recently (Arbaugh, 2000)). When possible, the instructor matched students and mentors based on occupation or professional interests. This resulted in some unlikely pairings that spanned large age gaps, race differences, and gender. This was obvious when, after the semester was over, the students were invited to a lunch meeting of the civic group to meet their mentors in person. Mentors received MBA mugs and letters from the dean of the business school in appreciation for their time and effort.

5. Assessment Results

The collaboration between the University and the civic organization is the most unique aspect of this project. In doing so, the project accomplished much more than its educational objectives. In particular, the virtual mentor exercise also served to:

- Enhance students' professional development. Beyond the formal education objectives, students learned to be intentional about seeking and cultivating mentoring relationships to advance their careers. The virtual mentor exercise also provided an opportunity for students to practice networking and to polish computer-based communications. These purposes were explicitly identified to the students at the onset, so they could be aware of how they presented themselves.
- Support the school's mission. The mission statement of the school is, in part, to integrate "quality business education and practice..." and "enhance... civic responsibility." Generally, the practical emphasis of the school is supported by guest speakers, case studies, and internships. This exercise was the first formal mentoring effort. The fact that the exercise also encouraged students to explore the idea of civic responsibility with their mentors further enhanced the experience.
- Leverage a local civic organization. Recruiting willing and appropriate mentors can be difficult and time-consuming. Using a local civic club ensured that the target mentors were business leaders who were community-minded and service-oriented. This international organization emphasizes "vocational service," and expects local club members to share their skills and expertise to enhance the employability of others. Having a project that enabled members to conveniently do this for local students was a very attractive proposition to this local club. There was the added benefit that, from the earliest days of the organization, members have promoted high ethical standards in their professional lives.

- Engage community leaders and prospective employers. Clearly, this exercise extended the students' network. Some of them were already professionally employed, but for others, this represented a connection that might lead to a job opportunity. In addition, at least half of the mentoring participants have cultivated a further relationship with the business school, with internships, projects, and career opportunities.
- Promote the school and its graduates and the civic club. This was a uniquely bi-lateral public relations project. Contact with the students raised the mentors' awareness of and respect for the MBA program. The club also benefited by exposing these students, the next generation of business leaders, to the civic organization. Several of the students expressed interest in joining such a group after their studies.

5.1 Students' Reflections

While students experienced varying degrees of success in engaging their mentors, and some students themselves were not very invested in the exercise, every student was able to identify positive learning outcomes. Table 2 presents a summary from the students' reflection reports.

Table 2 Student Reflection Summary

Question	Student Responses
What were the benefits of the assignment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The direct link to a business leader • Exposure to the civic club • Evidence of class principles at work • An outside resource for coursework • Important for professional I growth • No specific time requirements • Awareness of tone of voice in email • Empathy of mentor • Access to a mentoring relationship • Networking with someone in my field • Greater understanding of another's views on conflict resolution • Establishing an electronic rapport • Contact with a remarkable person • Exposure of the MBA program
What surprised you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The candor of the mentor
What did you learn?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How hard it is to trust some you only know electronically

How did your interaction with your virtual mentor relate to concepts learned in the course and, in particular, the readings?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensively
Will you maintain contact with your mentor in the future?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eight of the students said yes.

5.3 Mentors' Opinions

Ragins & Scandura (1999) identified several potential benefits of being a mentor, including the productive use of accumulated skills and wisdom, the sense of satisfaction and fulfillment, a contribution to future generations, and rejuvenation from the protégé's energy. This was evident in the opinions expressed by the eight mentors who responded online when asked what they liked best about the mentor experience.

Mentors were invited to give feedback through an online survey, available at: <http://www.surveymonkey.com>. Half of the mentors responded to the multiple choice questions. A summary of the responses is presented in Table 3. (Some question summaries were eliminated to preserve anonymity.) The response was largely positive.

Table 3 Mentor Survey Summary

Question	Mentor Responses
1. How would you evaluate the virtual mentor program in terms of value to you and to students?	Excellent: 5 Good: 5 Fair: 1
2. How would you evaluate the timeliness and responsiveness of your student protégé?	Excellent: 7 Good: 2 Fair: 2
3. How would you evaluate your specific virtual mentor experience this term, overall?	Excellent: 5 Good: 4 Fair: 2
4. How would you evaluate the quality of the questions and responses your student gave to your email correspondence?	Excellent: 7 Good: 4
5. To what extent did you find the mentor experience enjoyable and interesting?	Extremely: 2 Very: 6 Somewhat: 3
7. How likely is it that you would be a virtual mentor again next year?	Highly: 9 Somewhat: 1 Not at all: 1

5.3 Lessons Learned

In a study of 275 executives, Ragins and Scandura (1999) find individuals who were experienced with mentoring are more likely to be satisfied with a mentoring relationship. They also suggest that individuals without mentoring experience lack realistic expectations and may overestimate the costs and underestimate the benefits associated with being a mentor. It might make sense to screen the mentors for a prior relationship if that is a likely concern in future efforts.

In terms of implementation issues, there was one technical issue that should be addressed in advance of future attempts. Many of the mentors' business organizations had spam filters in their email systems. As a result, several of the students' email accounts were blocked without either the mentor or the student being aware.

In a few cases, the instructor was asked to intervene when a mentor was non-responsive. This usually happened during an out-of-town absence that was not communicated to the student. In one situation, the mentor was clearly too busy to be an effective mentor and a new mentor were assigned.

6. Transferability to Other Learning Environments

Plans had been to repeat the exercise the following year, when Ethical Leadership was to be taught again. However, due to some organizational changes, a different instructor was assigned to teach the course. He was not interested in repeating the exercise. It will be applied in an undergraduate Leadership class next year.

This innovation can be used virtually anywhere by professors seeking to enhance a management, leadership, negotiation or ethics course with practitioners' perspectives. Civic organizations have local chapters around the world, and the cost of the program is negligible for all involved. Collaborating with a civic organization creates a "win-win" proposition for students and mentors. Using electronic mail makes it convenient for participants to have thoughtful and meaningful interchanges. Encouraging metacognition in a similar program – or any kind of experiential learning – is highly recommended and easily done, simply by being intentional about it.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Course Syllabus Excerpt

Course Description

This course offers a multidisciplinary approach to the issues of ethical business practice. It examines the role of leadership as a specialized role and as a social influence process in society at large.

Course Design

This course is designed to follow the model of "learn, do, teach" by requiring the students to lead various class experiences and discussions regarding ethical dilemmas and other difficult situations. We will use a variety of different types of interaction to develop students' skills in situation analysis, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Case studies are used extensively in this course.

We will be using the Internet almost exclusively for course communications. Increasingly, businesses rely on computer-mediated communications, and being able to communicate effectively in this manner is a key business skill. This approach will also enable us to transcend time and space limitations as we discuss course content, develop negotiation strategies, conduct peer reviews, analyze case studies and leverage external resources.

Course Objectives

Upon the successful completion of this course, you should understand:

1. the role of market forces in aligning the interests of various stakeholder groups
2. the role of corporate culture in the creation of this alignment
3. the role of the leader in shaping this culture
4. different ethical frameworks that can be applied to a given situation, and
5. various approaches to conflict resolution and negotiation...

Performance Evaluation

Grading

Your final grade will be based on several indicators of performance against each of the course objectives. Each of the indicators is described in more detail below...

Case Study (25 points)... Discussion Leadership (25 points)... Participation (15 points)... Simulation Analysis (15 points)... Peer Editing (10 points)...

Virtual Mentors (10 points)

You will be assigned a "virtual" mentor, an experienced business leader or professional with whom you can discuss course content. This is intended to foster a dialogue about ethical leadership and civic responsibility. Your grade will be based on the thoroughness of monthly electronic mail exchanges and the thoughtfulness of your reflections about this experience. Guidelines for the final report are on the class website.

Course Outline and Schedule

The course outline and schedule will be maintained in WebCT. Note that our first class meeting is **Monday, January 9th, 2006.**

Appendix B: Report Preparation Guidelines

This pedagogical purpose of this assignment is to provide students with an opportunity to develop a productive relationship electronically. It is also designed as a way to facilitate student learning through communication with experienced professionals who have faced the challenges of ethical leadership and civic responsibility. This provides a means for students to take classroom concepts and see how they apply to individuals in the real world. Also, students can seek help and suggestions regarding their leadership practicum from individuals who have “been there” in their own work experiences.

A “virtual mentor” is a businessperson who is also a member of the [<<organization name and hyperlink removed>>](#), a chapter of ... You will be assigned a virtual mentor during the second week of class. All mentors have committed to this relationship and are aware of what the assignment requires for both students and mentors.

To complete the assignment, students are responsible for engaging in at least four email conversations with their Virtual Mentor. Each email conversation will be initiated by the student – see the course calendar for *guidelines* as to when you should make these contacts. *Make sure to save all of your email correspondence* – you will print them off and submit them as part of your final assignment.

The first email will be for students to introduce themselves to their mentor by exchanging a biography. After that, the student is responsible for contacting the mentor three times during the term (again via email) with questions regarding the course content, as suggested by the instructor. *Note: Career-related questions (i.e. advice on finding a job) are considered extra emails and will not be counted toward the 4 total exchanges required.*

Your performance in this effort will be evaluated based on a final report. Criteria for the report include the thoroughness of your exchanges, the thoughtfulness of your reflection about the virtual mentor experience, and the clarity of the report. It should start with a summary of the experience. Then answer the following questions.

- What were the benefits of the assignment?
- What surprised you?
- What did you learn?
- How did your interaction with your virtual mentor relate to concepts learned in the course and, in particular, the readings?
- Will you maintain contact with your mentor in the future?

Attach all emails exchanged as part of the assignment.

Appendix C: Mentor Recruitment Flyer

Note: the header of the flyer, which contained the course name and number and the logos of both the university and the civic organization has been removed for anonymity. Other descriptive information has been blanked out of the text below.

VIRTUAL MENTOR PROGRAM

This program is designed to connect _____ MBA students with _____ ians, to foster a dialogue about ethics with questions regarding the course content. Mentors are asked to respond within three days.

This course offers a multidisciplinary approach to the issues of ethical business practice. It examines the role of leadership as a specialized role and as a social influence process in society at large. It is designed to follow the model of "learn, do, teach" by requiring the students to lead various class experiences and discussions regarding ethical dilemmas and other difficult situations. We will use a variety of different types of interaction to develop students' skills in situation analysis, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Case studies are used extensively in this course.

We will be using the Internet almost exclusively for course communications. Increasingly, businesses rely on computer-mediated communications, and being able to communicate effectively in this manner is a key business skill. This approach will also enable us to transcend time and space limitations as we develop negotiation strategies, conduct peer reviews, analyze case studies and leverage external resources – such as the virtual mentors.

With very little time and effort on your part, you may have a significant impact on their professional development. Thank you for considering the program – and thank you for your support.

To volunteer, please contact _____ .edu or _____ - _____ .

For more information about the course, go to: http://_____ [_____ .htm](http://_____).

Information about the MBA program is available at http://_____ [_____ .edu](http://_____).