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Why the Future of Mentorship Needs to Extend into the Digital World

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Abstract

Using the strategic foresight tool "A Thing from the Future", this paper attempts to push teacher mentorship into the digital age. To get a better understanding of the premise of the project an examination of why there is a need for mentorship and the benefits of such relationships is provided first. With a grasp of the importance of such programs and the challenges they face, such as restricted timelines and unequal mentoring experiences, the 'big idea' for A Thing From the Future, of an online peer-to-peer mentoring program emerges. This paper examines the arc, terrain, object, and mood of the online platform, suggests other challenges that could arise, and addresses how we could create the program. Furthermore, there is an examination of how this digital transformation of mentorship connects with UNESCO 2050's goals and the OECD 2030 learning framework.

Introduction

Mentorship, an educational tool that has been used for years to enhance the learning of beginning teachers. Many school divisions participate in formal mentoring programs for early career teachers, pairing them with an experienced teacher that will help guide and facilitate them to becoming a confident professional. What the education system has failed to recognize is that all teachers require mentoring or support beyond the first two to three years of their careers. This paper navigates what mentorship is and why it is important to continue into all stages of a teachers career. Using the strategic foresight tool, A Thing from the Future, we will examine a digital peer-to-peer mentorship platform that could enhance the collaboration and support of teachers with different aspects of teaching and learning. This paper will also discuss connections to UNESCO 2050 and the OECD 2030 framework, as well as implications of the current global pandemic. The goal is to highlight the importance of mentorship for the future of teachers and

the need to propel it into the digital world. It is important to note that the tool presented will not save mentorship, but should be acknowledged as a potential future for mentoring that extends far beyond the physical barriers of the school.

Why Mentorship?

It is no secret that teachers undergo enormous stress in their profession. Many teachers echo the words of Hargreaves & Fullan (2012), "The day is never over. The job never ends. There's always more work to be done. And everyone wants a piece of you. Only in retirement will the moment arrive when you can say you have too much time" (p. 36). This thought transpires into the research findings of Clandinin et al. (2015), where they discovered that in Alberta, 40% of beginning teachers leave within the first five years and 25% of education graduate students never enter the teaching profession. Clandinin et al. (2015), also found seven themes that would lead to a high attrition rate. Some of these themes included aspects of work-life balance, new teachers feeling that they are unable to leave the school and had to participate in all aspects of the school, inadequate relationships, and uncertainties with their contracts. During a facilitated workshop with sixty-four Ontario teachers, that focused on emotional labour and consequences that teachers potentially faced in the workplace, Koenig et al. (2018) discovered that 40.7% of participants had high levels of emotional exhaustion, and 70.3% were experiencing secondary trauma through their students (p. 270). Another interesting find was in the research of Fitchett et al. (2018), who discovered that the risk of stress in beginning teachers was not substantially different from their vetern teachers. In reflecting on Clandinin et al. (2015), Koenig et al. (2018), and Fitchett et. al. (2018), there is little reason to question why some teachers are unable to develop their skills and attributes with all the internal and external factors

that all teachers, not just beginning teachers, face. The question now is how can we develop teachers to stay in the profession with the hardships and stressors they face?

After critically examining many articles, studies, and reviews, a common theme emerged in building positive relationships with a mentor teacher. It is my belief that mentorship in early career teachers is an effective tool to generate sustainability within a school, and lower the attrition rates of beginning teachers. Evidence to support this claim was found in two distinct pieces of literature.

The Importance of Mentorship

One piece was, Kutsyuruba et al. (2019), who conducted an online survey of "early career teachers" (ECTs) across Canada in regards to their personal perceptions and experiences within their first few years of teaching. After analyzing over two thousand responses the researchers found a strong connection between mentorship with (ECTs) and their emotional well-being. Although the survey was limited due to the participants' personal interpretations of the terminology used in the survey, Kutsyuruba et al. (2019) found that work-life balance and excessive work loads lead to negative effects of well-being, potentially leading to attrition. This was similar to Clandinin et al. (2015) and Koenig et al. (2018)'s findings. Kutsyuruba et al. (2019) discussed effective mentoring programs on ECTs can have positive effects such as "increased teacher effectiveness, stronger self-confidence, higher levels of satisfaction, motivation, and commitment, reduced stress, improved classroom instruction and student achievement" (p. 286). This further solidifies the notion of mentorship as an effective tool for early teacher development.

The other supportive document for mentorship was found in the work of Vicki Squires, Professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan.

She conducted a literature review regarding the role of mentorship, with a particular interest in the promotion of well-being in beginning teachers. Squires (2019) suggested that mentorship was valuable whether it was formally or informally provided to the mentee, the important factor was that the relationship is "built on trust, ensures that failures and successes can be shared and advice can be sought from a helpful, rather than a judgemental, perspective" (p. 265). Once again we see relationships as the forefront for developing teacher development.

There is little question of the effectiveness of mentors, but we must also consider the challenges surrounding mentorship programs. One challenge is the duration of the program. Many formalized mentorship programs last for five to nine weeks in Alberta, when a university student is gaining practicum experience. This is a very short time limit considering it takes ten thousand hours to be considered a master teacher (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). In some school divisions, formal mentorship is provided to teachers for the first two years. However, it is here we see another challenge because some mentees are paired with a teacher outside of their school and sometimes with someone who does not teach the same grade. Communicating with a teacher in another school, or town, becomes difficult with the amount of work surrounding a beginning teacher. The third challenge is that not all mentorship experiences are of equal value. Some pairings struggle to develop a relationship of trust, therefore honest and open communication can not occur (Tickell, 2018, p. 5). The question now is can mentorship overcome these challenges in the future?

Strategic Foresight Tool: A Thing From the Future

Now that the stage for mentorship has been set and the challenges illuminated, picture mentorship in the future to be online. Using the foresight tool, A Thing from the Future, the big

idea is to create a online platform where teachers can connect with their peers on all aspects of education. This platform would allow teachers to mentor each other in multiple peer-to-peer settings, not just for early career teachers. The online mentorship website would allow teachers to record their lessons, provide instructional lessons on items like report cards, how to conduct parent-teacher conferences, and even help teachers transition to different grade levels. The idea is that videos and questions would be posted for constructive feedback and support from peers as an ongoing mentoring process, where no time limit exists.

Table 1: A Thing From the Future

Arc	Growing one-to-one mentorship into a community of lifelong learners. Foreseeable collapse of professional learning communities. Transforming mentorship into a digital era with no time restrictions on mentorship relationships.
Terrain	Online platform that will start within a school division and expand. Available for all teachers at any stage of their career. Communication will be completed through videos and online chats.
Object	Website with an interactive platform that will allow peer-to-peer interactions amongst educators.
Mood	Mixed emotions - Highly beneficial when relating it to the global pandemic - Scepticism of technology and the preference of face-to-face interactions

This online peer-to-peer platform is not only for beginning teachers, this is for teachers in all stages of their career. As noted in the research above, teachers are under tremendous pressure to perform despite internal and external struggles, and can experience stress at any point in their career. The hope is that the platform could facilitate learning with choice in what you want to post, receive feedback in, or who you want advice from. The challenges mentioned early of limited time, unfit pairings, and unequal mentorship experiences would not present issues if mentorship was available online and hosted many peer mentors. This is not to say that

mentorship in person does not hold value. The idea is that in person mentorship continues in the early stages of teaching, then moves to online for further peer-to-peer mentoring and promotion of lifelong learning. We must remember that mentoring matters, as Lofthouse (2020) says, "A certainty is that when in training or during induction our new teachers need mentors; more experienced colleagues who can provide insight, support and guidance for those entering the profession" (p. 2). The online platform will serve as an extension of formal mentorship practices to venture beyond the scope of a single mentor to a large number of peer coaches.

It is important that we focus on mentorship to teachers in all stages of their professional career. When examining the Alberta *Teacher Quality Standards* (TQS) documents we see that "A teacher engages in career-long professional learning and ongoing critical reflection to improve teaching and learning" (Government of Alberta, 2018, p. 4). Some of the indicators of achieving this standard require collaboration "with other teachers to build personal and collective professional capacities and expertise" and "actively seeking feedback to enhance teaching practice" (Government of Alberta, 2018, p. 4). If teachers are secluded to their classroom, with minimal supervision, how can we expect them to enhance their teaching practice? The online platform would allow teachers to record their lessons and receive feedback from peers outside of their school.

Looking beyond the TQS, the Alberta *Leadership Quality Standards* (LQS) requires administrators and other leadership to lead a learning community which includes, "creating meaningful, collaborative learning opportunities for teachers and support staff" (Government of Alberta, 2018, p. 5). The administrator(s), using the online platform, could facilitate and encourage teachers to collaborate with other teachers on new learning opportunities. Another

standard is to provide instructional leadership, which requires "facilitating mentorship and induction supports for teachers and principals, as required" (Government of Alberta, 2018, p. 6). If leaders could not find a suitable mentor within their own building, the online platform could become a solution to connecting teachers with the support they need.

<div align="center">**Connections to UNESCO 2050 and OECD 2030**</div>

Looking at the stands of the Alberta TQS and LQS, we see an alignment with the UNESCO 2050s vision for the future of education, to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifeline learning opportunities for all" (Transforming our world, (n.d.), para. 68). The online platform could serve as an ongoing, collaborative, learning opportunity that extends to all corners of the globe. The scope of this platform must go beyond a singular school in order to enhance the quality and richness of the information. Starting within a school district and then moving beyond to the province, possibly into a global partnership.

The OECD 2030 has created a learning compass framework, stating the compass "defines the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that learners need to fulfil their potential and contribute to the well-being of their communities and the planet" (Learning - Organization for economic, (n.d.), para. 1). The idea is that students will acquire knowledge and global competencies to support their well-being, the community, and the planet. If we viewed the scope of the compass through the lens of educators, we would need to continue mentorship to support the wellbeing of teachers as well as connect with the larger global community on what students of the twenty first century will need to be successful. Walker (2012) reflects on our continually changing world and what these students will require in order to succeed. He discusses the impact of mass immigration on globalization and how being face-to-face with other cultures will require

new education strategies. Using the online mentorship platform, we could connect globally with other educators about culture, global communities, and the planet as a whole.

Requiring Outside Expertise

Creating a platform like this will not be easy, and will require outside expertise. ATB financial has created a similar platform where financial advisories film their interactions with clients and posts them on a community website (S. Murgatroyd, personal communication, August 4, 2020). The idea is that other financial advisories will watch and provide feedback and support on how to improve their interactions with their clients (S. Murgatroyd, personal communication, August 4, 2020). Having financial institutions all over the province of Alberta created a professional development challenge, however, the peer-to-peer interaction platform allowed the financial advisories to create a provincial online community. The website allows for financial advisories from anywhere in the province and at any stage in their career to interact and learn alongside their peers. Having a strategic partner from ATB that could help develop the program would be essential for the success of the platform in education.

Alongside ATB Financial, it would be also beneficial to work with companies that have developed a community of practice. According to Goncalves (2020) a community of practice is "an organized group of professional people who share the same interests in resolving an issue, improving skills, and learning from each other's experiences" (para. 1), which is the similar operating system of school. Companies such as Hewlett-Packard (HP) and World Bank participate in developing communities of practice within their larger company (Goncalves, 2020). Benefits such as adaptation and mentoring of new employees, "buy-in" of employees, the platform for out of the box thinking and brainstorming sessions, helps recruit and maintain talented workers, and an atmosphere of collaboration and community (Goncalves, 2020).

Developing an online platform for mentorship would follow the definition of a community of practice and therefore would be beneficial to explore companies that are already participating and developing in this line of work.

A Deeper Analysis of the Arc

When using the foresight tool, A Thing from the Future, we also need to examine what is being grown, collapsed, and transformed, as well as the mood the 'thing' will create. If the online mentorship tool was successful we would be growing the one-to-one mentorship relationship into a community of lifelong learners. With ongoing interactions of teachers, there may be a foreseeable collapse of professional learning communities, which could result in budget savings for all school divisions; professional learning communities in Alberta are part of an estimated twenty million dollar professional development budget for the province (number as of 2005/2006 annual budget) (Couture, 2006). The hope is that mentorship will turn into a lifelong learning process by transforming it into a digital platform. The mood of the 'thing' from the future is uncertain. With the current state of the global pandemic, one could argue that connecting with teachers on how to teach online, through a platform like this, would have been highly beneficial. Others are still sceptical of technology, and prefer to stay in touch with people face-to-face.

Considerations and Challenges

It is important to realize the importance of mentorship as well as recognize its complexities. Roegman & Kolman (2020) describes mentoring as a complex endeavor and points out the naïve thought "that a mentor teacher who is an experienced teacher of students will simply take on candidates and turn them into exemplary novice teachers" (p. 117). There is a heavy burden on the shoulders of mentors, which an online platform could create a system of distributed leadership for all teachers to succeed. Creating an online platform of this size must

start small, in a single division, before it can expand. We must also consider the challenges of FOIP and protecting the rights of our students. The well-being of our teachers is important, and if filming their classes causes undue stress, then participating must be voluntary. If we were to widen the scope of the platform to a global community, the technology would have to be accessible and all partners would have to be involved in the process.

Conclusion

Creating an online platform for mentorship to continue beyond the first two to three years of a teachers' career is perhaps a bold move, especially when considering it in the global community. However, teachers are consistently leaving the profession because of lack of support, burnout, compassion fatigue, and second hand trauma, not to mention the internal and external complexities of their classrooms and home life. We need a way to continue lifelong learning through the interaction of peers. If we are to meet UNESCO 2050s goal to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifeline learning opportunities for all" (Transforming our world, (n.d.), para. 68), we need a platform that can allow all stakeholders from around the world to engage and participate. Using the OECD 2030 learning compass framework, we can extend our vision to include global competencies, and learn from teachers and students from around the world on one shared website. It is important to reiterate that this tool will not save mentorship, but it could serve as an extension of formal mentorship practices to include a global community of learners. It is time for mentorship to leap into the future and allow for lifelong learning, connecting all teachers all over the world, building global competency within education.

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