

A Miniguide to Mentoring the Online Newbie Educator

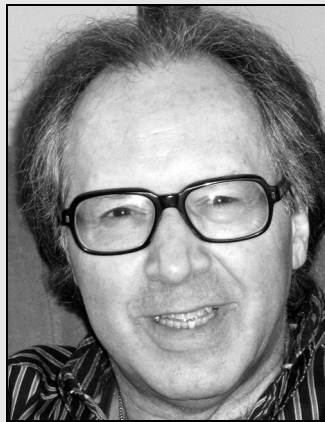
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Any so-called newbie to a course can use a bit of help; in the online environment this comes in one or more links that may contain faculty guides to teaching (at XXX school), to teaching specific courses, to a general guide of teaching students online, et cetera. But

studies and anecdotal evidence have shown the use of a veteran faculty mentor can prove the most helpful, for he or she can give real-time input and feedback, be available for questions and help on a 24/7 basis, and establish a solid and positive connection that enhances the mentee's teaching skills and the mentee's role as an asset to the school.

Yet as with any advisor capacity there are certain approaches that should be taken to ensure the most positive outcome for the mentee, as mentor (and less formal "point person") assignments are given with the long-term goal of the mentee being an ongoing and contributing faculty member to the school. Here are suggestions to help make that happen:

- **Obtain as many basic details as possible from the assigning supervisor.** Going into a mentoring situation is more often than not meeting a stranger, and the more you know about that person the smoother and less stressful will go the first "Howdi-do!" You will certainly be given some info from the person assigning the mentee to you, but remember these questions (one or more



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may already be answered by the supervisor): What is this person's professional background? Has he/she taught other courses at the school and/or has this person taught/does the person teach at other schools? Is there anything special on which I should focus? How often would you like me to contact (e-mail and/or phone) this online educator?

- **First item: write an introductory and welcome letter to the mentee.** You will be given the mentee's e-mail address; be sure to write him or her immediately, enthusiastically welcoming the person to his or her new assignment, introducing yourself, and letting the individual know you are willing to help in any way possible—and that you are always open for questions. Also: be sure to mention the online environment; it either may be new to the person or you would want to ask if there is anything about the online environment for the course that still perplexes. Finally, add to the connection by sharing a bit about your personal life—hobbies, family, weather, et cetera—and asking the mentee to do the same. And if this is a first online course for the mentee share one of problems/challenges you first encountered: it's always nice for someone to know he or she is not alone in "having a first time"!
- **Create a list of the most important "to do" items in the class.** There may be basic items on this list—items that one would consider any online educator for your school ought to know—but that is okay; there is always the possibility that one or more of the items may not be known by the mentee, you can offer additional insights on one or more items of which the mentee had not considered, or info can be presented the mentee may have known but simply forgot. Additionally, include those items you believe are important to making the course successful—but do make sure these are more on the traditional side, that is, no whistles or bells ... yet :).
- **Create a list of best practices and tips to excel in the class.** Here is where the so-called whistles and bells come into play: best practices—not those published or expected by the school (these would come under the previous bullet)—that you have created or adapted for use in your course that you believe are essential to having a successful course. Too, offer at least a few unorthodox or non-traditional teaching tips for the course you may have developed. Giving this to the mentee shows your solid interest in assisting him or her to do a fine job!
- **Set up a weekly phone call to chat about the mentees progress.** Speaking with the mentee is a great way to do that back-and-forth input/response that cannot be done via e-mail. Most important is hearing your tone of voice: enthusiastic and motivating just do not work as well in print! In addition, real-time comment can often lead to spur-of-the-moment thoughts from you or the mentee that might not happen in the slower exchange of e-mails. Finally, simply the act of talking with someone personalizes the relationship, allowing for a solid connection between mentor and mentee—and mentee to the school.
- **Send extra resources that have proven helpful.** This can be seen as the cherry on top of the mentoring: offering those little extras you have gathered for your courses—both in the general teaching of online courses and in the same subject being taught by the mentee—that you have found helpful for students. These can include newspaper and magazine articles, photos, puzzles, quotes, video and audio clips, and websites, as well as teaching strategies you have rated or adopted. One caution: don't send everything you have! You only want to give a few items, to both help and show your sincere concern for doing whatever you can to make the mentee's teaching experience a good one.

- **Always give feedback in a positive, motivating manner.** (NOTE: This suggestion is based on information only given by the mentee, that is, the mentor does not have access to the mentee's classroom.) This is one of those "no brainers," of course, but it's important to mention it, if only as a reminder. A mentor is not a lone contractor, but rather a representative of a university or college, and thus any feedback given to the mentee reflects on the school. The biggest piece of advice when it comes to feedback: look it over—word by word and tone of each comment—to be sure when it is submitted that feedback is not negative in words or tone, that vocabulary selected is politically correct and not disingenuous, and that it leaves one with the feeling of constructive criticism (if criticism is involved) and enthusiastic motivation. And when giving oral feedback just be sure the remarks are not spur-of-the-moment, but rather are thought through before offering them.
- **Give positive comments on the mentee's classroom (if applicable).** When the mentee's classroom is made available to you be sure to look it over for overall set-up of the classroom, remarks the mentee makes to students (including frequency), feedback in assignments (including timeliness of feedback), and use of all required course components (e.g., dropbox, discussion, quizzes, etc.). Additionally, see if there are areas that could be incorporated—optional for course use and not used by the mentee—that you have found are helpful.
- **Keep a record of all comments with the mentee.** Keeping a log of your substantive and meaningful comments (read: not "How's it going?" or "It's raining here!") to the mentee, as well as any from the mentee you believe to be insightful or meaningful to the mentee's ability in the classroom, is helpful for two reasons: [a] To help with future mentee assignments; [b] In case anything is questioned by your supervisor—or in the case of a complaint about you from the mentee. Also: as you think of new items or info you'd like to give a mentee or ways in which a situation could have been handled jot those down as well.
- **Write summaries—both required and not required.** Often, supervisors will require a summary of your experience with the mentee; but if not it is still advisable to send one: this shows your full completion of the assignment, as well as giving an overall assessment of the mentee's abilities—and any problems—in the classroom. Also: whether required or not, be sure the summary contains positive comments, when warranted. By the way: look over the notes you kept, include any quotes from the mentee you feel might be useful in the summary.

Remember: Watering seeds, giving fertilizer, and trimming when necessary result in plants that are strong, delightful, and pleasing—and contribute positively to the environment around them.