

## **FE8: ESTABLISHING AN E-MENTOR SYSTEM FOR DIPLOMA IN CHILDCARE AND EDUCATION LEVEL 3 STUDENTS**

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### **Aims**

Year Two Childcare students will use email to support Year One students to successfully complete child observations and assessments.

### **Background – FE college, tutor and classroom content**

I am the Course Co-ordinator for the CACHE Diploma in Child Care and Education (DCE) level 3 programme delivered at Bishop Auckland College. In recent years we have noticed drop-out from the level 3 courses which tutors believe is partly caused by the increasing academic challenges in the level 3 assignments – both the level of writing and the depth of knowledge required. To remedy this situation, I considered asking successful second year students to mentor first year students who were “at risk” and provide peer support with initial assignments. However as there is very limited personal contact – students attend on different days and live in different areas of the County – I wondered whether second year students could use the opportunity provided by Test Bed communication technology to share work and conversations via email, and “e-mentor” students from the first year cohort, and support them through the difficulties of these initial assessments. If successful, this would impact on course retention and achievement, as well as providing wider personal development for the participants.

This study is an extension of my first study “How does a Child Care tutor in an FE College Teach Students to use Email?” which investigated the teaching of email to the 10 students and established how they preferred to be taught IT skills raising the confidence and self-esteem of the students in accessing emails and attachments.

### **Research sample**

Seven first year students were selected on the basis of their results for college screening tests in communication. Three second year students who were to be the mentors of the seven first year students had relatively successful academic records. It was believed that the ementor scheme would raise their self-esteem and confidence through being involved in this research.

### **Collecting Data**

I had discussions with students as a method of collecting information on students’ perceptions of meeting each other and their experience of the use of technology, the assignment observation template and the CACHE marking criteria.

I used a self-answer questionnaire to establish a baseline for this study and offered opportunities for mentees and mentors to discuss their roles and responsibilities.

The questionnaire offered to first year students gathered information on their perception of the role of the ementor and investigated how the ementor would best support the individual students in their studies. This questionnaire completed by individual mentees also informed ementors of specific requirements of their mentee.

The questionnaire offered to second year students investigated their perceptions of the role of the ementor and asked how they would support the mentees to complete their observations.

## **Results of questionnaires**

From the questionnaires, mentees and mentors outlined what they believed would be the role of the mentor and mentees and how the ementor would support mentees in their studies. This ranged from general ideas about giving advice and support on how to write evaluations in order to gain a higher grade E or above, through to specific tasks of helping find quotes and check references and the reading over of work and checking spelling mistakes

Given these results I organised an introductory meeting with students to outline the individual needs of students, and identify the appropriate roles and specific responsibilities of the mentees and mentors.

## **Findings**

### ***a) The introduction of mentors to mentees***

At this stage it became clear that the success of the project was likely to depend on the best matching of mentor with mentees and a number of strategies were employed to facilitate this.

Prior to the 'matching' meeting, staff teaching on the programme observed and assessed behaviour and attitudes of students and their findings were reported back at a team meeting. Alongside this, individuals' preferred learning styles (mentors and mentees) were ascertained using the college tutorial system tool. Personalities and learning needs were noted.

From the beginning of the study it was always intended that mentors and mentees would choose whom they best believe suited their individual needs.

I introduced the three second year students and seven first year students to each other. They were then given the opportunity to discuss what they believed were their personal strengths and weakness when writing observations. The students were then given time alone to decide who they believed would best suit their individual needs. On my return the students had made firm and informed decisions about the best connections and thus decided whom they would best match as a "buddy" in the ementoring process. Interestingly, my own ideas about 'best matches' as ementors and mentees proved to be contrary to the choices made by the participants themselves (which in itself supports the idea that it is often best to directly involve students in decision making processes).

### ***b) Introduction to technology – laptop skills and confidence***

Second year students were allocated their individual laptops and given the opportunity to use them within the home environment. The three ementors commented that they were comfortable with the technology provided that they have access to the same model and specification of laptops within the college environment.

### ***c) Introduction of the task of successful completion of observations– including the Observation and Assessment template and marking criteria***

The first year students were familiar with the observation template, which was introduced late September 2003 in the light of this study; the year one students have used the template as an aide memoire for writing observations to date. (The template is effectively a checklist/ writing frame which ensures that a student's observation of a child covers all relevant areas to be assessed.)The first year students did not have knowledge of the observation template; however they did have a clear knowledge and understanding of the CACHE marking criteria for observations and found it easy to match the criteria to the observation template. Time and use will measure the success or failure of the template. The process of generating feedback to mentees from mentors on the attached copy was discussed by the students involved. A number of points arose from this focus on the example:

- Students with specific learning difficulties discussed the issues of colours which best suited their individual needs;
- It was decided that attaching highlighted comments would be the preferred approach;
- Given the language of texting, it will be interesting to observe if feedback becomes customised.

***d) E-mentoring requires confidence with a range of software programmes***

In the short term a significant issue has been identified with the use of the observation template. Within Unit 1 students are required to observe and assess the behaviour and development of a child or children within the child care and education setting. The students have to appropriately identify and use a range of methods for observing, assessing and recording childrens behaviour and development. The observation recording can take the form of a free description (verbatim observation), visual/graphic presentations, structured profiles etc. The first observation recording which is to be presented to the mentors takes the form of a graphic presentation of data in a bar chart, but unfortunately four out of the seven mentees have not yet gained the skills or confidence to present the observation recording using ICT. As a consequence the students have presented the data manually. This has resulted in the students not being able to email the observation recording to the mentors. Without this vital piece of work the mentor cannot advise on the evaluation, recommendations or personal learning sections of the work as all are influenced by the observation recording.

***e) Technical difficulties***

After introducing the ementors and ementees, email addresses were exchanged we had assumed that the process of ementoring would begin. Unfortunately the students could not access the college email service from home due a problem which developed with the student Microsoft Exchange server. The computer services ran various tests and discovered a faulty hard disc. This necessitates a backup of all the students email and the Exchange has to be reconfigured (not a simple job).

This unfortunate hiatus has caused the enthusiasm and momentum generated by the meetings to be somewhat curtailed.

**The next step to ementoring**

The next step in the process is for all students to begin the emailing process. As identified earlier in the study, students were not able to access the college email service from home due to a problem with the student Microsoft Exchange server. This halted the progress of the study and after a period of three weeks with no “econtacts” it seems that the good work of inducting mentors to mentees may have been wasted. To overcome this I have organised an interim meeting for all students to again meet “face to face” discussing their progress with the process to date.

To overcome the problem of some mentees being unable to present the observation recording of a bar graph using ICT, I am liaising with the IT tutors who deliver IT Key Skills at level two to discuss the possibility of raising student’s awareness of graphic presentation of data.

**Reflections on the research to date**

There may be difficulties in trying to introduce mentoring and e-mentoring in the same project. Consequently, any delays in getting email contact established may have proven beneficial in creating time for mentors and mentees to develop trusting relationships in a traditional face-to face college setting.

There may be difficulties in students establishing a sensitive and developmental tone when giving feedback – the direct impact of email may exacerbate these problems.

Email requires that all assignment information is adapted into email compatible formats – e.g. presentation of graphs etc, and this may require ementors and mentees to possess significant underlying confidence and competence with ICT

As students use the language of text (i.e. from mobile phones) with confidence, the resulting communications could have interesting implications in future research.