Abstract: As educators design, develop, and research models for effective online learning, descriptors such as facilitator and moderator dominate the literature related to the role of the online instructor/teacher. This paper offers the notion of mentor as a more appropriate alternative. In doing so, it becomes necessary to find ways to help mentors develop skills that enable them to work with learners in online environments in ways consistent with this more complex role. This paper examines the unique characteristics of online learner in order to identify what mentors need to be able to do. It then describes a process that scaffolds prospective mentors’ ability to meet learner needs. This process – the ART of mentoring – focuses on a framework for Assessing, Responding, and Targeting online communication so that mentors and learners may create shared responsibility and accountability for reaching learning goals.

Introduction

In 2001, I began designing, developing, researching, and teaching in virtual learning environments that use a mentor-learner model (Norton, 2002). In this model, expert mentors – those with deep knowledge of the content and an interest in sharing that knowledge – have been recruited to support online learners. While it may seem that a deep knowledge of content and a desire to support learners might be sufficient, I have learned that mentoring is not necessarily a natural extension of knowledge and desire. Instead, it has proved necessary to find ways to help others understand the role of mentor in online learning environments and to find ways to help mentors develop skills, dispositions, and habits that support the ability to mentor others effectively. This need became particularly clear nearly a year ago when I was asked to make a presentation about one of the learning environments I was helping develop. Early in the history of The Online Academy – a virtual learning environment for high school learners, members of the policy board and the design team met with an influential group of educational leaders and administrators. As the presentation neared its end, one administrator burst out: "I don't get this mentor thing. If by mentor you mean teacher then why not just call them a teacher. And, if mentor means something different from teacher, parents will never accept learning without a teacher."

At first glance, the answer to the administrator’s question "are mentors the same as teachers?" is yes. A teacher is a skilled professional whose goal is to promote learning. In that sense, the teacher's role and the mentor's role are the same. So why mentor? The answer lies in the recognition that learning in virtual environments is a related but different process and requires a number of habits and skills that are different from those in face-to-face classrooms. Virtual learning requires different learner support structures. So, while a teacher and a mentor both share the goal of promoting learning, they do not necessarily share the same processes and skill sets. Virtual learning requires new roles and responsibilities for both learners and teachers. In The Online Academy and other mentor-learner online environments, the concept of "mentor" best captures the new roles and responsibilities, but it is not always easy to describe that role or to help others prepare to assume the role.

In attempting to understand the role of mentor, three domains of inquiry have emerged. First, how might we clearly articulate to others what a mentor ought to be - what roles and responsibilities are associated with mentoring? Second, what are the unique challenges for online learners that mentors must become skilled at supporting - what do mentors need to be able to do? Third, what framework might be taught to mentors that will guide them in scaffolding and promoting the unique learning needs of online learners - how might we teach mentors to mentor?

What is a Mentor?

Three domains of thinking about mentoring have emerged in the last 30 years. Each offers definitions, roles, responsibilities, and research that inform the role of mentor. The first domain comes from corporate and
government sectors where there is an increased understanding that novice employees need the support and wisdom of veteran employees to become part of the culture and "business" of the organization (i.e. Buchanan, 2004). Many corporate and government agencies have established mentoring programs that link those with expertise and those entering or advancing within the organization. At the center of these mentoring programs is learning to become a contributing member of the organization and career development. A second domain of interest in mentoring has emerged in the area of "at risk" and disabled youth. Programs like Big Brother Big Sister and Partners for Youth with Disabilities have created programs that link caring adults with children and adolescents in an effort to provide these young learners with role models and emotional and interpersonal support. At the center of these programs is learning to become healthy, contributing, and achieving citizens (Sipe, 1996). The third domain of interest in mentoring has emerged within public education. Given the need for an increasingly larger and more skilled teaching force, school divisions and universities have begun mentoring programs that link the novice teacher with the veteran teacher. Referred to as teacher induction, these programs attempt to bridge the difficult first years of teaching and to pass on "best practices" with the goal of supporting good learning opportunities for students, teacher retention, and the professionalization of teaching (i.e. Fideler & Haselkorn, 1999). Much can be gleaned from these domains of inquiry to help clarify the role of mentor in online learning environments.

**A Mentor's Roles and Responsibilities:** Despite the challenges of defining role of the mentor, most all definitions include verbs like support, guide, and facilitate. Most agree with the importance of listening, questioning, and enabling as distinct from telling, directing, and restricting. The general tasks of the mentor involve generating opportunities for development, helping learners set high but achievable goals, making realistic plans, monitoring progress and providing feedback, passing on skills, providing personal support and motivation, and assisting the learner in solving problems. Partners for Youth with Disabilities states that a successful mentor respects young people, listens actively, empathizes, sees solutions and opportunities, is flexible, open, and approachable, is honest and non-judgemental, knows how to have fun, is persistent and committed, and shows a great deal of patience. They state that a mentor is a trusted guide, a caring, responsible adult, and a positive role model but not a parent/legal guardian, a social worker, or a psychologist. Both the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Department of Transportation characterize the successful mentor as one who is: 1.) Supportive - A mentor is one who supports the needs and aspirations of the learner as well as encouraging the learner to accept challenges and overcome difficulties; 2.) Patient - A mentor is patient and willing to spend time performing mentoring responsibilities, allowing adequate time to interact with the learner; 3.) People Oriented - A mentor is one who is genuinely interested in people and has a desire to help others and knows how to effectively communicate and actively listen; 4.) A Good Motivator - A mentor is someone who inspires a learner to do better and motivates through encouraging feedback and challenging work assignments; and 5.) An Effective Teacher - A mentor should thoroughly understand the skills required of the learner and be able to effectively teach these skills and to help manage the learning of the learner. The New York State Training Council, a not-for-profit organization that advocates and supports the training and development of the State’s workforce, states that mentors should: 1.) Value the development of others, 2.) Be willing to commit the time and energy needed to establish and maintain a productive mentoring relationship, 3.) Be willing to share the knowledge and experience they have gained during their career, 4.) Actively observe, coach, and guide the protégé, and 5.) Exhibit skills in active listening, coaching, and the ability to establish rapport with others.

**Learner Roles and Responsibilities:** Learning is not the sole responsibility of the mentor. The mentor/learner relationship is always a two-way interaction. While some learners may already possess the qualities necessary for taking an active role in the mentor/learner relationship, many learners need help in developing the ability to take an active role in the relationship. Many need help learning to become a partner in the mentoring/learning process and to be successful in the online environment. They need help learning to play an active role in their own development by identifying their own needs, making those needs specific, soliciting mentor assistance, and making effective use of that help to increase their own learning. They need help learning how to exhibit a commitment to self-development, to work independently, to develop effective verbal and written communication skills, and to commit the time and energy required to establish and maintain a learning partnership with their mentor.

Mentors can help learners to identify and share needs, to be receptive to information and feedback, to set realistic expectations of the mentor, to ask questions, to communicate problems clearly. Many learners need guidance from their mentors in order to be able to challenge assumptions about self and others, to actively listen, to search for ways to achieve learning objectives, to contribute ideas about options for solving particular problems, to provide feedback to the mentor (including a willingness to discuss failures as well as successes), and to openly express feelings that are important and/or strong. Finally, learners must be helped to follow through on commitments and seek help when necessary.

They also offer little in the way of understanding related to “how” one mentors. What is it that a mentor does? What does a mentor need to know in order to be effective? It is not wise to assume that because one knows their roles and responsibilities they have the skills to be an effective mentor. If one is to expand conceptions of the learning relationship in online learning environments to be more than teacher, facilitator (i.e. Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000), or moderator (Salmon, 2000), it is necessary to articulate what online mentors do. Thus, we turn our attention to the ways in which formal online learning environments present new challenges to learners and, as a consequence, define the kinds of skills and habits for which an online mentor must be prepared.

What Must Online Mentors Be Able To Do?

Defining Mentoring: A definition of mentoring may be as illusive as the process itself. Mentoring is not a new concept; in fact, mentoring existed in ancient Greece. It is only recently that the road has been repaved with new ideas, and efforts have been made to formalize and explain mentoring. The definition that best captures what is meant by mentoring in online environments is the following: “Mentoring has become less product-oriented (characterized by transfer of knowledge) and more process-oriented (involving knowledge acquisition, application and critical reflection).” The protocol for mentoring is grounded in a reciprocal and collaborative learning partnership between two (or more) individuals who share mutual responsibility and accountability for reaching mutually defined learner learning goals. . . No matter what the medium, the heart and soul of every successful mentoring partnership rests on learning and relationship. First, learning is the fundamental process, purpose and product of mentoring. Without learning, there is no purpose for mentoring. Second, mentoring relies on continuously connecting and cultivating the relationship (Zachary, 2000).” Using this definition as a guide, it still remains to clearly articulate exactly how a mentor fills this role – what must an online mentor be able to do? The following analysis of online learning environments articulates needs inherent in the more complex online role of mentoring. It suggests the centrality of knowledge and skills related to 1.) promoting content learning and conceptual understanding, 2.) supporting self-regulation and self-efficacy, and 3.) building personal and interpersonal relationships.

Promote Content Learning and Conceptual Understanding: There is some controversy and a great deal of discussion these days about the role of the teacher. Some say, often in a rather pejorative way, that the role of teachers has traditionally been that of a “sage on the stage.” By this they mean that a teacher stands before the class “telling” students what they need to know, expecting students to “spit” it back on objective tests. While newer understandings about learning suggest that a teacher’s role ought to be a bit different, it is a myth that a teacher ought not to be a sage. How are learners to develop expertise if there is no expert present? How are we to know if learners’ constructions are viable and rigorous if there is no sage supporting the learner? Deep content understanding is a prerequisite to good teaching. The teacher as “sage” must be as present in virtual environments as in face-to-face environments but being a sage in a virtual environment takes new skills. Online mentors must be prepared for the challenges of promoting content learning and conceptual understanding in largely text-based mediums. To do so, they must be able to use, promote, and even explain the language of thinking, mental management, strategic planning, higher order knowledge, and transfer of learning?

Support Self-Regulation and Self-Efficacy: In the last twenty years, new descriptions of a teacher’s role as facilitator, coach, and cognitive mentor have become popular. These descriptors of a teacher’s role reflect the notion that students not the teacher are the locus of the learning act. This suggests that as learners what students need is a “guide on the side” – a provocateur and support system. Virtual learning is essentially "homework" learning. Even in online environments that promote collaboration and/or use discussion boards, their rigorousness and success depends on students’ preparation prior to entering these activities. Online learners do not attend class where information is presented, where directions are given, where class projects and discussions scaffold learning, and where assignments are “turned in” and tests are “given.” Instead, the information to be learned is embedded in instructional resources made available to the learner. Directions, clarifications, discussions, and meaning are embedded in written messages (email, web pages, downloaded files, synchronous messaging). Learners must learn to ask for clarification. Accessing all this information depends on learner initiative. Virtual learning requires motivation, a new set of study skills, independence, self-direction, individual initiative and responsibility, and self-efficacy (a sense of competence in one’s learning ability). Younger learners, in particular, and all learners in general,
need and appreciate the counsel of others in meeting these challenging learning demands. Online mentors must be able to support self-regulation and promote self-efficacy in online environments where learning is essentially “homework.” They must be able to assist with time management, with study skills, with framing requests for learning support, and with the demands of predominantly text environments.

**Build Personal and Interpersonal Relationships:** Every teacher has a relationship with their students. Yet, with 30 or more students in a face-to-face class, a teacher's relationship with individual students is often not at the core of their relationship with students. A teacher's primary relationship is with the class-with the group of students. And, as veteran teachers know, each class has its own personality. A teacher's relationship with one class may be congenial; with another, it may be dominated by management issues. One class may readily engage in discussion; other classes are reluctant to discuss, and the teacher must rely on question and answer sessions. Assignments are usually given to all students, and it is not always possible to respond individually to assignment.

Individual students have their primary relationship with teachers through the class. They watch how a teacher presents themselves to the group, how they handle group challenges, and how they relate both positively and negatively to fellow classmates. Their opinion of teachers as people - coach, mentor, role model, intellectual, friend, and wise adult - derives more from the teacher's interactions with the group than with them as individuals. If a teacher seems trustworthy, it is probably not because learners have had a personal experience with the teacher but because they see the teacher acting with others in a trustworthy way. A teacher's time with the class is defined by the length of periods; their time with individuals is limited. Students find it hard to ask private questions about content, personal questions, or even for help. They are busy rushing off to their next class, to catch their ride home, to a part-time job, or to be with peers. In virtual learning environments, relationships shift from the class to the individual. Even when groups of students are taking the same class, communication with individual students is often private. Teachers must, can, and are challenged to know the individual. Students must, can, and are challenged to know the teacher through their own personal and individual experience. When a teacher no longer "knows" students as part of a class and must come to "know" and "interact" with them as individuals, not only is the relationship different, it is more intimate and introspective. The relationship is no longer the relationship of teacher/student but of mentor/learner. Thus, an online mentor must understand how to build relationships, to question and challenge, to listen, and to bring closure to the relationship.

**What Process Can We Teach to Enable Mentors?**

Given the unique attributes of virtual learning environments, promoting content learning and conceptual understanding, supporting self-regulation and self-efficacy, and building personal and interpersonal relationships become central mentor competencies. Yet, identifying these competencies does not suggest “how” one might meet them. Those who support the development of mentors must find a way to scaffold prospective mentors’ ability to meet learner needs. This paper proposes a framework – the ART of mentoring – to enable mentors to Assess, Respond, and Target online communication so that mentors and learners may create shared responsibility and accountability for reaching learning goals. Mentors must be aware of and have practice with the strategies or “tricks” associated with the ART of mentoring. They need to have a clear understanding that learning is not accomplished with a single response to a virtual message – no matter how well crafted. Rather, mentors need to understand that online mentoring is a process that is ongoing, iterative, and spiral in nature. There is always another incoming message whether it is a response to a previous message or a newly initiated message. Every outgoing message will elicit yet another incoming message. The mentor must Assess each message for danger, context, and content. They must Respond to each message in light of their assessment and choosing appropriate strategies or “tricks” selected from their mentoring repertoire. Last, before the response is sent, it is necessary to Target that response toward learning, linking the response to the learner’s prior knowledge, learning goals, or life experiences and, when possible, shaping the direction of the learning conversation. Finally, the mentor sends an outgoing message fully anticipating another incoming message. We turn our attention now to assessing, responding, and targeting.

**Assessing**

**Danger:** In assessing a learner’s incoming message, it is necessary first to identify danger or harm. The mentor/learner relationship can quickly become very personal and intimate. Learners often feel comfortable with or compelled to bring the mentor into the broader challenges of their life. A mentor must always and firstly be on the
look out for danger. They must ask: Does this message reflect danger to the learner or to others? Is the learner safe from harm? While this might seem rather dramatic, think about the following example. After just two weeks of an online relationship, one of our mentors received a message from a young high school student completing a short-term online unit. While the young student had been prompt with assignments and consistent in their communications with their mentor for most of the relationship, things had gone quiet. The mentor inquired about the student’s missed target for submitting an assignment and received a return message that the student had had a confrontation with his parents, had been banned from his home, and was “having problems getting regular online access.” Clearly, this young man was in harm’s way. Luckily, the student was simultaneously enrolled in a public high school, and a call to the school counselor brought community resources to the student’s aid.

Not all danger is as dramatic. However, it is still important to recognize it. A mentor who regularly asks the danger question during the assessing phase is one who is on the alert for signs of frustration, loss of interest and/or motivation, the urgent need for help, and poor allotment of time. Watching for danger signs like these helps the mentor anticipate and deal with factors that may interfere with learning before they become crises or slow or stop the learning process. Knowing about their learner and about school, university, and community resources positions the mentor to act quickly and intelligently. If, after assessing a learner’s message for danger, no danger seems apparent, the mentor moves on to assessing messages for both context and content before responding.

**Context:** Zachary (2000) describes the mentoring process as passing through four phases: preparing, negotiating, enabling, and closing. Issues related to preparing include exploring mutualities of interests, learning needs, learning goals, mentoring expectations, role assumptions, learning styles, learning needs, and role limitations is critical to setting the context for achieving desired learning goals. The learning relationship of mentor and learner depends on a shared relationship – a mutual exchange of interests and values. The mentor cannot hold back their self from the relationship. It takes work to establish multiple and meaningful points of connection (Zachary, 2000). Negotiating is the contracting phase of the relationship. During negotiating, conversations include when and how to meet, responsibilities, criteria for success, and accountability. In this phase, mentor and learner come to a shared understanding or working agreement about the “softer” issues in a relationship. The outcome of this iterative phase is a work plan consisting of well-defined goals, criteria and measurement for success, delineation of mutual responsibility, accountability mechanisms, and protocols for dealing with stumbling blocks. The enabling phase is when most of the learning between mentoring partners takes place. The mentor’s role during this phase is to nurture learner growth by maintaining an open and affirming learning climate, by asking the right questions at the right time, and by providing thoughtful, timely, candid and constructive feedback. During the enabling phase, the learning progress and the learning process are continuously monitored. The final phase, closing, involves evaluating the learning, acknowledging progress, and celebrating achievement. It sets the stage for ending the mentoring relationship or for moving the relationship on to a new set of goals and contents.

Although these phases are not as linear as they appear, understanding the phases and assessing incoming messages in terms of issues associated with the phases helps to place the message in the broader context of the mentoring relationship and to react to the meaning of the message as well as the content of the message. A mentor who learns to examine messages in terms of the mentoring process is better prepared to recognize learning tasks left incomplete, learning tasks that need to be revisited, or learning tasks that had seemed agreed upon but were actually still not part of a shared vision. Assessing a message for context helped one mentor understand that sloppy assignments were really a reflection of inadequate negotiations about what constituted acceptable work not about lack of student willingness to work. Assessing a message for context helped another mentor understand that a student’s slowness in meeting negotiated deadlines was not the result of poor work habits but the student’s lack of conceptual understanding. Asking the question enabled the learner to express their confusion.

**Content:** Messages from learners most likely fall into one of three categories: personal/interpersonal relationships, self-regulation, or content learning. It is not, however, always easy to tell what the content of a message is. Often, the overt message about one thing is really a covert message about another thing. Personal/interpersonal content is either directed to the mentor/learner relationship or to concerns about relationships with others. A message from a learner that expresses doubt about the value of their thoughts in response to a question or the “rightness” of an assignment is as much about their feelings about trust and risk-taking or themselves as a competent learner as it is about their mastery of content. Self-regulation messages are about time, difficulty of work, and feeling overwhelmed. When a learner writes that an assignment is dumb or takes too much time, it may well not be a legitimate concern or even a complaint but a cry for help managing their time or reflecting an inability to distinguish relevant information from elaborating details. Messages that contain poor quality work are often reflections of self-regulation issues. Since the focus of a mentoring relationship in formal online learning environments is learning, content learning messages are perhaps the most frequent. A question asking for clarification of content or assistance in completing an assignment is clearly about a content learning topic. Often,
though, messages that do not at first glance seem to be about content learning are in fact about content learning. Students have difficulty asking questions about what they do not understand. Often excuses about time or requests for extensions do not reflect self-regulation issues but are really reflections of content learning challenges. When a mentor has asked an extension question or a clarification question about content learning and the learner ignores that question or focuses on the next activity, the message is an attempt to avoid talking about content learning. If a submitted assignment has errors, it is not enough to identify the incorrect items or ask students to redo the assignment. The message is really about the need for assistance with content or concept understanding.

**Responding**

Messages with content that deals primarily with personal/interpersonal relationships are generally within the context of the preparing phase and less often the closing phase. Messages with content that reflects self-regulation issues are usually associated with the negotiating phase or less often the enabling phase. Messages with content that is predominantly related to content learning and conceptual understanding are most frequently within the context of enabling. Mentors must respond to these messages. Sometimes messages depend on the strength of the mentor/learner relationship but are about content unrelated to direct learning goals. They may be messages seeking advice about other learning contexts or about personal issues outside the defined learning space. Yet, the mentor must respond to these messages as well. The wise mentor is always on the lookout for the unexpected.

Carefully assessing messages to identify both the overt and covert content of the message promotes the ability of mentors to respond in ways that reflect the learner’s needs. Sometimes it is not clear exactly what the message is about, and the mentor might have more than one hypothesis. In this case, it is appropriate for the mentor to respond by asking follow up questions that help clarify exactly what the learner’s needs are. For instance, a young student in an online geometry class emailed their mentor saying how much they appreciated the mentor’s swift responses to all their questions and stating that they “had no support at home.” The mentor’s first reaction was one of danger – concern about the student’s home environment. Hoping to open a conversation that might lead to a better understanding of the student’s situation, the mentor asked what kind of support they felt was missing. The student’s response was: “No one at my house understands geometry.” The original message was not a danger alarm; it was a message about how challenging geometry was for him (content learning) and how he felt he needed the mentor’s support to be a successful learner (personal/interpersonal). Appropriate responses in the future should include efforts to help clarify concepts and assignments before the learner becomes frustrated or lost as well as reassurances about the strength of the mentoring relationship.

Mentors able to effectively assess messages and craft insightful and genuine responses are on their way to creating “a reciprocal and collaborative learning partnership between two (or more) individuals who share mutual responsibility and accountability for reaching mutually defined learner learning goals (Zachary, 2000).” Since messages are rarely about only one content or relate to only one context, responding to learner messages takes thoughtful reflection and attention to multiple learning needs. Like a classroom teacher who must possess a “bag of tricks” they can use in their classroom to present information, to demonstrate concepts, to manage student learning and student behavior, and to assess student learning, an online mentor needs a “bag of tricks” to inform the ways in which they respond to learner’s messages. Thus, a skilled mentor is knowledgeable about a series of strategies, is able to select from or combine these strategies, and is comfortable using the strategies to respond in ways that create a climate for learning. Below is a short description of the strategies a mentor ought to have in their “bag of tricks.”

**Facilitating Personal/Interpersonal Learning Relationships:** Mentors must be skilled at 1.) trust building strategies and understand that trust derives from communication, availability, predictability, and loyalty, 2.) active listening and attending strategies that paraphrase the speaker's words rather than react to them, allowing mentors to confirm or revise perceptions so that learning needs can be expressed and met, 3.) empathetic responding strategies that allow the mentor to convey understanding of both events and emotional response while simultaneously communicating intense interest, 4.) sending “I” messages through which the mentor is able to take ownership of their beliefs and feelings rather than blame or deflect, and 5.) questioning and challenging strategies that allow the mentor to take non-judgmental positions while prompting students to reflect on beliefs and choices.

**Supporting Self-Regulation and Self-Efficacy:** Mentors must understand the roots of self-regulation and the relationship between success with self-regulation and the building of self-efficacy. As mentors assist and promote learners’ ability to take charge of their learning, develop learning independence, and accomplish learning goals, learners build confidence and succeed at learning tasks. A mentor must be knowledgeable about a range of self-regulation techniques and be able to offer advice about using these techniques and clarification about how these techniques can be implemented. The mentor must be able to advise about study skills, especially those related to coping with large amounts of information. Summarizing, note taking, distinguishing between main ideas and...
Learning is not just limited to a course of study; learning should inform the conduct of a student’s life, promote their career goals, and/or support generalizable habits of mind useful in multiple contexts. A skilled mentor is able to build into their messages responses that encourage learners’ to build a language of thinking and develop thinking dispositions, mental management, strategic thinking, higher order knowledge, and transfer of learning. Skilled mentors know how to teach and use words and modes of communication in a natural language that refer to thinking processes and thinking products. They assist learners to internalize abiding tendencies toward distinct patterns of thinking behaviors. They promote metacognitive habits by asking questions that promote reflection on and about the learning process. They support learners to develop explicit and articulate plans for how to thread one’s way through an intellectually challenging situation. They push learners past the facts of a discipline to a consideration of disciplinary problem-solving strategies, characteristic ways of justifying and explaining things, and how inquiry proceeds in a particular discipline and goes beyond explanation to the search for questions, themes, and theories.

Targeting

Promoting Content Learning and Conceptual Understanding: Learning is about more than acquiring facts and skills. It is about seeing the relationship between those facts and skills and success with problem solving. Learning is not just limited to a course of study; learning should inform the conduct of a student’s life, promote their career goals, and/or support generalizable habits of mind useful in multiple contexts. A skilled mentor is able to build into their messages responses that encourage learners’ to build a language of thinking and develop thinking dispositions, mental management, strategic thinking, higher order knowledge, and transfer of learning. Skilled mentors know how to teach and use words and modes of communication in a natural language that refer to thinking processes and thinking products. They assist learners to internalize abiding tendencies toward distinct patterns of thinking behaviors. They promote metacognitive habits by asking questions that promote reflection on and about the learning process. They support learners to develop explicit and articulate plans for how to thread one’s way through an intellectually challenging situation. They push learners past the facts of a discipline to a consideration of disciplinary problem-solving strategies, characteristic ways of justifying and explaining things, and how inquiry proceeds in a particular discipline and goes beyond explanation to the search for questions, themes, and theories.
Conclusion

When I began designing virtual learning environments that used the mentor-learner model, I did not expect that teaching mentors would be a necessity. For the environments we have been designing, mentors were all graduates of our Master’s and doctoral degree programs who possessed rigorous, deep, and applied knowledge of the content of these environments. I believed that with a few words about mentoring that they would be able and comfortable in establishing mentoring relationships that bridged the range of complex tasks inherent in those environments. It did not take long to realize that mentoring is not necessarily a nature process, that understanding roles and responsibilities would not be enough, and that I would need to “teach” mentoring. From my research, experience supporting these mentors, and with a great deal of thought, I developed the framework described in this paper as the ART of mentoring. I have since designed and developed a 15 graduate credit hour university certificate program to support mentors in developing the knowledge and skills that allow them to mentor learners. This program is teaching teachers to teach in virtual environments and to assume ever increasingly complex educational roles.

This program is taught online using the mentor-learner model. It seemed to me that learning in a virtual environment and experiencing robust mentoring would serve as a model. If, indeed, we teach as we are taught, one needs to learn in a manner consistent with mentoring others in a virtual environment. Each course in the certificate program uses a text as anchor, a supplemental set of readings, an synthesizing activity to reflect knowledge gained from readings, a series of “incoming messages” that present the learner with messages they might encounter as a mentor, and a summative, reflective, culminating activity. Skilled mentors now teach virtual teachers and virtual high school learners supplemental to their own face-to-face classroom practice. Perhaps, the most dramatic evidence of the certificate’s impact are the mentor reports stating that their experiences in the certificate program and in mentoring virtual learners has impacted their face-to-face practice. Perhaps lessons learned in this emerging learning environment will help shape more longstanding practices in face-to-face environments for teaching is, after all, a very difficult art. Please feel free to contact me if you would like information about this program.

References


