

National School Network

TELEMENTORING

Community-school collaboration - BBN's Mentor Center™ -

Melanie Goldman
mgoldman@bbn.com

BBN Corporation, a GTE Company
70 Fawcett Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Telementoring opens up possibilities for new kinds of collaboration in the schools - ones where members of the community contribute to the learning of students and find benefits for themselves as well.

Mentoring involves an experienced person giving guidance, knowledge, and encouragement to someone who is learning. The benefit to mentors can be furthering one's own knowledge, the fulfillment of the desire "to make a difference," and to make a personal connection in their communities. In this age of the Internet, innovative educators are combining the concept of mentoring with the reach and convenience of new telecommunications technology. Now, more students can become involved in a positive, collaborative relationship with a caring adult, who can provide attention, academic assistance, validation, advice, and support.

BBN's National School Network, an NSF sponsored program, has created an easy to use Web-base tool Mentor Center™, that supports linking students and classes with outside mentors. Put in its simplest terms, Mentor Center™ brings together on the Web three participants in an educational collaborative relationship.

- The teacher - that is the person who has the responsibility for overseeing and facilitating a student's learning.
- The student - that is, the person who, in the course of his or her learning, is creating documents or products that require feedback from some more knowledgeable person.
- The mentor - that is a more knowledgeable person in the community (locally or globally) who is willing and able to offer feedback to some student about his or her documents or products.

Working with a 6th grade teacher, we initially designed Mentor Center™ as a way to have community members serve as mentors in an ongoing, constructive relationship with students to help them with their writing. Mentor Center™ has evolved to where any type of work available through the Web, text, graphics, sound, can be shared through the tool. Underlying the development of the Mentor Center™ tool is the hypothesis - telementoring could become more scalable if there were tools that tailor feedback to the learners' requirements.

Setting up:

For setting up the project, teachers enter mentors and students into respective "pools" of names/addresses and then match mentors and students. Mentor Center™ allows for several variations of relationships - one student to work with one mentor, one student to work with several mentors, or several students to work with one mentor.

Exchanging work:

Once assigned a mentor the student pastes his/her written work into a form on the web; an automatically sent email message notifies the mentor (or mentors) that the student's work is waiting for him/her to read and includes the Web Page address (URL). The mentor accesses the web page with

the student's work along with a feedback form. The mentor enters constructive comments which are automatically returned - either to the student or the teacher.

Technology:

The Mentor Center™ tool uses publicly available software such as World Wide Web based pages, Internet browsers. It will be inexpensive to set-up and maintain on a school's machine. To keep the technical and cost requirements low, it does not require any particular commercial database system. All information is kept in files on the web-site which can be used as is or shipped to a commercial database if desired. Mentor Center™ is designed so that at some future time we will be able to make it available to everyone, no matter what platform a site is using.

Teachers and facilitators find that Mentor Center™ provides a comfortable structure on which to base a telementoring project. Mentors and students find it easy to use. One project facilitator commented, "[Mentor Center™ is] extremely easy to set up and easy for students and mentors to learn."

Current projects:

- **ArtsEdge - Kennedy Center for Performing Arts**

Graduate music education students mentoring middle and high schools students.

- **Educational Testing Service, Princeton NJ**

Accomplished teachers will work with teachers to see and analyze other's practice as a way to improve their own.

- **Regional Information Center upstate NY**

Graduate education students mentor high school students in writing.

- **Concord, NH**

Lawyers in a local law firm will mentor 6th graders in writing.

- **Rosa Parks School, Cambridge, MA**

Employees of BBN mentor 6th graders in writing

- **MediaOne Company**

Employees in MediaOne's Cybermentor program will volunteer to telementor teachers in the Watertown, MA school system in use of technology.