

Cases on Online Tutoring, Mentoring, and Educational Services: Practices and Applications by Kate Schrauth & Elie Losleben icouldbe.org, USA edited by **Dr. Gary Berg.**

icouldbe.org

Mentoring the Next Generation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the high school dropout rate in the United States at epidemic levels and the proportion of guidance counselors decreasing, mentoring programs are an increasingly effective way to reach young people with the college and career guidance they need. icouldbe.org's online mentoring programs reach young people who do not have access to quality educational resources, using a dynamic virtual learning environment to connect them to mentors who offer practical and individualized advice, information and expertise. The organization's award-winning program is grounded on an evidence-based curriculum that is student-paced and student-led, placing young people at the center of a community of classroom teachers and adult mentors invested in the their futures. icouldbe.org puts child safety first and monitors mentor-mentee relationships in a controlled and accountable environment. Evidence indicates that icouldbe.org's e-mentoring program has many of the benefits of face-to-face mentoring--an exciting find as educators turn to mentoring as a classroom intervention.

BACKGROUND

Every nine seconds, a high school student in the United States drops out of school. Approximately one-third of high school students in public school will not graduate (Bridgeland, 2006). Add another challenge, like being an ethnic minority, coming from a low-income neighborhood, having a disability--even living in a city--and the odds of finishing school are even slimmer (NCES, 2002).

To make matters worse, the proportion of guidance counselors throughout the public school system is steadily decreasing, with one guidance counselor often responsible for over 500 students (McDonough, 2005). Students cite a lack of adult concern and involvement in their lives, as well as school seeming irrelevant, as key reasons for dropping out (Lehr, 2004). Even if they do graduate, studies show that ethnic minorities and students from low-income families continue to face barriers to college access (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). Experts agree that education is the cornerstone of young people's futures and a crucial step in breaking a cycle of poverty that can impact generations. How do we reach at-risk young people with the support and encouragement they need, not just to stay in school, but to work towards a better future?

Adam Aberman an educator with a history of working with at-risk youth in challenging situations recognized that at-risk young people are missing the role models and mentors that would inform and encourage them to make strong decisions about their futures. He believed that young people need experienced adults to help steer them towards their dreams. In low-income neighborhoods where one or both parents often work long hours and may have no college experience themselves, an outside adult can be crucial in raising young people's expectations of themselves, setting life goals, and helping them to learn and practice the skills to achieve them.

Connecting young people to mentors, Aberman realized, was the ideal solution. According to the National Dropout Prevention Center, mentoring programs are consistently correlated with improved school achievement, increased graduation rates, self-esteem and school attendance, a decrease in discipline referrals and early pregnancy rates, and even associated with an increase in the rate that young people secure entry-level jobs and perform community service. He knew that traditional mentoring programs are logistically challenging and expensive to implement. He was convinced that mentoring programs could keep young people focused on their goals, but knew there must be a better way to implement them.

Traditionally, mentoring programs have connected students and adults in environments where they meet regularly at a specific place and time. But putting school children and adult professionals in face-to-face relationships is both logistically challenging and a child protection risk. Although success stories across the United States are plentiful, traditional mentoring programs demand high levels of outside supervision and intense program administration. There is also the challenge of sourcing available and motivated mentors from the local area. For these reasons, bringing existing programs to scale is expensive and demands a large on-the-ground program staff. Traditionally, the benefits of mentoring carry a heavy administrative and personnel cost that often slow its growth as a scalable educational intervention.

By 2000, the Internet was already revolutionizing social interactions and learning spaces. Aberman wanted to bring that reach to the rapidly growing field of mentoring. What if the Internet could become the platform where students and their mentors connected? That way, young people could get the most out of potential mentors and pick someone that suited their unique goals and needs--not just someone who was available to meet them after school in their neighborhood once a week. Mentees and mentors could even live on opposite sides of the country--it wouldn't matter. Even better, an online program could be effectively managed and brought to scale with strong leadership and a good team.

The organization's goals were far-reaching yet focused. icouldbe.org's online mentoring programs would provide the college and career direction young people needed to make strong decisions about their future. Adult professionals would volunteer online to mentor young people in public schools under the guidance of their classroom teachers. The program would help to combat the loss of career and educational guidance programs in American public schools, especially in neighborhoods where young people were already at-risk for violent behavior, low academic achievement and truancy--the same factors that contribute to a young person not finishing school.

In 2000, Aberman and a Board committed to education founded icouldbe.org, eager to apply the principles of traditional mentoring to an online environment. They learned that online mentoring tends to remove not just geographical barriers, but individual biases and the effects of age differences between mentors and mentees. Developing a student-led curriculum that was driven by the student gave young people autonomy and power in their mentor-mentee relationships and made a substantial difference to empowering their students.

CASE DESCRIPTION

Almost ten years since its beginnings, icouldbe.org continues its mission to mitigate the American dropout crisis through its online mentoring programs. Mentoring programs have been so successful at raising the bar for college attendance and career achievement that many states in America have made them mandatory components of their more experimental takes on secondary education. At career-themed academy high schools in California, one-year mentoring programs are part of the curriculum. Michigan's state government runs a public program that supports more than 200 local mentoring organizations, with Governor's Service Awards that recognize outstanding service each year. In 2010, mentoring took center stage on the national agenda as a powerful way to support young people struggling in school, at home and in life. Mentoring programs across public school districts, supported by Boards of Education, are on the rise, yet few are tapping into the potential of online mentoring as a cost-effective and viable way to reach large populations of young people with quality mentoring programs. Can the Internet mediate a mentor-mentee relationship with similar outcomes to traditional mentoring?

One of the issues icouldbe.org sees at face-to-face mentoring programs is that they require a high number of program staff, something that isn't necessary for online mentoring. In each location a face-to-face mentoring program is implemented, the program needs people present to recruit and train mentors, match them to mentees, and to monitor and follow-up on how mentoring relationships are doing. While worthwhile, face-to-face mentoring programs are complicated, costly and can only reach a limited capacity. icouldbe.org circumvents many of these challenges. Online volunteers don't have to travel far distances to neighborhoods outside their comfort zone. They can mentor from their home or office at any time. Online, icouldbe.org connects young people to mentors that match their career and academic interests, no matter where they live. In underserved or rural areas, icouldbe.org's program is at a definite advantage.

Social science researchers at Drexel University in Philadelphia have been monitoring icouldbe.org's mentoring programs for over two years, evaluating their efficacy and effectiveness according to a carefully developed set of criteria. Drexel researchers used pre- and post-survey data from students, weighing responses using previously validated, multi-item scales of key outcomes including general self-efficacy and satisfaction, frequency of interaction and students' relationship with their online mentors. Transcripts of mentor-mentee communications, including curriculum posts and email interactions, are coded and analyzed. Qualitative analysis focuses on measuring changes in students' locus of control in making decisions that affect their current and future academic and personal lives. The findings show that students in icouldbe.org's mentoring program demonstrate a statistically significant increase in decision-making abilities and self-perception of their abilities to cope in school and life. As the locus of control shifts from external to internal control, students find new confidence and in using learned techniques and tools to reach academic, career and personal goals.

Mentors and Mentees on icouldbe.org

icouldbe.org's award-winning program is grounded on an evidence-based curriculum that connects young people to mentors from hundreds of professional fields, helping mentees to set career and educational goals. Whether you're a classroom teacher using the icouldbe.org curriculum, a student mentee or an adult mentor, all of icouldbe.org's programs are accessed through a unique online platform that requires a username and password to enter. One of the unique features protecting the icouldbe.org community is that mentors and mentees never meet face-to-face--all mentoring exchanges are limited to the icouldbe.org platform. All communications are filtered and monitored to ensure the safety of both mentee and mentor. This ensures a protected environment where students can connect with their mentors, focus on their dreams and set life goals. In addition, mentoring is asynchronous--mentors and mentees do not need to be online at the same time, allowing for a diverse pool of mentors to volunteer when it suits their schedules.

Recognized as a leader in the field of online child safety, in 2008 icouldbe.org was invited to present to the Internet Safety and Technology Task Force at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School. Icouldbe.org recognizes the importance of creating an environment where there is both absolute privacy and absolute accountability. Icouldbe.org screens potential mentors, filtering content, and monitoring and regulating all users. The organization also monitors young people's relationships on the site to protect against potential cyber-bullying. Learning how to interact and present themselves online in a protected community has a ripple effect on other sites the mentees visit.