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Article abstract

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Technical Evaluation Report

39. Marriage Mentorship at a Distance

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Abstract

Marriage mentorship is one of the most effective methods through which a couple can enrich their marriage. A good mentorship relationship is based on feelings of warmth and affinity between mentors and mentees. When a relationship of trust is established, the mentees feel more freedom to express their deeper feelings and to explore new paths of mutual understanding. In what ways does the quality of interaction change when mentors and mentees interact via a technological medium such as online audio-conferencing? This paper compares three marriage mentoring experiences that employed online conferencing as the medium of interaction. Audio-conferencing methods provided a particularly warm, trusting interaction between participants, and an effective environment for learning and for practicing communication skills. The paper makes recommendations for efficient online mentoring practice, and builds on a previous discussion of online practice in the community advocacy context (Report #35 in this series).

Introduction

Mentoring is a highly effective form of marriage enrichment for good marriages, troubled marriages, and those in between (McManus, 2001). Normally mentoring occurs face-to-face (F2F), which is regarded as the most efficient mode for the mentors and mentees to establish the warmth and affinity that is the foundation of a good mentoring relationship. When F2F meeting is not convenient or practical, however, online methods of communication may be considered. Can mentorship be effective when it is mediated through online technology? This paper examines the use of online audio-conferencing as a medium to support an effective marriage mentorship relationship in a distance education (DE) environment.

Three Online Marriage Enrichment Experiences

The writer has participated in three DE environments designed to enrich marriage relationships. Each experience was significantly distinctive, either in the content of the program, the medium of interaction, or the role of the writer. The first, "CoupleTALK," was an online marriage enrichment course. It is included in this discussion as an example of asynchronous interaction for comparison with the other programs that used a synchronous audio-conferencing tool. The second session, "Mentorship Training," was not designed as a mentoring program, but, through the experience, participants did feel mentored. As a type of mentoring situation involving relatively

healthy relationships, it provided some interesting comparisons with the third example - the online mentorship of a couple with a troubled marriage.

1. CoupleTALK Trial (CT)

The writer and spouse participated as students in *CoupleTALK* (1999), a DE program offered by Kansas State University. The main study materials were online texts by Olsen and Rice (1997). The program was divided into seven modules: 1) Introductions; 2) How to Fight Right; 3) Learning to Listen; 4) Expressing Yourself; 5) Managing Expectations; 6) The Balancing Act; 7) Best Friends. Each module specified its own learning outcomes, readings, and activities, and participants were instructed to complete these sequentially. Self-evaluation quizzes were provided at the end of each module to provide students with a metric of their own progress. Students were strongly encouraged to participate in an asynchronous, text-based computer-mediated conference (CMC) associated with each module. This was the only forum for interaction between participants. Private email communications could occur between the instructor and individual participants.

Twelve individuals were enrolled in the program: four from Kansas, three from Canada, two from Tennessee, two from Texas, and one from Argentina. There was no requirement that both husband and wife should register. Of the two couples enrolled in the session, the writer and spouse were the only obvious couple. The CMC postings indicated that many of the other participants would have liked their spouse to be involved, but for a variety of reasons including busy-ness, disinterest, and alienation, this did not happen. It was difficult to sense the degree of involvement of participants. Other than the CMC discussion, all the readings and activities were pursued independently. Apart from an anonymous final evaluation, the instructor did not receive any feedback during the session other than the participants' CMC comments. After the second module, only three participants plus the instructor/ moderator contributed to the CMC discussions. The instructor later reported that participation in this session of the course had been similar to previous sessions. The volume of discussion had dwindled sharply over the last three modules, and no more than 10 percent of participants completed the final evaluation.

2. Marriage Mentorship Training at a Distance Trial (MT)

In 2003, the writer and spouse, based in Ontario, were leaders in a series of a nine audio-conferences with three couples from a community located about 200 km away. The leaders had previously met F2F with most of the remote participants, who all knew each other well through their involvement in different marriage mentorship activities for several years. The online sessions were not intended as a forum to deal with the personal issues of the couples, but were intended to introduce them to new concepts and skills involved with marriage mentorship, both F2F and online. The conferences were facilitated by audio-conferencing software from *TalkingCommunities*. Participants required a Windows computer with speakers, a microphone attached to their computer soundcard, and a 33K or better Internet connection. Initially the three remote couples were together at one of their homes, but later in the series of meetings they each connected from their own chosen location. On one occasion with a guest participant, there were five simultaneous connections to the conference, the maximum that the software license would support. On another occasion, the group divided into pairs of couples meeting in separate conferences to practice using some of the techniques and tools under consideration. Most of the time the audio-conferencing interface worked well, though occasionally some users had problems maintaining a stable Internet connection.

Each conference lasted was about an hour and involved teaching, group discussion, and practice. With the half-duplex audio communication channel, there was opportunity for participants at each location to interact privately or with the whole online group. During each session, the leader/moderator controlled a display of PowerPoint outlines on each participant's screen. The couples had access to these outlines in advance of each session by downloading them from a website. Between sessions, they completed short assignments. A fruitful learning element was the discussion among the couples about the content under consideration, and its relationship to their mentoring experiences. In the early sessions, participants discussed the role and responsibilities of mentors. A number of the sessions dealt with communication skills, and how to introduce and rehearse them with mentees. The sessions at the end addressed the use of REFOCCUS (Markey, Micheletto and Becker, 1990), a relationship inventory tool designed to identify strengths in the marriage relationship and to explore areas for growth and problem solving. Because the couples were already active as marriage mentors in their communities, they were able to apply what they were learning in those situations. They would share some of their experiences in those mentoring situations with the group, and would discuss how the application of their learning had produced noticeable improvements in the interactions with and among their mentees. This was encouraging to all participants. One of the summative evaluations stated: "It has already had a great impact - we have seen just over the past two months great improvements in (the mentees') relationships, especially if they make the commitment to really use their new skills."

3. Marriage Mentorship at a Distance Trial (MM)

The writer and spouse, based in Ontario, met, as a mentor couple, in a series of synchronous, online audio-conferences with another couple about 200 km away. TalkingCommunities audio-conferencing software was used. The two couples previously had some F2F discussions, and it was understood by all that the mentee couple had some serious difficulties in their relationship. One of the mentee spouses was enthusiastic about addressing marital issues, whereas the other tended to avoid dealing with issues. This pursuer-avoider pattern has been identified as a major source of conflict in many marriages (Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg, 2001). The mentee couple was initially very uncomfortable with the concept of communicating through the computer. The woman indicated that she had a phobia about computers and avoided using them. The man had used the computer for writing letters and some email, but was very apprehensive about the technical demands he assumed would be involved in setting up and participating in the online conference.

The early online sessions focused on communication skills – identifying negative communication patterns, constructing positive messages, and practicing active listening techniques. Progress was quite slow as the mentees' typical pattern of communication often involved personal attacks and this was difficult to moderate in the online environment. By the fifth session, the mentees were beginning to recognize the benefits of modifying their communication patterns, and expressed appreciation for what they were learning. In the sixth session, they completed a portion of the relationship inventory REFOCCUS. The next two sessions attempted to apply those skills in discussion of the core issues identified as strengths in the mentees' marriage. Even when talking about strengths, the mentees were experiencing difficulty applying the principles and techniques they were learning.

Prior to each meeting, the mentee couple received by email reading material related to the upcoming discussion. They were also assigned short individual or couple exercises between sessions. They rarely read these materials in advance, however, and attempted none of the exercises. Both mentees were pleasantly surprised at how easy it was to initiate the first

conference, and at the user-friendliness of the conferencing interface. Although the original plan was to meet once a week, the mentees suggested, after the first session, that twice a week would be preferable. After three weeks, the seasonal work commitments of the mentees increased, and the rate was reduced to once a week. After eight meetings, the mentorship relationship was suspended when the mentees felt they could no longer spare time from their busy work schedules. The only cost of participation was the mentees' time. On a few occasions they neglected to keep their online appointment or were seriously late in attending. The mentors had to make several telephone calls to reschedule meetings. The mentors gained the impression that one or both of the mentees did not value the sessions enough to make a serious commitment to them.

Effective Strategies for Marriage Mentorship at a Distance

Marriage mentorship is a different kind of educational experience. It is a peer relationship. The mentors may be regarded as teachers, but they must also be learners, open to sharing their failures and successes, and valuing the group interaction as an opportunity to grow in their own relationship. The mentees are co-learners. If one partner does not cooperate, the learning experience is crippled. When one partner is more enthusiastic than the other, the less engaged partner may feel that they are being manipulated or controlled and may become more tentative. This appeared to be the situation some of time in the MM trial. On the other hand, the MT trial involved couples who were open and committed to making their good relationship even better. Their attitudes were more positive from the outset, and they were more motivated. This resulted in a more dynamic and productive learning experience.

Online mentoring involves important induction activities. It is essential that the mentors develop an open, warm, and accepting relationship with the mentees (Parrott and Parrott, 1997). A sense of connectedness and trust is needed between the mentors and mentees, a sense that all are working as a team in building stronger relationships, and that each participant is a valued and essential component of that team (Fage and Mayes, 1996). New beginnings involving personal revelations can be intimidating. Mentees need to be assured that they are in control of when and how much they wish to share. In a technologically mediated environment, induction means engaging the learners with the procedures relating to the interface, and encouraging them to see themselves as effective learners in this environment (Simpson, 2002, pp. 163 - 82). Simpson also points out that preparation involves helping the learners to develop the communication and problem-solving skills that they will need to deal effectively with their issues. In the CT trial, the curriculum was structured to address generic communication skills first. Participation faded away when participants were called upon to discuss personal issues. In the MT trial, the same sequence, first cognitive then affective, was followed and participation remained strong to the end of the program. The MM case was supposed to begin with generic communication skills, but the mentees seemed more willing to raise problematic issues; this seemed to decrease the sense of cohesiveness among participants. When the focus was redirected towards building communication skills, both mentors and mentees felt more at ease; there was an atmosphere of camaraderie and good humour as participants worked together on understanding and rehearsing these skills. The synchronous audio-conference medium seemed to support this cognitive learning. Throughout the activity, a sense of social presence was enhanced and essential skills for problem discussion were being developed, laying a good foundation for learning in the affective domain. Unfortunately, progress was slow in these sessions, and they were suspended before the participants were equipped to deal fully with problem-solving processes.

The CoupleTALK program materials are excellent at addressing the cognitive skills needed in rebuilding a marital relationship. When dealing with couple relationship, however, more than

good reading material is required. As in F2F mentorship, the interaction of the mentee couple with the mentor couple is the catalyst that enables the concepts and skills to be meaningfully applied in the relationship. Most mentee couples lack a shared vision of what they would like their marriage to become, and they lack the motivation and patience to persist in discovering that vision. Many are in somewhat adversarial relationships that make cooperative efforts difficult to start and maintain without the assistance of human mediators. Many lack the formal study skills to read, interpret, and apply instructional material without mentors' support. Good mentors will help a mentee couple to define goals for their relationship, and will assist in identifying and avoiding destructive patterns of relating. They will engage the mentees in skill building tasks, and will provide didactic support to supplement other learning materials. The mentees want structure. They need to feel that their mentors value them, and to have confidence in the materials they are sharing with them. Mentees are encouraged when they see progress coming from the interaction between themselves and with their mentors.

In surveys administered after the two programs employing the synchronous component, participants indicated they were very-to-extremely satisfied with what they had learned, and with how they had learned it. All indicated that they had already experienced personal benefit from the program: "As we put into practice and assist others in learning it, we really hear each others' hearts and gain a much greater understanding of each other." Although participants expressed appreciation for the cognitive skills they had acquired, there is also indication that significant personal transformation occurred in the affective domain for some of them.

Effective Media for Marriage Mentorship at a Distance

In the CT trial (asynchronous text discussion), there was no evidence of interaction between spouses other than between the writer and his spouse. Almost all participated as married individuals. In a trusted counseling or mentoring environment, individuals can be willing to share very personal details about their marriage relationships, but in the context of a CMC conference with 10 other strangers, as in this case, personal revelation is more constrained. Asynchronous CMC interaction has a "hyper-personal" character: individuals can create "heightened self-presentations and idealized perceptions that magnify one another to a super-ordinal level" (Walther and Boyd, as cited in Tu and Corry, 2001). "People need to present themselves to others as an acceptable person one who has and is entitled to certain kinds of consideration, who has certain kinds of expertise, who is relatively morally unblemished, etcetera" (Tu and Corry, 2001(page #)). Two kinds of "presentation" were evident in the CT discussions. Two participants presented themselves as a spouse in need because they were in a difficult marriage, and the other five as individuals who had sound marriages and were looking for new ideas for helping other marriages. Those in the needy group received probing questions and some unsolicited advice about their relationships; and they did not persist in the sessions beyond the second module. The way in which they represented their personal marital situation in the text-based situation may have affected their feeling of involvement/ isolation in the asynchronous discussion, resulting in their premature withdrawal from the program.

In pre-surveys, almost all participants anticipated that the computer-mediated audio-conferencing environment would be somewhat cold and sterile, and that there would not be as great a sense of connectedness between participants as in a F2F meeting. In the post-surveys, however, they generally rated the two modes as equally effective. The audio-conferences had emphasized cognitive skills, and practice with communication techniques. Participants' feedback indicated that the medium was effective for that purpose. The interaction shifted toward the affective domain when participants were encouraged to share personal experiences and feelings. Was the

computer medium supportive in that function also? In the MT case, the four couples interacted in a broader forum, and were not encouraged to share deep personal details of their marriage. In the MM case, participants shared freely, but not always appropriately. They needed better skills to make their sharing more productive. Their willingness to share, however, was an indication that the audio medium is capable of facilitating affective change. This capability may be largely dependent on the sense of social presence and connectedness that participants develop in their interaction, and the degree of trust that is established between the mentees and mentors. The lack of a visual component was a negative aspect for some of them. Online video-conferencing technology of a reasonable quality is not currently accessible to most users, however. Online audio-conferencing, on the other hand, is becoming a viable option for many. In these trials, participants initial expectations of the audio medium were generally exceeded. With improved program design and moderating techniques, even better results may be attainable.

In the marriage mentoring relationship, mentors strive to be as open as possible in sharing both the victories and problems they have experienced. The hope is that mentees will do the same. Because a participants' spouse is present in the interaction, a second opinion is readily available if anyone tries to be too selective in the image he or she projects. It is a further advantage to use a medium that encourages people to be as "real" as possible. In synchronous F2F interaction, people have a more difficult task than in asynchronous CMC in being selective or unreal in their self-presentation. Therefore, a F2F discussion is the generally preferred environment for marriage mentorship. When F2F is impractical, however, synchronous audio-conferencing appears to be a better alternative than asynchronous text-based CMC. In the MM trial, both mentee participants had a strong aversion to text communication anyway, because they felt their typing skills were deficient. This is another consideration supporting the use of a synchronous vocal medium rather than CMC, email, or real-time text chat. Audio-conferences encourage dialogue. The interaction between mentors and mentees may be restricted by the absence of visual cues that are important in conveying affective information such as happiness, sadness, uncertainty, stress, and anxiety, but are less so for cognitive information (Simpson, 2002, pp. 51 - 77). A combination of the synchronous component with appropriate asynchronous materials may produce an optimal learning environment.

Conclusions

Many programs, curriculums, and materials address marriage enrichment. The value of each can be measured by the degree to which it engages both partners in productive dialogue and activity that enhances their relationship. Mentorship is one of the best approaches. When F2F marriage mentorship is not available, online audio-conferencing appears to be a viable alternative. In the trials discussed in this paper, audio-conferencing provided an effective environment for learning and practicing communication skills. It also supported a warm, trusting interaction between participants, the important ingredient of a productive marriage mentoring relationship. As Parrott and Parrott (1997) have indicated, mentors should begin with relationship and confidence-building activities. The next stage should concentrate first on cognitive skills, progressing to a more transformative phase characterized by deeper interpersonal interaction. The trials reported in this paper did not test the various permutations and combinations of these phases in relation to different mentoring situations, media, nor learning materials. These possibilities invite further investigation.

The next report in the series discusses the educational usage of learning object metadata.

N.B. Owing to the speed with which Web addresses are changed, the online references cited in this report may be outdated. They can be checked at the Athabasca University software evaluation site: <http://cde.athabascau.ca/softeval/>. The report is also featured in the ConferReview archive of <http://www.conferzone.com/>. Italicised product names in this report can be assumed to be registered trademarks.

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