

Group Mentoring: Complex Communication in Human Networks, and its Implications for Development

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The basic concept of mentoring is well known and practiced in a variety of human social contexts – education, business, military and communities. As our forms of communication become more diverse and the contexts in which we use them become more complex, new forms of mentoring may be emerging.

The two most common forms of mentoring communication in common practice have been "paving the way" – in which a mentor takes a promising protégé under their wing to help them advance within a system; and "developmental" in which a mentor models behaviors and offers insight to help a protégé grow personally or professionally. This has normally been seen as a dyadic exchange between two people, and most formal or institutional mentoring programs are predicated on this model.

The availability of expanded communication modalities, and theories of communication to encompass them, now opens up possibilities for group forms of mentoring. This may include interactions between peer cohorts, and also a more "open-system" phenomenon, drawing in the influences of, and between, multiple influences in a "network-facing" mentoring context.

This session paper draws upon a recent study of processes of group mentoring among returning wartime veterans as they make the difficult transition through higher education. The dynamics of these interactions in the social sphere of the campus constitute what the author has termed "contextual mentoring," or the capacity of the communication environment to facilitate desired effects of supported transition from one deeply ingrained cultural context to another. This context also may include engagement in the humanities and adult education processes as a way of unlocking mentor influences from literature and archetypal influences of fellow learners.

This study was undertaken using a research method framed in the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory of social construction in communication. Among other things, the results point towards a way to engage communication processes to assist in the re-creation of social worlds in transition in order to reduce the jarring experience of "moral injury" that has historically accompanied the return of warriors from the intense world of combat.

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