

# **Evidence Based Library and Information Practice**

# Commentary

# Virtual Peer Mentoring (VPM) May Facilitate the Entire EBLIP Process

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#### Introduction

Rapid changes in information management bring increased urgency for all to engage in continuous lifelong learning. Common methods for keeping our individual skills and knowledge bases current include regularly scanning and reading targeted core journals; participation in conferences and continuing education workshops; coursework in subjects such as research methods; and, piloting new approaches in the workplace.

This commentary features the involvement of mentors as guides to professional growth and development. It devotes particular attention to an emerging information technology-based variation of mentoring known as Virtual Peer Mentoring (VPM). The author then employs the five-step EBLIP process to illustrate how VPM might contribute to one's continuous professional vitality.

# **Traditional Mentoring**

Mentoring occurs in many variations across

different contexts (Gabriel & Kaufield, 2008; Johnson, 2007; Mullen, 2005). Traditional mentoring consists of a colleague with far more experience and knowledge guiding a less experienced and knowledgeable colleague in gaining full membership into a profession. Studwell (2002) describes mentors as wise and trusted counselors or teachers. A traditional mentor "guides, teaches, and develops a novice...[who] can help with day-to-day tasks ...or they can help guide more substantial decisions such as career planning" (Zerzan, Hess, Schur, Phillips, & Rigotti, 2009, p. 140).

Traditional mentoring normally yields great benefits for the protégé (or "mentee") receiving this guidance. de Janasz, Ensher, and Heun (2008) note that traditional mentoring frequently results in protégé career success. In fact, traditional mentoring has been linked to successes for Alfred Nobel and his prize winners (Kantha, 1999; Bentivoglio, 2006). In *On Becoming a Mentor*, Johnson (2007) provides extensive inventories of benefits that can accrue to protégés due to appropriate mentoring, including psychosocial support,

commitment to the profession, professional growth, self-confidence, encouragement, support, and exciting challenges. Those who have had multiple mentors (and multiple protégés later in their careers) might add that mentoring also offers valued professional friendships.

Traditional mentoring does have weaknesses. The imbalanced power differential between mentor and protégé may cause this otherwise revered institution to develop pathologies. Barnett (2008) documents two such vulnerabilities: boundary issues and multiple relationships. Boundaries are the basic ground rules that structure these professional friendships. When these boundaries are breached in ethical ways, no such pathologies are likely to occur. Barnett relies upon the American Psychological Association's (APA) code of ethics (2002) principles of beneficence, nonmaleficence, fidelity, autonomy, and justice to distinguish between ethical and unethical breaches of boundaries in mentorprotégé relationships. Neither the American Library Association (1997) nor the Medical Library Association's (1994) codes of ethics elaborate to the same extent on such dimensions to ethical behavior so these APA ethics guidelines might serve our profession well for safeguarding these mentor-protégé relationships.

Barnett (2008) examines situations in which a mentor might have multiple relationships with a protégé. These might involve the mentor's serving as the supervisor or in another superior position within the organization. Other potentially complicating relationships might include a professional association appointment that could influence the protégé's career or an editorial position in a leading journal. As these roles, or relationships, multiply so does the potential exploitation of the protégé by compounding the inherent power differential in a traditional mentoring relationship. Barnett emphasizes that the existence of boundary crossings or multiple relationships does not automatically condemn such mentoring relationships to pathological outcomes, provided that the participants uphold ethical principles.

Traditional mentoring may be vulnerable to an entirely different weakness, related to supply and demand for mentors. Lublin (2003) observes that even the highest level managers need qualified mentors to guide their careers. Yet, most hierarchal organizations have few high-level professionals with time to mentor more junior professionals (Brice et al., 2002). Within five years of graduating from a library or information science degree program, most professionals reach a level of specialization within their institutions that they cannot rely on colleagues in the same institution to provide guidance appropriate to their specialties.

#### **Virtual Peer Mentoring (VPM)**

Over many years traditional mentoring has harnessed successively more sophisticated information and communications technology. Twenty years ago, when still early in his career, the author had several traditional style mentors who mentored him mainly via telephone. Email eventually supplemented the telephone for these mentoring relationships as well as his growing role as a traditional mentor to others. In recent years free webbased conferencing through services such as Skype and DimDim have further enhanced mentoring at a distance. E-mentoring research suggests that electronic mediation can beneficially focus mentor and protégé attention on shared goals and values rather than geographic, institutional or demographic differences (de Janasz et al., 2008; Single & Single, 2005). E-mentoring may also help build professional communities that can span continents (Gunawardena et al., 2008).

Johnson (2007) and Mullen (2005) observe the emergence of alternatives to traditional mentoring relationships. Peer mentoring, sometimes known as "reciprocal mentoring" or "co-mentoring", represents a form of mutual mentoring between colleagues who share approximately the same level of professional development or status. Kram and Isabella's (1985) pioneering research discovered many career-enhancing and psychosocial benefits of peer mentoring. Other researchers identify many advantages

over traditional mentoring for experienced professionals (Dahl, 2005; Jipson & Paley, 2000; Mullen, 2000; Kochan & Trimble, 2000; Gabriel & Kaufield, 2008). Bryant and Terborg's (2008) field-based experimental study suggests that peer mentoring might be a superior method for information-intensive professionals to contribute more productively to knowledge creation and sharing within their organizations.

Virtual Peer Mentoring (VPM), an emerging hybrid of e-mentoring and peer mentoring, offers some solutions for EBLIP practitioners concerned about the potential pathologies in traditional mentoring or the shortage of appropriate mentors in a traditional mentorship arrangements. The author has been engaged in VPM with various colleagues for the past two years. Table 1 offers guidance on how to maintain a VPM relationship. This guidance is based on the nascent literature and personal experiences and has not been subjected to rigorous tests. Nevertheless it is supported by research evidence on distance learning and collaborations involving similar situations.

Two themes from the research on distance learning emerge to inform newcomers to VPM. First, participants in VPM should make reasonable efforts to establish "Social Presence" in their interactions (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Social presence involves several avenues for presenting VPM participants as lifelike, trustworthy, and authentic as possible at a distance in order to approximate face-to-face communication. Establishing social presence can be a strong predictor of participant satisfaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) in virtual interactions. While not essential, it appears to help VPM participants to maintain social presence where they meet in person prior to engaging in distance co-mentoring (Morris, Nadler, Kurtzberg, & Thompson, 2002). Thompson and Nadler (2002) have identified possible miscommunications that might occur in VPM types of situations. A second theme involves sensitivity to cultural differences

between participants. Hofstede (1991) and more recently others (Knight, Gunawardena, & Aydin, 2009) note the dimensions of cultural differences. Power differentials, the degree of communitarianism, and extent of femininity or masculinity expressed within an individual's society can affect her or his virtual interactions. The author recommends Gunawardena and LaPointe's (2008) concise book chapter for readers interested in social presence and cultural sensitivity.

#### The EBLIP Process

The use of the EBLIP process for decision making has been described in detail previously (Eldredge, 2006 & 2008) so it will be summarized with an emphasis upon aspects related to VPM. Figure 1 offers a visual depiction of the five-step EBLIP process for readers to reference during the following text.

Step One: Formulate an Important and Answerable Question

The ability to plan and therefore enact decision making processes appears to be a uniquely human trait only partially shared with certain primates (Osvath, 2009). Within the human species, professionals in particular are required to make important decisions (Bennett & Gibson, 2006). Decision making inevitably leads to raising a central question. The EBLIP Process consequentially begins with an important and answerable question related to our professional practice. Because we aid users in answering their questions on a regular basis, we already possess skills particularly attuned and adapted to this first question formulation step (Booth, 2006). Formulating an important question that will appropriately lead to an informed decision typically presents a challenge even for experienced practitioners, however. It is easy to become distracted or diverted from articulating the central question. A mentor will actively listen to a protégé's description of the context of both decision and central question and will assist her or him in articulating and refining the central question.

# Table 1 Tips for Virtual Peer Mentoring (VPM)

#### When in the Virtual Peer Mentor Role:

- Actively listen to your virtual protégé without interrupting.
- Provide any needed information.
- Establish personal boundaries on what you are willing or not willing to share or disclose.
- Refer your protégé quickly to a colleague who possesses knowledge or a skill needed by the protégé in order to succeed. Be sure to follow-up on the referral.
- Only offer advice if your protégé asks for guidance.
- Search for new ways to provide useful guidance or encouragement for your protégé.

#### When in the Virtual Peer Protégé Role:

- Initiate contact when confronted with a decision or in guidance with applying the EBLIP Process to one's practice.
- Respect your virtual mentor's personal boundaries.
- Always credit your virtual mentor's contributions either through co-authorship or acknowledgements.

### For Both Virtual Peer Protégés and Mentors:

- Do not assume that either one of you will always be able to answer all of the other's questions.
- Arrange the best dates/times to meet virtually. Meet as often as desired.
- Seek clarification whenever one of you might not understand the other (Gunawardena & LaPointe, 2008).
- If your virtual peer mentoring relationship becomes far more of a personal rather than a professional relationship then you might want to cease the peer mentoring aspect.
- Recognize that misunderstandings will occur due to cultural differences. Embrace the
  challenge of overcoming these cultural differences and appreciate learning about your peer's
  background.

Step Two: Searching for the Best Available Evidence

Members of our profession additionally possess the skills needed for locating the best available evidence for answering the central question. Paradoxically, our documented knowledge base presents complex challenges for even the determined searcher. Our profession has a peculiar blend of incentives to

emphasize professional communication within the gray literature (Eldredge, 2008) while contending with negative incentives that frequently work against communicating in the more accessible and searchable peer reviewed literature. Denise Koufogiannakis and Ellen Crumley (2002; 2004) have developed six subject domains for librarianship research that inform this second step of searching the published literature: Reference, Education,

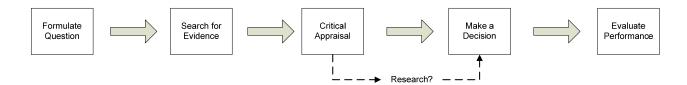


Fig. 1. Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP) Process Chart.

Collections, Management, Information Access and retrieval, and Marketing/Promotion.
Three of these subject domains (Reference, Collections, Information Access) are well suited for searching the library and information sciences literature databases. The other three subject domains (Education, Management, Marketing/Promotion) are better searched via specialty databases for each field's literatures. Beverley (2004) and Winning (2004) have diagnosed challenges to searching, and provide various solutions for EBLIP searchers. A mentor may advise their protégé on how to overcome such challenges.

Step Three: Critically Appraising the Best Available Evidence

Searching for the best available evidence typically produces an impressive stack of articles from peer reviewed journals as well as printouts from other authoritative sources. The EBLIP practitioner must then review and determine which articles offer the best available evidence. As it turns out, the kind of question asked in the first step in the EBLIP process provides important insights on selecting the best evidence for making a decision. Most EBLIP questions can be readily categorized into three major types: Prediction, Intervention, and Exploration. By categorizing our questions by one of these three types, we can evaluate which evidence has the greatest weight compared to other evidence related to our central question in the decision making process. Systematic reviews reside at the highest level of evidence for all three types of questions. Systematic reviews have addressed central questions such as those related to clinical medical librarian services (Winning & Beverly, 2003; Wagner & Byrd, 2004) and information skills training (Brettle, 2003). At this time, with few systematic reviews within our field, we must identify alternative

evidence for each question category. Intervention questions normally are answered best by an experimental design known as a randomized controlled trial, Prediction questions by cohort studies and Exploration questions by qualitative studies, provided that no relevant systematic reviews exist. The EBLIP Levels of Evidence are explained in more detail elsewhere (Eldredge, 2002). Booth and Brice (2004) have developed a tremendously helpful (and freely accessible) checklist of questions to consider while critically appraising evidence for answering EBLIP questions. Glynn (2006) also has created a checklist drawn from multiple sources. A mentor can help the protégé to navigate the different types of evidence, and with selecting appraisal tools appropriately.

Sometimes the EBLIP practitioner cannot find authoritative evidence to make an informed decision. Figure One reflects this possible scenario between steps three and four. In this instance, the VPM mentor may encourage the practitioner to articulate a call for further research or to participate directly in conducting the research needed to answer appropriately the EBLIP question.

Step Four: Make a Decision

EBLIP assists practitioners in making informed decisions. Although many of us are experienced decision makers, we can no doubt describe decision making processes undertaken by groups that have resulted in unsatisfactory decisions. The behavioral and social sciences have researched "cognitive biases" as obstacles to making sound decisions even where all of the best evidence is available to decision makers (Eldredge, 2008). The EBLIP practitioner must therefore remain eternally vigilant to biases contaminating the EBLIP process. A good mentor will make

themselves available as a sounding board to discuss and review the rationale(s) for the final decision.

Step Five: Evaluate Performance

Booth (2004) conceptualizes this final step at individual practitioner, institutional, and professional levels. We must always appraise our individual performances as reflective professionals. Peer review processes, whether job performance reviews within our institutions or review processes at journals or by professional associations, assist us in assessing our strengths and weaknesses as individual practitioners. Many institutions have become increasingly aware of, and aligned with, evidence-based practice in recent years, making it relatively easy to ask

collectively if the library practices EBLIP in making major decisions. Once identified, deficiencies can be addressed within the institution. The mentor's role may include identifying other colleagues who may help a protégé to address such deficiencies. At the professional level, colleagues need to evaluate whether their professional association identifies the most important and answerable questions facing our profession. Recently the Medical Library Association in the U.S. (Eldredge, Harris, & Ascher, 2009) and the Swedish Library Association (Maceviciute, Wilson, Lalloo, & Lindh, 2009) have commissioned such studies using the Delphi method to identify key questions facing the members of these respective associations. A mentor may encourage a protégé and others to contribute to such efforts.

Table 2
VPM Throughout the EBLIP Process

<b>EBLIP Process</b>	Protégé Role	Mentor Role
Step		
Formulate	Initiates contact with colleague for	Actively listens to protégé's description
	mentoring assistance when	of context of decision and central
	confronted with a decision in one's	question.
	practice.	Assists in articulating and refining
		question.
Search	Offers feedback on successes or	Suggests databases and other sources of
	deficiencies of different search	authoritative evidence.
	approaches.	Proposes possible controlled vocabulary
		or keyword approaches.
Appraise	Applies critical appraisal skills to	Listens and suggests inclusion and
	different evidence produced from	exclusion criteria.
	search.	
Decide	Final responsibility for making the	Available to discuss and review
	decision.	rationale(s) for final decision.
Evaluate	Self-assesses own performance in the	Refers protégé to other colleague(s) who
	process.	might possess expertise needed by
	Contributes to institutional and	protégé.
	profession-wide efforts to evaluate	Contributes to profession-wide efforts to
	the relevance of central questions	evaluate the relevance of central
	raised and how EBLIP might be	questions raised and how EBLIP might
	practiced by others.	be practiced by others.

## **Applying VPM to the EBLIP Process**

Table 2 summarizes how colleagues might use VPM throughout the EBLIP process by assuming the roles indicated.

Interchangeability of roles should be borne in mind since, at any specific moment, either member of a VPM dyad might be in either mentor or protégé roles. Table 2 further shows how VPM might be interpreted and adapted to guide each step of the EBLIP Process. By employing VPM in the EBLIP Process, we may even build an international EBLIP community of practice (Wenger, 1998) when used in conjunction with maintaining a peer reviewed journal and offering international workshops and conferences.

#### **Implications for Practice**

- Virtual Peer Mentoring (VPM) is one possible means for maintaining one's continuous professional vitality.
- Mentoring relationships can thrive despite boundary crossings or multiple relationships provided both participants uphold ethical principles.
- Virtual peer mentoring is a possible response to the short supply of high level professionals with time to mentor junior staff.

#### **Implications for Research**

- Professional associations must take the lead in identifying the most important and answerable questions facing our profession.
- Where authoritative evidence does not exist for an informed decision, a mentor may advise a protégé on the potential for further research
- Despite scarce research on Virtual Peer Mentoring, we can infer guidance from similar research on distance learning and collaborations.

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