

# Computer to Computer: Mentoring Possibilities

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Working in preservice elementary education on an urban university campus, I find it a constant struggle to build mentoring relationships with my students. Time is such a valuable commodity. Students work, take classes, observe and do preservice work in schools. As a result, their schedules do not match up with my office hours.

So, for the past three semesters I have used electronic mail with my preservice students. Electronic mail is a means by which students can send messages to others by use of computer. Our university provides two open public labs with computers for student use. Also, students with their own personal computers and modems can log into the system. Through e-mail, preservice elementary education students literally have access to me 24 hours a day.

## Electronic Reflection

Knowing that some students will be hesitant to use the computer for communication, I provide system instruction and then require them to use the medium to complete their bimonthly log assignments. The preservice students use their logs to record the new skills, techniques, and knowledge they have learned. They also use them to reflect on the personal meaning these things now have to them.

Perhaps the most notable outcome of the e-mail approach is the immediacy with which the students can establish contact with me and vice versa. No longer do they have to call for an appointment or wait until the

next class to address concerns, questions, or ideas. I have been able to provide immediate answers to any questions they have had.

The procedure also enables the students to express any anxieties they have about their assignments. Upon reading their log entries, I am able to put their minds at ease and offer reassurance about their efforts in a timely manner. Students have shared such comments as these in their e-mail logs: "Thanks for the feedback," "E-mail provides a more personal way to communicate with you," "I'm able to ask questions (and get responses) about things I'm reluctant to ask about in class."

## Getting Comfortable with Technology

An interesting side benefit is that students are beginning to realize that computers are not technological mysteries but useful tools that facilitate learning and reflection. Students wrote: "I sure do like this now that I know how to use the program," "I never expected to say this, but I'm really enjoying this means of communication."

Most students say they find it easier to elaborate on their thoughts as they complete their logs because typing is easier than handwriting. Likewise, I have been able to write more as I respond to my students' comments about topics presented during the two-week interval between their log assignments. Students wrote: "Logs have helped me focus on questions I have about issues," "We take time to reflect on what we are actually learning; often we don't do this because everything seems so over-



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whelming," "It makes me stop and reflect on what I'm doing and how I'm improving on my teaching in my practicum."

The written communications give us a better opportunity to get to know one another and to establish long-lasting relationships that seem to continue after the class comes to a close. The students comment: "I like being able to write to you without judgment," "Now stay tuned for many reflections to come concerning the risks I will soon be taking teaching my science thematic unit. If not for the risks, I wouldn't be growing," "I haven't asked all my questions yet."

We must provide preservice students the opportunities to "talk about teaching," whether they be face to face, paper to paper, or computer to computer. I am using this e-mail approach to help me gain immediate access to the students' thoughts and questions, and it has been successful. As one student wrote: "I can share my discoveries with a listening ear." □

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