# Mentorship Journal

**Journal Reflection: Preparing for the Virtual Mentorship Experience**
*Before you begin your begin your virtual mentorship experience, reflect on where you want to be by the end of this experience.*

*What do you want to know?*
I'd like to know how he feels teaching a science class online. I viewed a high school biology class in the intro to distance education class, and while I thought the labs were ok, they weren't close to what I did in the classroom. Similarly, I'd like to see how physics labs are done with no F2F interactions. I'd like to know how he got into teaching distance ed, how many years he taught in a classroom, what he thinks about the future of distance ed, and what he feels are the best and worst parts about teaching online,

*What do you want to have done?*
I'd like to interact with the students at some point, look at their discussions, sit in on any synchronous sessions if there are any, and – if I'm allowed – take a look at some student work. Also, IF I establish a rapport with my mentor and IF I feel there is anything lacking in the course via course design (I'm definitely not well-versed in physics enough to make suggestions there!), I'd like to make suggestions. Obviously I would be very delicate in my suggestions as I'm working from a purely theoretical/educational standpoint vs. actually being a distance education educator, but if I can help, I'd like for him to feel like he benefited from the mentorship as well.

*What do you want to understand?*
I'm not sure at this point what I want to understand. I don't think I can divorce "knowing" from "understanding", but I guess the overall goal is to understand what it's like in the life of a distance educator. What frustrates him, what motivates him, what he feels are his weaknesses and strengths.

*Other?*
Can't think of anything at the moment.

*Before you meet with your mentor for the first time, generate a list of questions/concerns you want to ask him/her and post here.*

How do students perform labs without a F2F component? Do you feel this is just as good as students physically performing the labs with an instructor?
Why did you decide to start teaching distance ed? Prior to that, how many years were you in a classroom?
Where do you see the future of distance education?
From your observation, do students perform just as well or better in an online environment?
What are the best and worst parts about teaching online?

Do you think teachers need any special training to teach online, or is classroom experience enough?
Did you receive any professional development to teach online?
How did you develop your course?

## Journal Reflection Mentor Meeting Week 1: Let's Get This Started

*After you have 'met' your mentor and taken a spin around the course or worked out another mentoring scenario, reflect on the following themes:*

*Initial impressions*
My mentor is Mark Matthews. He is quick to return emails, but a little terse, which makes me a bit nervous. He doesn't really know what is expected of him, so I hope he was briefed in some way so my questions/presence in the classroom isn't unexpected. Looking at his biography, this is his first year teaching online, but he has extensive classroom experience. *(Later note – I was wrong. He's taught online for several years).* He also has an undergraduate in biology, so I might share that I have one as well. UPDATE: Little concerned that I haven't heard back from him for several days as I try to set up our first official meeting.

*Initial concerns*
Looking at his class, at first I was concerned because I saw no evidence of student interaction (no discussion boards, no real assignments even!) but now I'm realizing that I probably only have access to the public page and (hopefully!) when I'm given permission I can log in and see all the behind the scenes action!

*Goals for the first week*
Schedule a meeting!
Log into the course so I can actually see what's up
See if I can get access to the lab simulator the students use

*Questions for your first official meeting*
See questions in previous journal entry

How do you feel about the LMS used? What would you change?

*Include the date of your first Mentor Meeting and any other pertinent information.*
3.22.13 – see Mentorship Notes for full details.

## Journal Reflection Mentor Meeting Week 2: Well... okey dokey then...

*Has the 'cool factor' worn off? You have met with your mentor and should be getting ready for meeting number 2. Where are you in your thought process? Go back and review your goals for the experience - where do you want to go next?*
*The focus of your next two mentor meetings should be on specific instructional strategies and interaction within the virtual space.*

*Take some quick notes based on your observations –*

I had a really good first meeting with Mark. He is heavily involved in distance education and teaches multiple classes for multiple places, something that I hadn't even considered. I'm not going to be reviewing the class Debra originally intended for me to do (AP Physics) because that's with GA Virtual, not Impact, but Justin has given me access to Mark's biology, chemistry, and physics classes. They all use the FVS material, so the biology is familiar since I reviewed the biology course during the first distance education class *(Later note – I realized I reviewed his class in Intro to Distance Ed).* He has 48 students in biology, 10 in chemistry, and 1 in physics.

*Based on the current unit or content, do the students demonstrate a solid understanding? How do you know this?*
In our first meeting, Mark said that with virtual students he sees 80's, 90's, or 10's, 15's. He is not kidding. There are a few kids on the cusp of passing/failing, but pretty much, all of his students are either doing ok, or below a 30.

*What do you think the students are struggling with? Why? What suggestions, changes, or supports do you think would help?*
The homework the students turn in seem to show decent mastery of the subject, but so many of them are turning in things so late that they are only getting a 50% (and that's if they turn in anything at all). So I'd say the students are struggling with time management. I don't know what would help them, since there is a pacing guide and Mark contacts them and their parents if they fall too far behind. The only thing that might help is to not take ANY work past 2 weeks instead of letting students turn in work as late as they want for up to 50% credit, but I don't know if that would really help students with time management.

*How does the interaction within the class help or hinder student learning?*
I haven't attended any Adobe Connect sessions yet, so I'm hoping I'll see a lot of interaction there. Within the classes, there isn't too much. Biology has two discussion questions that I can see for this term, one for everyone, and one just for honors. The regular discussion question, I'm not sure exactly how it helps student learning since almost every student is saying the exact same thing (and then every student replies with "I agree!") but there is more thought going into the honors discussion, and I can see some students expanding their views based on the comments of other students.

Chemistry has a collaboration component, but I don't know what that is. I can see the grades for it and what the students are turning in, but I don't see the requirements.

Physics has one student. It's a little sad seeing her one post on the discussion questions. This is another aspect of distance learning that I didn't consider – if there is no minimum number of students required, will students receive an education that is comparable to a brick and mortar class if they are the only one in there? So much of learning is social, and to be the only person in a virtual class – that seems really lonely.

*What else are you observing? How does it relate to what you have learned in your classes so far?*
Something I want to ask him – one of his students has a 3.37%. Looking at the 3 things he's turned it, it was the last week in January/first week of Feb. The three things he turned in have an average of 84. Based on this, I assumed the student must have just decided to drop the course but never informed anyone, but then I looked at his activity, and he's logged in a few times for decent amounts of time since the turned the 3 things in. While he hasn't turned in anything yet, there's the possibility that this student is going to try and catch up. Per the syllabus on late work: "You have up to five (5) school days after an assignment is due to submit it. There is a ten percent penalty for each day that an assignment is late (maximum of 50%). No assignments are accepted after the fifth school day." So one question I want to ask is – when do you tell a student to just stop? Are teachers even allowed to tell students this? In a regular school, students still have to attend classes even if they have no hope of passing, so I don't know if teachers at a virtual school have to continue urging student to log in even if the kid will never pass.

Never mind – apparently he does accept things that are super late, although he docks them. Does that happen in regular schools? I never turned in assignments super late, so I don't know if a traditional teacher would accept, say, a worksheet from January at the end of March.

## Journal Reflection Mentor Meeting Week 3: Preparing for the End

*By now you have hopefully had two very specifically focused mentor meetings. I realize that you have written your informal notes, however, now that time has passed, what really stands out about this experience both good and not so good?*
The not so good – I didn't realize that teachers were so limited in customizing their classes. I don't teach, so I have no idea the amount of time it goes into creating a class (other than knowing it must take a huge amount of effort), but I thought the teachers would tweak their classes more, even if they were using FLV content. However, I know that I am viewing this from a technology perspective, because I would love to spend the time trying to make changes via the LMS.

The good – About everything else. I think it's neat that he teaches for so many different schools.

*Go back and review your initial goals. Were you able to meet them? Did they change? Why?*
I did meet all of them, with the exception of making any suggestions for the course, but that's because I didn't realize how little the teachers are able to make changes to the course. One thing I wish I had been able to do was interact more with the students. There aren't many discussion questions for the biology, chemistry, and physics classes, so there wasn't much to read. So far I've sat in on one Adobe Connect session, in which no students showed up. I'm going to sit in on another one, so hopefully some students will attend. Based on my studies in my distance education classes, I know that interaction is important for student understanding and motivation, but I'm not seeing a lot of it.

*Prepare your thoughts for your final meeting.*
I know that I'm going to ask about cheating since so many op-eds dealt with cheating.

*What are your lingering ideas and questions? What surprises you?*
One thought that came to me during me third meeting was that the students don't use any web 2.0 tools. I know the first semester of the course because I reviewed it in my intro class, and I know the second semester because I'm seeing it with my mentor, and the kids don't use tools to create. I discussed this with Mark, but we had different views. I find it funny that students using distance education could actually be receiving less instruction on how to use web 2.0 tools than those in a brick and mortar school. If a traditional teacher has students use tools to create projects (like blogging, wikis, presentation tools, VoiceThread, etc.) but none of those are used in a distance ed class, the first group of students are going to be better equipped to use technology. My mentor believes that students shouldn't have to learn new technology to be in a distance ed class, and that the technology should be easy so students aren't intimidated.

*As you reflect on this experience, what are your strengths as a future online teacher/admin? Weaknesses?*
I think my strengths are that I am very devoted towards encouraging interaction and will do everything I can to make sure students feel that they are not alone. This means having on-going chat sessions, interacting on the message boards, and giving lots of feedback on assignments.

A weakness would be that I'm not qualified to teach traditional material in the sense that I would not be as effective at picking out curriculum material. I also might get too frustrated at the limitations of the LMS and want to design a course from scratch.

## Journal Reflection Mentor Meeting Week 4: Final Summation

*Your final reflections on the whole experience. (Be more specific than ... "it was good." or ..."it met my expectations." or ... well you get the picture. Look at your initial goals, what you were able to accomplish, etc. What was the most interesting thing you learned?*
As a whole, the mentorship experience was bittersweet. As with many areas of life, what we learn about in the classroom is not always reflected in real life. In classes – especially at the graduate level, especially in an elective – people (professor and students) tend to be very interested, if not passionate, about a subject. You get the idea that everyone who works in this field must be equally passionate and dedicated. So then you meet someone in the field who is a fine teacher, all-around decent person, but not passionate about the field and reforms, and it's a bit of a let-down. The let-down is all on my end, because I do know there is a difference between theory and practice (when I think about all the things I've ever wanted to implement, but real life thought otherwise) so my expectations were not reasonable. To sum it up, after two distance education classes, I was ready to meet Santa, and instead I met a lovely man with a beard and a suit.

In terms of my initial goals, I feel I met all of them except interacting with students. No student ever came to any of the review sessions I attended. There were no active

discussion posts (although, looking back, my expectation/hope of interacting with students on discussion boards would work better in a humanities class instead of the sciences). I really wish I had seen just one instructor-student interaction.

The most interesting thing I learned was how little instructors can change their own courses. Again, I am not a classroom teacher so I have only theoretical knowledge (from classes at West Ga) on how to design learning experiences, etc. so perhaps the inability to add or take out activities is very common for classroom teachers as well. All the Impact courses I saw used FVS. Mark said that some teachers don't like distance education because they don't like teaching another "person's" class. I wonder if these teachers would enjoy it more if they could customize their classes more. And in terms of customization, is it all a LMS issue, the teacher's technical knowledge, or what? So I say that this was the most interesting thing I learned, and yet I am obviously still learning about it!

*As you reflect on this experience, what did you learn that could make an impact on your own teaching? How could you extend and deepen the learning experience for your students?*
I do like the idea of recording all interactive sessions so students who aren't able to attend can view them and then turn in notes for bonus points. Although I'm not sure I'd make it be for bonus points as much as a regular assignment. If I were a regular classroom teacher, that's something I would try to implement.

In terms of my own professional goals (IT integration/professional development), I'm not sure if there is much I learned that applies, except a greater understanding of why some teachers don't like teaching online. If I ever worked with a teacher who was looking to do distance education or even blended/hybrid I would offer as much support as possible to help her/him customize the course as much as they wanted. There are limits to what a LMS can do, so I would be supportive/instructive/creative in using adjunct materials/sites that allow more flexibility (such as linking to a wiki like in this course).

*Based on your experience, do you feel that eLearning will continue to grow? How do you see this environment impacting your specific instructional setting? What will you be taking back and paying forward?*
As a whole, eLearning is going to grow, and grow, and grow. There's just no chance that it's going to go away. The potential consequences (both positive and negative) that occur from this growth are up for debate, but distance education as a whole is here to stay. For me, I want to see more and more professional development put online, but in a way that provides structure. At my old school, there was a staff intranet page full of links to sites/resources for teachers to use, which was pretty much all the online professional development available (other professional development was in person). There's no structure to that. You wouldn't provide a page full of all sorts of biology links to a student and expect her to succeed. I want to see (and will do) more mini-PD modules that a teacher can do when her/his schedule allows, that has some scaffolding of content, and provides a means of discussion/human interaction.