TECHMENTORING: The Partners in Learning (PiL) Way

By

SHERLITA L. DAGUISONAN
ILIGAN CITY EAST HIGH SCHOOL-Hinaplanon
Mindanao, Philippines
School Tel. No: 063-223-7493
e-mail add : sheleyrey2000@yahoo.com

MANUEL O. CABERTE
BAYUGAN NATIONAL COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL
Bayugan, Agusan del Sur, Mindanao, Philippines
School Telefax No. 063-85-343-6115
Mobile No. =639197274222
e-mail add: cab_0269@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Technology has the potential to open the classroom to a greater world of learning and experience. Teachers are challenged to prepare their students for a technology-driven environment and to innovatively make technology a part of their teaching tools. Helping the country's educators teach technology and teach with technology is Microsoft's Partners in Learning initiative.

Through Partners in Learning (PiL), Microsoft Philippines trained forty (40) public high school teachers (called "techmentors) in May 2005 to provide instructional support for technology and curriculum integration to peers (called "mentess") in their respective schools/divisions.

These forty core techmentors are full time teachers at the same time doing the techmentoring in their schools, divisions and some even extend to the regional level. Based on the feedback of the core techmentors, the PiL techmentoring program easily gained wide and positive acceptance to teachers since the program is not following a rigid structure or format in mentoring process. The mentors are given the freedom to innovate strategies that would be most suited to their own locality.

This paper describes the experience of the authors and show how techmentors and mentees undertook learning from each other in order to realize the educational potential of technology. Specifically, this paper focuses on the following questions:

1. *How do we get started as a techmentor?*
2. *What kind of support do techmentors provide mentees?*
3. *What aspect of techmentoring do mentees find most helpful?*
4. *What is the impact of techmentoring on the professional practice of the mentees?*
5. *What are the challenges to successful techmentoring?*

6. *What are the effects of techmentoring on students attitudes and performance in school?*

Iligan City division has created a core of technology mentors involving 30 teachers from six (6) public high schools. The division of Agusan del Sur has also formed a core group of techmentors. The group is composed of 38 public secondary school teachers and two elementary school teachers coming from 19 high schools and one elementary school of the division. At the start of the school year (2005-2006), the techmentors underwent 5 days of training in FUSION. The training was designed to engage teachers how to implement an ICT enabled learning environment in the classroom. The most important components included the ICT Fluency Continuum. The continuum provided techmentors with a framework for the integration of information technology to achieve the vision of information technology as a foundation skill area.

Over the year, the authors took part in a number of activities with techmentors in the different schools who had been selected because of their knowledge and successful use of the framework. Prior to the techmentoring process, mentors identified who (depending on the number of teachers the school has: i.e. 1 mentor : 5 mentee) they would work with regardless of the subject area taught. But it was made clear that mentors

worked only with those teachers who are willing, ready and interested in working to integrate technology into teaching and learning. Based on the techmentors feedbacks, technology mentoring:

- provided the mentees with the support needed for implementing technology in the teaching and learning

- assisted them in designing a curriculum material on a topic and provided at least a useful resource

- facilitated change among teachers from being routine experts to adaptive experts;

What kind of support did the techmentors provide?

The writers had observed that the technology mentors provided the following support:

- highlighted mentees' strengths, suggested alternative practices, emphasized important teaching points, and helped teachers select materials especially when the mentees first began to implement ICT integration in their lessons;

- developed rapport between mentors and mentees to foster a successful working atmosphere. This was usually done by frequently communicating with the mentee;

- established good relationship with the mentee, based on trust and respect

- reassured mentees when they had doubts about the effectiveness of their teaching (specially with ICT integration) and confirmed their teaching strengths and areas in which they could improve.

- encouraged mentees to take risks in the classroom and not to give up when they experienced difficulty when implementing technology integration in teaching and learning process;

- enhanced mentees collaborative skills in working with other teachers in other subject areas specially working with interdisciplinary Problem-Based learning (PBL) activities;

- discussed and shared with the mentees' programs, and planned learning experiences for the students during the regular learning core meetings (usually once a month) . The meeting was done in order to develop a common understanding of what is expected for the various learning areas. This was an effective way for mentors across learning areas to network and share innovative teaching ideas and projects that have been successful in the classroom. The discussions also helped the mentees to think about future lessons and the changes they would make.

How did techmentoring affect the mentees?

The mentees changed in terms of their:

- technical expertise – they became more skillful at implementing and integrating technology in their lessons.

- role - changed from being dispensers of information to more of facilitators.

- feelings about the effectiveness of their teaching – their confidence on their understanding of the framework of ICT integration grew and how well they applied their understanding of it in the classroom. Mentees who were hesitant about implementing components of the framework in their classrooms at the start shared their expertise confidently and expertly with others.

- reflections about teaching and learning – most of the mentees realized that the use of ICT was not simply a technique to be implemented, but that their teaching would change as the students grew and as their own knowledge of teaching and learning developed.

What characteristics of mentoring did the mentees find most helpful?

In the writers' experience, most school-based techmentors/mentees preferred:

- discussion with a more experienced techmentor in order to relate to the concerned mentees' experiences and thus help them address certain concerns;

- frequent visits from an experienced techmentors- at least twice a month (especially for mentees in other schools);

- observations to be done as early as possible so that mentees could be provided with guidance as they began integrating ICT and this helped them build confidence about using information technology in the classroom. However, this area is still debatable. Some Principals do not allow a techmentor to observe classes;

- group discussion with the mentees and the techmentors to share their learning in the implementation of the ICT –enabled teaching-learning process;

- learning action cell (LAC) sessions that provided update on the innovative use of technology in enhancing the teaching learning process which are found to be effective in sustaining the enthusiasm of the mentees to continue fusing ICT fluency continuum with the prescribed curriculum competencies.

Below are some of the feedbacks/comments given by the mentors/ mentees in terms of the benefits of techmentoring:

> *"The mentoring program have made me more humble and flexible. It has provided me with an avenue to continually seek out my mentees and develop a deeper friendship with them".* (Lorna L. Tumampil, ITLA I-winner)

> *"Mentors have encouraged me to try things that I have never done before. Even if I have doubts about what I have done, there is a support base that I can turn to for help and encouragement".*
> *"I have recently changed my teaching practice to incorporate more technology".* (Richard S. Talaid-ABMNHS)

> *"Students' work exceeded my expectations. Students engagement with task was more sustained and they worked at higher level of thinking and reasoning*".(Ramon Loberiano-ITLA II Winner)

"I like techmentoring because somebody is there to listen to you and who isn't there to make judgments or to criticize things that you are doing, but to look at those things that you are doing and to help you build on those".(Norma P. Dayto-ICEHS-Hinaplanon).

*"Techmentoring gives us teachers the challenge to use computer as a tool in enhancing the teaching-learning". (*Ma. Gina A. Arjona-BNCHS-Bayugan).

"With the PiL mentoring program, I am encouraged to become innovative in making my students meaningfully and functionally understand my lessons". (Oscar T. Calingawan-BNCHS-Bayugan).

"At first I was hesitant to use computer. I felt I was too old to learn computer, however, because of techmentoring I realized that age doesn't matter anyway". (Helen M. Taboada-BNCHS-Bayugan).

While many teachers genuinely wanted to take ICT as an innovation in their teaching, some found it difficult to make because of the following obstacles that needed to be overcome to fully embrace the innovation:

- Lack of Resources. Many classrooms have limited number of computers and other ICT tools. There is lack of funds for the maintenance and sustainability of the technology resources.

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- Teacher Resistance. Many teachers are resisting the use of technology, due to a number of factors such as age (especially those in the late forties and fifties), lack of skills and knowledge on the use of technology , and lack of confidence to take risks and try new methods.

- Workload and Personal commitments. For a number of teachers, workload and personal commitments were the most common responses to why they refused to consider ICT in the teaching and learning process. They thought that it requires more time in terms of teacher preparation.

- Lack of Administrative Support. Some administrators did not realize the urgency of embracing the use of technology in improving teaching-learning process even with the presence of the technology tools. They thought that using ICT tools specially computers are luxurious innovations.

What are the effects of techmentoring on students attitudes and performance in the class?

Students working with teachers who undergo techmentoring show some noticeable improvement in their attitude toward learning as well as improved performance in their classroom activities.

- they have become more independent and collaborative learners;

- they have become more active and participatory;

- they have learned more through discovery;

- they tended to be in class whenever a computer activity is scheduled;

- many of the students' outputs exceeded the expectations of the teachers.

Generally, the success of the mentoring program depends on the program itself. The authors recommend that mentoring program in the school/division should be institutionalized. In institutionalizing the program the school/division managers should give the necessary administrative back-up to empower the techmentors. The program should clearly define mentor roles and tasks and the mentoring relationship. This will help the mentors to accomplish the task expected of them. Ultimately, the main goal is to contribute to the improvement of the classroom learning for the benefit of our true clients, the STUDENTS.