Adaptation Guidelines: e-learning materials for Mentors[1]

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance for entities that prepare or impart E-Learning training activities, and plan to adapt their teaching materials to facilitate support by mentors.

When adapting training material for Mentor use, keep in mind that mentoring is a process meant to improve the learning process and progress of students. We first summarize the concept of the mentoring process, as a framework for understanding the proposed technical adaptations of E-learning materials and environments. However, it must never be forgotten that the personal characteristics, attitudes, and abilities of the mentor are as critical for success of this concept as the technical adaptation.

The following "Roadmap" to effectively develop and adapt E-learning content and environments is entirely based on the experience and feed-back from the mentors that participated in Routes 4: as students during their own mentor training, or applying this knowledge in test training activities with students. General remarks are in normal letter, *while recommendations or suggestions for adaptation are in italic.*

1) The concept of "Mentor" - why and what

1.1 The main problem in training: eLearning students neglect participation or abandon

One of the most important factors in mentoring is observing and monitoring the student's attention to avoid de-motivation and "drop out" from the training.   "Keeping a close watch" on the students and their doubts, especially promoting their work and encouraging them at emotional level, is critical for success.

Together with an attractive presentation of contents, such personal monitoring and emotional binding are important to assure that the student will finish the training action and the learning process with success.

1.2 Understanding the role of Mentor and his tasks

He/She provides guidance of the learning process, using own experience, ideas and perspectives to engage the student.

Again, the capability to establish not only a technical, but also a personal contact and

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"feeling" between mentor and student is important. Connecting students to their learning targets and objectives shall be promoted through tangible or practical advice that is related – wherever possible – to the personal situation and needs of each student. Other mentor tasks are to help with planning of the learning process, continuously providing them feedback and motivation.

1.3 What a mentor can achieve ... and what not

A mentor can achieve a personalized progress monitoring of students, minimizing difficulties in the process, and promoting self-confidence of the student. Experience tells us that an unmotivated student from the beginning, hardly will pursue anything beyond just obtaining a a certificate with minimum effort.

The mentor can not
- take care of technical problems of the e-learning platform.
- solve problems created by insufficient didactic materials or tutors
- intervene or solve personal situations of the student that difficult the learning process

In the end it is **the student** who has to put effort. A mentor can support the willingness for this, but cannot force or substitute a positive attitude: his role is to help a student find the right answer in his own way.

1.4 Important personal traits of a mentor

Mentors need to be capable of self-motivation and proactive in the context of a virtual environment. This requires an ability of expression in written form using electronic media, both for exact (technical) and human (emotional) content. Specific capacities in the practical use and application of communication through such media are critical. The "Nerd"-type of person may well fit for this profile.

On the other side, in the case of presential sessions also the "traditional" abilities of personal interaction are important.

2) Adaptation of teaching materials

2.1 Summary overview of contents and context of the training subject

Mentoring is relevant to master the content, and this requires from the mentor to understand the structure of the course and the skills to connect with the student. Existing contents must be reviewed and extended with special attention to these aspects.

Mentors will mostly not be specialists in the field of the training action they are mentoring: from the knowledge side, they are at a similar level as their students. Therefore it is important to provide the mentor with a simple, easy-to-understand information about the structure of the training action, tools, practical cases and tasks, scheduled work-shops (if any), etc.

Theme-specific experiences regarding frequent problems, conflicts, reasons for de-motivation, and possible actions to react from the mentor side should also be provided.

2.2 Time schedule of modules, practices, social activities, work, ...

A clear structure of the training action regarding these aspects is strongly recommended, with deadlines for fulfilling specific tasks or online questionnaires. The mentor must receive this information some time before starting his work.

Rules for flexible application of deadlines shall be defined, with clear indication who can authorize in each case (mentor, tutor, training entity, …).

2.3 Interactive elements (chat, tasks, online collaboration, ...)

Interactive elements are the (almost) only tools that a Mentor will have at hand to interact with his students; at the same, students depend on them for interaction amongst themselves. Mentor intervention and support in how to use such elements will be necessary, especially when students are "novices" in their use.

The elements can be part of the existing e-learning platforms, such as the forums or chats integrated in Moodle. However, with the general use of social media like Facebook the virtual interaction of a training action may gain in acceptance if arranged through such external tools: they avoid the need to learn, use, and adapt to a different environment. Mentors need to be familiar with setting up and mastering such external tools, if applies.

The vitalization through elements 24/7/365 distinguishes e-learning from other systems. To launch issues for discussion proves very effective for promoting dialogue among participants, and provokes exchange of views. For the mentor, it offers wide opportunities to catch the attention and participation of students, and to enhance their commitment to learning.

Mentors shall be provided with a clear list of interactive elements that can be used in each training action, including eventual internal Best Practice Rules established by the training institution.   In turn, mentors shall have a say in defining the tools and elements that they prefer to use.

Moments and critical issues during the action

- Understanding of the individual situation of students. Ideally, this information should exist before the training actions starts as such, enabling the mentor to focus his attention from the very start.

- First contact between students, tutor, and mentor. "Break ice" is highly important, i.e. through individual online presentations of all persons involved in the training action

- Control and reinforcement of deadlines for questionnaires, tasks, or participation in forums etc   A clear time schedule of all these elements from the very beginning is helpful.   Students that do not comply early should be contacted, supported and motivated already a couple of days before the deadline. Case given, some extra time should be allowed for if justified.

- Different learning speed of participants. Related with the previous. If no time structure is imposed, it may happen that some students finish the whole action during the first week, while others only start in the last week.   This makes any common "learning by doing" through group work, discussions, etc impossible.

2.5 FAQ – "Frequently Asked Questions" List

Experience with mentoring in a specific training action over a certain timeframe, allows to prepare a list of "FAQs" – Frequently Asked Questions or problems raised by students. This information is very useful for

- students: these matters can be made available in form of a FAQ-list with the answers, avoiding extra repetitive work to the mentor

- Mentors: who can anticipate and prepare for problems that are more likely to appear during his work, speeding up the time of response.

- Training institutions: they can detect frequent problems, improve their internal procedures, and monitor success of such improvements.

Elaboration and update over the time of a FAQ list is suggested, with versions for students, mentor, tutor, and training institution.

3) Training Environment

3.1 Knowledge level of students and their basic needs

Previous knowledge of the individual situation of students: knowledge, expectations of the course, social environment, etc.   As commented above in 2.4, such information is very useful for a fine-tuned mentor support.

A specific pre-course phase for gathering and processing this information is suggested.

3.2 E-learning Platform

When developing educational content for e-Learning, it is evident that the future mentor must be able to manage and work with the platform at least of the level of an advanced user; this can be even more important for the mentor than for a tutor.

From the technical side, it is paramount that the platform works properly, and that technical support is available to solve any incident in short time. A frequent malfunction can affect the development of the program at the expense of student motivation.

The following adaptations and functionalities are suggested:

- *An introductory course or equivalent introduction for mentors to the management of the E-learning platform is mandatory.*

- *Technical support to the platform must be available at least during 12 hours/day on working days, and within 24 hours during weekends.*

- *Define a specific Mentor access to the platform with rights to handle specific content and solve problems; this should include simulation of access as student in order to check / reproduce possible problems reported by course participants.*

- *Provide an area for the action of "mentoring" itself on the platform*

- *Personal face to face interaction between students and mentor, (presential lessons, meetings, individual or group visits): opportunities, infrastructure, organization*

- *"Hot Line" to solve technical problems or other questions*
  - *For mentors they need to consult with the entity*
  - *For students who need to contact a Mentor*

- *Make available tools or social networking platforms to solve these problems: use of a Wiki, Skype connection, Facebook group, WhatsApp list, and similar*