Blended Mentoring

The use of internet-based communication tools to accompany new teachers

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Summary

This article presents the main features of blended mentoring for newly qualified teachers (NQTs), new teachers (NT) and mentors in Austria. The methodological approach is based on a written survey. The article addresses the following research questions: How do mentors and mentees experience blended mentoring? Which internet-based tools are used in the mentoring process and how regularly does the exchange take place via digital media? What are the concerns of digital meetings? What advantages and disadvantages do mentors and mentees see in the use of digital communication tools?

E-Mentoring elements can offer a variety of advantages. Although internet-based communication tools have their challenges, the analysis shows numerous possibilities of blended mentoring to keep the mentoring process going and to supplement it. Furthermore, the results show a special need for targeted use of internet-based communication tools for mentors.

Keywords: Mentoring, Blended Mentoring, Newly qualified teachers (NQTs)

1 Induction for new teachers in Austria

Since the academic year 2019/20, it is mandatory in the Austrian school system for new teachers to undergo the induction-phase, during which they are accompanied by trained mentors for one year. Starting a career is a decisive phase in the professional biography of teachers. For many teachers, entering the profession is a stage with special challenges and formative events. A support structure is paramount to beginning teachers successfully overcoming the many hurdles starting their career (Keller-Schneider, 2020). In Austria, this takes the form of qualified mentors supporting students during their internship and newly

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qualified teachers with the many challenges they face during the sensitive induction phase in addition to her*his professional practice (Dammerer, 2020). The induction-phase serves as an extra-occupational primer to teaching.

The mentor …

- has to advise the newly qualified teacher in planning and structuring the lessons,
- has to analyze their teaching and education activities with them and guide them to reflect on their own teaching,
- shall guide them as needed –,
- has to support them in their professional development and in coping with professional requirements,
- has to observe the lessons of the contract teacher to the extent required,
- has to introduce the mentee to the specifics of the school location, and
- has to communicate current focal points of school development (Employment law, 2022, BGBI I Nr. 137/2022),

Based on these guidelines, a mentor has to use different ways to foster mentees effectively in their professional development, networking and promote collaboration. E-Mentoring is an option and alternative way to stay connected when face-to-face meetings are hard to organize due to organizational hurdles and official obligations (Dammerer, 2020b). E-mentoring is a special form of mentoring that exclusively represents collaboration and communication in virtual space. Terms such as online mentoring or non-face-to-face mentoring, tele-mentoring or cyber-mentoring are also used synonymously (Law, Ireland & Hussain, 2007; Wood et al., 2019). In addition, there are various ways of combining traditional mentoring with electronic media in order to make mentoring relationships between mentor and mentee effective (Rowland, 2012).

This article addresses the following research questions:

- How do mentors and mentees experience blended mentoring?
- Which internet-based tools are used in the mentoring process and how regularly does the exchange take place via digital media?
- What are the concerns of digital meetings?
- What advantages and disadvantages do mentors and mentees see in the use of digital communication tools?

2 Blended Mentoring

Eby, Rhodes and Allen (2010) have analyzed the characteristics of mentoring. They define five key characteristics of mentoring partnerships: (1) Mentoring represents a unique relationship

between two individuals and no two mentoring relationships are alike. (2) Mentoring is always a relationship that is designed to generate some form of knowledge. (3) Mentoring is always a process that is further defined by the nature of the support or relationship. On an emotional or psychosocial level, mentoring can range from friendship to support to acceptance. On a career-related level, the relationship can mean passing on information, advocacy or coaching. (4) A mentoring relationship is always asymmetrical (someone with a clear advantage in terms of knowledge and experience mentors someone with less knowledge and experience), but this does not mean that it is not reciprocal. Even if a mentoring partnership always focuses on the further development of the mentee, in whatever form, the mentor also always benefits from the exchange. (5) Mentoring partnerships are dynamic relationships.

Blended mentoring, e-mentoring and virtual mentoring represent distinct approaches. While the focus in this article will be on a detailed exploration of blended mentoring, e-mentoring and virtual mentoring will also be briefly examined to establish clearer boundaries for the discussion.

Following the idea of blended learning, blended mentoring is the combination of offline and online collaboration (Sautner et al., 2004; Murphy, 2011). There have been studies on e-mentoring and virtual mentoring. Murphy (2011) concluded in his research that blended mentoring and face-to-face meetings provided positive experiences for both mentees and mentors, increasing students' propensity to engage in developmental relationships, a valuable skill for career development. In a study on virtual mentoring, Chan from the University of Hong Kong (2021, p. 285) demonstrated that a secure environment is essential for the success of a mentoring program. This means that a face-to-face meeting between the mentee and mentor is crucial for enhancing the relationship.

Blended Mentoring is defined as the process of using digital means as a complementary channel of communication between mentor and mentee. It is a type of mentoring that indicates that more than one means of communication are occurring between mentor and mentee (Wiesner & Dammerer, 2020, Engelhardt, 2014). These means include face-to-face-meetings and internet-based communication tools (Graf & Edelkraut, 2017). It is a teaching/learning concept that combines the available possibilities of networking via internet with traditional forms detached from time and place. So, this type of mentoring combines traditional face-to-face mentoring aspects with online setting in a meaningful teaching/learning arrangement. It involves using a combination of technology-based communication tools, such as video conferencing, instant messaging, email or online collaboration platforms, along with in-person meetings to facilitate a mentoring relationship (Graf & Edelkraut, 2017, p. 290). Blended mentoring offers numerous and diverse possibilities to keep the mentoring process going and to advance it despite of local and scheduling restrictions as mentor and mentees stay connected and communicate in a variety of ways. The success of blended mentoring relies on effective communication, trust and a strong commitment from both the mentor and the mentee.

Blended mentoring offers a variety of advantages that can support professional development. Some of the key advantages due to Graf & Edelkraut (2017, p. 291) are:

- Flexibility: Blended mentoring provides flexibility in terms of scheduling and communication as mentors and mentees can cooperate and communicate through a variety of technology-based tools. So, exchange is possible without being at the same place and at the same time due to the lack of time and resources.
- Extended range: It is even possible to get in touch with other mentor-mentee-tandems.
- Reduced costs: Blended mentoring can be more cost-effective than traditional face-to-face meetings as it reduces the need to travel.
- Increased access to resources: Work material can be made available online, distributed and worked on together. The use of online resources can expand access to information and expertise.
- Learning on demand: Blended mentoring impresses with flexible design for learning processes according to the mentees needs.
- Side effect: The IT and media competences may increase.

While blended mentoring offers many benefits there are also some disadvantages to consider:

- Lack of personal interaction: Blended mentoring may not provide the same level of personal interactions and relationships as traditional face-to-face mentoring. The online meetings may be perceived as impersonal, distant, superficial and not binding.
- Technical issues: The use of internet-based technology can cause technical problems, such as connectivity issues, software glitches or hardware malfunctions.
- Communication barriers: As blended mentoring heavily relies on online communication, it can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretation. The absence of nonverbal cues, such as facial expression and body language, can make communication error prone. It may be difficult to establish rapport or to build trust.
- Potential for distraction: social media, e-mail or notification can distract from the mentoring process and reduce its effectiveness.

3 Methodological approach

The experiences of blended mentoring from the perspective of Austrian mentors and mentees (NQT) are discussed and focused on in this paper. The research questions are already mentioned in chapter 1.

The methodological approach was based on a written survey. Mentors and mentees (new qualified teachers NQT and new teachers NT) were asked at the end of their first year of service, after a one-year induction-phase. NQT means that these new teachers entered the profession with a completed teacher training program, but due to the current shortage of

teachers in Austria, people without a completed teacher training program are also already teaching (NT).

The collection of the data took place in June 2023. The response rate was 62,6%. 132 of the 140 questionnaires collected were processed and included in the evaluation. The data was analyzed with the survey and examination software "evasys".

3.1 Description of the sample

The written survey consists of four socio-demographic items, 46 items concerning blended mentoring and one open question soliciting personal statement. The sample size is 132 (n) of which are 58 mentors and 74 are mentees. Figure 1 shows the participants:

Participants				
		Frequency	%	Valid %
Valid	Mentor	58	41,7	41,7
	NQT (Mentee with degree)	29	20,9	62,6
	NT (Mentee in education)	45	32,4	95,0
	Missing	7	5,0	100
Total		139	100	

Figure 1: Participants – current position in the school system

Of these 132 valid participants, 82% were female and 18% male. Although there is no equal distribution, there is agreement with the gender ratio in the population.

27,9% of the participants work in primary school, 46% – the majority – in Secondary 1 (pupils from 10 to 14) school. 26,5% of the respondents teach in Secondary 2 schools (pupils from 15 to 19) and 1,4% did not specify their working environment.

The average age of the mentor is 44,7 years with an average deviation of 6,1 years. The mentees with degree are in average 31,1 years old. The average deviation is 7,8 years while the mentees in education are in average 28,4 years old. Here the average deviation is 6,7 years.

3.2 Results of the data evaluation

The respondents entered their answers to 48 items on a four-point scale whereby a choice could be made between the following four gradations: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree.

Regarding the tools of digital communication used, the survey shows the following result:

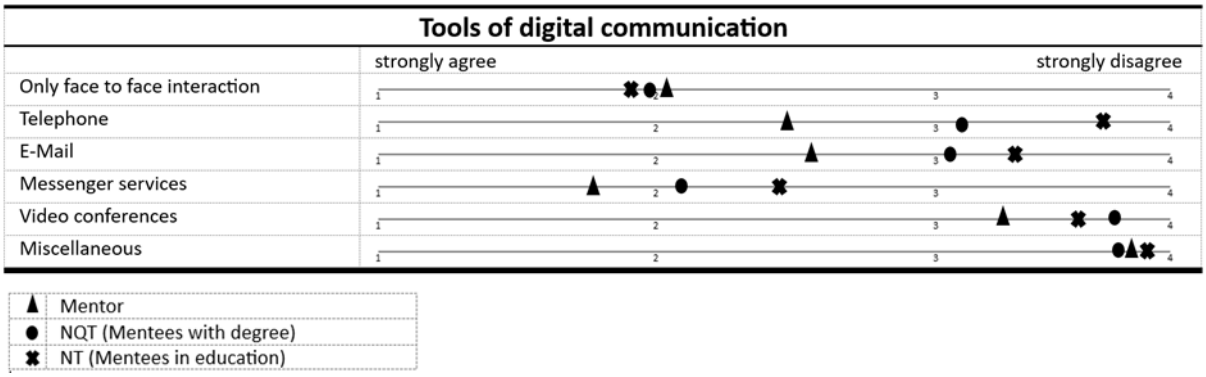

Figure 2: Results – tools of digital communication

Figure 2 shows the variety of internet-based communication tools are used during the mentoring process and focusses on the research question which internet-based tools are used during the mentoring process? Only some respondents state that they only meet in person. Messenger services, such as SMS, WhatsApp, Signal or Instagram are most often used whereas video conferences are hardly ever carried out. Mentees in education state that they hardly ever make phone calls or write e-mails whereas mentors make other statements on this.

Figure 3 examines the research question of how regularly the exchange takes place via digital media. When looking at the results on the intensity of virtual meetings, the following result emerges.

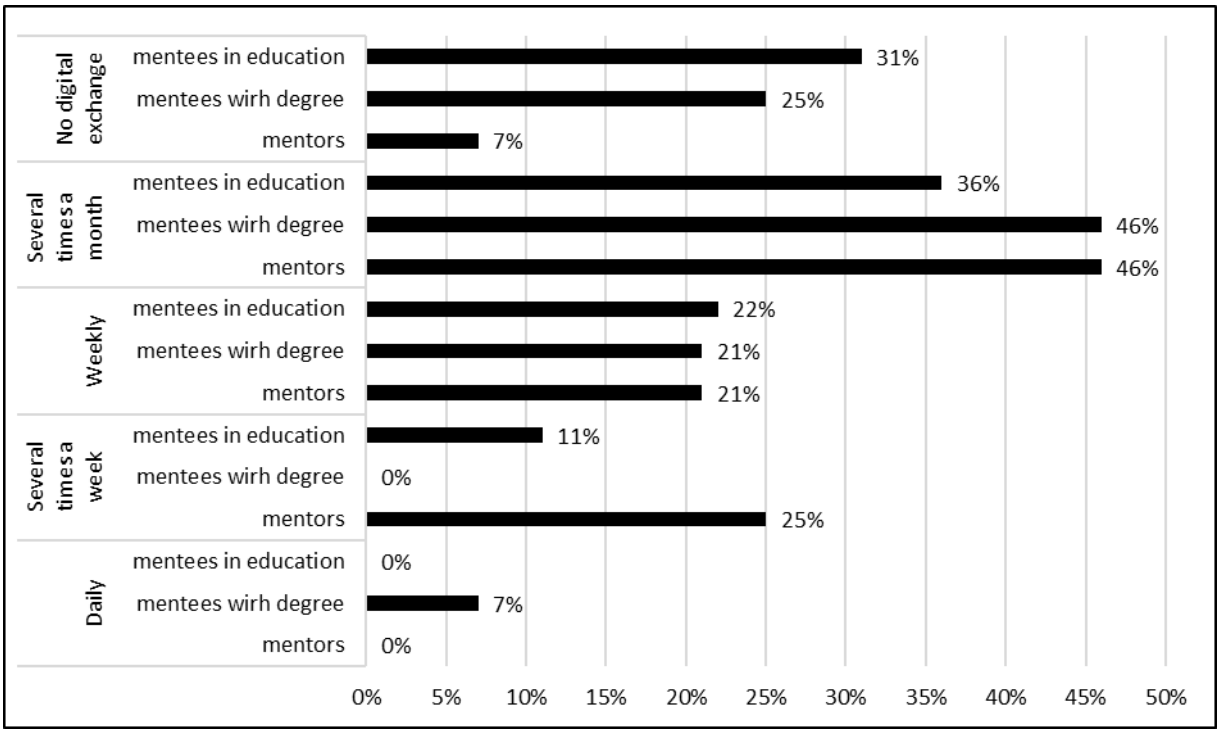

Figure 3: Results – intensity

From the results of the survey, documented in figure 3, it can be deduced that the various parties show different perceptions. In general, the online meetings take place mostly weekly or several times a month. Mentors state that they are more in contact with each other than

mentees perceive. These findings might suggest that mentors and mentees have different time availability and that they have different internet behaviours due to age difference.

As part of the survey, it was determined which concerns are the focus of digital meetings and what are the main topics in the meetings. The following answer options were given and show the following characteristics from the perspective of mentors, newly qualified teachers with a final degree, and new teacher without a final degree.

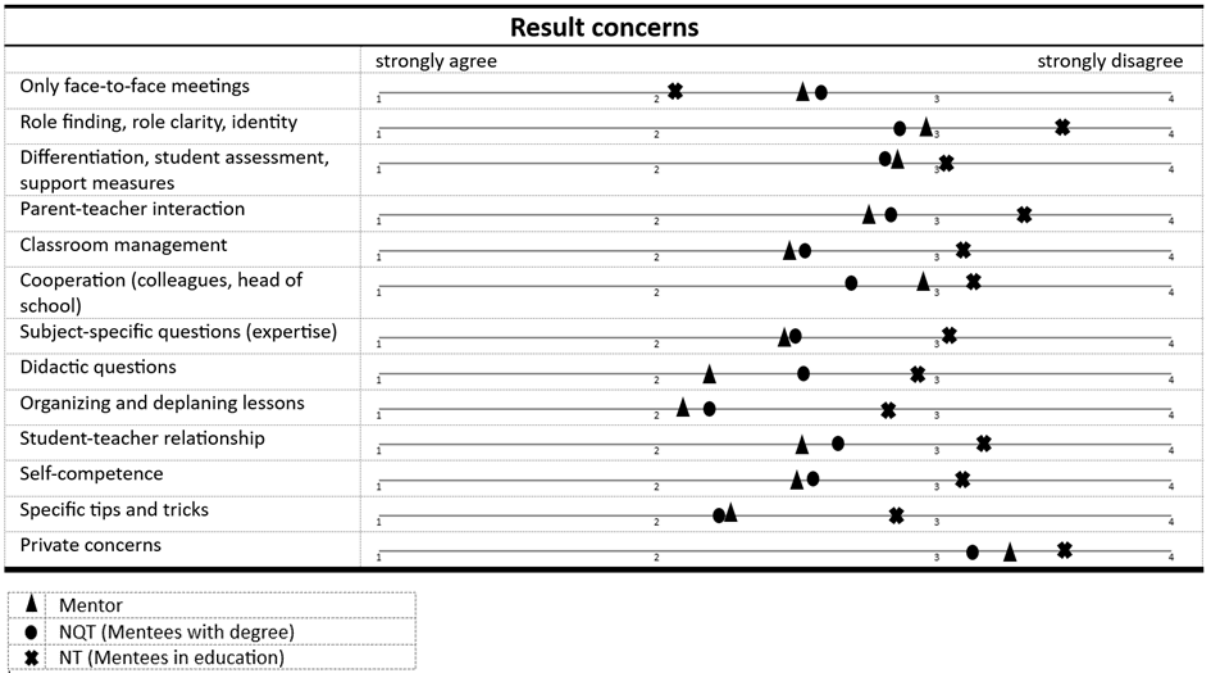

Figure 4: Results – concerns

The results in figure 4 show a parallel trend, with mentees agreeing more strongly in most points. If mentees need simple information, such as tips and tricks or organisational question, they choose digital settings. It can be deduced that face-to-face meetings are preferred to discuss complex issues, such as relationship work or role finding.

When asked about the advantages and disadvantages regarding the use of digital media for the mentoring process, the information provided coincides with the information in the specialist literature. The main advantages cited by respondents were that blended mentoring is an individualizing form of learning and teaching despite geographical distance. Another advantage is that the use of digital media makes it possible to meet in groups despite geographical distance. It is a time and resource saving option to stay connected and offers more flexibility in terms of time and place. Furthermore, the respondents stated that blended mentoring is beneficial for urgent questions to be answered. Moreover, virtual meetings reduce costs and make exchange with other tandems easier.

In terms of disadvantages, the most common indication is that online meetings are perceived as impersonal and reduce social context. Important aspects of human communication are lost. Both, mentors and mentees experience meetings in the virtual space as unsatisfactory, superficial, distant and not binding. Some mentees say that weak internet connec-

tions make online meetings difficult. However, disadvantages are weighted much less than advantages as disadvantages are rather individual voices.

When asked about the desire for further training or support services mentors and mentees indicate that they have basic competences and sufficient skills for general operation of the tools. Mentors wish for concrete implementation ideas for mentoring processes. Regarding the use of digital communication for mentoring, there is still room for improvement.

The qualitative analysis of the final open question did not yield any additional findings. It clarified and emphasised the results already mentioned.

4 Conclusion and discussion

Due to the sample selection, the random sample and the small sample size, the generalization of the study is limited. The results presented are merely representative for the researched group. Despite these concerns, the evidence suggests that virtual meetings offer an opportunity for the accompaniment of newly qualified teachers beyond traditional face-to-face mentoring and have to potential to complement the mentoring process.

Blended mentoring is a promising option to design a need-based mentoring process for newly qualified teachers. The results of this study demonstrate benefits of blended mentoring for both mentors and mentees as it holds promise to connect mentoring tandems across geographical and time barriers. Both parties – mentors and mentees – experience the mix of face-to-face and online meetings as an appropriate possibility to promote mentees effectively in their professional development. For blended mentoring to succeed, face-to-face meetings are important to create a basis of trust. Furthermore, it must be considered, what models of learning and teaching are virtual meetings designed to support. Mentors and mentees show a very positive attitude towards digital communication as they state that the advantages of digital communication outweigh the disadvantages. Advantageous mentoring methods are also characterized by the flexibility of the mentor writes Sotos Serrano (2019) and blended mentoring increases flexibility.

Thus, mentors must be able to accompany and support mentees through different communication channels. Here is room for improvement as mentors do not yet know how to use digital forms of communication for mentoring in a targeted manner and how to initiate collaborative learning processes in online settings. Additional research endeavours could aim to compare the quality of online meetings with those conducted in person and to assess the needs in the design of online mentoring processes. Mentors might need some practical implications on how to design blended mentoring processes purposefully and effectively. This could include tools such as practical guides or checklists including time management tips for virtual meetings, best practices for combining in-person and virtual mentoring as well as case studies of successful blended mentoring programs, which demonstrate challenges and solutions found in corrections. Furthermore, feedback tools for assessing the quality of blended mentoring relationships could be helpful. Within the scope of training resources, greater

emphasis could also be placed on this field so that mentors improve their skills in blended mentoring. The subjective feeling regarding the frequency of virtual meetings is higher among mentees than among mentors. This might be because of a divergent messenger behaviour. Mentors state that they communicate via digital media a lot, while mentee do not. Mentees are accustomed to using digital media and are making increased use of them while mentors do not use digital media that much. This might be a generational issue.

Mentors and mentees state that complex topics like role finding, parent-teacher-interaction are rarely discussed in online meetings whereas pragmatic questions are dealt with using internet-based communication tools. The question here is whether complex topics generally play a subordinate role in the mentoring process or whether they are not discussed in direct exchange at all. Due to the high level of training of the mentors (partly master degree), it can be assumed that complex concerns will be addressed in person.

Technology has become a great harmonizer, breaking down visible and invisible social and geographical barriers that can restrict interaction between people. Numerous electronic possibilities for exchange have been established in recent years and we can no longer imagine life without them. There is no question that these possibilities are also used for learning. How intensive the relationship is when communicating via digital channels still needs to be clarified. As explained in Chapter 2, the relationship level is important in a mentor-mentee relationship, especially when it comes to coaching and counselling conversations (Dammerer, Ziegler & Bartonek, 2019).

The skills in dealing with digital media is high among all respondents but mentors do not yet know how to use digital forms of communication for mentoring in a targeted manner and how to initiate collaborative learning processes in online settings. So, this study suggests exploring methods to design E-Mentoring more effectively and targeted in terms of complex topics.

School is a professional and learning organization, it evolves in a changing environment and thus requires an improvement in interpersonal communication (Marabesi & Kelsey, 2020; Othman & Senom, 2019), blended mentoring would be one such possibility.

The data collected and the results obtained can serve as a starting point for further investigations. Blended mentoring could become even more important in the future as technical and digital tools are used more and more extensively. How this will develop in the context of beginning teachers cannot be predicted at present. In any case, however, we would recommend that further empirical and hermeneutic research be devoted to this topic.

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