

8-15-1997

Mentoring and Scholarship: Electronic Possibilities for Academic Conferences

Reagan M. Ramsower
Baylor University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis1997>

Recommended Citation

Ramsower, Reagan M., "Mentoring and Scholarship: Electronic Possibilities for Academic Conferences" (1997). *AMCIS 1997 Proceedings*. 192.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis1997/192>

This material is brought to you by the Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS) at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in AMCIS 1997 Proceedings by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact elibrary@aisnet.org.

Mentoring and Scholarship: Electronic Possibilities for Academic Conferences

By Reagan M. Ramsower
Baylor University

Introduction

This paper presents a discussion of the possibility of using electronic technologies to support the mentoring role of academic conferences. Specifically the use of the collaborative Internet-based technologies to support the mentoring function of conferences is presented as a method of rethinking the structure and process of research into "living scholarship."

Mentoring

A fundamental activity of scholarship is mentoring. This includes both mentoring others and being mentored. A mentor is an advisor, guide, coach, counselor, consultant, friend, and confidant. A mentor can also be a committee of inquiry or a consultative body. Helping people adjust to new organizations and cultures—to "learn the ropes" is a highly visible role of mentors. Mentors also play a critical role in scholarship by serving as a reviewer for ideas and papers. The process of mentoring and being mentored is one of the critical success factors in scholarship.

A mentor can be thought of as a friend whose relationship extends into the workplace and whose experience in a particular domain is greater than the person being mentored. In the academe, colleagues who are more experienced in a particular knowledge domain and who agree to work with a less experienced colleague become mentors. At any given life stage, a scholar is generally mentoring and being mentored.

Technology is changing the mentoring process. The location of a mentor can be an important issue when considering a successful research agenda. Academics who share similar interests are attracted to Universities where a mentor already resides or is likely to be found. However, the telephone, fax, and other communication technologies mediate the need to locate at the same University as a mentor. As technology mediates the spatial distance required by a mentoring relationship, the importance of academic conferences as a place to meet and exchange ideas face-to-face with mentors has increased.

Academic Conferences

Support of mentoring activities is an important *raison d'etre* for academic conferences. Seeking out a mentor, and engaging mentors in discussion are fundamental reasons for attending conferences. Additionally, being available to discuss topics with interested parties and developing friendships that carry over into scholarship activities are important to becoming a mentor for others.

To investigate how electronic technologies can augment mentoring, consider three areas of mentoring:

- Identification—the process of matching a mentor with individuals wanting to be mentored in a particular subject matter domain.

- Brainstorming—the process of bounding preliminary ideas around to test their feasibility and value.
- Guidance and Review—the process of submitting plans, emerging ideas, experimental designs, and works in progress for review and feedback.

Successful academic conferences are organized to support these processes. Identification is supported by "Birds of a Feather" (BOF) sessions, panel discussions, and other activities. Brainstorming is generally handled outside conference sessions in comfortable isolated locations and conferences offering these settings often receive high praise. Guidance and review occurs in Research-in-Progress sessions and in general sessions where conferences have high acceptance rates. Mini-tracks cluster mentors and those seeking a mentor into particular sessions.

Electronic Technologies

Academic conferences are experimenting with electronic alternatives and extensions to their traditional activities and publications.

Alternatives and extensions include electronic proceedings, electronic discussions, and even electronic hallways for serendipitous meetings. A number of virtual conferences have been tried where the entire conference is held using electronic support. While each of these alternatives and extensions serve to augment a number of conference functions, no important electronic implementation is specifically directed at the mentoring function for academic conferences.

Currently used electronic methods include:

Web Publishing

- Web Pages
- Web accessible Papers

Asynchronous Electronic Discussion and Review

- E-mail
- Listservs
- Newsgroups
- Push-technology Channels

Synchronous Electronic Discussion and Review

- Web-based Discussions and Chats
- poor quality videoconferencing
- whiteboarding
- document sharing

Web Publishing. An informal survey of active conference web sites between January 15, 1997 and March 1, 1997, showed that the most popular use of electronic technologies for academic conferences is the use of the web to advertise and inform people about the conference. Academic conferences commonly use web pages to present basic conference information. Academic conferences are also using electronic technologies to publish the conference papers on the web; however, this method is only used by less than 10% of the conferences surveyed.

The Association for Information Systems Americas Conference has published the conference papers for 1995 and 1996. An analysis of the use of the papers from that web site reveals that interested readers access papers well beyond the date of the conference. The top 5 most frequently access papers from the AIS 1995 Conference had a total of 8,510 hits in the nine months immediately following the conference.

Asynchronous Electronic Feedback. A number of conferences, including the AIS conferences, are using e-mail, and listservs to decrease the time to review conference submissions. Electronic submissions are e-mailed to reviewers and comments are e-mailed back to the chairs of sessions. Listservs are used to keep the large number of geographically dispersed people involved in a conference informed. Private newsgroups are occasionally used to support a conference; however, this technology appears to have a much greater potential than is being exploited. Push technologies also hold significant promise to help coordinate and inform small groups of conference participants.

Synchronous Electronic Feedback. A few sites are using web-based discussions and chats to support of sessions, particularly virtual conferences that rely completely on this method to review and discuss papers. Only a small number of conferences have used some form of synchronous communications (low quality videoconference, shared whiteboards, or shared workspaces) to support conference sessions. However, it is more common to find high quality videoconferencing being used to allow a speaker to present their session from a distance.

Electronic Support for Conference Mentoring

Mentors are confidential coaches and sounding boards who work with you to identify and develop specialized areas of investigation and research and to help you develop positive approaches to your personal, management, organizational and change issues. To facilitate mentoring, the activities of a conference should start well before the conference, beginning in earnest with the call for papers. The call for papers becomes a call for an expression of a research interest. The expressions of a research interests are collected and categorized into research-tracks and published on the web. Private newsgroups for each research track are created and made available to those who are interested. To further support the development and discussion of research issues, push channels are established and subscribed to by the truly interested. The push channels contain early drafts of portions of manuscripts for comment, review, and consolidation. The subscribers to the push channels become the authors of the paper.

The papers that are developed out of these efforts are the combined efforts of a large number of authors. When the paper is presented in a session, a large portion of the audience may have been involved for months in the development of the paper. Other portions of the audience will have observed the development of the paper from afar by following message threads on the newsgroup. The conference serves as a face-to-face meeting time between the authors. Interactive videoconferencing, if available, would allow authors unable to attend the conference to participate in the session. Interactive videoconferencing would also support face-to-face meetings among authors after the session.

Research topics don't conclude with a paper. After the conference session, authors and those who have become interested in the research topic will continue to develop and refine the research area. Their work will continued to be supported through the same collaborative technologies. Deep mentoring relationships can be expected to develop over time as trust and a high degree of familiarity among the team develops.

Summary

Electronic communication and collaborative technologies can be used to significantly strengthen academic mentoring and increase scholarly productivity. Academic conferences provide a time-based focal point for developing research topics for discussion and review as well as a place where interpersonal relationships can be developed into deep mentoring relationships. Electronic strategies can turn conference research into "living scholarship" by using the mentoring process to initiate, evolve, and develop research topics in small collaborative groups prior to the conference. The conference becomes the deliverable point as well as the

opportunity to meet face-to-face with other authors/mentors involved in the development of the scholarship. Continuation of the collaborative group beyond the conference keeps the scholarship alive and updated by including new members who have become interested based upon the conference presentation.