



# FieldNotes

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## Developing an E-Mentoring Initiative

*"It's Nadine writing back. I hope you're having a good day so far. Thanks for the great letter you sent me. I will tell you a little bit about myself. I have long brown hair, dark brown eyes, grade 6, 12 years old. I was born in McLeanne in Alberta on March 16, 1992 and I'm Cree from Frog Lake First Nations. Do you have any pets? I did once. It was a cat named Drew and I had a puppy I loved very much named Bear. I hope you write as soon as possible." — Nadine, grade six student<sup>1</sup>*

**N**adine, a sixth grader at the Piitoayis Family School, an Aboriginal school in Calgary, Canada wrote the above email to her online mentor, a human resource professional at Nokia working thousands of miles away. Nadine was one of more than twenty sixth-graders to take part in an e-mentoring pilot project undertaken by Thrive! The Canadian Center for Positive Youth Development, a partner of the International Youth Foundation (IYF).

Since October 2002, Thrive! has worked to address the needs of Aboriginal children and youth as part of a global youth development initiative of Nokia and IYF. Thrive's efforts through the

program focus on empowering up to 15,000 Aboriginal young people with life skills such as improved communication, conflict resolution, respect for self and others, and community involvement.

In discussions between Thrive! and Nokia staff, e-mentoring emerged as a potentially valuable means of facilitating employee engagement in the program, while strengthening participants' life skills. The "e-buddy" program paired Nokia employees who had undergone training with Aboriginal youth, ages 11-13. Piloted in 2004-05, the initiative offers insights for other youth development projects interested in involving mentors.

## The Benefits of E-mentoring

E-mentoring differs from traditional mentoring in that communication between mentors and protégés<sup>2</sup> takes place via the Internet.<sup>3</sup> E-mentoring has the advantage that mentors and protégés may live in geographically diverse locations. In the case of the Nokia-funded project in Canada, Aboriginal beneficiaries live hundreds of miles from Nokia's three country offices, located in Vancouver, Toronto, and Ottawa. E-mentoring offers the additional advantage of enabling mentors to carry out their service from their workplace during the day. Similarly, protégés can be supervised and encouraged by teachers or program practitioners within a set environment (e.g., a school computer lab). For young people who are reserved or reluctant to discuss sensitive issues face-to-face, e-mentoring offers a less-intimidating alternative.

“Young people need someone to listen to them and discuss things openly, without judgment.”

*Thrive! e-mentoring manual*

When carried out effectively, e-mentoring programs can achieve many of the benefits of traditional mentoring. Research demonstrates that young people who have engaged in trusting, supportive relationships with

mentors often develop greater self-confidence and faith in their abilities. Mentoring programs can also contribute to young people getting better grades, enjoying healthier relationships with parents and peers, and choosing not to engage in negative behaviors (e.g., drug or alcohol use).<sup>4</sup>

## Getting Started

A critical first step in launching an e-mentoring initiative is generating a strong level of interest and enthusiasm among potential mentors and protégés. The Canadian pilot was the brainchild of Thrive! and Nokia representatives. While promoting the program to Nokia staff was relatively easy, the real challenge lay in convincing the program's Aboriginal beneficiaries of its value to them. Most of the young people liked the concept in theory, yet their level of commitment varied considerably over the duration of the program, according to Thrive! Executive Director Joanne McQuiggan. Some students were simply unsure what they could learn from “people in offices,” she explains.

In preparing for the program, Thrive! developed a training manual for Nokia employees that described the benefits of mentoring, offered tips for becoming an effective e-mentor, and provided information on appropriate behaviors. Also featured were weekly “conversation starters” designed to engage mentors and protégés in a progressively richer dialogue over the course of the 20-week

program. For the first several weeks, for example, mentors were urged to concentrate on building trust, e.g.:

- **Week 1**—Introduce yourself and why you became a mentor. Ask your protégé where he/she is from, about their family, and who they spend their time with.
- **Week 2**—Share some of your hobbies and other interests, particularly those you had as an adolescent. Ask your protégé to share theirs.
- **Week 3**—Describe one of the best/worst days of your life. Elaborate on what you like to do, the places you've lived, or what you like to eat. Encourage your protégé to share similar experiences.

In subsequent weeks, the guide suggested more substantial discussion topics. For example, by Week 8, mentors were encouraged to write about the boundaries and expectations they experienced when they were young, while encouraging their protégés to share similar reflections. Week 11's discussion starter involved setting goals for the future.

The process of recruiting mentors was carried out by designated Nokia staff, who publicized the program at the company's three Canadian offices. Each of those who expressed a desire to participate filled out a questionnaire and agreed to undergo a background check. Following, participating mentors took part in a teleconferenced training session facilitated by Thrive! staff. The matching of students to mentors was carried out by a lead teacher at the Piitoayis Family School, who based such pairings primarily on gender.

## Technological Considerations

One of the most time-consuming aspects of launching the e-mentorship initiative was identifying, installing, and testing the software needed to facilitate an online dialogue in a secure, private environment. “There are huge concerns with student access to the Internet,” cautions Thrive's McQuiggan. “Understandably, school administrators don't want students getting anything inappropriate through a school-based computer.” To address such concerns, a password protected dialogue section was incorporated within Thrive's website. The dialogue platform, which included a feature that would delete offensive words, enabled Thrive! staff to monitor the discussion threads and the program's overall effectiveness.

## Launching the Pilot Phase

At the school level, the program was coordinated by a trained teacher and introduced to students as part of an existing computer lab class. Students who expressed an interest in participating in the program filled out a simple sign up sheet, stipulating their name, age, level of Internet proficiency, and what they hoped to get out of the program.

Twenty-three students in all signed up for the program, which ran from March to June, 2005, with mentors encouraged to dialogue

with their protégés at least once a week. While initially slated to last 20 weeks, the pilot was reduced to 10 weeks as a result of delays in installing the necessary technology.

The level of dialogue between mentors and protégés varied considerably, with the majority of conversation limited to the sharing of hobbies, interests, and family life. McQuiggan attributes this to the relatively young age of participants (11 to 12 years), the abbreviated time frame of the program, and the cultural divide that exists between Aboriginal youth and middle class professionals. “There’s a lot of skepticism about what the white man’s agenda is,” she says. “There’s a suspicion underlying the Aboriginal culture that it takes a long time for people to trust you.”

## Lessons Learned

Anecdotal evidence collected through the email discussion threads suggests that those students who were active in the program benefited from developing a relationship with a caring adult mentor. In addition, they were able to exercise their communication skills and develop their cultural understanding through connecting in a meaningful way with someone with a distinct background and set of experiences.

Among those challenges Thrive! experienced is the tendency among Aboriginal youth to exhibit shyness, and the fact that many program participants missed school on a regular basis where they had access to the Internet. The program would have also benefited from more in-depth teacher training and creating an opportunity for the mentors to visit the school and interact with students prior to the email exchange component. “If the kids could have met a real Nokia office worker—since we wear jeans, are usually open and friendly, and could demonstrate with body language that we are genuinely interested in them as people—then perhaps we could have gained the trust of the students and the online communications from them may have been richer,” said Anita Caspo, Communications Specialist, Nokia Canada.



*This symbol was chosen as the logo of the Nokia-funded project in Canada. In Aboriginal culture, the eagle represents wisdom and having the courage to change when one needs to. The human figures underscore the importance of connection among people.*

Thrive! offers the following lessons learned for those local partners considering a similar initiative:

- **Make sure there’s genuine interest among mentors and protégés before launching an e-mentoring initiative—**Ideally, protégés should be recruited first to gain a sense of their interests and what they hope to learn from a mentor. Make sure mentors and protégés understand the potential rewards, as well as the time commitment involved.
- **Determine staff and cost needs upfront—**Thrive’s pilot required roughly 25 days of staff time (for website and manual development, protégé and mentor recruitment, and training and ongoing support), and an additional investment of \$9,000 for their website. For its part, Nokia invested roughly 20 days in project support, including producing collateral materials, website development, and communicating the program to its employees.
- **Target young people of an appropriate age range—**Thrive! initially tailored the program to students, ages 11-12; yet now recommends reaching out to older youth, ages 14-16, who are likely to be more responsive, and generate a more substantive dialogue.

## Questions to Consider

In determining whether an e-mentoring component is appropriate for achieving your project’s goals, consider:

- Whether the inherently impersonal nature of e-mentoring works within your project’s overall framework.
- How email exchanges might help foster enhanced communications skills—or other life skills targeted by your project.
- The most logical stage in your project design to introduce e-mentoring.
- How you can create a mutually beneficial match between the developmental needs and interests of protégés and what a given mentor population has to offer.
- How you can best monitor and evaluate email exchanges to ensure that the desired goals are achieved.



- **Ensure adequate time for your initiative**—As a result of technical problems and school delays, Thrive's planned twenty-week program was reduced to ten. This limited the time available for developing the mentor relationship and entering into a richer exchange.
- **If pursuing a school-based program, make sure teachers allocate a designated time period for students to engage in dialogue with mentors**—In the Thrive! pilot program, students were asked to write their mentors during their computer lab time, when they frequently had competing assignments.

“There's a suspicion underlying the Aboriginal culture that it takes a long time for people to trust you.”

*Joanne McQuiggan,  
Thrive! Executive Director*

## E-Mentoring Checklist

Below are key steps to bear in mind when developing an e-mentoring initiative.

- ☐ Determine your goals and objectives for the initiative and the specific life skills you seek to develop.
- ☐ Construct a time line for completing key elements (e.g., drafting an instruction manual and addressing software requirements). Establish when and where mentoring will take place, the length of sessions, and the duration of the e-mentoring component itself. Thrive! recommends 20 weeks to ensure a substantive level of engagement.
- ☐ Establish roles and responsibilities for key personnel (e.g., assigning point persons to oversee mentor and protégé involvement, coordinate materials development, and monitor email content).
- ☐ Determine criteria for evaluating the program's effectiveness (e.g., number of participants, retention rate, development of specific life skills).
- ☐ Identify the youth population to be served (Thrive! recommends targeting young people, ages 14 and up) and develop a plan for engaging and informing protégés about the program, its goals, and potential rewards. Make it fun. Thrive! distributed “goodie bags” to confirmed participants.
- ☐ Publicize the program among the mentor community you have in mind (e.g., corporate employees, other adults in the community, etc.). Recruit and screen mentors. (If targeting Nokia employees, be sure to consult the local Business Integration team regarding the use of company resources for this purpose.)
- ☐ Draft training materials and a mentor handbook for guiding the content of discussions.
- ☐ Create the necessary technical infrastructure to facilitate the online dialogue, taking measures to ensure privacy and enabling program administrators to monitor content.
- ☐ Develop systems for providing ongoing support to mentors and protégés engaged in the program, and for troubleshooting problems should they arise.
- ☐ Monitor the program's effectiveness at key intervals, making necessary corrections.
- ☐ Upon program completion, acknowledge and congratulate participants. Distribute a survey tool and/or conduct focus groups, as appropriate, to evaluate impact.
- ☐ Summarize key learnings for subsequent initiatives.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of participants.
- <sup>2</sup> In this context, the term protégé refers to a young person who receives care and support from a mentor.
- <sup>3</sup> E-mentoring programs can incorporate a face-to-face component. The Internet was used, as opposed to direct email, for security purposes.
- <sup>4</sup> Source: *Make a Connection E-mentoring Manual*, Thrive! The Canadian Centre for Positive Youth Development, © 2004. For additional e-mentoring research and resources, see: [www.mentoring.org](http://www.mentoring.org).

*Field Notes* is a publication series of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) aimed at capturing valuable lessons and experiences from its programs worldwide. For additional information about IYF, visit [www.iyfnet.org](http://www.iyfnet.org).

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