

DISTRICT DRUMMER

Ann Arbor Public Schools

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The Insite Mentoring Network: An Old Idea with a New Twist

Paul Fortier calls mentoring "the only effective way to help young people make the transition into the adult world since the beginning of civilization," and adds that "only since the arrival of our fast-paced, whanized lifestyle has mentoring the young been relegated to programs' and institutions." Fortier believes that the "single most important reason for our problems with youth today is lack of guidance from the adult community," and that because of this lack, "all kids are at risk to some degree."

Given his strong views, it's no surprise that Fortier has long contemplated how to build these important mentoring relationships in the midst of the pressures and time constraints of modern life. His recent answer: use the technology of the web to make mentoring available on-line. He calls his late effort the Insite Mentoring Network, and you can see the results of his vision at www.mentoringnetwork.org. The web site helps students explore various careers and benefit from adults' life experiences by providing searchable access to profiles of working and retired adults, and to screened e-mail so kids can converse with the people whose lives are featured on the site.

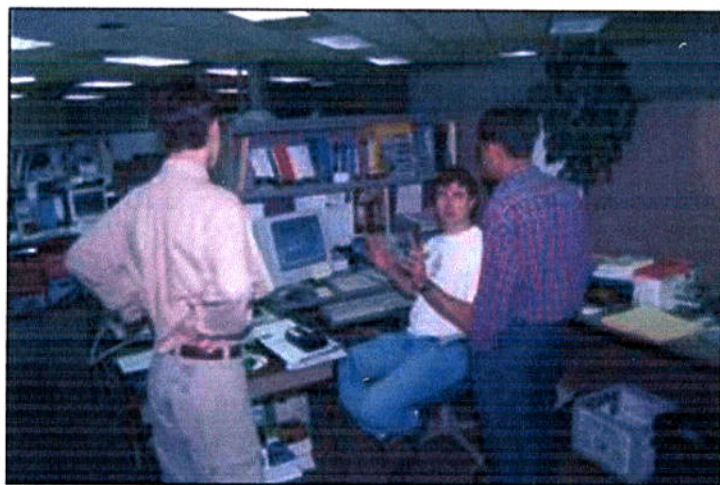
Fortier has been working with at-risk kids for thirteen years. He first experimented with technology-based mentoring in Livingston County, where he experienced "much success" with an intergenerational web project. Kids built web pages based on the lives of older adults, an activity Fortier describes as "kids mixing with adults in the medium of new technology." He soon found forces conspiring to "move us toward a career focus." One source of pressure was the students themselves, who asked for more information on careers. The other impetus came from publicity provided when Fortier and two mentors were interviewed about the intergenerational project by a local radio station. The result: dozens of new volunteers, most of who were younger, working adults.



High school student, Astacia, interviews Lena about lessons she learned from her life experiences. Lena's web profile was then created and posted in the Insite Mentoring Network's database.

Thus was born the Insite Mentoring Network, sponsored by The Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation, the Huron Valley Community Network, and the America Online Foundation. Fortier recruited students at Project Education to serve as his web production team. Under his guidance, these students, many of whom had no computer or web experience, created their own on-line resumes and web profiles of local adults from various career areas. Michael Riesterer, a graphic communications and information technology teacher at Huron High, visited Fortier's Project Ed classroom, and soon saw the fit between Fortier's work and his own students. So he got a grant from the Ann Arbor Education Foundation to purchase the necessary software and peripherals so kids in his advanced Graphic Communications class could work with Fortier to build more Insite web material.

Then Fortier, Riesterer, and Bert Chapman of the AAPS Career and Technical Education Department, sought and won a Next Day technology grant, which allowed them this year to expand the number of participating classes. Says Riesterer, "I see this as an important part of the curriculum I teach. It provides a solid, real-world way for kids to get their hand on [multi-media authoring for the web]. It's important to stay on the cutting edge, and I'm grateful that I could be involved in a program that helps us to do that while providing a service to the community."



James Hills, system administrator for Central Gearing, Inc. explains his work to students during a June 1999 job shadowing activity sponsored by AAPS's Career and Technology Education Department and the Wachsenaw Manufacturer's Council, in collaboration with the Insite Mentoring Program.

Compelling Profiles, Relationships

The adult profiles on the network are much more than simple overviews or careers. Each mentor's life experiences are captured at three levels: Core values, present life (here is the career emphasis), and life history. In addition, there are "Day at Work" features that show students how adults typically spend their time at work.

The first few profiles were built by Project Ed students under guidance of Fortier and one of the mentors, Colin MacGregor, a retired airline pilot and elementary school principal. More recently, the profiles have been built by students in Restorer's Graphic Communications and Information Technology classes at Huron High School, with interviewing support from an English class and transcription services from a Business Education class.

Nicole Cullen, now a senior at Project Ed, was a student in Fortier's original class, which was her first experience with the web. "I had no idea what you could do [with the web]. Paul opened my eyes," she says. "You have lots of freedom to make it the way you want." She says she was surprised by how creative and visually oriented the web design process was. Cullen ended up concentrating on the photography. Under MacGregor's guidance, she took digital photographs for many of the profiles her class built. Cullen calls MacGregor "an awesome guy" and credits him for shifting her photographic interests from "big industrial buildings" to people.

Cullen was also deeply touched by the interview process, during which, she says, "you talk about really meaningful, personal things." Nick Roumel, Board of Education Trustee, agrees. He visited Fortier's class at Project Ed, was extremely impressed, and immediately volunteered to be profiled. He said the interview was "not superficial. It was penetrating enough that they made me really think about my own life and direction."

Such meaningful, personal introspection doesn't end with the mentor profiles. Mentors and students can participate in on-going discussion through posting questions and thoughts on topics like "Living Well," "Lessons from Painful Experiences," "Big Questions about Life," and many more weighty topics. Students also profile themselves by building on-line resumes, which potential employers will eventually be able to search. Jenny Cabotage, a sophomore in Restorer's Information Technology class, photographed some of her best artwork and scanned it in to use on her resume site. Unsure of her career goals, which included "writing on the side, possible, with maybe a steady job in biological or life sciences," Cabotage soon found herself corresponding with Beth Colaner-Kenney, an artist and web designer turned librarian (due to a shoulder condition aggravated by web work) who is profiled on the Insite network.

Colaner-Kenney calls Cabotage "a delight" who sent her "very interesting, wonderful long emails." Cabotage says, "It's really helpful to correspond with someone who's already doing what you might want to do." Her on-line mentor helped her to understand how much art there is in web design, and the flexible hours freelancing can provide. Cabotage is now planning to take a programming class next year, and will spend part of her summer at a computer exploration camp to learn about multimedia tools. Colaner-Kenney and Cabotage haven't corresponded in a while. Colaner-Kenney rues the loss, saying she feels like "a thread [in my life] has been cut."

Safety Gets Lots of Attention

Fortier has gone to great lengths to ensure that the Insite network is a "safe vehicle for correspondence." All mentors in the database are screened using the same criteria as the Big Brothers/ Big Sisters of America. Mentors must provide photo identification and three personal references. In addition, they must pass the Family Independence Agency and State Police records checks. Complete privacy and security is afforded all student and adult participants. No last names, personal information, or identifying details are included in any web profile or on-line resume, or are any permitted in e-mail correspondence. (Last names are used in this article with permission from the participants.) In fact, Fortier spends forty percent of his time personally reading every resume and profile before it's posted, and every piece of email correspondence before it's forwarded to its recipient. "When a student says, [for example] 'my teacher at Pioneer High School,' I take it out. When a mentor names his employer, I take it out."

Volunteers Needed to Help Insite Grow

Fortier's vision is not yet complete. He readily admits he needs help to make Insite all it could be. "We can't-I can't-there's only one of me, he sputters ruefully. He has grand plans: "I would like to see the mentoring network do more face-to-face work," he says. (Right now, parents must arrange and supervise any such contact, after receiving clearance from Fortier.) He'd also like to see students accessing the network in non-technical middle and high school classes. "I have lots of [lesson] ideas written down. This can address history, writing, and more. I would LOVE to brainstorm with some teachers on this." He has a backlog of adults awaiting construction of their on-line profiles, but at the same time would like more mentors to volunteer, especially adults who don't have high-tech careers. He has search engines waiting to be built. ("A PERL programmer would be an ideal mentor for ME," he muses.) He hasn't gotten around to all the schools whose participation he'd like to solicit. And, of course, he'd welcome more money, so he could hire some staff.

Riesterer, for one, hopes Fortier gets what he needs. "This deserves to be supported, and [the project] should be expanded. We should have lots more kids having access to [this]."

Insite is looking for teachers who want to incorporate web production or Internet correspondence into their middle or high school curriculum; adult mentors; companies who have job shadowing or student internship opportunities; PERL programmers; money; and of course, student users who want to learn more about potential careers.

Visit the Insite Mentoring Network on-line at www.mentoringnetwork.org.

Email Fortier at info@mentoringnetwork.org, call 734-995-8853, or write to Insite Mentoring Program, 2700 Arrowwood Trail, Ann Arbor, MI 48105-1216. Email Michael Riesterer at riester@aaps.k12.mi.us.