



E-Professional Development and Rural Teachers: Finding the Blend

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the outcomes of a study on teacher supply and demand issues in Northern Canada. Using questionnaires and interviews, participants were asked to comment on professional development models currently used and models to be considered. In particular, comments on the use of blended learning as a viable method of e-professional development model were favourable. In subsequent research to follow up those comments, the researcher provided professional development model exemplars and asked the participants to discuss the advantages and disadvantages for rural teaching professionals. The researcher argues that the chosen blended learning model is superior to others as it is based on adult-learning principles. The results of this study are promising as the majority of participants chose blended learning as their primary choice for professional development. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Adult-Learning Principles; Blended Learning; Rural Education

INTRODUCTION

The issues of recruiting and keeping teachers are particularly pressing, in general, (Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006), but are particularly important in the North of Canada. Professionals

receive very little professional development, in situ, and often attending conferences is cost prohibitive for them. Clearly, one viable answer is technology and electronic professional development. This article will present a preliminary model of e-professional

development designed for teachers, administrators, and human resources personnel in four Northern Canada sites, Fort Nelson, BC, Fort Vermilion, Alberta, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, and Whitehorse, Yukon. Although the definitions of blended learning vary (Bersin, 2003; Douglass, 2002; Graham, 2006), for the purposes of this study, we defined blended learning as a process by which educators use varied web-, print-, and classroom-based techniques to present a specific set of skills to a group of adult learners

THE STUDY

This Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded study addressed the issues of teacher supply and demand in the following ways: (a) formed partnerships with school district personnel to ascertain their recruitment needs and to consider the development of a formula that will predict their future needs in relation to specialist and generalist teachers (British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 2000; Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2000; New Brunswick Department of Education, 2001; Tremblay, 1997); (b) investigated existing recruitment and retention practices with district personnel (Echols, Grimmitt, & Kitchenham, 1999a, 1999b; Kitchenham, 2001); and (c) asked personnel what professional development opportunities, vis-à-vis blended learning models, could be accomplished with Northern teachers

(Kitchenham, 2006). As well, practices from across districts, provinces, and territories are being brought to the attention of hiring personnel as we disseminate our preliminary findings. It is then proposed that this information will be shared with universities so that they can more effectively tailor their programs for Northern teachers, especially universities such as the University of Northern British Columbia.

The researchers¹ acknowledge that this study will be the beginning of several studies; however, the research SSHRC monies have, thus far, assisted us, and the field of rural studies, to develop future research. The final date for completion of the two-year study was December, 2008.

In total, there were 113 participants from BC, Alberta, Northwest Territories and Yukon representing teachers, administrators, and human resources personnel.

There were three data sources used in this mixed-methods study: an online survey, semi-structured interviews, and an emailed survey. The on-line questionnaire using Zoomerang was completed at the outset of the study. The follow-up face-to-face or telephone interview was conducted one month after the respondents completed the survey. The emailed survey was sent four to six months after the interviews were completed.

The questionnaire was completed by 113 school personnel in the partner school districts in which they identified demographic information (e.g., gender; number of teachers; age range;

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