Chapter 1

A Blended Learning Course for Teachers' Ongoing Professional Development in Greece

Charalambos Mouzakis
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Constantinos Bourletidis
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the design, implementation and evaluation of a professional development program for teachers initiated by the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs in cooperation with the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. The course focused on multicultural education and bullying in schools as it was realized through blended learning whereas the methodology applied was a face-to-face meeting and 250-hour web-based learning. The evaluation process aimed to involved teachers' perceptions toward different aspects of the blended training process. The quantitative and qualitative results indicate that the teachers were satisfied both with the opportunity to learn at home at their own pace as with the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills in relation to their work. The results brought to light arguments, controversies, and problems related to the course. Finally, some recommendations that would improve the effectiveness of courses employing blended learning methodologies are given.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers' professional development is integrally related to the quality of education and is closely linked to improved learning outcomes and school environment (Meiers, 2004; Snoek, Uzerli, & Schratz, 2008). Recent studies offer compelling evidence that professional development offers skills and knowledge that enable teachers to improve their instructional and intervention practices and to deal effectively with local community needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; OECD, 2005). Teachers' professional development encompasses different types of facilitated learning opportunities, ranging from a single workshop to a full-semester academic course, and varying widely in the content and the form of the learning experiences involved (Borko, 2004; National Professional Development Center

on Inclusion, 2008). The rapid development in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has provided more flexible and effective ways for professional development for teachers, not possible in traditional in-class education (Dede, et al. 2006).

Recognizing the importance of ICT, the majority of the countries in the world have developed open and distance learning methods supported by (ICT) to facilitate teachers' networking and to provide online learning experiences (Jung, 2005). Academics, education researchers, political and policy driven motivators have also begun to support the development of online professional development not only in distance education settings, but also in courses, which combine features of online learning with traditional classroom-based learning (Owston, et. al., 2008; Simkins, et. al. 2009). These courses are often referred to as 'blended learning', combining various types of pedagogy with different tools for interaction and discussion (Lord & Lomicka, 2008). Research evidence suggests that blended learning courses reap the benefits of both face-to-face and online learning such as flexibility, convenience, scalability and adaptability, enabling teachers to become more directly involved in their own learning and their professional growth (Rovai & Jordan 2004).

Based on the assumption that professional development should be an integral part of daily practice for all teachers, the European Commission supports policies for improving teacher competences and qualifications under the 'Education and Training 2010' programme (European Commission, 2007; Zgaga, 2008). In this context, the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs with the support of the European Commission initiated a teachers' professional development course under the name "A Web-based teachers' training to enhance teaching and learning". The course was developed in cooperation with the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and combined both a face-to-face meeting and web-based learning, supported by facilitators. A total of 187 teachers employed in state schools, primarily from the rural areas of northern Greece, participated in the course, which lasted from October to November 2008.

This chapter aims to describe the components of the teachers' professional development course and to investigate the teachers' personal experience of the blended learning process. The findings of this study offer further understanding of the specific contexts, conditions, and practices that contribute to the success of blended learning for teachers' professional development courses.

BACKGROUND

Current literature provides varying definitions of blended learning, reflecting the diversity of instructional practices, pedagogic approaches and technology modes (Stacey & Gerbic, 2009; Martyn, 2003). Although there are different points of view regarding the various components of blended learning, educational theorists and practitioners seem to agree that the essential nature of blended learning is the on-line delivery of instructional content with the on-site implementation of instructional strategies (Graham 2006; Osguthorpe & Graham 2003). In teachers' professional development setting blended learning is viewed generally as a combination of face-to-face and distance learning methods offered to develop teachers' knowledge and skills and provide them with additional qualifications (Hellmig, 2008). Research evidence suggests that the blended learning approaches increase teachers' access to training, improve teachers' flexibility and convenience, and facilitate effective pedagogical strategies to develop teachers' knowledge and skills (Fiege, Peacock & Geelan, 2004; Hojsholt-Poulsen, 2007; Samarawickrema, 2009).

To date, much of the research examining blended learning has been done with researchers who are involved in national projects designed to support teachers' on-going professional de-

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