

Chapter 17

Teacher Professional Development through Virtual Campuses: Conceptions of a ‘New’ Model

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ABSTRACT

This chapter acknowledges the increasing impact of eLearning and the associated rise of Virtual Campuses (VCs) for Teacher Professional Development (TPD). On the basis of reported literature, in particular, deficiencies identified in Bell’s (1991) traditional “individual”, “group,” and “school development” approaches, the authors propose an alternative model for TPD delivered through VCs. In support of this “new” model, key issues underlying the VC paradigm in terms of the design and implementation of such environments are further discussed. In particular, the authors argue about the value and complications behind the adoption of this model and suggest principles supporting the design of such type of environments.

INTRODUCTION

In order to thrive in increasingly demanding school contexts, teachers must adapt to diverse students’ needs through adjustment to new pedagogical

approaches, education policies and educational reform efforts. In this regard, teachers need continuous support through multiple professional development opportunities to deepen content and pedagogical knowledge and to improve teaching skills.

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Studies on either school-based training programmes or training programmes designed and implemented by outside providers -at the local and national level- often prove such training ineffective (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). Traditional and popular approaches to Teacher Professional Development (TPD) appear to have negligible impact on teachers' ability to put innovative teaching approaches to practice. In other words, conventional approaches to TDP in support of teachers' continuous learning seem to fail (Mouza, 2002).

At the same time, the rapid expansion of the Web, as a potential course delivery platform, provides a significant incentive for educational institutions to develop e-learning programmes through both on-line and blended approaches (Harasim, 2000). E-learning is nowadays commonly accepted, not just as a popular alternative to traditional face-to-face education, but also as a tool for lifelong learning.

Consequently, since traditional education appears inadequate to provide an effectual answer to teachers' enhanced professional development needs, Virtual Campuses (VCs) emerge as a route towards high-quality TPD. Thus, this chapter acknowledges the value of such settings, not only in building individual knowledge and skills but also in enhancing collaboration among colleagues across the world against feelings of isolation, often inherent in the education community. Through such settings, teachers can strategically position themselves in relation to others, enacting a collaborative rather than isolated professional role (Cohen, 2008). As Tickle (1994) proposes, online communities of reflective practitioners contribute towards development, beyond private introspection while networked intelligence can be utilized when planning educational interventions (Ryymin et al., n.d.). Therefore, the need arises for teacher trainers to design programmes of web-based learning that will break the boundaries of individual teachership and create activities for collaborative TPD (Ryymin et al., n.d.).

In an effort to draw the qualities and limitations of a 'new' teacher development model based on VCs -the VCTPD model- this chapter aims, primarily, to address authors' concerns to re-define and re-design meaningful teacher professional development through virtual settings and, secondarily, to highlight the roles of academic and professional institutions as external forces in the implementation of this model to meet the learning needs of individuals and organizations (Sandelands, 1998).

DEFINITIONS AND APPROACHES REVISED

Teacher Professional Development

This chapter builds on the notion of teacher professional development (TPD), for which there is no single or agreed definition (Glover & Law, 1996; Evans, 2002). For some, it overlaps with in-service training. Bolam (1982) refers to education and training activities that teachers engage in, following their initial certification: induction training, short courses, school-based training and university award bearing courses. Others (Taylor, 1980; Bell, 1991; Fullan, 1991; Hoyle & John, 1995) describe a continuing learning process, extending from initial training to retirement by which teachers acquire and develop knowledge, skills and values. At the same time, TPD is also used loosely and interchangeably with the terms 'professional development' and 'staff development'. The former embraces education, training and job-embedded support activities teachers engage in, following initial certification (Bolam, 2000). The latter is seen as the way by which an individual is developed as a member of staff in a particular school, or the development in some way of the whole staff of a school (O' Sullivan et al., 1998). An additional term, 'teacher development', often denotes the process whereby teach-

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