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► To cite this version:

Jacques Ginestié, Maria Antonietta A Impedovo. International Teachers Professional Developing: Blended Learning between Europe and Asia. 1st International Conference on Innovation in Learning Instruction and Teacher Education, Hanoi National University of Education; Southern Cross University (Australia), Dec 2019, Hanoi, Vietnam. pp.4-8. hal-02421231

HAL Id: hal-02421231

<https://hal.science/hal-02421231>

Submitted on 20 Dec 2019

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International Teachers Professional Developing: Blended Learning between Europe and Asia

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Abstract. Blended learning is one of the wider used instructional approaches to higher education for initial and continuing education. Blended education proposed between different international regions and countries is still scarce, especially involving developing countries. Specifically, we are interested to explore blended learning course for international teachers professional learning. Some theoretical and operational principles to the design of blended learning are discussed in a socio-constructivist approach, followed by the description of a blended design in an international project. The paper goes in the direction to explore the potential for global collaboration and cooperative growth in blended learning.

Keywords: Blended learning; Collaboration; International Professional Learning; Design; Teacher.

Introduction

Over the last decade Blended Learning (BL) becomes one of the wider used instructional approaches proposed by higher education for initial and continuing training, with prominent international conference dedicated to this topic (like “the Blended & Personalized Learning Conference” and the “International Association for Blended Learning Conference”). BL is particularly interesting for features like flexibility, effectiveness, cost reduction, allowing an optimization of resources by the participant and the training institute and making possible a re-design of a traditional course. Despite the widespread of BL in higher education, few are the blended learning course proposed in international settings or addressed to international issues (Halverson, Graham, Spring & Drysdale, 2012). Also, BL in international collaboration with specific attention to the diversity of the cultures and group is still scarce, especially for teacher professional learning.

Keeping in mind the need to design innovative training skills in order to convey knowledge and skills, the purpose of this paper is to explore the potential for global collaboration and cooperative growth in blended learning. Below, BL is analysed considering an international perspective and specifically related to teachers professional learning. Then, theoretical approaches and strategies to design international blended learning are examined in a socio-constructivist approach.

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Content

1. Potentialities and Spreading of Blended Learning

Blended Learning is gaining institutional-wide support in formal education. BL enhance the potential benefits of both face-to-face and online approaches for participants and educators, in an effective and flexible communication and collaboration adapted for adult education (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2014). Indeed, here, BL is understood as the optimal combination of learning and online presence, enhancing the potential benefits of both approaches (Graham, Allen, & Ure, 2003). Bonk and Graham (2006) propose four dimensions as being able to synthesise and represent the possible structure of BL: space, time, the characteristics of the media, and human characteristics. So the strength of BL lies in the rethinking of the teaching model to adapt them to the specific context of use (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

It emphasizes a participant-centred perspective, facilitates access to continuing education for new audiences and a better use of educational resources. In this way, it helping to rethink modes of teaching and learning, introducing new script, plan and organizing of lessons, taking into account the educational context. The flexible use of ICT in BL offer participants new opportunities to develop a personal vision of pedagogy that facilitate the use of the technology too. Also, the recent review of the literature shows evidence that BL appears to facilitate learner empowerment more than either face-to-face or fully online courses, with a greater sense of succeeding (Owston, 2018).

In educational settings, Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) argue that the reasons why educators, instructors, trainers, and students prefer BL to other formats may be educational. That is to say, it offers pedagogical wealth; direct access to information; the possibility of more varied social interactions; customisation, flexibility, and accountability; and the optimal relationship between costs and results. The differentiation of teaching methods leads to the personalisation of the educational intervention, playing on the pleasure of technology and the blending of the formal and informal. Scholars also argue that BL is particularly effective at encouraging the development of critical and reflective thinking, relying on the ability of the participants to engage in self-regulated learning. In professional settings, BL is also sufficiently flexible and efficient to adapt to different working situations.

Despite this variety of potential described above, the adoption of BL for international training is still in the starting phase, as presented in the following section.

2. Blended Learning in International Training

In their review about BL in worldwide, Spring & Graham (2017) show evidence that in educational literature a lack of connection between countries and regions, considering that there are “instances of successful collaboration and connection among distant and unique regions that could be echoed elsewhere” (p.35). Indeed, the authors show that most frequently cited articles discussing BL are by North American researchers. In others countries and regions like the Asian countries, differently, few are the scientific article in the educational literature focuses on BL. Inside this regions, main contributions are by economical competitive countries like China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. For example, the analysis of Tham and Tham (2013) discuss BL cultural, pedagogical and

design issues in China, lack of interactions in Korea, limited internet use in Japan and Singapore. In other regional, like Africa, the implementation of blended learning is growing in active and isolate institutions, with obstacles related with the level of infrastructure and culture (for a case study in Uganda, see Ayoo & Lubega, 2008 and the project “Chalkboard.education” in Ghana).

Yet, the potential of BL in developing countries is not yet explored. BL could be an interesting choice to be supported in developing countries, looking for flexible and effective solutions to adapt in a challenging context with limited technology solutions. Indeed, the BL is based on a no-expensive technical infrastructure, like a free online learning environment such a Moodle, already rich in online tutorials in different languages and well adapted for mobile.

Connections and research between regions supported by technology could contribute share international issues and program for complementary solutions and contributions. International exchange and discussions supported by technology have rich implications for teachers professional learning, that we will examine in the next paragraph.

3. Blended Learning for International Teacher Professional Learning

Blended learning (BL) could be a suitable approach to introduce innovation and international added value for international teacher learning. However, in a hyper-connected world, initial and continuing teacher education proposed by higher institutions still remains generally limited to national borders. Examples of international collaboration are recent, like an international collaboration between college students and pre-service teachers in Norway and the UK (Naylor & Gibbs, 2018). A more international teachers exchange, for both developed and developing countries, can be strategic to tackle common issues in a wider and more complex vision of the teacher professionalism.

More, according to Snoek et al. (2011), intensive international exchange of learning by teachers will contribute to their professionalism. Engaging in an international training international training course give to the teachers’ new knowledge but also give the teachers opportunity to challenge themselves with the management of resources, building new relationships and growing the professional network that could play a role in modelling the professional career. Indeed, teachers’ skills are built through a long process based on information, knowledge, studying one’s own daily classroom practices but also learning with and from colleagues. For this, it is important that teachers are exposed to innovative training, with an international and intercultural perspective too (Hajisoteriou, Karousiou, Angelides, 2018), as also supported by the European Union with the Erasmus programs and mobility (see the program Erasmus+).

Taking into account all the consideration in these sections, below are described the theoretical perspectives and operations of how to concretize the design of a blended learning to be adopted in an international context.

3. Case Study: A Blended Learning Course Between Europe and Asia

The project “Blended Learning Training for Teachers educators” (in the following indicated with the acronym “BLTeae”) – for more info <http://blteae.eu/> - led by Aix-Marseille University (France) is supported by the European Capacity Building Program. This European program has the aim to foster and increase trans-national cooperation projects between higher education institutions, addressing challenges and cross-cultural awareness. The project BLTeae

is oriented to involve European countries (France, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia) and Asian countries (Malaysia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan) in a collaborative community capable to reflect on teaching trainers' practices. It responds to the common European and Asiatic issue to improve and revise teacher training programs. Indeed, improving the quality of teacher teaching effectiveness is one important school-related factors in student achievement in different regions (OECD, 2014). The project BLTea is articulated in three years, with some main activities (for a summary, see Table 1):

- In the first year an initial questionnaire is conceived and submitted to all the community to know need and skills of teacher educators. In the same time, all the institutions are involved in co-developing content for a training course organized with 20 online modular courses and two face-to-face training (one in Bangladesh and the second in Pakistan);
- In the second and current year, all the members are involved in video sharing about teaching practices (related with the modules) and online community discussion on the teachers' practices;
- In the third year, the main activity is the sharing of best practices about teacher educators' practices to build a common reference curriculum for teachers' educators.

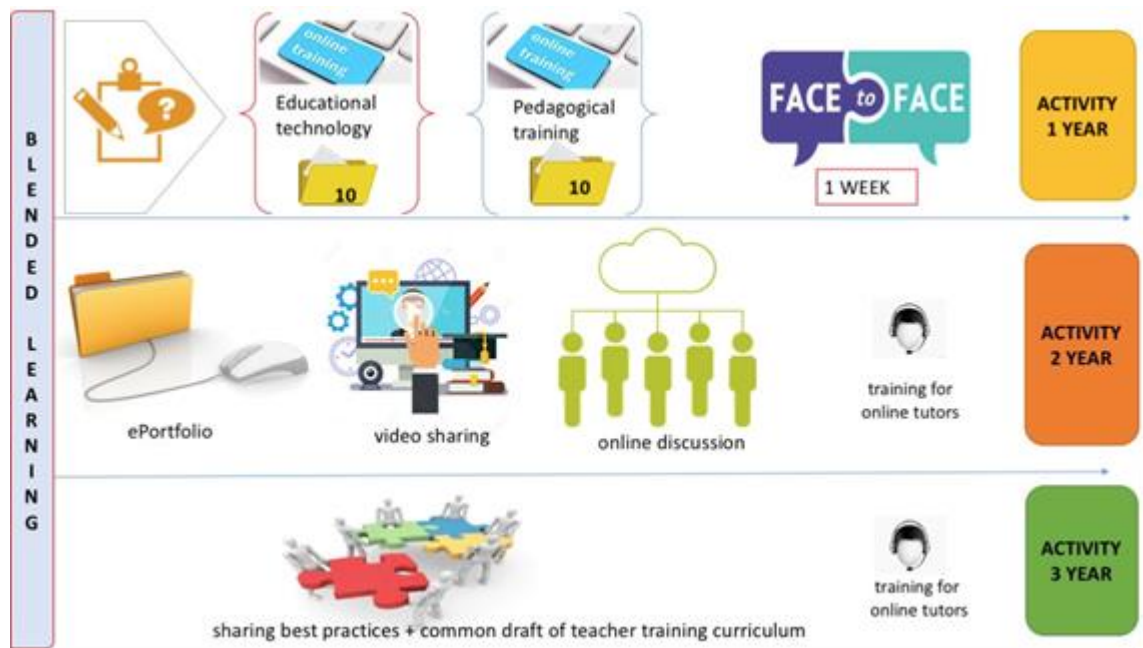


Table 1. Three-years activities in the BLTea project

3.1 Learning through Personal, Peer and Group Activities

The blended learning is proposed considering the three macro level: 'personal', 'peer' and 'group'. Indeed, adopting a socio-constructivist perspective, learning derived from a complex interaction with other people who feel connected by belonging to a community. Also, an active participation in a learning community brings the sharing of experiences and meaning, making

a possible new form of collaboration and active knowledge building process, with discussion, sharing, negotiation and integration of ideas.

The personal dimension of teacher-educators in the project is supported by the use of space (like e-portfolio) for individual reflection. Also, an online tutor guides the individual reflections. The peers (teachers-educators from all the institutions involved in the project) share in the community what they have learned by the online resources, and re-evaluate these experiences to see them in new ways that might suggest new practices. In particular, the role of the peers is active in the sharing of digital video about their teacher practices (Santagata & Angelici 2010). Indirectly, this online activity could have an impact on their local teaching class and in the educational community. Learning innovative practices, the embedded use of ITC in the training course and continue discussing knowledge and personal experiences on common space could strength effective teaching.

About the “group”, the international dimension in the project between the partners makes possible the sharing and critically discussion about common topics and see the links with local educational context. Teachers are sensitized to use an adequate and clear communication for the international community, using the common language of English and critically consider perspective (ex, the pedagogies of the Flipped classroom) to local situations. The international cooperation enriches teachers’ practices, making possible a critical comparison and the sharing of reflections.

Finally, the BLTeae project has a special focus on the developing of common results through the mediation of technologies (Impedovo & Brandt-Pommares, 2018). Indeed, the BLTeae project proposes to the teacher-educators to improve teacher practices joining in common discussions finalized to a shared and joint curriculum. For this, concrete attention is in the co-build of educational resources (online modules and face-to-face resources), the creation of videos to share, receiving a direct scaffolding by all the international participants. In this way, each participant can discover and explore the potentiality of ITC (Moodle, social network etc.) for the growing of the collective reflective community. In the same time, promoting teachers’ intercultural knowledge, attitude and skills.

Conclusion

The paper goes in the direction to explore the potential for global collaboration and cooperative growth about BL. Connections and research between regions could contribute share international issues and program for complementary solutions and contributions. This prospective is used for discuss about teachers professional developing. In fact, we consider that the development of a complex professionalism such as that of the teachings can take advantage of an international networking, which today the technologies make possible but it not yet full proposed by higher institutions. The design of innovative learning courses, supported by technology, is strategic for the today international globalization. The BL based on international collaborative learning can be particularly useful in designing interventions, with a scenario that includes social interaction; open and complex issues requiring investigation and active engagement; shared knowledge objects and collective efforts to advance knowledge.

The analysis of a BL course can support the tutor and lecturer in educational monitoring and in planning issues and conceptual changes during the learning process. A method of data collection in the BL context is “blended ethnography”. It is a form of ethnography that

integrates techniques of traditional face-to-face research with those of virtual ethnography, conducting an in-depth study of a blended community (Stringer et al., 1997). The adoption of BL is certainly not easy to implement and does not always guarantee satisfactory results, considering the lack of shared knowledge of the procedures and proper information for implementing it. Consequently, it is important to train tutors and teachers properly, especially regarding the integration of technology in the pedagogy.

Finally, if well designed, BL could be a space within which to improve professional competence and transversal skills, considering that learners have to deal with new working contexts in their personal and professional lives. Thus, the design of a BL course could help to support a new generation of international teachers, more connected beyond national borders.

Acknowledgement

The project “Blended Learning Courses for teacher educators between Asia and Europe” (n°: 574130-EPP-1-2016-1-FR-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP) is supported by European Commission Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) - Erasmus+ Higher Education – International Capacity Building program.

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