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OUTPUT NO 1 OF BLETEACH PROJECT: GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES AND BLENDED LEARNING CONCEPTS IN TEACHERS´ CPD IN HUNGARY

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Abstract

Within the frame of the European Erasmus+-Project "BleTeach - Blended-Learning in Teachers´ Professional Development" an international consortium (including Hungary) intend to develop an advanced professional development course which will enable secondary teachers of all school subjects to integrate content-specific literacy skills into their subject classes. The particular concerns of the project are to combine elements of face-to-face learning with e-learning in an optimal way for teachers in a „blended learning" format. The planned course is going to build on the results of two predecessor projects in the Comenius-programme (BaCuLit, ISIT), but will also update and expand the results of these projects. Furthermore, it is also planned to build the course on national examples and materials for each of the involved countries (e.g. Hungary). The basic conception and main objectives of BleTeach are presented in the paper in which the methods, objectives and outcomes of the first output are also introduced.

1 Introduction

The BleTeach project addresses two important challenges in European educational policies: the integration of digital and online learning opportunities into teachers´ professional development and the reduction of low achievers in literacy among adolescents (secondary school students). The link between these two major goals is the following: In order to address the problem of low literacy skills of adolescents in many European countries it is crucial to improve teachers´ expertise to integrate literacy instruction into their regular content area classes - not only in primary but also in secondary schools. As research has shown, content area literacy (i.e. content specific reading and writing skills) has to be taught in secondary schools across all school subjects ("content areas") in all grades. Unfortunately in most European countries secondary teachers mainly study their subjects and subject-related didactics during pre-service education but do not get trained in content area literacy. In the long run this component needs to be integrated into teachers´ initial education at colleges and universities. For pragmatic reasons we decided to focus on teachers´ professional development.

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The main target groups of BleTeach are:
1) secondary teachers of all school subjects and
2) teacher trainers / in-service training institutions in teacher education
3) (indirect ultimate target group:) students in secondary schools – and especially adolescents struggling with literacy requirements in content learning.

The partners of BleTeach Consortium are:

Partner 1 - Germany: University of Cologne (Coordinator: Prof. Dr. Christine Garbe)
Partner 2 - Romania: Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking, Romanian Association, Kluj-Napoca
Partner 3 - Hungary**: Pallas Athene University (PAU)** (Prof. Dr. Janos Steklacs, Dr. Ildikó Szabó, Dr. Veronika Szinger)
Partner 4 - Germany: Pädagogisches Landesinstitut Rheinland-Pfalz
Partner 5 - Belgium**:** University of Liège
Partner 6: Belgium**:** Haute Ecole de la ville de Liège/ Haute Ecole JONFOSSE
Partner 7 – Portugal**:** University of Minho**,** Braga,
Additional partner: Russia: Herzen Pedagogical State University Sankt Petersburg External Experts**:**
External evaluator**:** Dorothee Gaile, Amt für Lehrerfortbildung Hessen (Germany)
External consultant**:** Prof. Dr. Colin Harrison, University of Nottingham, School of Education (UK)

2 Scientific background of the project

The BleTeach project addresses two crucial needs in teachers´ continuous professional development (CPD) in most European countries:

1. A general (structural) problem: The unsatisfying structures of teachers' continuous professional development (CPD) in the EU.

2. A specific (content related) problem: the lack of literacy expertise of secondary school teachers, i.e. content area teachers of all school subjects. Content area literacy expertise is required to address the problem of low literacy skills of children and adolescents in European countries.

In many European countries the time for face-to-face learning in teachers´ CPD is limited to a few days per year and this practice privileges "one-shot-approaches" which are not effective in changing classroom practice. Therefore BleTeach will analyse the most promising formats in blended learning offers in CPD in order to develop and implement a blended learning course (BLC) for secondary teachers.

The PISA studies (OECD, 2000 ff.) [1] revealed: in European countries, one out of five adolescents lacks the necessary basic literacy skills to cope with literacy requirements in education, training, workplace, societal participation and lifelong learning. The Final Report of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (published in 2012) [2] stated an urgent need of action; the 2020 Education and Training Benchmarks of the European Commission defined the reduction of low achievers in literacy, maths and science as one of its major goals One reason for these deficits of adolescents in literacy is seen in the lack of a systematic reading instruction in mother tongue and content area education in secondary schools. International research found that understanding content area texts (or disciplinary texts) should be taught in all subjects and all grades systematically. The term content area literacy (CAL) refers to teachers' competence to deal with reading / writing and learning instruction not only on the elementary level in the language arts classes, but in all subjects and all school levels. But in most European countries, content area teachers are not trained to fulfil this task.

Thus BleTeach pursues two main objectives:

a. A general objective: Modernizing structures of teacher education by integrating digital learning opportunities into teachers´ professional development.

b. A specific objective: Developing a model blended learning course (BL-course) in CAL to be included into the regular course programme of around 40 European Teacher Training Centres.

The BleTeach-Consortium consists of 7 partner institutions working in five different countries and in different fields of teacher education:

- Universities with an expertise in educational sciences and initial teacher education,
- Teacher training centres with an expertise in teachers' professional development,
- Providers of teacher training and of IT-offers.

In addition the BleTeach-Consortium cooperates with a total of 40 "associated partners": in-service teacher training institutions and schools. Continuous cooperation will be arranged in a series of 3 Multiplier Events per country and on the basis of a common E-learning platform.

The main results of the project will be:

- National reports on good practice examples and concepts in blended learning in teachers´ CPD from Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Romania (and Russia)
- Handbook of success factors in blended learning offers for teachers´ in-service-training containing guidelines, indicators and examples of good practice (about 100 pages)
- Blended Learning Course in CAL for Secondary Teachers and Teacher Trainers
- Producing the master version (English) and five national versions.
-Concept for implementation of CAL course into the regular offers of 40 teacher training centres, including general certification and national accreditation requirements.

3 Methods and objectives of Output No1.: National report on good practice examples and concepts in blended learning in teachers´ CPD (Hungary)

We applied a four-stage methodology, which gradually provided the data that allowed us to provide answers to the specific research questions.

In stage 1, the purpose was to contact tertiary education institutions that provide CPD-courses for in-service teachers. In order to get in contact with these institutions we used the phone/mailing list of teacher training colleges and universities. The Administration Office of PAE provided us the names and availabilities of administration office heads and/or deans of these higher education institutions. As we already used this tool to promote ISIT project at these institutions when recruiting participants for that project, and it was very efficient, therefore this tool seemed to be reliable again, this time with BleTeach project. We also contacted two CPD provider institutions that are not higher education institutions. We contacted 28 higher education institutions and conducted 17 interviews by telephone either with the head of the administration office or the head of the institution. We prepared an official letter containing the leading questions of our research (see Annex 1) in case the institution has any experience in the field of blended courses, we could send it to them.

In stage 2 we used the online source containing all accredited in-service teacher training courses. We were searching for blended courses on the official website of accredited courses (www.oktatas.hu/tovabbkepzes/pedakkred). There are blended courses offered here, most of them run by HIERD. They are as follows:

• Preparing education advisors for supporting institutions in interprofessional groups
• Training education advisors to advise principals
• Supportive assessment in practice
• Teaching learning to learn in secondary schools
• Teaching learning to learn in primary schools
• Institution development, change management in practice
• Preparing advisors to support teachers

In stage 3 we interviewed two lecturers at the Pedagogical Faculty of our university (back

then Kecskemét College Teacher Training Faculty) about whom we knew had either taken part in a blended course or was a member of an EU project designing one.

In stage 4 we collected information based on articles and publications in the field of blended courses. There is a good example in pre-service teacher training at Eszterházy Károly College, Eger. We analysed this good practice using the article describing it. The other source that we found relevant was written as a thorough guideline for providers of CPD blended courses on how to design a blended course for a successful accreditation. This document gives recommendations on several aspects of in-service teacher training blended courses based on experiences of experts of distant courses. The document was funded and published by the Educational Authority, the body responsible for all teacher training courses in Hungary.

We interviewed representatives (heads of the administration office, vice deans) of 15 higher education institutions offering in-service teacher training courses. Only one from the respondents answered positively when we asked about the existence of blended learning courses. We sent an e-mail to the person who said to us during the interview on the phone they had a blended course. The letter contained all our questions, but we did not receive any further response. All the others (14) answered that their institutions do not offer blended courses. Although they offer distant courses, it means that participants of the courses have to appear in person on a regular basis (most often every second week) for certain number of hours. In between they have to prepare at home using course materials the course provides for them. However, it is not online.

We also contacted two institutions that are not higher education ones. One of them, the Catholic Pedagogical Institute (offering its advisory, training etc. services for all Catholic schools all over the country) was just planning to introduce such a course. They were considering designing a blended learning course, therefore we sent our letter to them, however, no response was received afterwards.

4 Outcomes of Output No 1

In 2002 Károly Esterházy College initiated an accredited e-learning/blended BA course, the Librarian and Information Scientist BA. A year before, in 2001 the college started to run a Virtual Centre for Individual Learning; lecturers and teachers adapted their course books into web-based learning tools. In 2004 a survey was conducted among all the students (78 students) about the course. Based on this survey, a SWOT-analysis was done about the course. In the followings we summarise the outcomes of this survey [3].

Strengths:
- learning on an on-line platform takes much less time than learning from printed materials
- students appreciated the learning materials available on the website
- the most popular service was the mock tests (not chats, forums or consultation)
- interactive tests, distant learning course materials were very popular
- students had a very positive overall impression about the course

Weaknesses:
- two-thirds of the students used the printed learning materials
- students do not learn at a balanced pace, but they rather tend to have dense learning periods
- they do not take the advantage of on-line consultation
- students expect to be provided with all course materials; they do not search for any sources

Opportunities
- blended learning is an effective learning environment in the 21st century
- new e-learning learning tools and materials should be developed
- students' all activities can be followed and documented; not only their exams but even lessons they skipped
- the system is flexible, multifunctional, easy to transform

The authors of the study emphasise the importance of the trainers/tutors: on the one hand, they have to be very good experts of their fields; on the other, they have to be open-minded and innovative people. Having an IT-expert available all the time is also crucially important.

Regarding the content and time management of the course, the authors emphasize that teaching materials are designed to have lessons short enough to be comprehended at one sit. The learning materials contain self-check sections, answer key and practical assignments. The style is informal with lot of dialogues.

The structure of this course has 6 phases.

1. Preparatory consultation: at the beginning of each term there is a face-to-face 3-day consultation, when students receive the learning materials for the term and access to the website.

2. Group meeting: introduction into the subjects students learn in the term, meeting with trainers, discussing the requirements of the term

3. Learning to learn support

4. Individual consultation: asking for help from the tutor (optional); Support by the tutor: evaluation and formative assessment of the assignments

5. Fulfilling the tasks of the term, completing the assignments

6. Exams: face-to-face phase at the college (summative assessment). At the end of the term students fill in an evaluation questionnaire about the course.

In 2015 the Educational Authority published a list of guidelines of blended CPD courses for providers in-services teacher training courses. This study contains recommendations of dos and don'ts for designing a successful blended learning course [4].

Analysing the data we have gathered the following features can be identified as success factors. The content of the blended course should be interesting, motivating, up-to-date and current. As there is a wide range of CPD courses, these courses literally compete for the participants. Teachers are obliged to take part in in-service teacher training, therefore they want to learn something that is really innovative and applicable in their practice.

The trainees' motivation and commitment also counts a lot. It seems there are two extremes of the scale of participants who are interested in blended courses. It is either the young, freshly graduated teachers with little practical experience but good ICT skills, or the well-experienced, highly committed and motivated teachers who feel like taking the challenge of entering blended courses.

The trainers'/tutors' or the provider's professional background, authenticity, reputation is also an important factor. As there is less personal contact with the trainers/tutors in a blended course, their reliability, expertise should be well and widely known among the participants. There is less opportunity for the participants to be convinced about the trainers'/tutors' expertise by themselves, involving experts of the field in the blended course can compensate for the lack of the personal conviction.

The teaching and learning resources of the course also have to be taken into consideration as a success factor. They should be designed so that they would be difficult to comprehend without any help, explanation; moreover, at certain points self-check parts or mock tests/exams are appreciated by participants. Extra materials should be offered and made available for the participants in case they would like to read or learn more about certain aspects of the training topics.

Time management and time frame of the blended course is also an important factor. Time and deadline related issues: a) blended learning courses save time otherwise spent away from home; b) the fact that the task can be set a firm deadline, after which there is no possibility to upload work helped the learners to submit their work in a timely manner. On the other hand, this type of training allows more flexibility regarding deadlines. Tutors may set up new deadlines if the participant misses to hand in an assignment.

The tutor or the trainer should be really available all the time, and an ICT expert should also be involved throughout the training to give technical support.

Interactivity in the whole group and in subgroups of the participants is of key importance. It is what designers and providers of blended courses highly emphasize, however, participants are not

very keen on. They feel that it is not very real-life like that they comment on everything they "hear" or read.

The opportunity of choosing from different kinds of assignments and/or selecting certain assignments the participants want to do research about is a success factor. The individualised/personalised nature of assignments is appreciated by the participants.

The fee of the training is also an issue. Financial aspects of participation in the course, while pointed out by the trainers as strong motivators, do not relate directly to the blended learning nature of the course, and should be interpreted in the socio-cultural context of the country.

The perceived obstacles, as expected, are relative to ICT skill mastery of the learners and the technical aspects of accessibility of the e-platforms.

To compensate for modest ICT skills, guidelines for providing blended courses offer to have preparatory course to introduce the platform for the participants and give them a chance to familiarise themselves with it. It is also an occasion to ask questions about the technological/technical aspect of the training. According to experienced trainers, it is very important for participants of blended courses to have a chance to verbalise their worries, anxiety about the technical aspects of the training.

Prompt, even around-the-clock technical assistance can be of help in case of technical glitches (e.g. when the platform does not operate properly).

In terms of evaluation, good practice seems to imply good formative assessment, ample monitoring and of constructive/ corrective feedback.

5 Conclusion of BleTeach Project Output No 1 in Hungary

In conclusion, for a successful blended learning course, it depends on the topic of the course what ratio of face-to-face vs online time to allocate; the previous experience or lack of such experience of participants is also very important. Another aspect to take into consideration is how important it is to have a personal dimension in the course, if it counts a lot, the course should start with a longer face-to-face section. Time-related factor; obstacles relate to ICT skills and technical aspects of the platform are important; formative assessment during the on-line phase is the most ideal way of evaluation, but summative assessment at the end of the course is advised to be carried out in a face-to-face phase. This way the trainer/tutor gets real and reliable feedback on how deeply the content of the training is interiorised among the participants. Therefore, for a successful blended learning course, BleTeach course developers should take into account the above findings, and especially the following recommendations:

- for timely completion of the online tasks, time allocation should be considered carefully, not many on-line tasks should be given within a short time;
- ensure prompt technical support;
- invest time in the beginning of the course to make sure that participants can use the platform;
- develop a user-friendly interface, which is not cluttered, and which allows easy orientation;
- have well-known trainers/tutors with high expertise who provide ample, specific constructive feedback; they have to be motivated to feel responsible for the participants and/or any drop-outs;
- use teaching/learning resources that are motivating, interesting, are adjusted to e-learning needs;
- let participants work in pairs, subgroups (not only in the whole group), make the course collaborative;
- let participants have some choice of certain subtopics within the training and provide the extra sources about the topics;
- conduct face-to-face final evaluation for clear communication/ observation of learning outcomes.

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Annex 1

<div align="center">**Tisztelt Hölgyem/ Uram!**</div>

Engedje meg, hogy a Kecskeméti Főiskola Tanítóképző Főiskolai Karának dékánjaként egy kutatásban való közreműködésre kérjem fel Önt!

Karunk egy nemzetközi projektben (BleTeach - Blended Learning a tanártovábbképzésben) nemzeti jelentést készít jó gyakorlatokról és koncepciókról blended típusú tanártovábbképzési kurzusokban. A blended típusú képzés azt jelenti, hogy részben távoktatással, e-learning képzéssel, részben személyes találkozókkal valósul meg a továbbképzés.

Van-e az Önök intézményében blended (vegyes típusú) képzés?

<div align="center">□ van   □ nincs</div>

Kérem, amennyiben van az Ön intézményében blended (vegyes típusú) képzés, válaszoljon a levél mellékletében található néhány kérdésre!

Válaszait a szinger.veronika@tfk.kefo.hu vagy a balazsne.ildiko@tfk.kefo.hu e-mail címre legyen szíves visszaküldeni 2016. április 8-ig!

Kecskemét, 2016. március 18.

Közreműködését és segítségét köszönve tisztelettel:

<div align="right">Prof. Dr. Steklács János
dékán</div>

1.   Ön szerint mi a legideálisabb kombinációja
- az egyes képzési típusokra (e-learning és a személyes konzultációs órákra) szánt időnek,
- a tananyagok típusainak,
- a feladattípusoknak?

2.   Hogyan befolyásolja az, ha blended képzésként tartanak meg egy kurzust
- a motivácót,
- az interakciót
- és az az elsajátított ismereteket?

3.   A továbbképzésekben melyek a blended kurzusok megvalósításának legfőbb gátló tényezői?
4.   Melyek a legfőbb sikertényezői a blended kurzusoknak?
5.   Milyen (hallgatói és kurzus-) értékelést végeztek, milyen értékelési módszert használtak?