

Συνέδρια της Ελληνικής Επιστημονικής Ένωσης Τεχνολογιών Πληροφορίας & Επικοινωνιών στην Εκπαίδευση

Τόμ. 1 (2008)

6ο Συνέδριο ΕΤΠΕ «Οι ΤΠΕ στην Εκπαίδευση»



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Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Eteokleous-Grigoriou, N. (2026). Viability of Web-Based Professional Development Training in a Centralized Educational System . *Συνέδρια της Ελληνικής Επιστημονικής Ένωσης Τεχνολογιών Πληροφορίας & Επικοινωνιών στην Εκπαίδευση*, 1, 095–102. ανακτήθηκε από <https://eproceedings.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/cetpe/article/view/9548>

Viability of Web-Based Professional Development Training in a Centralized Educational System

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study consists of an in-depth examination of the viability and acceptability of web-based learning as an instructional method for in-service teacher professional development training in a centralized educational system. The study explores whether web-based training can address the problems encountered related to teacher professional development training on computer integration and contribute to the successful integration of computer technology in classroom practices. The study applies a phenomenological approach, making use of qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews gathered from a pull of eighteen in-service elementary teachers. The study examines teachers' experiences, and opinions towards the application of web-based professional development training, as well as the factors that influence the application of web-based professional development training. Given that the results of this study reveal that web-based training is viable and acceptable; requirements for successful development and implementation are determined.

KEYWORDS: *Web-based professional development training, Elementary teachers, Centralized system*

WEB-BASED COURSES AND NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS

The use of computer technology has deeply affected education. With the rapid diffusion of the Internet, computers, and telecommunications, new approaches to learning were created including online course delivery (Crosta, 2004). As a result, the interest in the development and use of distance learning in education has been steadily increasing (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2004) providing "anytime, anywhere learning" (Berge, 1999; Gilbert & Moore, 1998; Tianguang & Lehman, 2003). Hodgson (2002) mentions that open and distance learning is no longer working only with students located somewhere other than a university or college campus, but is convenient and suited to the needs of adults or non-traditional learners who are often constrained by their work, family and household commitments (U.S. Copyright Office, 1999). As Bickle and Carroll (2003) state, online courses offers the opportunity to working students or other professionals that are unable to attend in-classroom instruction, to continue their education, to meet their personal needs and educational interests, and advance their careers. Numerous researchers suggest that on-line instruction is successful reporting high satisfaction rates (Navarro &

Shoemaker, 2000) and increased student level of motivation and performance results (Rosenkrans, 2000). Finally, due to people's busy life styles online courses provide a pervasive new channel for education that makes it more accessible and appealing to learners (Owston, 1997; Shanley et al. 2004; Tianguang & Lehman, 2003).

ASSESSING ICT INTEGRATION IN EDUCATION

More than a few studies covering different parts of the globe examined and evaluated ICT integration in numerous different educational settings (Angeli & Valanides 2005; Earle 2002; Honey 2001), suggesting that elementary teachers do not integrate ICT in their classroom practices. The above happens due to a number of factors such as: lack of resources, inadequate professional development training, lack of guidance, support and incentives from the officials, teacher computer skills and attitudes towards computer technology, etc (Carvin, 1999; Earle, 2002; Ertmer, 1999; Eteokleous, 2007; Hadjithoma & Eteokleous, 2007; Honey, 2001; McKenzie, 2001).

One of those factors is the inadequate professional development training in developing skills to integrate computer as a tool in the teaching and learning process. Successful computer technology integration into classrooms requires the continuous and adequate professional development and training of teachers (Carvin, 1999; Demetriadis et al., 2003; Mullen, 2001; Peck et al., 2003). Studies suggest that more important than simply learning how to use computers, is professional development in computer curriculum-integration. Finally, many researchers (Brush et al., 2003; Carvin, 1999; Earle, 2002; Honey, 2001; McKenzie, 2001; Thompson et al., 2003; Wilson, 2003) suggest that teachers who had received both kinds of training (basic computer skills and technology integration) are likely to feel more prepared and comfortable to integrate computers in their classroom practices.

ICT POLICY IN CYPRUS

The Cypriot Ministry of Education (MOEC) follows a centralized and homogeneous approach to managing schools. Curriculum driven practice, content/text-book -oriented activities, educators' evaluation through the inspectorate system, lack of time, pressure to cover the curriculum, bureaucratic procedures are some of the characteristics of educators' work (Hadjithoma & Eteokleous, 2007). The launch of an ICT policy by the MOEC took place in the early 1990s. Some primary schools were equipped with computers at an experimental level, a Departmental IT group was created, while the governmental Pedagogical Institute (P.I.) started offering at the end of the 1990s an optional training program for teachers (Eteokleous, 2007). 'Evagoras' was the first formal ICT policy document, and describes the action plan for the embedding of new technologies in primary education from 2000 to 2005 (District Curriculum Developers and Evagoras team, 1999). Since 2006 we have entered the second phase of "Evagoras".

The Problem

The implementation of 'Evagoras' was partial and some of its goals were postponed. As many teachers around the globe, Cypriot teachers use computers rather extensively for their own purposes, although they use them less frequently in their classes. When teachers do use computers in classrooms, it tends to be rather restricted, in sporadic fashion, more like high tech chalkboards or as supporting tools. Few teachers were found to use computers as educational tools integrated in the teaching and learning process. Inadequate professional development training of Cypriot in-service teachers seems to be an important contributor to the above described situation (Angeli & Valanides, 2005; Eteokleous, 2007; Hadjithoma & Eteokleous, 2007).

MAIN PURPOSE AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall purpose of this study is to get insights concerning the acceptability of web-based learning as an instructional method for in-service teacher professional development training in a centralized educational system. More specifically, the study consists of an in-depth examination of whether web-based training can address the problems encountered related to teacher professional development training on computer integration and contribute to the successful integration of computer technology in classroom practices. To this end, the study aims to address the following:

1. To identify the reasons for inadequate professional development training,
2. To examine teachers' experiences, and opinions towards the application of web-based professional development training,
3. To identify any factors that might influence the application of web-based professional development training.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research work applied a phenomenological approach, making use of qualitative data. Phenomenological research was used to understand the beliefs, and behaviors of people and the meaning they make out of their beliefs, and behaviors (Creswell, 2003). This approach seemed ideal to underpin this research study, since it is concerned with understanding human beliefs from the participant's own frame of reference. It assisted in the construction of semi-structured, open-ended questions that encouraged the participants to use their own terminology to describe their experiences and perceptions on the subject under investigation (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The interview template was prepared in July 2006 and face-to-face interviews were carried out in September – October 2006. Each interview was completed within one hour. The research population consists of in-service elementary teachers that have computers in their classrooms since 'Evagoras' project launched. Purposive sampling was used in an attempt to select in-service teachers that participated to the professional development training organized by the MOEC and P.I., from different work locations (urban Vs rural schools) and with different computer literacy level (high Vs low). To measure teachers' computer literacy level

the *Loyd/Gressard Computer Attitude Scale questionnaire* was carried out (Loyd & Gressard, 1984, 1985).

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Demographics

The research sample consisted of 18 elementary in-service teachers. The majority of the teachers were females (72%), were between the age of 31-40 (67%), taught in urban schools (60%), and finally taught in fourth grade (36%). Almost half of the elementary teachers were married (25%) and married with children (22%). The average class size appeared to be 16-20 students. Regarding teachers' education all of the teachers held a bachelor degree in Primary Education, and 60% percent held master's degrees in various fields. Four of the interviewees (2 men and 2 women) had prior experience with distance learning during conducting their master's degree. Finally, 11 teachers categorized as high and 7 teachers as low computer literate.

Inadequate Professional Development Training

Reasons for inadequate professional development training vary. Firstly, small number of instructors was available for the seminars. As a result, teachers could not receive adequate and continuous help, guidance, and support. Another reason was the lack of resources, including hardware and software. Consequently, very few seminars were planned that they could not address the demand of the educators that were interested in attending. Also, many educators could not attend the seminars due to time and place constraints. Too many educators were not in position to travel to the place where the seminars took place due to geographical constraints - the seminars took place at the Pedagogical Institute located at the capital of the island. Along the same lines, lack of time due to family, household, and work constraints inhibited teachers from attending the seminars. Moreover, seminars were not planned towards teachers' needs. For example the training was not related to the materials distributed to schools for ICT integration. The above led to lack of teacher motivation to attend the seminars. Finally, the high cost of the seminars generated more problems as well. Besides the expenses of the resources needed and instructors' salary; monetary rewards was given to the teachers attending the seminars.

Teachers' experiences and opinions towards web-based training

No differences revealed between teachers from rural Vs urban areas, although different opinions were expressed between high and low computer literacy teachers and teachers that had prior experience in relation to web-based training.

"Using web-based technology to train in-service teachers on computer technology integration? This is a perfect idea and a very interesting concept to be applied". Web-based training "widens the educational opportunities for educators". "This must be a very good idea for self-motivated, disciplined educators who are absolutely committed...". The above are representative comments from 8 teachers which expressed enthusiasm regarding web-based training. As expected teachers

that previously experienced web-based learning and were classified as high computer literate expressed more positive reactions and reported that they would consider attending web-based training. The teachers that did not previously experience web-based learning and were classified as low computer literate; accepted the idea of web-based training in a more conservative way.

Interestingly enough, even the three teachers that mentioned they would not consider using this form of training, reported it as a good idea to be applied and that it widens educational opportunities. "I would not use it, no matter what since I am not self motivated enough" or because "...face to face, daily interaction is valuable"; explained their personal rejections towards the idea. One of them firmly expressed her negativity towards the idea, reporting that she would never consider attending web-based training since "socialisation is violated through on-line courses".

Influencing Factors

A general uniformity across the interviewees was apparent in terms of the factors that that might influence web-based professional development training or in other words the circumstances that must exist in order to use it. Those factors classified in the following two categories: personal and lesson-related factors. The personal related factors can be summarized as follows. Teachers reported that self-discipline, personal commitment and their computer literacy level are fundamentals for their decision in attending web-based training. Additionally, flexibility in terms of space and time, (better management of time, i.e. spending more time with family and friends), are two other factors that positively influence teachers in attending web-based training.

The second category of factors, named as lesson-related factors, includes first of all the nature of the course offered that should be such that physical interaction is not absolutely essential despite the existence of web-tools that help interaction. Secondly, teachers reported that the course needs to have the appropriate platform and tools to support sufficient degree of contact with the instructor and classmates. The interviewees identified the importance of personal contact and direct communication with the instructor. A flexible web platform must exist to incorporate web tools needed such as video conferencing, discussion forums, and problem solving boards.

The aforementioned factors can be also viewed as the prerequisites for web-based professional training success. Through an e-learning platform, teachers would like to have continuous support, guidance and help as well as the employment of a more personalized training, developed on the needs of each educator.

CONCLUSION

Research results revealed that web-based professional development training is possible to be applied. Web-based training reveals to be viable and acceptable given that teachers' reactions were mostly positive. It can be used to develop teacher

computer skills as well as skills on integrating computer as a tool in the teaching and learning process. Teachers recommended that combination of online teaching and physical meetings for learning and problem solving should be provided. It can be also said that success of this attempt lies in identifying and addressing teachers' concerns and needs related to computer technology integration in classrooms. Since this is an exploratory study, the concept will be further tested through an experimental study examining teachers' experiences in a web-based professional development training environment. Finally, the positive results of the study become even more valuable in Cyprus context since web-based learning is a newly established concept in Cyprus educational system and society. Other reasons that contribute to the above are: higher educational institutions in Cyprus do not offer online courses but they collaborate with universities from abroad to achieve the above, the first higher educational institution in Cyprus that offers mainly on-line courses started its operation in September 2006, and last but not least a few years ago online courses were not even accredited by Cyprus-based accreditation bodies assigned by the government.

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