

Professional development with the help of mobile and blended learning: Teachers beliefs about changing higher education practices

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Research background

Professional development as a phenomenon could be discussed as occurring at least at two levels. The first level relates to processes of change at the individual level. This level could be discussed in terms of developing abilities, behaviours, knowledge and skills for dealing with professional issues. At the second level professional development is a phenomenon related to the practices in which individuals belong. At this level professional development contributes to the ability of organisations to be competitive and up-to-date in their processes and products. Professional development is important for the members of these organisations. Particularly, this is true in a society that emphasises knowledge as an important asset. In short, professional development embraces change at both these levels.

Professional development is a phenomenon that could be related to both informal and formal aspects of learning. Formal learning, sometimes discussed in terms of training, relates to event-driven professional development activities. Such events could include participation in courses, seminars and workshops. Moreover, formal learning in professional development could also include assignments (Noe, Wilk, Mullen, & Wanek, 2014). Informally related learning in professional development embraces a wide range of activities. These activities have in common that they occur during participation in ongoing job-related tasks. Moreover, they are characterised by engagement in tasks where learning is secondary. Nevertheless, in the performance of such tasks learning is an important by-product that relates to individual and organisational professional development and change. Scholars such as Lave and Wenger (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) discuss such learning in terms of participating in communities of practice. Therefore, it could be argued that professional development commonly takes place in everyday work-based settings.

Development within the field of information and communication technology, in terms of a shift from desktop-based solutions to more mobile solutions, has had a great impact on societal development, including participating in working life (Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Linchuan Qui, & Sey, 2007; Goggin, 2012). Therefore, modern working life relates professional development to learning enhanced by technologies. This comprises supporting professional development in terms of both formal learning as well as informal learning. The relationship between formal and informal aspects of learning and technology-enhancement is a feature that needs to be taken into consideration in designing for professional development. Moreover, professional development supported by social and technological networks could include collaboration as well as individual development. If such development embrace opportunities to apply and reflect on knowledge in practice together with peers it could lead to a long-term change of practices (Holmes & Sime, 2014).

Aims and research questions

The proposed research aims at analysing and understanding practices of professional development supported by social and technological networks. Such practices should include both formal and informal learning activities. Particularly the proposal aims at understanding the beliefs of teachers in higher education. Presented below are examples of research questions that could be explored:

RQ1: How do higher education institutions apply mobile and blended learning in designing for professional development?

To explore RQ1 semi-structured interviews with teachers and educational technologists might be an appropriate method for getting information about how changes are implemented at the individual level. Moreover, the study should apply online ethnographic methods that explore teachers' and students' activities in internal resources such as Learning Management Systems (LMS) and external resources such as various social media applications. An analysis of policy documents should give insight into official statements from higher education institutions.

RQ2: What beliefs do teachers in higher education have about applying mobile and blended learning as tools for changing higher education?

RQ2 might benefit from interview methods such as focus group interviews or semi-structured interviews. Whatever interview-method we choose it might benefit from discussing examples from teachers own practice. In larger groups, questionnaires might be an alternative method.

Examples of empirical cases

At Mid Sweden University we recently had ran two different professional development projects. These projects aimed at developing higher education practices supported by blended and mobile learning (Jaldemark & Lindberg, 2014). In the first project, which was a pre-runner to the second project, seven courses were included. The design of the project included three phases. First, there was a preparation phase comprising research reviews, participation in conferences and a sampling of courses. The second phase included recurrent and iterative features such as modifying the LMS, participating in a competence development course, planning trials, conducting trials and evaluating teaching. The third phase focused on evaluation and dissemination. The second project ends in 2107 and includes six higher education programs, five of these programmes are teacher education programmes aimed at different levels in the school system, and the sixth is a behavioural science programme. Professional development is expected to occur with the help of an iterative design comprising the following five features: participating in a competence development course, planning trials, conducting trials, evaluating teaching and participating in a pedagogical seminar. Both projects included institutionally owned equipment as well as utilising students and teachers own equipment, a so-called bring-your-own-device approach.

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