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 and teacher-educators 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 et al. 2012]. Also, BL in international collaboration with specific attention to the diversity of the cultures and groups 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 exanimated.

1. Theoretical Background
1.1. 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-centered 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.

1.2. 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. International exchange and discussions supported by technology have rich implications for teachers professional learning, that we will examine in the next paragraph.

1.3. 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.

2. Research Question

The research question of this paper is: What are the potential for teacher educators' global collaboration and cooperative growth troughs blended learning?

3. The Study
3.1. Context: 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 BLTeae 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.

Figure 1. **Three-years activities in the BLTeae project**

BLENDED LEARNING

Activity 1 year

| Questionnaire | Educational technology | Pedagogical training | Face to face |

10   10   1 week

Activity 2 year

| ePortfoloi | Video sharing | Online discussion | Training for online tutors |

Activity 3 year

Sharing best practices + common draft of teacher training curriculum   Training for online tutors

The blended learning is proposed considering the three macro level: 'personal', 'peer' and 'group'. 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 [Santagata, Angelici 2010]. 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.

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. Finally, the BLTeae project proposes to the teacher-educators to improve teacher practices joining in common discussions finalized to a shared and joint curriculum [Impedovo, Brandt -Pommares 2018].

3.2. Participant and Data

In this paper, we focus on Pakistani Teacher-educators group from the BLTeae community. The analysis was carried out starting from three main sources: traces are written in the online platform by Pakistani teacher-educators; 47 questionnaires at the end of the face-to-face training sessions in Pakistan (35 by a woman and 12 men). The questionnaire was composed of closed and open questions; 10 deep-interviews with Pakistani educators carried out in Pakistan (8 women and 2 men).

3.3. Results Developing Technological Skills

Generally, teacher-educators appreciated the practical competencies developed, in particular, the skills related to how to use social media in teaching, how to do video-clips and how to use their ePortfolio. These three aspects are considered to be fairly new topics in their repertoire. Teacher-educators were interested in understanding the functionality and utility of recent technology: "I have used YouTube video clips, video lectures, feature films, and WhatsApp during class. I have just started using Google Classroom to incorporate eLearning. I plan to incorporate Google Forms in [the] classroom for formative assessment[s]". Also, teachers appreciated best practices that can be quickly adapted to their context. Pakistani teacher-educators involved in the project had positive attitudes toward the use of technology in teaching ("I [have integrated] technology in teaching since 2008. I have observed that students are fully involved in learning when we integrate technology"), using a variety of tools ("Generally I use video clips from YouTube, and TeacherTube. I share video clips through [my] WhatsApp group and assign students' tasks for future [classes]"). Laptops, desktops, mobile phones, and tablets have been used for Internet surfing & searching, as well as for preparing presentations and watching videos, with growing attention to social networks.

3.3.1. Developing Pedagogical and Instructional Design skills

Furthermore, teachers' attention is centered on the use of ePortfolios ("I will develop the ePortfoli of my students and their teaching practices as they [have] already [developed] it manually"), videos and social media to teach ("To use Facebook as a platform"). Teacher-educators are interested in BL, which they discovered through their participation in the project, which proposes an online platform and face-to-face meetings with an international audience or at national events. Consequently, they propose using BL in classrooms ("I will try to follow the BLT methodology in my training"), adopted in their practices: "I have tried blending mediums with lectures and discussion methods. The students are better able to attempt analysis questions after watching a video clip and discussion. They are motivated and explore other sources on the topic on their own. They also share their learning with their classmates afterward". BL is interpreted as a suitable and equilibrate introduction of technology in the classroom, with a good integration of activities with both technology and paper: "If the students watch a movie of a video lecture, they are given a small question-

naire [in which] to express their opinion about the content, as well as the concepts discussed. This activity can be for individuals or in the think-pair-share methodology". This teacher, for example, exposes his use of BL: "I observe that the concept of blended learning carries a contextual meaning. In our scenario, we as teachers blend technology in teaching through certain ways, like showing video [clips] relating to certain concepts that we have to teach, using multimedia projects for teaching through using PowerPoint slides, sending important electronic material through emails, receiving assignments of students through emails, sharing important electronic material and relevant videos with students through WhatsApp". This broad interpretation of BL is linked to the contextual resources and the novelty of the concept, stressing the role of preparing the lesson with the use of technology. The introduction of technology in learning has some rapid advantages, such as leading to more active student participation ("Student classroom participation increased. Absenteeism lessened and they started to work enthusiastically on the given online assignments. They became more open in giving their opinions and participating in discussions"), motivating the teacher-educators to continue to use it.

3.3.2. Developing Interpersonal and Intercultural skills

Thanks to these experiences, teacher-educators became more aware of the introduction of more cultural and social aspects in the instructional design of their lesson, valorizing the interactive side. Indeed, all teachers appreciated the sharing with international trainers and participants ("It is good to share and exchange ideas, good practices, challenges and situations", "Exposure to international perspectives and learning from each other facilitates future collaboration"). Indeed, from face-to-face training, they have had the opportunity to spend time with international participants, sharing formal and informal time together ("Yes, get to know their culture, personal life, hobbies and personal experiences in different subject areas"; "Yes, I enjoy the exchange as they clarify those concepts which I could not ask during session"; "Increases cultural awareness and builds good relationships"; "Because different cultures have different taste of customs"). The motivation to appreciate the international exchange allows them to appreciate experiences across the globe ("To know … the new technique[s] in teaching internationally, we learn many things directly related to their culture"; "It is important. It encourages the authority to provide and arrange more training sessions for us"). Generally, teachers express the value of the international exchange, stressing the need for more sessions, including informal ones ("Provide social trips to know the participants better"). The international confrontation also helps to increase motivation in the challenge to renew their teaching practices, as expressed by the teacher-educators: "The training (4 days) has not only provided us with knowledge and skills in blended learning but also brings together with the teaching community from many countries. It has allowed us to share common goals,

common difficulties and common reflections which will help each institution to move forward. The sharing of issues and problems faced by different teachers was really helpful for me as I learned almost all people have to face challenges and I should not give up implementing new trends".

4. 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. A more international teacher exchange can be strategic to tackle common issues in a wider and more complex vision of the teacher professionalism. Intercultural competence is here considered the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions [UNESCO 2013]. The development of intercultural skills in a context of international training have to take in consideration critical ethnocentrism; including empathy, flexibility, patience, interest, curiosity, openness, active listening, cultural sensitivity, knowledge of other cultures, understood as competence in situation.

Finally, the design of innovative learning courses, supported by technology, is strategic for the today international globalization. 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.

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