EFFECTIVENESS OF BLENDED TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: AN EGYPTIAN CASE-STUDY

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Abstract

The case-study examines a pilot blended learning teacher professional development course in terms of student satisfaction, engagement and impact. Four data sources were used to answer the research questions: 1) end-of-course evaluations; 2) archived online discussions; 3) semi-structured interviews; and 4) the course website. Despite the intensity of the experience, the results suggest an overall student satisfaction with the blended course; both the online and face-to-face components. Students’ considered the latter as the “backbone” of the course, providing ample opportunities for learning new skills, building community and democratic interaction. The online activities, on the other hand, gave teachers the possibility to move at their own pace, and developed their reflection and communication skills. Participants also reported that the course had an impact on their practices at work. One recommendation students had was consideration of students’ unreliable access to the Internet and their need for more technology support. From a design perspective, the online component could have provided more opportunities for active engagement with the content and among peers, and could have witnessed a stronger facilitator presence. Having said that, this case-study suggests the potential for blended learning as a modality for teacher professional development within the Egyptian context.

Keywords: case study, technology, blended learning, teacher professional development.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Need for Teacher Professional Development in Egypt

The Ministry of Education has been addressing the educational crisis in Egypt through a series of political reforms and policies ever since the early 1980’s (Ginsburg, Megahed, Elmeski, & Tanaka, 2010). The primary reform agenda during that era paid more attention to reforming educational governance and management systems in Egypt, focusing on decentralizing districts and schools, encouraging the private sector to play a more positive role and empowering communities, while allocating funds for classroom construction and the purchase of instructional material (Ginsburg et al., 2010). However, within the last decade that emphasis has moved to teacher professional development (TPD) due to the realization that no reform efforts can succeed without including the teacher at the center. Globally any educational reform requires a qualified teacher (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Statistics claim that 26% Egypt’s population live in poverty (Osman, 2015), making public free education the only available way to educate that sector regardless of the quality of education that is offered through those schools. The UNICEF (2014) report reveals facts concerning how over 18 million children in Egypt are taught through grades K-12. They are mostly taught by either underpaid or unqualified teachers and mostly by both (Osman, 2015).

Accordingly the country’s strategic plan for improving the educational sector would include strategies for developing teacher skills. Professional development opportunities in that case have always shown to be centralized, limited and not even addressed to local or individual needs of districts let alone teachers (Osman, 2015).

1.2 The Need for a Blended Learning Program

There is a consensus in the literature that building teachers’ capacity for improvement needs a rather extended time and engagement to produce the change while having tight and busy schedules of teachers. Furthermore effective personalized teacher professional development opportunities are often not offered locally. The need for a TPD program that can offer high quality of professionals and fit into teachers’ busy schedules can be easily managed through a blended approach (Dede et al., 2008). Blended learning pedagogy combines face-to-face meetings with online learning experiences, bringing in the best of both worlds.
2 METHODOLOGY

This research is a case study of teachers’ experience with a blended TPD course piloted at AUC. By investigating the learners’ experience in terms of their satisfaction, engagement, achievement as well as the impact of the TPD on their classroom practices, the researcher is hoping to reach a deeper understanding of the factors that impact the success of blended learning in the particular campus of professional educator diploma blended courses offered to Egyptian public school teachers at AUC. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent were participating teachers satisfied with the blended TPD experience?
2. What factors impacted teachers’ satisfaction with the blended TPD course?
3. To what extent were teachers engaged in the blended TPD course, especially the online component?
4. What factors impacted their engagement?

2.1 Research Design

Because the aim of the study was to conduct an in-depth comprehensive investigation of this pilot blended learning course, a case study design was chosen to answer the above research questions, thereby, giving more opportunity for the researcher to study “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003, p.13).

Case-study research allows mixed methods of data collection to investigate a variety of evidences and perspectives. The inclusion of multiple forms serves to enhance the validity of the data and add to an in-depth comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Despite the limited data available for analysis in this study, the researcher believes that the study is of definite direct value to the Professional Educator Diploma. However, the researcher also believes that the results are of relevance to the University as a whole due to its engagement in blended learning, and might actually be of relevance to international audiences interested in the blended approach for the training of in-service teachers in developing countries.

2.2 The Context

In 2012, AUC announced that online learning was to be a strategic goal that the University would aim to achieve; BL was mentioned as a pedagogical mean to provide easy access, outreach and help offer educational excellence to AUC’s staff, faculty and students (Osman, 2013).

The aim of the University conducting this blended course was to enhance access and outreach to educators beyond the borders of Cairo or those whose schedules prohibit them from coming to campus on weeknights. The learning management system was the Google Bundle. Google Sites was used to communicate the overall goals for the course, the schedule, assignments, and readings. For communication and assignment submission, g-mail was used. Google Groups was used for student-student communication and reflection. The instructor had access to these forums and facilitated interactions. The course took eight weeks, of which three were face-to-face and five were online. However; online sessions were based on checking uploaded files or links on the website and required students to write a reflective paper along with sharing their ideas with their colleagues on Google groups.

2.3 Participants

The researcher explored the above research questions through the eyes of the 15 teachers who enrolled in this pilot course. The point of view of the instructor was examined in a different study (Osman 2015). All the teachers were solicited to participate in this study. All the participants were Egyptian school teachers at different stages of their career. Some of them had leadership positions, while others were aspiring for leadership within their schools in the future. Eight of the participants were female and seven were male. Out of the 15 students who took this course only four agreed to do an interview. The instructor was a US citizen who had a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership from a US university. At the time this pilot was conducted, she worked as a full-time faculty in the Graduate School of Education.
2.4 Data Collection Instruments

Four sources of data were used to answer the above research questions: 1) end of-course evaluations; 2) archived asynchronous discussions; 3) interviews; and 4) course Website.

2.5 End-of-course evaluations

The archived results for the surveys administered to all students at the end of the course were used to partially answer the first two research questions. The survey elicited information on students' experience and instructor performance. The survey included questions covering the course design and overall effectiveness enabling the researcher to draw conclusions concerning quality of the course. Finally, the survey elicited information on instructor's teaching skills and whether he/she were able to scaffold a pathway for the learners to grasp the concepts of their program throughout the course and whether it was able to match their expectations or not.

2.6 Online discussion archives

The online discussions, via Google Groups, were integrated to facilitate instructional activities during the online weeks. It was anticipated that since students came from diverse geographical locations that they would depend on online tools for communication during the weeks they do not meet face-to-face. To answer research questions 3 and 4, all the archived discussions via Google Groups were analyzed for all 15 students and the instructor.

2.7 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four of the 15 course participants. The teachers were all solicited via e-mail. 40% of the e-mails were no longer valid. Out of the remaining students, only these four responded. Interviews were conducted via Skype or phone. Interviews lasted 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded. Follow-up questions were sent via e-mail to all participants to clarify some of the emerging themes. Only two of the four students answered.

2.8 Website analysis

The Website was designed to act as an anchor for students during the course, especially during the online weeks. It contained information on the schedule, the syllabus, readings, assignments, online sessions as well as face-to-face sessions. Although this data does not directly answer any particular question, it helps in understanding some of the results and themes identified by other data sources.

2.9 Data Analysis

2.9.1 End-of-course evaluations

Due to the small sample size of 16 students, only percentages and frequencies were used to report on the closed-ended Likert-scale items. Open-ended questions were analyzed for recurring themes.

2.9.2 Online discussion archives

Archived discussions in Google Groups were analyzed to investigate teachers' engagement with the course, by looking at their level of interactivity and quality of their posts. The unit of analysis was the individual student post. Several rubrics were used to investigate online interactions via Google Groups. The rubrics were adapted for analysis of discussion using computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA), an approach to discourse analysis tailored to online communication (Herring, 2004), and following the coding and counting approach suggested by this method. Also, based on CMDA, participation analysis will be conducted by identifying the number and length of messages for each participant (Herring, 2004). Each of the rubrics used in this study has been used and validated in previous research.

2.9.3 Interviews

Interviews were analyzed using Applied Thematic Analysis to identify themes with reference to particular research questions (Guest, MacQueen, &Namey, 2012). The transcript of each interview was read separately, then themes were compared and contrasted across participants. Interpretations and debriefing of themes took place with the capstone project supervisor.
2.9.4 Course website

The Website was analyzed in terms of information provided to students to support their learning experience for this pilot blended course. Special emphasis was given to content that was relevant to the online component of the course.

2.9.5 Credibility and Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness the researcher employed several measures following the recommendations of (Guba, 1981). Triangulation of this study was achieved to make sure that there is more than one method of collecting data as a means of reassuring validity (Creswell, 2012). Data will be collected via 3 methods, namely interviews, end-of-course evaluations, and content analysis of archived discussions in Google Groups, in addition to the analysis of the website. Peer Debriefing with the capstone supervisor also took place for all the data sources. The researcher and supervisor analyzed the data separately and debriefed on interpretations and results.

3 RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate students’ satisfaction and engagement in a blended pilot course in educational leadership

3.1 End-of-Course Evaluations

There were 13 participants that responded to the anonymous evaluation survey from a total of 15 active students in the course. On the whole participants found the course materials very beneficial. More than 84% of the participating students related their readings and articles to their course goals and felt challenged to reflect deeply on what they were reading rather than memorize content. Almost 92% reported that course material had a positive impact on improving their teaching practices at work. Most of the students highly evaluated the instructor and the pedagogy used throughout the course. Twelve participants (92%) out of 13 regarded the instructor as knowledgeable of the subject matter and a good communicator of content. They also found that she exhibited strong interest in student learning. When questioned if the classroom culture allowed them to voice their opinions democratically, all except for one member strongly agreed. Students’ satisfaction with assessment and workload exhibited more variation. About 85% (11 students) thought assignments reflected the purpose and content of the course, and helped them apply what they learned in the course.

Data yield from different sources seem to draw a picture of a group of students that is generally satisfied and engaged with the content of the course. Students loved the convenience and flexibility afforded by the blended format. They also enjoyed the time it gave them to read and reflect at their own pace.

Students engagement online varied but was mostly limited except when prompted by the instructor or by a students who decided to assume unsolicited feedback. Although the online component seemed quite limited in the variety and interactivity of tasks, students were happy with the experience and mostly regarded instructor presence as adequate. However, what students really appreciated was the face-to-face component of the course. Students valued the strong presence of the instructor; she was knowledgeable, sociable and engaging. They loved the variety of tasks, many of them very novel, and the skills that they learned at a result of it. Also appreciated was her attention to the social aspect of the course. This according to them helped in establishing a strong sense of community that some said continued online. Students found the course intensive but worth it.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This case-study explored the experiences of 15 Egyptian teachers taking a blended professional development course. Four different data sources were analyzed to examine: students’ satisfaction and engagement with the course, the instructor, and the blended approach as well as the impact the course had on their professional practices after the end of the course. The research focused particularly on the online component for a number of reasons. The online component of a blended course – as identified in the literature – is the realm that is most often unfamiliar to both the instructor and students, and is thus at times the weaker component (Jeffery et al, 2014). The quality of
integration is often lacking thus compromising the full potential of the blended approach and adding experiences to the learning process that beyond the affordances of face-to-face and online on their own (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). This was the first time for this course instructor and for the teachers to take a course that entailed a substantial online component. We wanted to examine the manifestations and implications of this on the engagement and satisfaction in the course. Second, where as end-of-semester evaluations and interviews provide perceptions of engagement, assessing patterns of interaction and participation in terms of quality and quantity can provide a more objective view (Herring, 2004).

4.1 Satisfaction

The majority of participants seemed to be very happy overall with the course in terms of its relevance to their work as teachers. When asked about blended learning as professional development modality, most respondents expressed extreme satisfaction with the experience, and stated that they would recommended blended learning to others.

Learners’ expectations before beginning the course regarding what constituted a blended experience varied dramatically reflecting the breadth of the concept and the absence of a commonly agreed on definition in the general literature (Allen et al., 2007; Friensen, 2012).

As such it was no surprise when students’ expectations did not initially match the reality of the learning experience. Administrators advertising the course did not apparently clarify what a blended modality was - probably because they had not experienced it themselves. However, after an initial period of ‘acclimation’, participants came to enjoy the convenience of not having to come to campus as often as regular students did, the intensity and variety of the face-to-face component, and the reflective potential of the online activities (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). They also experienced a sense of community that was established early on through the instructors’ design of collaborative activity and social mini-events such as bringing food to class and sharing it during break (Diaz & Strickland, 2009).

The face-to-face sessions, although fewer in number than regular classes, made a tremendously strong impression on course participants. They regarded it as the ‘core’, ‘basis’ and ‘backbone’ of the course. They were impressed by the course content and that variety of collaborative practice tasks that the instructor used in class. This in itself was an important learning experience. Using video for instruction was a minor detail that had a major impact on their satisfaction. Another important aspect of the face-to-face component was the social one. Since the very beginning the cheerful respectful collaborative approach of the instructor encouraged a non-threatening learning environment and helped promote a sense of community among all participants.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor Prof. Gihan Osman for the continuous support of my Master study and research, for her patience, motivation, enthusiasm, and immense knowledge. Her guidance helped me in all the time of research and writing of my thesis.

REFERENCES


