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Abstract

The Finnish education system has received a lot of media attention due the results of PISA examinations. Many countries have considered ways to implement the 'Finnish model' into their own context. This paper examines the experience gained from the first graduating cohort of a fully online Finnish teacher development program in a Middle Eastern country with diverse, multicultural faculty participants. It examines the challenges of implementation and reflects upon the successes and participant experience. The paper describes how the principles of authentic e-learning (Herrington, Reeves and Oliver, 2010) were used to design the program and whether it was possible to harness these to enable real change to take place in professional practice. The program made use of both formal tools and social media to engage and support staff as they implemented new ideas and methods into their classroom practice and reflected on their professional identities.

Keywords

21st, century, faculty, lessons, online, finnish, teacher, development, authentic, program, education

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Authentic Education: Lessons from an Online Finnish Teacher Development Program for 21st Century Faculty.

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Abstract: The Finnish education system has received a lot of media attention due the results of PISA examinations. Many countries have considered ways to implement the ‘Finnish model’ into their own context. This paper examines the experience gained from the first graduating cohort of a fully online Finnish teacher development program in a Middle Eastern country with diverse, multicultural faculty participants. It examines the challenges of implementation and reflects upon the successes and participant experience. The paper describes how the principles of authentic e-learning (Herrington, Reeves and Oliver, 2010) were used to design the program and whether it was possible to harness these to enable real change to take place in professional practice. The program made use of both formal tools and social media to engage and support staff as they implemented new ideas and methods into their classroom practice and reflected on their professional identities.

Introduction

In April 2013 the first cohort of teachers to complete a Post Graduate Certificate for Teaching in Higher Education offered by Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK), graduated in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This program, known as 21st Century Educators, was designed to meet the needs of educators who wished to study a teacher development program designed in Finland.

This paper will briefly examine why there is international interest in Finnish teacher development programs and the particular context of the cohort in the UAE. It will then outline the design of the program and some the challenges faced in implementation. The paper will finish by considering if the program was able to meet its objective of supporting staff in improving their practice and so enhancing student learning by a process of reflection and examination of professional identity.

Background and Context

Finland

Over the last ten or eleven years Finland has gained a reputation for having one of the best education systems in the world. This has been due in part to the media attention gained by its consistently high scores in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) examinations (OECD, 2010). Even when other factors are taken into account beyond PISA examinations, Finland still ranks as one of the top systems in the world, as evidenced by The Learning Curve Report from the Economist Intelligence and supported by Pearson publishers (Kielstra, 2012).

Researchers have tried to identify some of the many the key factors that have led to Finland success and there would seem to be consensus that the following factors contribute significantly (Sahlberg, 2011. Hargreaves, 2012. Ripley, 2013).

- Highly qualified and professional teachers who have autonomy and trust.
- Relatively little standardized testing.
- Collaboration between teachers and schools rather than competition.
- Inclusion and equality rather than elitism.
- A generally held belief that education benefits society and the individual.

In the documentary film ‘The Finland Phenomenon’, Tony Wagner points out that children in Finland start school later, have less hours of formal classes, less homework, and few formal standardized examinations and yet outperform most of their Western counterparts (Wagner & Compton, 2011).

As a result of this many educational policy makers have sought to find ways to transfer this success to their own context. One aspect of the Finnish system that is particularly attractive for educational managers to adopt is teacher education and development. Because of this there has been increasing demand and curiosity about Finnish teacher educational programs.

At the same time Finland’s Government has been encouraging Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) to develop programs for what has been termed as “Education Export” (“Can Finnish Educational Model,” 2013). To assist HEI’s to develop programs and sell the Finnish programs overseas they have established organizations such as Future Learning Finland (Rautakoura, 2013).

It is against this background of growing overseas demand and interest and domestic support and encouragement, that the 21st Century Educators program was conceived and designed.

The need for teacher development

Many countries allow content experts to work as teachers in further and higher education with no pedagogical qualifications or training. Consequently many teachers have only their own experiences as learners to draw on for developing learning materials and activities or assessments. Frequently these experiences will go back to an earlier educational period when different skills and knowledge was required by society and employers. The model is often based on an industrial knowledge transfer model, where the teachers transmits information to the students and then tests to see if they have learned it.

Additionally teachers frequently do not have time to stay current in their knowledge of educational technology tools. They are often then faced with a situation where their students have higher level skills and knowledge with regard to new technologies than they have themselves.

Thus it is believed that there is a requirement for a program that brings together the existing content knowledge and expertise of the teacher with an examination of pedagogy and learning theory. Such a program should also allow its participants to explore new technologies in a very practical way, while considering an appropriate pedagogy for their use. In addition the program would need to allow teachers to consider appropriate assessments and learning outcomes and to reflect on their practice and their own professional identity and beliefs as a teacher. The 21st Century Educators program is designed to meet these requirements.

Finland requires that all teachers working in schools have a Masters degree in Education, further it also obliges those teaching in vocation higher education to have a pedagogical qualification. It was this pedagogical qualification that formed the basis of the program that would eventually become the 21st Century Educators program.

United Arab Emirates

The Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) is the largest provider of higher education in the United Arab Emirates with over 18,000 students across 17 campuses. This federal institution provides a wide range of vocational higher education courses to Emirati students, both male and female. The majority of instruction is in English and the multinational faculty come from a diverse range of backgrounds, experiences and content areas that include business, engineering, health sciences, avionics, language and technology. The staff are well qualified in their

content areas but the vast majority have had very little or no teacher education. To improve the quality of the learning experience of students it was recognized that there were four factors that underpin a highly competent teacher and thus allow for a satisfactory student learning experience; content knowledge, pedagogy, understanding of the processes of assessment and learning technologies (Curcher et al, 2012).

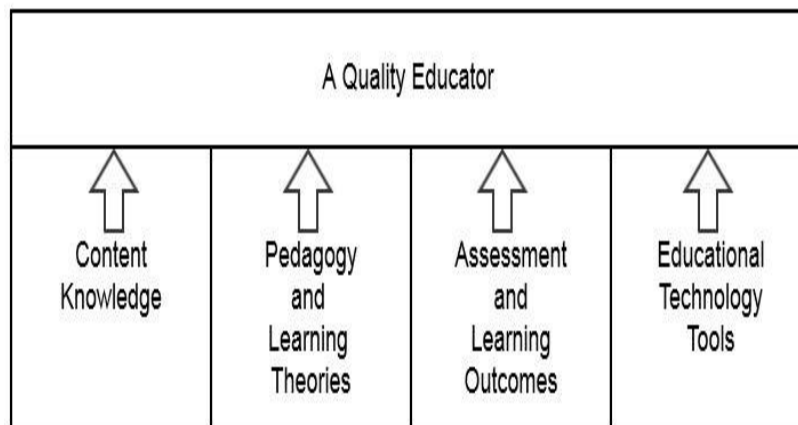


Figure 1. Characteristics of a Good Teacher

When the HCT management became aware of the details of the 21st Century Educators program they recognized that it represented an exciting opportunity to improve the student learning experience in the classroom by pulling these four strands together. Staff in six colleges in the HCT system were encouraged to enroll on the program as part of their professional development, with some colleges subsidizing part payment of the tuition fees. In addition a small number of suitable staff were recruited to act as local facilitators supporting participants on a voluntary basis. They were usually staff who were already involved in teacher education programs. They were trained with an intensive three day workshop prior to the start of program implementation.

21st Century Educators

Design of the Program

Earlier research at Tampere University of Applied Sciences had found that authentic e-learning (Herrington et al 2010) and other approaches with similar underlying educational philosophy, such as progressive inquiry (Hakkarainen et al. 1999), combined with the use of social technologies, seem to be especially suitable for teacher education and teacher professional development. (Teras & Myllyla 2011). The positive impacts that were observed earlier included deeper learning, improved collaboration and networking skills, appreciation of diversity, and a broader conception of teacher's work. (Teras & Myllyla, 2011). These experiences encouraged the development team to use the principles of authentic e-learning as the pedagogical framework for the learning design of the program. Moreover, in addition to a learning management system, a variety of social technologies, such as personal blogs, Google Docs and Google+ were used as the learning environment.

Implementation

Thirty three participants' started the Post Graduate Certificate for Teaching in Higher Education in September 2011. This was a diverse group of faculty representing a wide range of prior learning experiences and nationalities. The participants taught a broad range of subjects that included courses from Engineering, Business, Languages and Islamic Studies.

The program was delivered online, by facilitators from Finland supported by voluntary local facilitators who helped and mentored participants during the program. The cohort was divided into three smaller groups of around 11

participants, each with their own local facilitators and it was these small groups that formed the basis of collaborative work.

Challenges

There were some challenges during the initial implementation of the program. Firstly the participants' prior learning experiences, based on knowledge transfer models of education, created false expectations of the program, how it was delivered and its facilitators. This led to tensions as the participants adapted to new methods of working and learning.

False assumptions were made about the participants' knowledge and skills in the use of learning management systems and educational technologies. These proved to be less well developed than thought and this led to technical support issues and problems as participants struggled to use new technologies and tools.

The course required the participants to work collaboratively. This requires that they stay on schedule and do not rush ahead or fall behind, however this proved to be an ongoing issue. The aim was to develop an online community of practice. Kear (2011) identifies similar problems as participants tried to work collaboratively online, these include disengagement, information overload, and low participation. The heavy teaching load of participants meant that they often had insufficient time for reflection or to design an inquiry into practice (Curcher et al, 2012).

Changes were made to address these issues in the implementation of Module 2 and 3 that included the introduction of a fortnightly online newsletter, greater support from facilitators and smaller subgroups.

In April 2013 the first cohort graduated in a ceremony in held at the Sharjah HCT. Twenty three participants successfully completed the program and were awarded their PGCTHE certificates from the Finnish Ambassador to the UAE. The graduation was held in parallel to a conference that allowed the participants to showcase their work undertaken during the program.

Evaluating the Success of the Program

The success of the program was being evaluated throughout the duration of the program. After each of the three modules, a survey was conducted to find out what the most important challenges and successes were. This data was always directly used for the continuous development of the program. This proved to be a successful approach: whereas the results of the first survey revealed some problems with regard to the learning design, collaboration and scaffolding, the second survey indicated that there was great improvement in many of these areas. (Teras, Teras & Herrington, 2012, Teras, Leppisaari, Teras & Herrington, 2013).

The final survey was conducted after the third module, and its purpose was to map the participants' experience during the entire process, as well as to find out what value they found in having taken the program. The questions of the survey were open-ended and encouraged the respondents to share their authentic stories and experiences. Many of the participants felt that taking the program had helped them to become more aware of their professional practice and reflect on their choices, actions and teaching methods more profoundly and critically. Many had also gained more confidence in using blended delivery methods and different technologies in their teaching. Some mentioned that the feedback they got from their own students had improved. Other benefits that were mentioned included better assessment skills, better understanding of different learning styles, learning to innovate, positive impact on professional identity, and appreciation of one's students as well as oneself as a dedicated, highly skilled professional educator.

Conclusion

Feedback from the participants of the first cohort of the program would indicate that this initiative was a success. The broad aim of the 21st Century Educators program was to improve the quality of learning for students around the world by improving the knowledge and skills of teachers. The objective was to help and support teachers to better prepare their students for living and working in a knowledge economy. The model for doing this was a supported online program designed around authentic e-learning pedagogy. Every indicator, from the participants and from

their students and the management of the institutions where the participants work, show that the program succeeded in its aims.

Around thirty people benefited from the process of completing the modules and reflecting on their professional practice and identity. Through the methodology required in the program, participants have become researchers in their own classrooms, using progressive inquiry as an investigative tool. Several have described themselves as becoming ‘reborn learners’, continuing a process of on-going professional development and lifelong learning. All have improved their educational technology skills and have a better understanding of how these tools might be used with students.

A new cohort started the program in September 2013 and several of the graduates from the first cohort have now decided to continue with a newly develop module that will lead to a Post Graduate Diploma and eventually a masters degree in online education. The 21st Century Educators program is therefore in the process of further development and diversification and in future will include face to face workshops and shorter, more intense, online courses.

Tampere University of Applied Sciences has responded to the call from the Finnish Government and to the international interest in Finnish education by designing and implementing a program that has a significant impact on teachers practice and identity and improves the learning experience of students.

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