

DEVELOPING A BLENDED LEARNING COURSE IN CONTENT AREA LITERACY FOR SECONDARY TEACHERS



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ABSTRACT

An international consortium led and coordinated by the University of Cologne developed a well-evaluated programme for teachers' professional development (BaCuLit) with six training modules which all serve the literacy development in the subject area classrooms of secondary schools. The follow-up project (ISIT) built on BaCuLit and is aimed at supporting the introduction of such training into the regular programmes of the participating institutions for in-service teacher training in three European countries: Germany, Hungary and Romania. The tool for transmission of these innovations was the training of in-service teacher trainers in a Blended Learning Course where we could modernize structures of teacher education by integrating digital learning opportunities into teachers' professional development. The basic conception of our blended learning course, the content and structure of the E-learning part is presented in the paper in which the main objectives of our current project (BleTeach) are also introduced.

Key words: blended learning, CAL (Content Area Literacy), teachers' professional development, BaCuLit, ISIT.

INTRODUCTION

Reading and understanding texts of all kinds forms a basic competence for participating in social and cultural life and for being successful in a job. This societal expectation has induced the European Commission to invite tenders to promote literacy in education through involving several EU countries and their experts in common researches in the field, and developing effective teaching tools and materials to be used in continuous professional development of discipline teachers. Kecskemét College Teacher Training Faculty entered the first international project in the field in 2006 (ADORE) looking for good school practices all over Europe. It was followed by designing and implementing an in-service teacher training course (BaCuLit).

The follow-up project, ISIT aimed at developing a research strategy to identify the key factors of success for an implementation of innovation into in-service teacher training. According to research on effective in-service teacher training, one-shot activities or short scale approaches have almost no sustainable effect on classroom practice. Teachers' routines and beliefs are often stronger than new ideas and concepts. Therefore, there is a gap between what teachers know and what they do ("knowledge-action-gap"). To overcome the "knowledge-action-gap", long-term approaches are needed that involve coaching teachers continually over a longer time period. Teachers try out in actual school contexts what they learned in the training and form professional learning communities which offer support and foster commitment and accountability. Blended-Learning approaches seem to be appropriate for teachers' professional development because time and personal and financial resources are used in an optimal way. To promote BaCuLit curriculum among highly qualified teacher trainers, a blended learning course was designed and implemented in ISIT project (Garbe 2015). Based on the project participants' positive feedback about the structure and form of the training, our current BleTeach project aims at designing CAL-courses adapted to national conditions, needs and requirements in six countries.

THE GOALS OF ISIT

The ISIT project (Szabó, & Szinger, 2014; Garbe, 2015; Szabó, & Szinger, 2015) addressed two of the crucial needs of European literacy: (a) the problem of low literacy skills in many European countries and (b) the unsatisfying status of teachers' continuous professional development (CPD) in the EU. Thus ISIT pursued the following specific (pedagogical) objective: training and qualifying 30 teacher educators from 3 European countries (Germany, Romania, Hungary) in content area literacy (CAL) on the basis of a well-evaluated programme for teacher professional development (BaCuLit)²⁷. ISIT built on these BaCuLit standards and model curriculum with six training modules which all serve the literacy development in the subject area classrooms of secondary schools²⁸ (Steklács, Szabó, & Szinger, 2011; Steklács, Szabó, & Szinger, 2012; Garbe 2015). The target group of ISIT were professional teacher trainers from in-service teacher training institutions working full- or part time. The project was led and coordinated by the University of Cologne (Prof. Dr. Christine Garbe). The training of the trainers took place in a national blended-learning course consisting of 3 months E-learning via Online Platform for each country and one common 5-day international summer school. Blended learning has been chosen because participants from across the country could receive training and collaborate with each other without having to travel to a central location (e. g. a capital city), take time off work, or be away from their families. Online professional development could give participants the flexibility to work on courses whenever they wanted, throughout the day or at weekends

27 Basic Curriculum for Teachers' In-Service Training in Content Area Literacy in Secondary Schools.

28 (1) BaCuLit Principles of Lesson Planning; (2) Text Structure & Text Diversity; (3) Vocabulary Instruction; (4) Reading Strategies; (5) Formative Assessment; (6) BaCuLit Practice of Lesson Planning.

from any location (Mackey, 2013, p. 6). From our point of view, blended learning seemed to be the most cost-effective and time-efficient way of professional teacher development.

DEFINITION OF BLENDED LEARNING

In 2011 Innosight Institute suggested a preliminary definition of blended learning which was revised by two colleagues of this institute. Staker and Horn (2012) introduced a slightly refined definition to incorporate feedback from the field. According to the definition, “blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace and at least part at a supervised bricks-and-mortar location away from home” (p. 3). The phrase “formal education program” makes it possible to distinguish blended learning from informal online learning. The term online learning is used interchangeably with virtual learning, cyber-learning, and e-learning. “Content and instruction” was added to distinguish online learning from using only Internet tools. The authors included the phrase “with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace” to distinguish blended learning from technology-rich instruction. This part of the definition is described by Digital Learning Now! (Staker, & Horn, 2012), according to which online learning can be characterised in the following way by taking four aspects into consideration:

- time: learning is no longer restricted to the school day or the school year,
- place: learning is no longer restricted to the walls of the classroom,
- path: learning is no longer restricted to the pedagogy used by the teacher; interactive and adaptive software allows students to learn (in a method that is customized to their needs),
- pace: learning is no longer restricted to the pace of an entire classroom of students.

Staker and Horn describes four models of blended learning: (1) Rotation model, (2) Flex model, (3) Self-Blend model and (4) Enriched-Virtual model. ISIT could be an example for the last one where students divide their time between attending a bricks-and-mortar campus and learning remotely using online delivery of content and instruction. In an Enriched-Virtual model students meet face-to-face with teachers for their first course meeting at a bricks-and mortar location. Then they can complete the rest of their coursework remotely.

CONCEPTION OF THE ISIT BLENDED-LEARNING COURSE

The concept of ISIT course was to combine synchronous and asynchronous learning settings in the training. The first session was a face-to-face meeting with all the applicants to get to know each other, make them familiar with the technological background and create their own profile on that e-learning platform that was selected to serve the aims of the project best. This Presence Day was organized for all participants in April 2014 in Budapest, where the participants got the basic concepts of the whole blended learning course, and the ratio of online

and face-to-face course elements. The chosen e-learning platform was *its learning* platform (*its learning*, n.d.). The original share of online and face-to-face parts of the whole training course was as follows:

Table 1

Original share of online and face-to-face parts of the whole training

Module 1	online
Module 2	online
Module 3	online
Module 4	online
Module 5	online
Module 6	face-to-face

According to this plan the course included 12 weeks of an E-Learning-course (3-hour work load per week = 36 hrs, from April till June, 2014). Participants could work at their own pace as the e-learning part of the course was asynchronous (they could watch the video presentations, join the forum, upload assignments, peer assess the assignments when it suited them).

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE E-LEARNING COURSE

Creating online courses is a great challenge in higher education institutions. A good point of departure for designing a blended learning course is to transform an existing teaching programme into a blended learning one (Alammary, & Carbone, 2014, p. 440). The online course followed the model curriculum of BaCuLit addressing such topics as:

- Module 1 (12 hrs): BaCuLit Key Concepts and Principles of Lesson Planning (metacognition, interaction, engagement, lesson planning framework).
- Module 2 (6 hrs): Text structure & Text diversity.
- Module 3 (3 hrs): Vocabulary instruction.
- Module 4 (9 hrs): Cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies (What are strategies? Reciprocal Teaching, Reading apprenticeship).
- Module 5 (6 hrs): Assessment.

Every module contained these elements:

1. Short introduction (video with PPT and module overview) – orientation session.
2. Theoretical part (input, videos from trainers) – orientation session.
3. Practice exercise (applications) – The course combined independent activities with activities that the participant had to design for implementation in the classroom. This allowed the teachers to implement what they had learned in the online course.
4. Collaborative / communicative part (e. g. blogs) The course used a learning-community model (Mackey, 2013, p. 7) Each participant had to respond to at least two other participants' discussion board responses.
5. Assessment / feedback from trainers.

The learning design taxonomy identifies seven types of learning activity (Rienties, Toetnel, & Bryan, 2015). ISIT course applied in each module the following types:

- assimilative activities (e. g. reading texts, watching videos),
- finding and handling information (e. g. looking for authentic texts in their content area, analyze textbook text, analyzing students' log),
- communicative activities (e. g. forums where participants could have discussions about the modules or the readings),
- experimental activities (e. g. applying what they have learnt in their classrooms: thinking aloud, reciprocal teaching),
- productive activities (e. g. making a learn ability checklist of a textbook text, making their own CARI²⁹, creating graphic organizers),
- assessment (e. g. present their lesson plans to the whole group).

The online facilitator determined whether each participant had successfully completed all requirements in order to receive the certificate for completing the course.

The e-learning part of the course was followed by a summer school in August, 2014. It was a 5- day long practical training ending with a final examination and certification ceremony.

SUMMER SCHOOL

The International ISIT Summer School was the first and only meeting of all partners of the project – teachers/trainers and ISIT staff from the core partners as well as experts in reading research and teacher education from the associate partners (Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, Greece and Portugal). Additionally, our American expert Prof. William G. Brozo, PhD (George Mason University Fairfax, Virginia) was invited for the opening speech about the *Contemporary Issues in Content Area Literacy / Disciplinary Literacy in the US*. For both the core and the associate partners separate programs were offered tailored to their needs which partly overlapped and gave opportunities for mutual exchange and shared input.

The core partners were present with their groups of teachers/teacher trainers who by then had finished the 36 hours E-Learning course about the BaCuLit curriculum and continued the practical part of their training during the summer school. The final training courses for these partners took place during the first half of the summer school and were held in the native language of the national groups: German, Romanian and Hungarian. As Module 6 – Practice of lesson planning – was excluded from the E-Learning part, it was done in the summer school. Each participant had to complete a final product, which involved creating a presentation of a “BaCuLit Model Lesson” on a poster form, based on the course content, teaching of a little unit to their peers. After the certification ceremony teacher participants became “second level” BaCuLit trainers³⁰.

29 CARI: Content Area Reading Inventory. It's a tool that assesses students' reading, thinking, and study processes with content texts that teachers plan to use for instruction. Results can be turned into instruction to address specific reading and learning needs.

30 In Hungary at the moment there are two first level BaCuLit trainers, the authors of this paper.

In the second half of the summer school all partners worked together (in plenary and group sessions) in English in order to prepare the last phase of the ISIT project. It was about analysing good examples of how to implement innovations into different national structures of continuous professional development (CPD) of teachers.

BLETEACH

– BLENDED LEARNING IN TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The focus of our current project is developing a blended learning course in content area literacy (CAL) for secondary teachers. The BleTeach project consortium consists of the coordinating partner (University of Cologne led by Prof. Christine Garbe) and seven more partners (Romania, Belgium with two teams, Portugal, Russia, Germany, and Hungary). Hungary is represented by (among others) the two authors of this paper. External experts are Angelika Schmitt-Rösser from Germany (evaluator) and Prof. Dr. Colin Harrison, University of Nottingham, School of Education (UK) (consultant).

BleTeach pursues two main objectives (*BleTeach Project Application*, 2015, p. 2):

1. A general objective: Modernizing structures of teacher education by integrating digital learning opportunities into teachers' professional development.
2. A specific objective: Developing a model blended learning course (BL-course) in CAL to be included into the regular course programme of around 40 European Teacher Training Centres.

According to our intentions, altogether, BleTeach will deliver six intellectual outputs which are closely connected to the two project objectives (*BleTeach Project Application*, 2015, pp. 16-20):

First phase (November 2015 – May 2016):

1. *National reports on good practice examples and concepts in blended learning in teachers' CPD in Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, and Russia.* "These national reports will give an overview of the national state of research and development concerning the implementation of blended learning formats in teachers' professional development. The reports will focus on conceptual and didactical questions like: What is the most effective relation of face-to-face and e-learning components regarding learners' (i. e. teachers') motivation, interaction and learning outcomes? Which were the most important obstacles and failures in blended learning and delivery principles and learner success principles? Which evaluations have been carried out, which methodology has been applied? Which criteria for good practice have been developed, which evaluation results matter for developing a blended learning concept within BLETEACH?" (*BleTeach Project Application*, 2015, pp. 29-30).
2. *Pool of concepts and course materials about Content Area Literacy Training for Secondary Teachers in English and all involved national languages.*

“Within this second (parallel) work strand the involved partners focus on the content of the planned blended learning course. For this purpose all partners carry out an inquiry about international concepts and course materials in content area literacy training for secondary teachers (for example BaCuLit in Europe, Project CRISS and Reading Apprenticeship in USA) and about concepts and materials in their mother tongue. All partners produce an overview of the different topics and modules and of the existing content (materials, methods, text books, worksheets etc.) in their national language. Based on this pool the consortium will then decide which modules and materials to integrate into the blended learning course and which adaptations, translations or development of new materials are needed for this purpose”. (*BleTeach Project Application*, 2015, p. 30).

In the second phase (June 2016 – December 2016) the focus will be on conceptual development:

3. *“Guidelines for Success”: Handbook of Success Factors in Blended Learning Offers for Teachers’ In-service Training.*
4. *Concept and Preparation of Materials for Content Area Literacy Course Addressing Secondary Teachers (Including Adaptations and Translations).*

In both outputs, the research results of work phase 1 will be transferred into guidelines and concepts: in outcome 3 related to success factors in blended learning and respectively in outcome 4 related to the concept and material for the CAL course.

The third project phase (January 2017 – September 2017) focuses on the production of the blended learning course in six versions: the master version in English will be produced by all partners following an agreed work distribution including all (exemplary) materials (worksheets, texts, assignments, PPTs, video presentations, etc.). All national partners will then translate this master version into their national language and adapt it to their national conditions, e. g. replace the general example (of a text book) by specific examples from their country, etc. Technical production includes design of materials, production of video clips, assignments, worksheets, etc. It leads to the fifth outcome:

5. *Blended Learning Course in CAL for Secondary Teachers and Teacher Trainers – Producing the master version (English) and five national versions.*

The fourth project phase (August 2017 – April 2018) deals with dissemination and implementation of the project’s results. Its main objective will be the definition of common quality standards and an agreed implementation concept, which results in the sixth output:

6. *Concept for implementation of BleTeach CAL course, including Certification and Accreditation Requirements.*

SUMMARY

Blended learning can make professional development far more affordable and convenient for teachers because they do not have to travel too often, they can participate in a course either without missing teaching time or with the least absence.

Compared to conventional professional development programs, it is also good for schools because they do not have to substitute teachers.

"Online professional development in a train-the-trainer model can have a significant impact on teachers' knowledge, skills, and practices. [...] Online learning is a classic disruptive innovation – an innovation that transforms a sector where the products or services are complicated, expensive, and inconvenient into one where the services are simple, affordable, and accessible – relative to traditional learning" (Mackey, 2013, p. 12) Besides the above mentioned advantages, a blended learning course lets participants deepen their knowledge to a greater extent as they can reread, rewatch or relisten to the resources; this training can be more self-reflective as forums and communicative activities make participants think about their whole learning process. By doing so, they can revise their practice, make alterations, get individualised feedback both from their tutor and peers. Self-reflection can also be strengthened by the asynchronous nature of blended courses, because participants can access the materials on their own schedule. Learning by doing approach of the blended courses improves the ICT competences of the participants.

Designing a blended course in CPD does not only mean including both face-to-face and online sessions into an integrated unit. It also means considering issues of designing learning activities different from a traditional in-service teacher training course. This was the challenge ISIT course had to meet. Using BaCuLit as a model, ISIT had a variety of learning activities meeting the requirements of a blended course. In BleTeach project the aim is to design a blended course that integrates traditional face-to-face and online activities based on pedagogical decisions (e. g. what to do online or face-to-face, what participants do independently/with others, what to be facilitated by tutors etc.) with Content Area Literacy content.

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