Chapter 8
EPICT:
Transnational Teacher Development through Blended Learning

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ABSTRACT

This case aims at introducing international professional audiences to a transnational teacher development program, the European Pedagogical ICT License (EPICT), empowering teachers to use information technologies with greater efficiency in their everyday practice. Beyond introducing the program through the Hungarian experience, the present state of teacher training will be discussed, under transformation in line with the Bologna process and the joint European harmonization of education systems. It will be examined how alternative forms of learning and networking bring about changes to the teaching profession in Europe and other affiliated countries.

INTRODUCTION

Common Technologies in the 21st Century

With the emergence of new technologies, the learning habits of today's youth have undoubtedly changed worldwide. Those born in or after the 1980s or even more so towards the end of the millennium – referred to as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) – take instant access to information for granted and do not wait for authority figures, for instance educators, to enlighten them about the issues that interest them. This obvious change in attitudes towards acquiring new knowledge forces education to face the new challenges and offer a diversified pattern of delivery. Prensky (2001) extends the metaphor to those over 30, which the majority of teachers are, calling them 'digital immigrants': learning about, using and even and conforming to technology is one thing, but being born into it is another. Immigrants will almost always have accents or linguistic imperfections that natives may find amusing or at least peculiar. One digital example of this may be when the teacher prints the digital image for the students rather than projecting it in the classroom,

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or writes a URL on the board rather than posting it on his or her webpage or sending it to the students via email.

As opposed to earlier decades, it is not only the infrastructural environment that changed in schools, but students themselves arrive with a different frame of mind as well. The generation raised with computers and high-speed Internet at hand is commonly referred to as *Generation D* (D for digital), who take connectivity and immediate feedback for granted, and the way they think is completely different too.

Although the above distinction undoubtedly exists between naturally comfortable users of technology and the older generation, in his recent article, Prensky suggests that it is more important what users make of technology rather than how comfortable they feel with it.

Homo sapiens digital, then, differs from today's human in two key aspects: He or she accepts digital enhancement as an integral fact of human existence, and he or she is digitally wise, both in the considered way he or she accesses the power of digital enhancements to complement innate abilities and in the way in which he or she uses enhancements to facilitate wiser decision making. Digital wisdom transcends the generational divide defined by the immigrant/native distinction. Many digital immigrants exhibit digital wisdom. Barack Obama, who grew up in the pre-digital era, showed his digital wisdom in enlisting the power of the Internet to enhance both his fundraising ability and his connection with the American people (Prensky, 2009, www.innovateonline.info/index.php?view=article&id=705).

According to Prensky, today it is digital wisdom that makes a stronger distinction and beyond the fact that youth expects teachers to understand and be prepared for the digital era, but they should also be ready to integrate the various tools and resources into the curriculum in a manner that facilitates youngsters' multilateral thinking (Prensky, 2009). In today's classroom, the traditional setup, i.e. teacher talking, students listening and taking notes, replying to questions, is not feasible any longer. It is not only the teacher and textbooks, or even static material on the Internet that are the sources of information, but also 'unapproved' sources are relied on such as strangers' opinions in forums, wikis and blogs as well as peers.

The question arises: does school environment conform to these changes in the students' general environment? Do teachers try to synchronize their teaching practices with students' lifestyles? Or is it still the transition of an elaborated knowledge base that characterizes the learning process in schools? It has to be noted that active learning is certainly not a new phenomenon: it dates back to Socrates over 2400 years ago. In the spirit of the Socratic method, the learner is inspired to learn actively (Robinson, 1953), to question the world. Both teacher instructions and the learning environment are meant to assist the learner with constructing knowledge independently, creating a system, thus becoming part of an active, constructive participant in the learning process. Well-built study programs enable learners to discover their own learning styles and preferences, make decisions of their own time schedules, learning pace taking responsibility for their own learning at the same time. This is what teachers could expect from today's learners given the circumstances, but are educators themselves prepared for this process? Before further investigating this question, let us examine the local educational context.

Integration of New Technologies in Education in the Hungarian Context

Although once a relatively isolated country behind the Iron Curtain, Hungarian education has caught up with the methodologically more flexible and technologically more developed parts of the world by now. The days of centralized and uniformed education are over, flexible delivery methods and new modes of learning are emerging. At the same