

Chapter 14

Blending Professional Development for Rural Educators: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning is a process by which educators use varied web-, print-, and classroom-based techniques to present a specific set of skills to a group of adult learners. In this chapter, the author argues that Rossett, Douglis, and Frazee's (2003) blended learning model is superior to others' as it is based on adult-learning principles. In March, 2007, the researcher and one colleague conducted a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) federal study on teacher supply and demand issues in Northern Canada. As part of the questionnaire and interview data, the participants (n = 113) were asked to comment on professional development models currently used and models to be considered. In particular, comments on the use of blended learning as a viable method of e-professional development model were favourable. In follow up to those comments, the main researcher provided professional development model exemplars and asked the participants to discuss the advantages and disadvantages for the rural professionals. The results of this study are promising as the majority of participants chose blended learning as their primary choice for professional development.

INTRODUCTION

The issues of recruiting and keeping teachers are particularly pressing, in general, (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2000; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, in press), but are particularly important in the

North. Professionals receive very little professional development, in situ, and often attending conferences is cost prohibitive for them. Clearly, one viable answer is technology and electronic professional development. This paper will present a preliminary model of e-professional development designed for teachers, administrators, and human resources personnel in four Northern

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Canada sites, Fort Nelson, BC, Fort Vermilion, Alberta, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, and Whitehorse, Yukon. Although the definitions of blended learning vary (Bersin, 2003; Bonk, 2009; Bonk & Graham, 2006; Douglass, 2002; Graham, 2006; Wilson, Andrews, & Dale, 2009), for the purposes of this study, we defined blended learning as a process by which educators use varied web-, print-, and classroom-based techniques to present a specific set of skills to a group of adult learners.

THE STUDY

This Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded study addressed the issues of teacher supply and demand in the following manners: (a) formed partnerships with school district personnel to ascertain their recruitment needs and to consider the development of a formula that will predict their future needs in relation to specialist and generalist teachers (British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 2000; Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2000; New Brunswick Department of Education, 2001; Hannum, Irwin, Banks, & Farmer, 2009; Tremblay, 1997); (b) investigated existing recruitment and retention practices with district personnel (Echols, Grimmitt, & Kitchenham, 1999a, 1999b; Kitchenham, 2001); and (c) asked personnel what professional development opportunities, vis-à-vis blended learning models, could be accomplished with Northern teachers (Barter, 2008; Kitchenham, 2006). As well, practices from across districts, provinces, and territories are being brought to the attention of hiring personnel as we disseminate our preliminary findings. It is then proposed that this information will be shared with universities so that they can more effectively tailor their programs for Northern teachers—especially universities such as the University of Northern British Columbia.

The researchers¹ acknowledge that this study will be the beginning of several studies; however, the research SSHRC monies have, thus far, as-

sisted us, and the field of rural studies, to develop future research. The final date for completion of the two-year study was December, 2009.

In total, there were 113 participants from BC, Alberta, Northwest Territories and Yukon representing teachers, administrators, and human resources personnel. These 113 participants were represented by 96 teachers, 13 administrators, and four human resources personnel.

There were three data sources used in this mixed-methods study: an online survey, semi-structured interviews, and an emailed survey. The on-line questionnaire using Zoomerang was completed at the outset of the study. The follow-up face-to-face or telephone interview was conducted one month after the respondents completed the survey. The emailed survey was sent four to six months after the interviews were completed.

The questionnaire was completed by 113 school personnel in the partner school districts in which they identified demographic information (e.g., gender; number of teachers; age range; retirement predictions); statistics on the areas of immediate and chronic teacher shortages; their definitions of rurality; information on teaching outside of their expertise; and professional development services available to them. In particular, as part of the on-line Zoomerang survey, each respondent was asked which of seven models would best meet his or her professional development needs: bringing in prominent speakers, bringing university instructors with specific expertise, using local professionals with expertise, attending national and international conferences, connecting to video conferences (e.g., webcasts), action research projects, and a combination of on-line and face-to-face sessions (e.g., blended learning).

We also conducted one to three face-to-face or telephone interviews with each of the three stakeholder groups: teachers, administrators, and human resources personnel. These participants volunteered to be interviewed by selecting the response at the conclusion of the on-line questionnaire. In total, we interviewed seventeen

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