

Collaborative Learning Environments for Teacher Education

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It is in this context that we aim to present a case study of continuous training for teachers, carried out within a b-learning framework. In this presentation, we shall present and discuss the concepts related to this approach to teacher education. We shall also present the structure of the platform used for collaborative work, characterise the participants in this research and illustrate the kind of activities and tasks that were conducted by approximately forty teachers in two continuous courses for professional development.

Finally, we intend to address a number of reflections emerging from the data collected, including: i) the functionality of the platform; ii) the constraint factors that can affect collaborative learning in such an environment; iii) the changes in the role of the teacher as educator; iv) the changes in the role of the teacher as learner; v) the development of new pedagogical interrelations; vi) the complexity of collaborative learning.

Keywords collaborative learning; b-learning; virtual communities, teacher training.

1. Introduction

Technological and pedagogical innovation has enabled the development of virtual environments that bring about the possibility of learning with others at a distance. The development of these virtual environments is nowadays an expanding field of research. Continuous training of teachers is a highly suitable field of application for these new ways of promoting learning. Despite the indefinite nature of these new ways of learning, which is but typical of new environments, collaborative learning is being recognised as quite important within professional contexts as means of answering educational needs of the information society. The development of these environments based on the creation of virtual learning communities and their collaborative activities must be the object of further study to guarantee the success of its inclusion in professional development, therefore to improve teacher practice. This following work is intended to contribute in this sense.

2. A new context for teachers' professional development

The teachers' capacity of assuming their own professional development seems to be connected, on the one hand, with their preparation for the transformations that are taking place very rapidly, and, on the other, with the obstacles which might affect that professional development and with educational change within the current training perspective.

The current context for professional development seems to be related to professional "dilemmas", to professional culture and to the organisational structure of educational institutions. The ongoing changes in society and in its respective educational systems are a challenge for redefining the teachers' job, their training and professional development. A job traditionally marked by individualism and by difficulties in learning from and with others demands a change in professional culture. The job of being a teacher faces an array of interrelated "dilemmas" that can work as obstacles to their professional development, such as the intensification of teachers' work, continuous training, working conditions and constant educational reforms. The comprehension of these situations can be challenging so as to avoid presenting solutions without previously having the necessary wide vision which enables this understanding of the problems.

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