ONLINE INTERNSHIP WORKSHOP ADAPTING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM TO THE 21ST CENTURY: A CASE STUDY OF A PILOT ONLINE INTERNSHIP WORKSHOP FOR INTERN TEACHERS

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study designed to test a pilot online internship workshop. The purpose of the workshop is to develop a professional learning community of intern teachers and to enable professional development through the use of modern technology. Interns' reactions to the online workshop were somewhat inconsistent, as their experiences varied, both in terms of technological knowledge and their internship sites. Results show that the online workshop has been evaluated as an effective tool providing support and professional development to intern teachers. However, the difficulties that were encountered stemmed from technical problems, connection interruption and lack of a face-to-face (F2F) meeting.

Introduction

Internship is a critical stage for novice teachers and it is intended to assist new teachers in integrating into the educational system and adapting to it. At this stage, a student teacher moves from the theoretical learning and training to the practical stage where s/he becomes an official teacher. This is the induction stage, and it is characterized by many obstacles and difficulties, and has a decisive effect on the professional life of the teacher, both in terms of teaching and devotion to the perception of the teacher role, and professional identity (Administration of Teacher Education and Professional Devlopment, 2012). Many practitioners in communication-based fields, such as teaching, consider a career-related internship to be a critical element in the student's undergraduate program (Fulmer, 1993).

Researchers McIntyre, Hobson, and Michell (2009), described the feeling of novice teachers at the beginning as a "reality shock," or a "painful start," especially when they realize the existing gap between theory and practice. The mandatory internship program in Israel has started gradually since the year 2000. During the internship year, the intern[1] must work as a teacher in a certified educational institute for at least a 33% part-time position, and not fewer than 6 months during that year. The intern work includes active and continuous teaching, class management, and fulfilling an educator role. At this point, the intern needs professional support in the process of bonding with the teaching profession. This support is given by three parties: the Mentor[2] from the working institute that has undergone appropriate training for this position; the workshop facilitator[3]; and the Internship Coordinator from the

Academic Teaching Institute (Administration of Teacher Education and Professional Development, 2004; Orland-Barak, 2005).

The Internship Coordinator is responsible for the internship system at the different participating organizations. Responsibilities include collecting data about the intern integration, following up on mentors' assignment to all interns, setting up enough workshops at the educational institute, following up on interns' assessment, and managing and dealing with all sorts of problems encountered during the internship year.

The Internship Workshop is an integral part of the learning process that pre-service teachers undergo at the beginning of their professional career. The workshop is given at the Teacher Education Institute, and it provides a source for emotional and social group support, as it becomes a resource for professional learning and the organization of novice teachers (Rychenberg, Lozovski, & Zyger, 2002). In many instances, a beginner teacher feels lonely and frustrated while facing the system, the pupils, the learning material, and the parents (Romano, 2004; Sagi & Regev, 2002). Therefore, a group meeting with colleagues that are in a similar position provides them with an opportunity to share their experiences, difficulties, and methods of problem solving. These workshops emphasize the theoretical and practical aspects, such as reflective thinking, and provide exposure to obstacles and clarifying them.

As the second decade of the 21st century begins, schools in Israel are undergoing extensive processes of change. This change aims to facilitate the adaptation to the current reality and will provide the students with an education system that reflects the current era (Science and Technology Administration, 2012).

Online classes have many advantages. The almost immediate response means that interns do not have to wait for their weekly meeting to get answers, and the support received empowers them and helps them in their daily teaching, which is a major gain. Another advantage is the reduced time consumption and the commuting money saving; it also saves the college on the maintenance of a classroom and the use of educational equipment. Finally, and most importantly, the use of an online workshop is a solution for long distance participants (Ra'nan, Bergman, & Amiti, 2004). Adapting the internship program to the Education System of the 21st century and the assimilation of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) among novice teachers is a goal in itself that the researchers are seeking to realize. The online workshop is intended to develop a professional learning community of intern teachers, to prepare them to ICT oriented teaching, and to enable professional development through the use of modern technology.

However, the challenges of developing online internship workshops that are effective learning experiences for students and for the training system have been the subject of intense scrutiny (Flesher, Leach, & Westphal, 1996). Academics have recognized that students sometimes enter internships with unrealistic expectations, and deal with inconsistencies in grading and

evaluation (Weitzel, 1992). In addition, the educational institutions recognize that it is difficult to establish and maintain appropriate academic standards for off-campus internship experiences, and that successful internship programs require direct guidance and feedback from both the practitioner and the academic supervisors.

The online workshop might enhance student internships, both by providing a means of communication with faculty, and as a method of communication among the students. The following case study reports the implementation of a restructured internship workshop that utilized ICT in order to develop an internship program to meet the 21st century challenges, as well as to meet interns' need for mobility.

Background and Rationale of Pilot Program

The policy makers of the internship workshop do not count the online workshop as a popular one; they value the face-to-face (F2F) meetings more. They believe that the facial expression, feelings and sensations that accompany an expression of emotion, the social aspect that accompanies introduction to and identification with workshop colleagues, and the mutual reflective discourse, etc., are essential for the learning process and constructs of the internship workshop.

The pilot internship workshop was developed at Teacher Education College in Israel for two main reasons. One, the vision of the national ICT program, "Adapting the Education System to the 21st Century"; the key objective of the program is to transform all schools nationwide into places where students and teachers work in an instruction-learning environment that can manage learning and activity in the online space, both within and outside the school environment. By implementing ICT, the schools will optimally use the pedagogy in various ways, but mainly for imparting 21st century skills to improve the skills of the teachers and expanding the boundaries of the classroom beyond the permanent time and space of school.

The second factor was the trouble that was encountered by some of the interns; they could not arrive physically at the college due to logistic problems, such as geographic distance, working hours, distant working place, stressful and busy schedules of their school, and the college course schedule, or for other personal reasons that prevented them from attending the workshop at the college once a week for one school year. The online workshop saves the interns time and trouble, provides them with a flexible platform for supportive learning, and allows them to integrate with the offered activities and fulfill their duties in a virtual space, where they discuss and share their knowledge and experience beyond the computer screen.

Due to the implementation of the vision of the national ICT program, and the massive request of the interns, we at the Arab Academic College of Education challenged ourselves first and the system second, by launching the first online workshop accompanied by a study that helps us develop a model that meets the needs of the interns.

Objectives of the Study

- To scrutinize the effectiveness of online workshop.
- To examine the added value of an online media usage and how to exploit it for further learning of the interns.
- To reveal the challenges the interns face in teaching, as well as in the training system due to the use of an online workshop.

Components of the Pilot Program

The online workshop components included: (a) a mandatory F2F group orientation meeting for all students, (b) guidance in the use of the online platform "Elluminate," (c) a mandatory 2 hour weekly synchronized meeting, (d) exercises for reflection throughout the internship experience, (e) a class forum discussion to allow interaction and discussion between students, (f) ongoing faculty guidance via a-synchronized sessions followed by the forum discussion, and (g) a series of short, written assignments that culminated in a final, written portfolio. During the orientation sessions, the students received a formal course syllabus and detailed instructions on how to use the technology.

The distance-learning component of the course ran during two college semesters. During that period, we used a variety of communication technologies to offer guidance for problems that arose at the internship sites to guide students in drawing connections between students and their internship experiences, to moderate and facilitate the class discussion, and to evaluate and grade students' work.

As students prepared for their internships, the workshop facilitator responded to their questions by phone, forum, and e-mail. During the formal course session, she sent tips, suggestions, and handouts to the students every week. The students were required to post to the class in the Learning Management System (Moodle) a small weekly assignment that focused on some aspect of their final paper. The facilitator monitored the class Moodle at least twice each day, and consistently sent feedback, comments, and suggestions–often within minutes, and always within 24 hours of receiving assignments or questions.

The students completed evaluation forms that were included as part of the original internship program. In addition, participants in this pilot workshop were asked to complete a questionnaire that evaluated the relative merits of using ICT as channels for facilitating the internship program.

Results

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative data, as well as the process of the data collection, processing, and findings. The SPSS statistical package was used to present the descriptive statistics for the quantitative data, while a content analysis was used for the qualitative one.

Quantitative Data

The quantitative data was collected via an online questionnaire; the interns had to answer it toward the middle of the second semester. A total of 53 interns registered for the online internship workshop. Forty eight percent of the

registrants chose the online workshop because of their remote place of residence from the college, 30% because of a conflict between their course schedule and the workshop hour, 18% because of a personal priority to use computerized discourse rather than F2F, and 4% due to lack of time.

Only 18 interns were selected to participate in the online workshop, which is the maximum number of internship workshop participants assigned by the Ministry of Education (Administration of Teacher Education and Professional Development, 2012). The selection was based on the distance of the workplace and the status of the intern in the college; participants were fourth year undergraduate students working toward a B.Ed., or a B.A. graduate who was studying for a Teaching Certificate. High priority was given to B.A. graduates; the workshop for students in their fourth year was integrated in their academic course schedule. Thus, they had no problem attending the F2F workshops at the college.

Of the 18 interns, 3 (17%) were men and 15 (83%) were women, 11 (61%) were graduates and 7 (39%) were undergraduates. These undergraduates were accepted to the online workshop because they worked in the southern part of the country and needed to leave our college, which is situated in the north, early enough to get to their workplace. Of the whole group, 5 (27.7%) were in Special Education, one was in Early Childhood (5.5%), 3 (16.6) were in Science Teaching, and 9 (50%) were in Language Teaching.

By the middle of the semester, two interns dropped the workshop: the first one dropped due to technological problems, and the second one found that this learning style did not suit her. At the end of the semester, another two interns dropped the workshop due to Internet connection problems. The 14 interns who remained in the workshop successfully completed their assignments. All 18 participants, who joined the online workshop at the beginning of the school year, completed questionnaires of satisfaction with the online workshop.

The data show that over 50% expressed great satisfaction with the workshop; 89% were satisfied with the frequency of the workshop meetings and they thought that it contributed to their professional development and school integration to a large extent. Data show that 30% of the interns were able to conduct a computerized lesson in their classrooms, and received positive feedback from their mentors. The other 70% succeeded in preparing computerized lesson plans, yet were unable to implement it in the classroom. Seventy eight percent specified that the workshop contributed a lot to the development of a teacher leadership and decision making, as well as to class management, coping with behavioral problems and working in a heterogenic classroom. Eighty four percent thought that the workshop provided professional ethics and contributed to developing reflective ability as a tool for professional development.

Nearly all the interns (94%) thought that the workshop contributed a lot to their personal empowerment, and 83% indicated that it contributed to their interpersonal communication. Another 83% saw the workshop as a supporting process in personal and educational terms, and 72% indicated that their

attitude towards the workshop has been changed for the better. Eighty three percent of the interns indicated that the facilitator was often available and that she gave professional and helpful information.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data was collected through an external observer, attending the weekly online sessions, followed by personal interviews with the interns. Eight interns were interviewed: the four dropouts and four more that are currently enrolled and attending the online workshop.

The interns' reactions to the online workshop were inconsistent, since their experiences varied widely, both in terms of technological knowledge, and in terms of their internship sites. All of them agreed that the most useful aspects of the online internship workshop were convenience, communicating with other interns, communicating with the facilitator, the facilitator role, and learning the technology. The majority of the interviewees reported that the online workshop was convenient for performing collaborative tasks or for social interaction It also saved them time, effort and expenses to get to the College. One noted, "I am very satisfied, the online method of learning is very convenient for me; the most important thing is not to get to College."

They communicated easily with other interns: synchronously using the chat tool during the sessions, and asynchronously via the forum, and email:

> I connect and participate in the session from home, which is so convenient for me. I don't want to miss any meeting but if it happens I can hear the recording, all course materials are in the site, so I can go back and retrieve any file I need over and over without having to save it and lose track of it.

The facilitator's role and character had a great impact on the degree of the interns' satisfaction with the workshop. They reported that the facilitator had done a very good job, being professional, helpful and available:

> She is rich in technological knowledge and the workshop materials; she shows empathy towards interns and understands what goes on with them; She answers and responds to our requests and questions, she is good and we all feel good with her.

Another useful aspect of the online workshop was learning new computer skills:

> Thanks to the workshop I acquired a lot of knowledge in computer applications, now I know how to format my lesson plan properly using the Word program, and can prepare a good presentation to my class. I learned how to search for online material and choose a good source.

The least useful aspects of online internship workshop were: technical problems, difficulty accessing the session, and lack of F2F contact. Observation of the synchronic sessions revealed that the communication problems still existed -- at the 12th session, the Internet connection was still unreliable in some areas and students got disconnected again and again, and

until they reconnected they lost continuity and concentration. Connection problems were the main reason for three interns to drop out of the workshop. Two of them work in Bedouin Schools in the south, and because of the long distance away from their home, they live there. The southern part of the country does not have a good Internet infrastructure, a frustrated intern noted:

> Many times there is no connection and if there is, it disconnects several times during the session. There are other technical problems. I try to talk during the session but they don't hear what I say. The speaker's voice suddenly disappears and after few seconds it comes back. I feel lost because I don't understand what the other participants are saying.

The learning style of an online session does not suit all learners; it seems to have an impact on the social dimension:

> In the online session, I lose concentration because I can't see the others. Besides, sitting in front of the computer for two hours is tiring for me.

Another intern said that she chose the online workshop as a solution to problems in the lesson schedule, and because it is more comfortable to learn from home. After four sessions, she dropped out:

> I got tired. it wasn't easy after a full day of work; to sit, listen, follow, and respond… without having to see who you are communicating with. I am a type of person that like to be with people, to see facial expressions, movements, feel the presence of the supervisor and peer in person…In the online sessions, I had trouble to feel or sympathize with others; it does not attract me. In my opinion, the online communication destroys the social aspect.

Overall, the online internship workshop has been successful and is recommended, provided that online technical support and assistance are given.

Discussion

The results of this study show that the majority of interns clearly recognized the usefulness and the effectiveness of the online workshop.

Nevertheless, not all of the interns' reactions to the online workshop were consistent. Data show that effective and non-effective aspects of the online internship workshop have been found. The most useful aspects were: convenience, communicating with other interns, communicating with the facilitator, the facilitator's role, and learning the technology. Integrating ICT into the internship process facilitates discussion and collaboration among the interns, and between them and the facilitator. Similarly McComb (1994), and Shedletsky (1993a) suggested that integrating ICT in college instruction potentially facilitates discussion and debate, enables collaboration beyond a single physical location or classroom (Lopez & Nagelhout, 1995), and offers students opportunities for experiential learning (Bartel, 1995; Cohen, 1995).

The interns expressed satisfaction with the online workshop, the way it was conducted and administered, and evaluated it as contributing to their personal empowerment and professional development in various aspects of teaching in the 21st century such as: confidence, self-esteem, interpersonal communication, leadership and acquiring ICT skills. In addition, they found it convenient, being able to connect from home, and reliable. All course material is organized in one platform used at the college (Moodle), and the session is recorded. So, if they missed a meeting, they could hear the recording and compensate for their loss of the online session. It should be noted that all the interns perceived the character and the role of the facilitator as the most significant aspect in the whole workshop process, and that it had a great influence on the degree of their satisfaction.

Because of the obligatory participation in the internship workshop, most interns perceived the workshop as a burden. However, the process that the interns experienced in the online workshop changed their perception positively toward the internship workshop method.

The least useful aspects of online internship workshop were: technical problems, access difficulty, and lack of F2F contact.

In general, the use of an online workshop as a learning and supportive tool had some disadvantages. Having to rely on the technology, which could be unreliable sometimes, computer failure or Internet disconnection could disable the interns from participating in the session. A study that examined using an online forum for an event study in class at training teacher of elementary school (Ayalon, 2005), found that technological problems prohibited teachers from participating in forum discussion at critical times, which caused them inconvenience.

Some interns expressed frustration due to continuing technical problems and non-accessibility. They put all their efforts into being accepted to the online workshop because it was the best way to overcome their conflicting course schedule and workplace, but they dropped out because they got tired of the unreliable Internet connection and the many attempts to connect to the online session, and they felt lost.

The online learning style seems to have a negative impact on the social dimension. This method is not suitable for all interns, especially the ones preferring the physical presence of the facilitator and the colleague interns. People differ in their nature and character; a small percentage of participants could not bear the online setting. It lacked the facial expressions, the physical presence and the real talk of F2F. Despite their determination to join the online workshop as a solution to their inability to come to college, they dropped out of the workshop. It is evident that the misunderstanding and misconception of the online learning style deprived the interns of the workshop benefits. Likewise Ra'nan et al. (2004), found disadvantages along the advantages of the technology mentioned above. The most important one is that the online learning method is not suitable for all students.

Only a third of the interns could implement the computerized lessons in their classrooms; other interns found it difficult to implement because the school they teach at lacks the technological facilities. Others were not confident enough to teach in a computerized setting.

Overall, the online internship workshop was a success for the remaining participants. It would have been successful for the dropouts if online technical support and assistance had been given. Some students do not find this learning style suitable and they can still choose the F2F one, but for many others it fits. The results of the study have led us to ask questions about the relative roles of digital and non-digital tools in teaching and learning. We suggest that within a particular knowledge domain it may be important for young people to be able to work with both digital and non-digital tools.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of the online internship workshop is to develop a professional learning community of intern teachers; to prepare them to be ICT oriented teachers; as well as to enable professional development through the use of modern technology. Results of the pilot program suggest that the online workshop is an effective means for providing support and professional development to new teachers in their first year. Through sharing information and problem solving online, the participants created an extended learning community that was not constrained by time or space.

Some of the results tended to be controversial. The interns' reactions to the online workshop were fairly inconsistent, since their experiences varied widely, both in terms of technological competency and access, and of their internship location/sites. Most of the difficulties stemmed from the technical difficulties, connection interruption, system failures and lack of F2F meeting. We have seen through the work of the online internship workshop that teachers can begin to develop ways of embedding ICT into their subject teaching and that a good starting point is to practice it first hand in their own courses and to creatively exploit readily available software for teaching and learning.

The online internship workshop is recommended with the following suggestions: providing online technical support and guidance to participants and facilitators, and conducting the workshop with an oriented facilitator with ICT tools, internship domain, and supervising skills. In light of the positive results and the demand of online workshops, we suggest increasing the number of such workshops to assist more interns to acquire ICT skills, and to reflect a more valid picture in order to develop an effective model for an online workshop for interns' teachers. Active research accompanying the implementation of the program is needed.

Notes

1. An "Intern teacher" is a regularly enrolled student of an approved teacher education institution, who teaches under the supervision of full time teacher (mentor) at school, and of the employing school district,

and assisted by a facilitator in order to acquire practical experience in teaching, for which the student receives both academic credit from the institution and financial compensation from the education service district.

2. A "Mentor" is a teacher at the school that teaches the candidate what is known about how to teach, coaches the candidate so that his/her skills can be developed in a supportive environment that promotes risk-taking, and provides opportunities for the intern to reflect on the many aspects of the teaching and learning process. His support is expressed in three areas: professional, emotional and environmental.

3. The "Internship Facilitator" assists interns through their induction procedure, in co-generating plans, ideas, approaches, solutions and focuses on inquiry as well as sharing and exchanging resources. Internship Facilitators can assist interns in offering information about the principles of effective learning and curriculum based on experience, theory and current literature.

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