BLENDING EDUCATION FOR TEACHERS: ISSUES FOR THE LEARNERS

Carina Girvan  
Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

The Masters in Educational Practice (MEP) for Welsh NQTs re-conceptualises the notion of what blended learning is: blending online and face-to-face instruction; learning relationships between learners, external mentors, peers and academics; places of formal, practice-based and informal learning; and policy, academic and practice needs in the design of a national programme for early professional learning.

These ingredients provide an opportunity to blend academic and practice-based elements, as well as providing students in remote locations with equivalent access to learning opportunities, via online learning and interaction with visiting external mentors. Barriers exist however to the variety of learning relationships that need to be developed. For example, technology can overly constrain what needs to be a flexible and dynamic programme and may limit as well as provide opportunities for some learners to engage; over-dependence on ‘expert’ outsiders can limit learners’ confidence in peer-learning and the sustainability of self-regulating professional learning communities. With these concerns in mind, this paper reports on research into the issues for learners in this blended programme context.

The research focuses on two modules in the MEP: Numeracy and Literacy. These modules reflect current Welsh Government policy priorities and the changing expectations of teachers accompanying the introduction of the new National Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) in September 2013. The modules aim to develop teachers’ understanding by engaging with theory, practice and data. In order to blend both academic and professional needs, case studies were developed as a core learning resource in which teachers and senior school leaders describe the practical implications of the LNF as they develop their school policies and pedagogic approaches. The case studies reflect the current policy context and provide a framework from which to develop learners’ understanding at Masters level of the complexity of the issues, in preparation to engage in a small investigation into their own practice, supported by online resources and mentor visits.

Three focus group interviews with learners and external mentors are analysed, to provide insight into the impact of the blended design of the modules on the teachers’ learning and practice. Tensions between the needs of teachers in the classroom and m-level study are explored, as the module was first presented shortly after the LNF became statutory. The blended experience of learning relationships with academics, mentors and peers in the context of online and face to face learning is examined, to identify its potential to resolve these tensions.