Enhancing Greek Teachers' Training in Sex Education: Could Collaborative Learning in Online Environments Be the Solution?

Marianna Vivitsou, Margarita Gerouki
University of Helsinki, Finland
marianna.vivitsou@helsinki.fi, margarita.gerouki@helsinki.fi

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the issue of teacher training on sex education in online environments with the use of Web2.0 tools and collaborative learning framework. Sex education has been introduced in Greece following an educational reform in 2001 as one of the thematic units for Health Education interdisciplinary activities' implementation. Research data show that most teachers subscribe in the importance of discussing sex education topics in school, however, as other data show they are reluctant to undertake sex education projects. One of the main reasons for that according to research findings is insufficient training on the subject. In this paper we propose a framework that meets teachers' needs and argue on the effective use of online environments for such purposes. Also we discuss collaborative learning as an appropriate framework for teachers' online training and outline the basic requirements for such project.

KEYWORDS: *Sex education, Greece, Collaborative learning, Online training, Teachers*

Introduction

This short paper aims to present and discuss the benefits of using online environments and a collaborative learning framework as an alternative solution for teacher training. We have selected the case of sex education as a case study because as we argue in the first part of this paper, this is an important area for educational interventions that does not meet adequate teachers' interest. Moreover, the need for training on the subject has been explicitly made by teachers as well as other educational administrators. In the second part of the paper we discuss why collaborative learning can be an answer and how online environments and Web 2.0 tools can enhance such endeavour.

Sex and Relationships education in the Greek school

Sexuality and relationships education is a lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs, and values about identity, relationships and intimacy. It encompasses sexual development, reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, affection, intimacy, body image, and gender roles.

In Greece, the official framework for sex and relationships education has been provided following the 2001 educational reform, when Health Education was

introduced as part of the "Cross-thematic Unified Curriculum Framework". Re-
search data (Gerouki, 2007) indicate that the majority of Greek teachers subscribe
in the importance of teaching about sex and relationships issues at school. Similar
opinions share, according to other research studies, the majority of parents (Kirana
et al, 2007), as well as students (Kakavoulis et al, 1999). However, as research data
point, eventually, very few teachers decide to undertake a Health Education project
on sex education. According to a survey research on Health Education coordinators
just 1, 6% of the implemented Health Education projects was on sex education
(Gerouki, forthcoming).

The most important reason for rejecting sex education according to a research
on teachers has been the lack of proper training on the subject (Gerouki, 2007).
Similarly, for Health Education coordinators, training could be the single most
important factor for enhancing the implementation of more sex education programs
(Gerouki, forthcoming; Yarber & McCabe, 1981). Teachers in Greece believed that
receiving continuous education in the form of seminars and workshops and having
access to continuous information on the subject was the most significant aid for
teaching about sexuality and relationships matters (Gerouki, 2007). Continuous
opportunities for teachers' training related to sexuality education curricula, was
found essential in international research studies as well (Tappe et al. 1997; Milton
2001).

The use of online collaborative environments for teacher training purposes

The rising popularity of Web 2.0 tools, such as weblogs, is attributed to the
qualities that the software offers: it is easy-to-operate and allows for content cre-
ation; it can be 'meeting places' for socialisation, idea and opinion sharing.
Nowadays in-service teachers need to keep informed of developments in both the
pedagogical and technological fields in order to be able to adapt their teaching to
the expectations of the digital generation. However, research findings (Guskey,
2002) show the limitations of conventional training. The incorporation of Web 2.0
technologies into course design can serve the perspective of using alternative
paths, as they encourage active participation, networking and collaboration.

Koschmann (1996) defines collaborative learning as the practices of meaning
making in the context of joint activity, and the ways in which these practices are
mediated through designed artefacts. Moreover, Dillenbourg (1999) argues that the
four criteria that characterise a collaborative setting are: *situation, interactions,
processes and effects,* relates CL to joint problem solving and views learning as the
outcome of problem solving activities.

In the following section we will present previous experience gained through an
e-course that incorporated the use of Web 2.0 environments in the syllabus.

Greek teachers collaborate and learn through asynchronous online environments

E-course aims and participation

The online course ('The Project Method and the collaborative web 2.0 tools')

(PM2) was implemented on the Greek Schools Network (GSN) e-learning platform (http://e-learning.sch.gr) and lasted 4 consecutive weeks (from February to March 2007), each of which corresponded to a pre-determined thematic unit. For the achievement of the pedagogical goals, a virtual classroom was established while the introduction of Web 2.0 tools into the course curriculum aimed to enable e-learners to form connections (Siemens, 2004) for the facilitation of the learning process and to encourage collaboration and networking.

There were 128 participants (121 registered e-learners and 7 e-tutors) in PM2. The majority of e-participants (78%) had no previous experience in using learning management systems and lacked training (70%). Nevertheless, 74% of the total number of respondents estimates that the integration of such environments into e-learning courses is of high priority.

Greek teachers blog in the social web: The first steps

The weblogs (39) of the e-course were hosted on several free platforms and their presentation involved different templates, layouts and formatting, depending on the owners' preferences. Image files were uploaded for aesthetic purposes and for the reinforcement of the intended message. Links to suggested websites were added in the sidebar and e-learners were interconnected using the blogroll. Most digital artifacts were created by primary school teachers (9) and computer science teachers serving in secondary education (8).

Discussion and further research

The analysis of e-learner participation data indicates that Greek teachers chose to focus on general and issues that had a pedagogical value to them, in their effort to construct the new mental schema of building and using a weblog. Compared with previous level of participation in the GSN e-courses (Vivitsou et al., 2008), increased participation and interaction in the PM2 forums also shows that the collaborative culture is reinforced.

Also the analysis of questionnaires, of the outcomes of engagement in course activities and observation of individual and collective contributions signify the potential for dynamic use of weblogs when incorporated into e-learning and hybrid teaching (i.e. ones that combine face-to-face and distance learning methods) curricula, as participation had a multi-disciplinary character, the pedagogical use of the tools was highly valued, different thematic areas were tackled, suggestions for future pedagogical exploitation were offered, interaction was triggered and networking at an initial stage was observed.

Teacher training on Sex Education

Previous experience of teachers' learning in an online environment encourage us to apply the principles of collaborative learning and the use of collaborative online learning tools for designing a training e-course aiming to facilitate teachers' collaboration in order to improve awareness on the subject. Sex education is a sensitive issue and teachers need learning and supporting conditions for undertaking

368   MARIANNA VIVITSOU AND MARGARITA GEROUKI

such endeavour. We believe that these are more likely to happen in an online environment.

Initial important decisions, however, should be made regarding the duration, the specific content, the number and type of participants as well as the financial costs of the whole project.

REFERENCES

Dillenbourg, P. (1999). What do you mean by collaborative learning? In Dillenbourg, P. (ed.) Collaborative learning: Cognitive and Computational Approaches. Oxford: Elsevier, 1-19.

Gerouki, M. (2007). Sexuality and relationships education in the greek primary schools – see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. *Sex Education, 7*(1), 81-100.

Gerouki, (forthcoming). Innovations on hold. Sex Education in the Greek primary school.

Guskey, T. R. (2002). Does It Make a Difference? Evaluating Professional Development. Educational Leadership, 59(6), 45-51.

Kakavoulis, A. & Forrest, J. (1999). Attitudes and values in sexual behaviour and sex education: A cross-cultural study among university students in Greece and Scotland. *International Review of Education, (45)*2, 137-151.

Kirana, P., Nakopoulou, E., Akrita, I., & Papaharitou, S. (2007). Attitudes of parents and health promoters in greece concerning sex education of adolescents. *Sex Education, 7*(3), 265-276.

Koschmann, T. (1996). Paradigm shifts and instructional technology: An introduction, In T. Koschmann (Ed.), CSCL: Theory and practice of an emerging paradigm, 1-23, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Scardamalia, M., & Bereiter, C. (1991). Higher levels of agency in knowledge building: A challenge for the design of new knowledge media. *Journal of the Learning Sciences, 1*, 37-68.

Milton, J. (2001). School-based sex education. *Primary Educator, (7)*4, 9-15.

Siemens, G. (2004). Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age. Available: http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/connectivism.htm (updated: 05-04-2005). Retrieved: 02-10-07.

Tappe, M.K. Galer-Unti, R.A. & Bailey, K.C. (1997). Evaluation of Trained Teachers' Implementation of a Sex Education Curriculum. *Journal of Health Education. 28*(2), 103-108.

Vivitsou, M., Lambropoulos, N., Konetas, D., Paraskevas, M. & Grigoropoulos, E. (2008). The Project Method e-course: the use of tools towards the evolution of the Greek teachers' online community. *International Journal of Continuing Engineering Education and Lifelong Learning*, 18(1), 26-39.

Yarber, W.L. & McCabe G.P. (1981). Teacher Characteristics and the inclusion of Sex Education Topics in Grades 6-8 and 9-11. *The Journal of School Health,* 288-291.