

The Development of an eLearning Platform as a Resource for the School Practicum in Initial Teacher Preparation

M. Evagorou, Z. Zacharia, C. P. Constantinou,
Th. Kyratsi, M. Papaevripidou

*Learning in Physics Group, Department of Educational Sciences, University of Cyprus
{sepgm4e, zach, c.p.constantinou, kyratsi, sepgmp3}@ucy.ac.cy*

Abstract

The current research study focused on the development and evaluation of the Learning Space Platform™ as a resource for improvement of the student teachers practicum. The research reflects upon describing processes followed both by student teachers and their supervisors when engaging in school practicum. The results of this research were the identification of standards that a platform, which is used for educational purposes, must have in order to effectively facilitate and manage the teaching and learning process during school practicum and students' and supervisors opinions on using the e-learning platform for the purposes of School Practicum.

Introduction

A lot of universities internationally confront the challenge of adapting their program of study to follow the priorities of the society of knowledge. The European Committee has repeatedly pointed out that information literacy is an essential tool in our effort to move towards the society of knowledge[5]. Universities around the world upgrade need to upgrade and modernize their learning, organizational and managerial procedures, and use the new internet technologies in order to move towards the society of knowledge (European Center for the Development of Vocational Training, 2001, European Commission, 2000).

Using the new internet technologies enables academic institutions not only to provide full access into information education but also to accelerate learning through the continuous exchange of ideas with people around the world (European Commission, 2000). Additionally, the new internet technologies provide the essential tools for the quality upgrade of education (Goodyear, 2000, Ryan & Hall, 2001), allow the user to choose the pace and time of study, permit communication among users and experts and provide support to the learning process and management of learning (Masie, 2000, Stevens, 2000) and facilitate the emergence of learning communities.

The purpose of the current study was the configuration of an e-learning platform for the automation of processes and quality upgrade related to school practicum in Initial Teacher preparation at the

Department of Educational Science at the University of Cyprus. Particularly the research reflects upon describing processes followed both by student teachers and their supervisors when engaging in school practicum.

The course of School Practicum (EDU 429) that is taught at the Department of Educational Sciences at the University of Cyprus presents possibly the greatest challenge due to its unusual structure. In this course, at least 35 supervisors, 100 students, 100 primary education teachers and 20 elementary schools are involved each semester. School Practicum is a compulsory course for all fourth year students studying at the Department of Educational Science, University of Cyprus to gain a teachers degree. The course has duration of one semester and the goal of the course is to familiarize students with what takes place in school settings, with planning for instruction and with the various roles undertaken by teachers in school settings. Specifically, it aims at providing students with the opportunity to familiarize with school life and school work.

Methodology

The study is composed of seven phases which begun in September 2003 and finished in May 2004. Phases 1&2 aimed at identifying School Practicum processes and developing the specifications of the e-learning platform. The sample consisted of 7 science education supervisors that were interviewed using unstructured interviews. The interviews were analyzed and specifications for the e-learning platform were developed. Phases 3 & 4 aimed at developing the e-learning platform based on the specification identified in Phases 1&2. During these phases we had the configuration on the Learning Space Platform and the assessment of prototypes by researchers. At the end of phase 4 a first fully functioning version of the e-learning platform was available to the researchers. The aim of phases 5 & 6 were the assessment of the usability and functionality problems of the e-learning platform and the revision of the platform based on users' feedback. Science education school practicum supervisors and graduate students involved in School Practicum were interviewed and the semi structured interviews were

used to identify the usability and functionality problems of the e-learning platform. The aim of Phase 7 was the implementation of the revised e-learning platform. During this phase seventeen undergraduate students and all science education school practicum supervisors used the e-learning platform. At the end of the semester data were collected both from students and supervisors using questionnaires that aimed at identifying possible problems from using the platform and users' attitudes towards using the platform.

Findings - Discussion

The study focused at identifying, recording and automating processes involved in School Practicum. These processes concern two distinct categories, the teacher students and the supervisors. For this reason the specifications are presented separately.

According to the specifications the student using the platform is able to:

- Edit his/her personal information in the platform.
- To submit a lesson plan, the classroom's program, a personal program (which days he/she is teaching), self assessment
- Receive assessment from the supervisor
- Find information for supervisors (names, office hours, email, office phone number)
- Chat on line with supervisor or other teacher students
- Browse material provided by supervisors

According to the specifications the supervisors are able to do the following using the platform:

- Edit personal information
- Browse for lesson plans that were submitted to the platform by the student (they can browse by subject, student name, teaching date etc)
- Program visits to schools. The supervisor can choose which school to visit by browsing through the students' schedules and lesson plans
- Submit assessment
- Provide feedback
- Chat on line
- Add material that students can view
- Add questionnaires or on line tests for teacher students to complete

Data analysis made it possible to record reactions from students and supervisors concerning their attitudes towards using the e-learning platform during the semester for the purposes of School Practicum. Most of the students (13/17) and all the supervisors (6/6) stated that the e-learning platform helped them manage their time better, 16/17 students and 5/6 supervisors declared that the learning platform provided easier

communication among students and supervisors for questions and feedback and all participants (students and supervisors) encouraged the use of the e-learning platform in other courses as well.

Conclusions

Our experience with changing a course to use the new internet technologies proves that the transition to e-learning is a long and gradual process and for a successful implementation it is important to select all of those aspects of the course that are suitable for automation, formulate detailed specifications, develop the learning environment, pilot test the environment to resolve technical problems and finally, fully implement and evaluate the outcomes.

Using an e-learning platform to deliver an academic course requires both time and effort from the instructor but provides improved organizational structure, such as automatic submission and archiving of assessments, on line submission of student teachers self evaluation forms, on line submission of feedback forms and announcement and discussion boards that can be proved useful. Additionally, the results can be rewarding since the platform can provide increased student time on task, enhanced student interaction and collaboration, greater responsibility on the part of the students, effective communication among the different networks of the learning community.

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