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The Use of e-Learning in Teacher Professional Development: Attitudes and Perspectives of Greek Teachers

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Abstract

The sprawl of information technology and other sciences changes both the content of training and the techniques teachers and trainers use in their profession. It transforms their relationship with knowledge, learners, and the media they use in their teaching. Nowadays the need for teachers' training is discussed more and more. It seems to highlight the need for securing the quality and the effectiveness of the offered educational services. This paper presents a case study on Greek teachers' needs and their opinion about distance education and life long learning, and investigates the trends, issues, and challenges in the use of e-learning for teacher development in Greece. Some of the most important research results concerning the teachers' attitudes are presented, as far as the utilization of the methodology of the open and distance education (ODE), and of the information and communication technology (ICT) in their training and continuous education

Introduction

With the advent of the knowledge-based economy, more and more people around the world are embracing the concept of lifelong learning. It provides paths for self-advancement and opportunities for career development, while it helps communities stay competitive in order to meet the growing challenge of globalization.

Research has shown that student achievement is directly linked to teach-

er quality. Teacher preparation and professional development in skills and content areas represent a major challenge for education systems around the world. The existing teacher's in-service training in Greece is limited, and resources often fail to meet the career-long professional needs of teachers. Even when such resources are available, teachers have limited time for professional training due to their classroom responsibilities. Expectations about teachers and skills are increasing every year. Teachers are expected to learn new content, to use new pedagogies and new technology tools for learning (European e-learning Summit Task Force, 2001). The increasing demand for continuous professional development means that providers must expand face-to-face programs to include on-line activities and content that engage teachers anytime, anywhere.

Open and distance learning is becoming an increasingly effective means to deliver knowledge, and to help achieve the ideal of 'Education for all people.' Thanks to the results of research on information and communication, multimedia and networking technologies during the last decade, more people can benefit from this convenient, flexible, and ubiquitous mode of teaching, and learning has become a lot more interesting than in the past. The sprawl of information technology and other sciences changes both the "content" of training, and the techniques teachers and trainers use to teach. It transforms their relationship with knowledge, learners, and the media they use in their teaching.

From research findings (Cedefop 1999; Kassiotakis 1996; OECD 2003; Papadakis 2003; Xohellis 2002), it follows that the main factor of effectiveness in education is the teacher, and the abilities and skills the teacher has developed. Another important finding of the research is that a very basic element that renders a teacher effective is the quality of the teacher's relationship with the pupils. The teachers' initial education and training alone can cover all the spectrum of the interests, knowledge, abilities, and skills that the teachers need to perform their duties. The teacher's role is changing. Knowledge of the material and plain transmission of it is not sufficient. The teacher should have the ability to communicate, to collaborate, to self-develop (life long learning), to be self-confident, and to facilitate his/her learners in the utilization of information and the building up of knowledge (Makrakis, 2000). The use of multimedia and the world wide web for the improvement of the quality of education, with the facilitation of access to the resources and services now constitutes a necessity.

The application of reformations in education is hindered due to the lack of qualifications, and the teachers' resistance to change (Mavrogior-

gos, 1999). The teachers' professional development advances slowly. So far, training (mainly in the form of self-education), and the most novel and good practices are mainly a product of the initiation taken by a small number of teachers who devote a great deal of their personal time to this target. The regular use of ICT, group work, exchange of experiences, and support of one another between colleagues and friends constitute the most effective means of development of the teachers' abilities. However, the teachers' professional development is not only a personal issue to be left to the generosity and the personal motives of a small portion, but the state should undertake initiatives, and offer substantial resources towards this direction as well.

The Committee of European Communities is systematically studying the issue of training the teachers in ICT in order to improve the quality and the effectiveness of the educational and training systems through the application of new practices and pedagogical organization (Report of the European Committee to the Council and the European Parliament, 2000). Since 1999, initiatives have been taken for the promotion of the open and distance education (ODE). The decision taken is teachers should obtain access to the information society. The rapid technological developments lead to a review of the structure, and the content of the educational and training programs.

In this paper, we inquire into teachers' desires and stances regarding the utilization of the methodology of the open and distance education (ODE) and the information and communication technology (ICT) in their training, continuous education, and professional development in relation to their population statistic characteristics.

Theoretical Framework

Teachers require rich learning environments supported by well-designed resources. They expect on-demand, anytime-anywhere, high-quality, in-service training and instruction with good support services. The concept of lifelong learning refers to the activities people perform throughout their lives to improve their knowledge, skills, and competence in different fields, given some personal, societal, or employment related motives (Aspin & Chapman, 2000; Field, 2001).

Distributed learning is an educational model that allows instructor, students, and content to be located in different, non-centralized locations so that instruction and learning can occur independent of time and place. The distributed learning model can be used in combination with

traditional classroom-based courses, with traditional distance learning courses, or it can be used to create wholly virtual classrooms (Khan, 2003).

Research Method

Our main research questions were:

1. Is teachers desire for training with the utilization of ODE differentiated depending on their sex and specialty?
2. Are the teachers' preferences for their training with the utilization of ODE differentiated in relation to their years of previous working experience, their working conditions, their knowledge and experience of ODE, and their degree of familiarity with the ICT?
3. Are the teachers' preferences as far as the methods of training, and the duration of the offered training programs concerned dependent on their family status, the number of members in their family, their previous years of experience in education, and their working condition?

The School of Pedagogical and Technological Education (ASPETE) offers pedagogical education, and promotes applied research in educational technology and in pedagogy through training or specializing to teachers or prospective teachers in primary and secondary education (www.aspete.gr). The diploma issued by the departments of ASPETE qualifies its holders for teaching in the corresponding discipline in secondary education. To approach the research questions, we made research with the teachers-students of the ASPETE (Department of Patras) during the academic year 2003-2004. The present paper is a small part of the research concerning the training needs, and the teachers' attitudes for the utilization of alternative methods in terms of life long training.

The techniques used for the selection of the research data were interviews and a questionnaire, which are extensively utilized as research tools in the social sciences, and they permit the selection of a great number of data in a short time. The main axes of the research concerned: (a) population statistic data, (b) already existing trainings, (c) detection of training needs, (d) knowledge and attitudes about the method of the open and distance education, and (e) degree of ICT knowledge of and desire to utilize it for the teachers' training with open and distance education.

Based on the aforementioned axes, we performed semi-structured interviews, the results of which helped us with the development and shaping of the questionnaire. In order to secure the validity of the questionnaire, apart from the students of the ASPETE of Patras, it was also given to a group of primary and secondary teachers in schools in the prefecture of Achaia, who had simi-

lar population statistics as those of the sample. The conclusion that appeared was that the questionnaire with a few corrections could record the needs and the teachers' perceptions in relation to the issues of the research. The identical conclusion occurred again, when ten days later the same improved questionnaire was given to a second control group, which consisted of other K-12 teachers in the prefecture of Achaia with the accordingly population statistic characteristics. No changes were recorded in the answers we received from the first measurement of the two groups and those that we received from the second measurement of the same groups. Thus, the validity of the questionnaire was confirmed.

Participants and Procedure

Questionnaires were given to all 108 students of ASPTE (Department in Patras during the academic year 2003–2004) with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the research. The voluntary nature of the study was emphasized, and participants were assured that their responses would be anonymous. The usable responses received were from 71 out of 108, a response rate of 65.7%.

As indicated in Table 1 there were more women (54%) than men (46%) and most (43%) are from science and technology specialties (Figure 1).

Table 1

Demographic Factors

	Number	Percentage
Men	33	46.0%
Women	38	54.0%
Single	30	42.9%
Married	39	55.7%
1 person member family	17 teachers	27.0%
2-4 person member family	39 teachers	62.0%
More than 4 persons member family	7 teachers	11.0%

As seen on the left side of Figure 1, specialties were grouped and studied in three great categories: (a) *Humanities Sciences* (philologists, teachers, kindergarten teachers), 23 teachers (33%); (b) *Social Sciences* (sociologists, working therapists, nurses, physical therapists, doctors), 17 teachers (24%); and (c) *Positive and Technological Sciences* (mechan-

ics, agriculturist), 30 (43%). On the right side of Figure 1, *working status* indicates: (a) full-time teachers (permanent) 29 (41%), (b) full-time substitutes (assistants teacher) 11 (15%), (c) part-time teachers 14 (20%), and (d) candidate teachers 17 (24%).

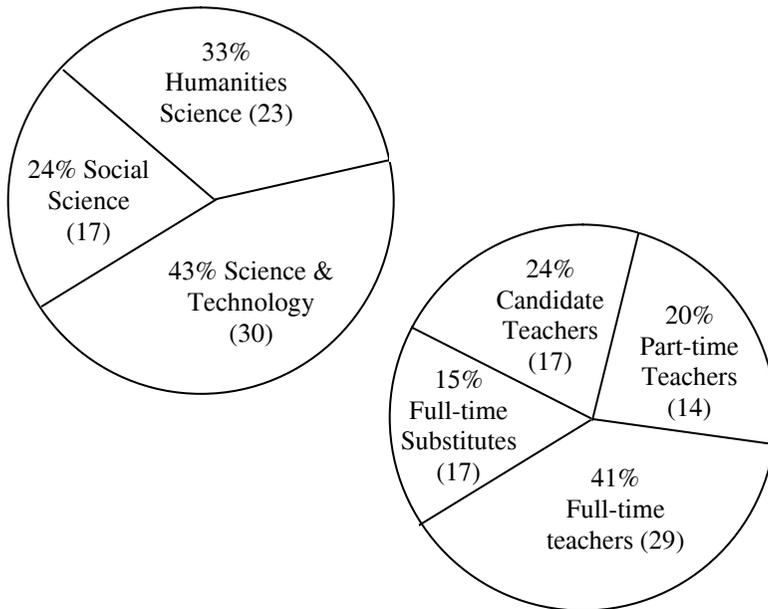


Figure 1. Distribution concerning specialties and experience.

A considerable spread of *experience* in teaching was evident: (a) no prior experience 16 (23.9%), (b) 1 to 3 years 19 (28.4%), (c) 4 to 15 years 22 (32.8%), and (d) more than 15 years 10 (14.9%).

Questionnaire

The survey incorporates questions about a range of demographic factors including gender, age, occupational position, and teaching experience. Responders were also asked about distance education experience and technology use in their teaching or in-service training, its relative value and the main barriers, and advantages and disadvantages associated with ICT and DL. In addition, we included several scales adapted from the literature or innovation diffusion and technology acceptance measuring such items as computer experience, availability and internet accessibility, computer enjoyment, perceived ease of use, and future intentions to use distance learning and web-based technology.

Results and Discussion

Our results highlighted the relatively slow diffusion of distance edu-

cation and e-Learning among the participants in the present study.

To the question “Do you know (even vaguely) the methodology of distance education (DE)”, the teachers declared to a great percentage (75.8%) that they know the method of DE. However only 17.7% declares having participated in seminars or post educational programs with the method of DE until today, while 82.3% has no experience of training or post education with this method. Of those, 64.7% with experience used much to very much ICT in ODE.

To the question “Would you be interested in the future to attend training programs with the ODE method?” almost all of the teachers responded positively to a specially great percentage (Table 2), while no difference was observed between the sex and the desire of the subjects for their training by utilizing ODE and ICT. The results of the bi-variable analysis showed that both men (71.9%) and women (75.1%) express their desire to attend future training programs with the ODE method. The same applies to the utilization of the ICT in this, in ODE slightly lower percentages (65.7%) to men and (68.8%) to women.

Table 2

Interest in Attending Training Programs With the Open and Distance Learning Method in the Future

Likert Scale Anchors	Percentage
1. Very much	48.5%
2. Much	25.0%
3. Few	13.2%
4. None	2.9%
5. I don't know the method	10.3%

The teachers' specialty does not affect their desire for training with the DE and ICT methods. The same result was observed in relation to the previous years of the teachers' experience, and their desire to be trained by utilizing the DE and ICT methods. We note that the teachers' interest is not influenced by the previous years of experience, since in every age group (0-3, 4-15, 16-25, >25) the percentages of preference (*much* and *very much*) range from 65% to 71%.

The teachers' working condition influences the desire for training with the utilization of ODE and ICT, since through the bi-variable analysis increased percentages of preference by the permanent teachers (78.5%) were observed, in comparison to the substitute and part-time teachers who exhibit lower percentages (65%). The main reasons for the selection of the specific method reported were: (a) saving of time, 46.8%; (b)

avoidance of moving, 29.8%; and (c) versatility in the formation of the training program, 10.6%. The teachers who have and use computers at work or at home exhibit greater interest to be trained with ODE and ICT. The interest increases even more in teachers' categories who are familiar with the use of the internet, and constitute 43.1% of the sample.

To the question "Would you desire the training with the DE method to be based on the utilization of ICT and why?" Table 3 shows 67.2% answered positively (much and very much), but there is also a small percentage (20.4%) who does not desire or has a small degree. The 12.5% of those being questioned declares that they do not know ICT and do not answer.

Answers to the questions regarding the preferences of training methods, exhibit that the traditional (face-to-face) teaching continues to be supported by a great percentage (57.1%). In the case where there exists a possibility for training exclusively with the ODE method, 71.1% would prefer (much and very much) to be trained with this method. However, a special interest is express for the blended method (Figure 3) which is chosen by 94.2% of the subjects (Papadakis & Fragoulis, 2003).

To the question "Would you prefer to be free from your working – teaching duties during your training?" 55.1% declares that they desire to be totally free, 39.1% partly free, and 5.8% do not want to be free. From the results of the bi-variable analysis significant differentiations arose, as the population statistic variables (family status, number of members in the family, previous years experience and working condition) seem to influence the desire to be free from teaching duties during their training. More specifically, it has been observed that 64.9% of those wishing to be totally free of teaching duties were married, while only 32.4% with the same wish were single.

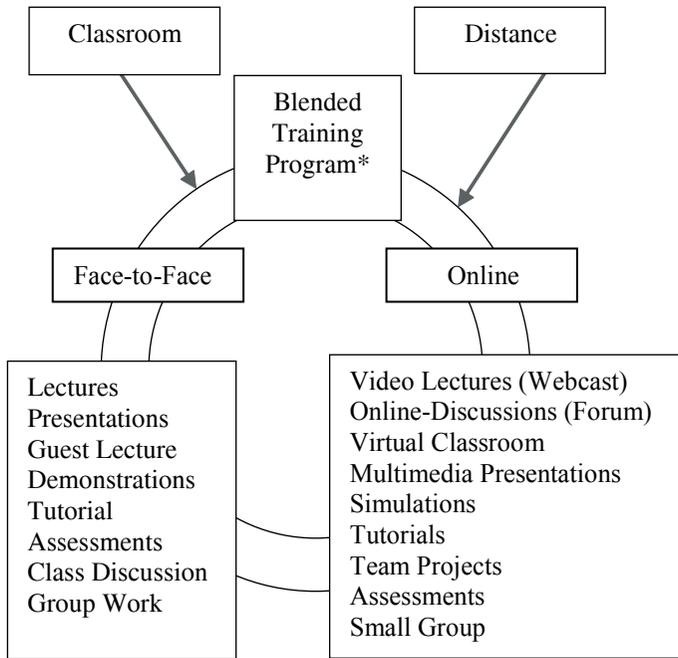
Table 3

Desire To Have Training Based on Distance Education Method and Information and Communication Technology

Likert Scale Anchors	Percentage
1. Very much	39.1%
2. Much	28.1%
3. Few	14.1%
4. None	6.3%
5. I don't know ICT	12.5%

As the number of family members increases, their desire to be totally free from their teaching duties increases as well (Table 4). The same is

observed as far as the previous years of experience and the desire to be free from their teaching duties are concerned (Table 5).



*A blended training program is any course in which approximately 70% of the face-to-face activities are replaced by instructor guided online learning.

Figure 3. Distribution concerning working condition.

As far as the working conditions and freedom from teaching duties is concerned, a differentiation is observed on the part of the permanent teachers, who desire more their freedom in combination with the greater duration of training (annually or semester). The substitutes and the part-time teachers show a greater preference for partial freedom and short

Table 4

Family Obligations and Desire to Be Free From Their Teaching Duties During Training.

Likert Scale Anchors	Percentage
1. Very much	39.1%
2. Much	28.1%
3. Few	14.1%
4. None	6.3%
5. I don't know ICT	12.5%

duration of training on a weekly basis (5-8 hours). Of those, 44% who desire total freedom wishes to receive annual training, 24% semester training, 28% a 1-3 month(s) training, and 4% a short training of 1-2 weeks. From those who desire partial freedom from their duties during their training, 24.3% prefer its frequency to be 2-4 hours weekly, 35.1% to be 5-8 hours, 29.7% to be 9-12 hours, and 8.1% more than 12 hours.

Table 5

Teachers With Previous Years of Experience

Years	Cumulative
1. 0-3 years	38.9%
2. 4-15 years	59.1%
3. 16-25 years	100.0%

Conclusion

From the research results, it is noted that the teachers' desire for training with the utilization of ODE is not differentiated in relation to sex and specialty. The teachers' desire for training with the utilization of the DE method is due to the fact that the traditional (face-to-face) methods of training, followed up to now, do not satisfy their needs in quantity or quality. At the same time, in the last few years distant education is fortified as a reliable alternative solution in opposition to classroom traditional education. Furthermore, a special interest to utilize this method is observed, both in tertiary educational institutes, which offer pre-graduate and postgraduate studies by using this method, and in other public and private bodies like e.g. the Pedagogical Institute, the National Accreditation Center for Continuing Vocational Training (EKEPIS), and the Centres of Free Studies, which offer training using this method to a great degree (Kokkos, 2004).

The research is showed that the teachers' desire to be trained by utilizing DE is not differentiated in relation to the previous years of experience. However, it is differentiated in relation to their working conditions, knowledge and experience in relation to ODE, as well as to their degree of familiarity with ICT.

The teachers, independent of their specialty and years of experience, recognize that the advantages of this method may satisfy their needs for training and post education to a great degree. The notification that the rapid disdaining of knowledge, and the ongoing social and cultural changes require a continuous training is common. The teachers' individual attempts

for awareness, and the general amount of life long training that is offered to them does not satisfy their needs abundantly in order to be in the position to respond successfully to their job (Vergides et. al., 1998; Xohelis, 2002).

The full-time teachers exhibit a stronger interest in relation to their younger colleagues (substitute and part-time) for training with ODE. This element may be due to their greater need for training (as they are in a greater distance from the time of graduation), and to the fact that for many years the existing in-service training system has been insufficient to cover their needs.

The lack of experience in ODE by a large number of teachers is mainly due to the fact that only in recent years in our country, it was adopted and used systematically as a method of education and training for the teachers and the executives of education (TRENDS, 1997; Vergides et. al., 1998). Its successful utilization by more and more teachers is expected to make it especially popular, like it has already happened in many other countries of the world in which it has been used after many years. The fact that the teachers are becoming more and more familiar with the ICT, and can see benefiting from the possibilities they offer creates estimations that the demand for training with the ODE will continuously increase. The continuous development and evolution of educative technology, and increasing bandwidth to the internet for more teachers contributes to this.

From the research results, it arose that the teachers independently of their population statistic characteristics desire to their greatest majority the use of a blended method of training. Differentiations were observed in relation to the teachers' population statistic characteristics, the duration of their training, and their desire for in part or total freedom from their teaching duties during it.

Specifically, the married teachers, as well as those with many members in their family, desire their total freedom from their teaching duties, while the singles do not. The same is observed with the permanent teachers with many years of work. The aforementioned teachers' groups desire long term training (annual or semester). In opposition to the full-time teachers, the substitutes and the part-time teachers desire partial freedom from their teaching duties, as well as short-term training (a few weeks training).

The teachers' great desire to be trained with a blended method (a percentage with face-to-face, and a percentage with the ODE method) is easily understood, if we reflect on the fact that this method combines the advantages of the traditional life long teaching (a positive influence through the direct contact and utilization of the feedback from trainers and trainees), and those of distant education (saving of time, avoidance of moving, and versatility in the program formation).

The desire of the full-time, married teachers with increased family

duties to be totally free from their teaching duties during their training, is easily observed if we reflect on the fact that their increased family commitments occupy a lot of their time of study, and do not allow them to respond successfully to the demands of their training. Desiring a substantial training, they suggest an annual or semester duration. The view of the full-time substitute and part-time teachers to be partial free from their teaching duties is understood, if we reflect on the fact that due to their insecure working scheme they desire to continue working in order to gain the necessary money, as well as their training and professional development.

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