

Informal Learning for Creating Professional Support Groups for Teachers and School Leadership Teams: A Case Study

Oskars Kaulēns, Edīte Sarva

University of Latvia

oskars.kaulens@lu.lv; edite.sarva@lu.lv

ABSTRACT

From the school year 2020/2021 the implementation of a competence-based curriculum has started in Latvia which determines new learning outcomes for students and at the same time defines new professional development needs for teachers. There are changes in the content that teachers need to learn and the learning approach that teachers need to use for their professional development to ensure that they meet the new quality requirements of teaching. In order to successfully implement new teaching and learning approaches and to promote the development of a wider learning community, teachers' formal professional development, such as attendance at lectures, seminars etc., has to be supplemented with informal professional development through sharing experiences, participation in learning groups, etc. The remote work experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided additional opportunities for a variety of online in-service teacher education activities based on principles of informal learning. The goal of the research conducted by the authors is to find out what is the interest of teachers to get involved in the teacher cooperation events "Emergency Methodological Assistance" organised by the Friendly Appeal Cesis State Gymnasium and what are the professional benefits of teachers' participation in such informal learning activities. Within the framework of the research, a qualitative content analysis of the teachers' reflection bulletins has been performed, which teachers have submitted at the end of events, evaluating their professional benefits from participation in the events. The data of the research show that teachers appreciate the opportunity to get acquainted with professionally tested and practical teaching methods and techniques for the implementation of new curriculum, to receive encouragement from other colleagues in the conditions of constant change and uncertainty, and to find professional partners among teachers for long-term planning and cooperation activities.

Keywords: professional development, formal and informal learning, distance learning, remote learning, learning community

Introduction

Along with the changes taking place in society, characterised by rapid digitization and globalisation (Kurer & Gallego, 2019), there are also changes in society's demand concerning the education sector, where new achievable results for students and employees are defined. The nature of changes in education is particularly evident in crisis situations, when the processes taking place on a national or global scale affect the content and the approach towards organising learning. Thus, for example, the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 determined the need to organise learning remotely, using various technological solutions, such as the internet and television. This also meant that the teachers had to learn new pedagogical concepts and teaching methods, the use of which they were not specially trained for before (Schleicher, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly transformed learning by moving it online in many schools around the world (Hodges et al., 2020; Laganovska, 2021).

Online learning has also directly affected teachers' expectations, learning needs, professional skills and roles (Darling-Hammond & Hylar, 2020), creating additional cognitive, subjective, physical and social challenges (Viac & Fraser, 2020). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, new learning needs were defined for teachers, for which innovative online professional development solutions were sought. Moreover, this was done despite the findings of previous studies before the COVID-19 pandemic showing that teachers prefer to participate in face-to-face rather than online professional development activities (OECD, 2019).

Also, in the context of professional development of teachers, the pandemic caused by COVID-19 raised the question of how further education activities can help teachers become more effective leaders of their personal growth and learning, can provide access to tools that support teachers' specific learning needs, and promote cooperation and interaction between teachers, to increase the impact on their professional performance in work with students (OECD, 2020). As a result, more emphasis was placed on informal online learning in teacher professional development, thus creating innovative solutions for both how teachers work with students and how they organise their own professional development (Yu et al., 2021).

The aim of this research was to determine whether teachers are interested in participating in the online teachers' cooperation and networking events "Emergency Methodological Assistance" organised by the Friendly Appeal Cesis State Gymnasium, as well as to investigate what are the main benefits for teachers from participating in such online professional development events. A research of the scientific literature on issues related to the informal professional development of teachers and its implementation in distance learning was carried out. Also, a qualitative content analysis of teachers' reflection on these online events was performed in order to determine the categories of professional benefits indicated by teachers.

Informal learning as teacher professional development

Informal learning is emphasised as a particularly important mechanism for increasing the professional capacity of teachers (Rogoff et al., 2016), as it provides the opportunity for teachers to choose the learning content and the most suitable form of learning according to their personal interests and current learning needs. Informal learning is not didactic because it does not identify a person whose role and responsibility is to teach others. It is organised through meaningful activities in which participants take part willingly, not forcibly; the learning process is based on the personal initiative, interests and choices made by the participants, not on externally defined achievable results, and does not involve external evaluation of the results achieved. Informal learning occurs as a result of social interactions where participants use their existing knowledge and skills to innovate and develop new ideas and skills (Desimone, 2009; Rogoff et al., 2016).

Informal learning refers to acquiring new knowledge and developing skills outside of a structured, institutionally organized learning environment. Such professional development takes place in a process of voluntary cooperation and exchange of experiences, where employees of one or more organizations interact (Marsick et al., 2008). Informal learning is a type of professional development that is not always purposefully organized, externally or internally guided, systematic and regular and does not have predetermined learning content. Informal learning occurs unconsciously as participants engage in activities that provide new learning experiences without pre-defined achievable outcomes, such as socializing with others, participating in conversations and discussions, etc. (Melnic & Botez, 2014).

Informal learning involves intensive use of previous professional experience and reflection on it. Learning in this format takes place as an exchange of knowledge and experience among colleagues, trying out new teaching methods and reflecting on the acquired experience, researching the professional environment inside and outside of their own school in order to gain new ideas for organising learning for their students (Lohman, 2006). Informal professional development is the result of observing the professional performance of other colleagues, conducting trials and analysing errors, asking for help in problem situations, talking with other colleagues and reflecting on one's previous experience (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012, p. 4).

The purpose of informal learning is to provide teachers with continuous, goal-oriented competence development in the workplace, taking into account the real learning needs of the parties involved and using the knowledge, experience and available professional resources already accumulated in the organisation (Tynjälä, 2008). Therefore, unlike traditional professional development, which takes the form of lectures, conferences, seminars, etc. in attending similar events, informal learning enables teachers to meet specific learning needs and

offer solutions to the challenges they face in their daily work with students. The positive impact of informal learning on teacher performance and professional competence is also determined by the fact that such learning is based on well tried and immediately usable examples (Cheng, 2017).

Distance learning as teacher professional development

Researchers point to differences in the use of the terms distance learning and remote learning when describing the teaching and learning process that was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. So, for example, distance learning has so far been considered as an opportunity for students to learn the full curriculum or individual parts of it remotely and self-directedly. Using the opportunities created by technology, such as TV, radio or the Internet, students can participate in the learning process organised in this way both synchronously and asynchronously (Anderson & Dron 2011). Remote learning, on the other hand, is associated with attempts to create and implement in practice the same organisational structure of the learning process that is implemented in face-to-face setting, and technologies are used to communicate with students, conduct lessons, check whether and at what level the set learning goals are achieved, and provide feedback on learning outcomes (Daniela & Visvizi, 2021).

Effective distance learning involves several interrelated elements: effective teachers, the use of appropriate technology, and engaged students. Teachers with good content knowledge, technical skills for using technologies and support resources, and appropriate pedagogical techniques are more effective than those who lack such skills. On the other hand, the availability and use of technologies appropriate to the learning context and learning goals is a prerequisite for distance learning to be possible at all (Muñoz-Najar et al., 2021). This allows us to conclude that in the context of teachers' professional development, it means that effective informal learning of teachers remotely becomes possible if the learning process is purposefully managed and organised, in this way, informal learning is supplemented with elements of formal or traditional professional development, for example, the person who organises the learning for others.

In the distance learning, the teacher's role and direct control over students and their learning decreases, while students' individual responsibility for their own learning increases, thus creating a demand for the implementation of a new learning approach (Azorín, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Reimer & Schleiche, 2020; Diguseppe et al. ., 2017; Bonde et al., 2014). This means that distance learning provides an opportunity to individualise the learning experience, develop self-directed learning and digital skills, and provides access to learning opportunities in situations where this would not be possible otherwise (Bonde et al., 2014; Dhawan 2020; Nolen & Koretsky, 2018). In the context of teachers' professional development, this means an opportunity for teachers to improve such important

skills as defining their individual learning needs, setting professional development goals, organising effective cooperation among colleagues, meaningful use of technology in learning and other skills.

The professional development of teachers during distance learning can be viewed as informal learning, since the teachers themselves choose which online learning resources to use, which online learning activities to participate in, and the teachers themselves take responsibility for their learning results. Such professional development can be considered as experiential learning, which includes the creation of new online learning experiences and promotes the formation of alternative learning behaviour, which is manifested in the analysis of the performance of other colleagues and conversations about their professional practice (Manuti et al., 2015; Wolfson et al., 2018). The main differences between face-to-face and online informal learning are related to the fact that online informal learning provides participants with a higher degree of individual autonomy and a larger variety of learning opportunities, so it provides more advantages and better reflects the nature of informal learning (Yu et al., 2021).

Online informal learning is in a way an action research, where learning occurs to bridge the gap between teachers' existing and desired knowledge and skills needed to solve a particular problem or make a decision. As part of such professional development, teachers also collect information from several involved parties, try to understand and interpret it, as well as evaluate several problem-solving alternatives. Engaging in such learning activities is a social activity as it involves collaboration with other colleagues within one or more organisations. In addition, such learning is also influenced by several contextual factors, such as the existing power relations between the participants, the distribution of roles and responsibilities during learning, the access of all participants to the necessary learning resources, etc. (Watkins & Marsick, 2020).

Methodology

The research is based on data collected during Friendly Appeal Cesis State Gymnasium organised online events "Emergency Methodological Assistance". These are professional development events for teachers, where deputy principals or teachers who teach a similar subject and student age group and have started implementing the improved curriculum, meet. The purpose of these events is to provide an opportunity for teachers and representatives of school management teams to talk about the challenges they face in their daily work, and search for solutions to solve common challenges in their work, to share experiences and teaching materials, as well as to plan the implementation of the improved curriculum.

From 2020 to 2022 13 "Emergency Methodological Assistance" events were organised during the school year. These events took place online via *Zoom*

meetings and were organised according to the principles of informal learning – the participants themselves chose the content they wanted to discuss during the meetings and chose what they wanted to learn from colleagues they met during these events. Information about the possibility to apply for participation in the “Emergency Methodological Assistance” events was distributed through the Friendly Appeal Cesis State Gymnasium *Facebook* page and through local municipality Education Departments sharing the information through official emails and inviting to pass it on to interested schools. Participation in teachers’ cooperation events “Emergency Methodological Assistance” was voluntary, thus the composition of participants in every event was variable.

At the end of each event, participants were asked to reflect on their learning experiences and benefits from participation in the event. Participants were informed that gathered data will be used in the research analysis of the learning event and could submit their reflections publicly using the *Zoom* chat feature or anonymously by sending a personal message in *Zoom* chat. As a result, 714 participant responses were obtained, of which 458 were selected for further analysis according to the purpose of the study. Responses that were too general or provided information other than participants’ reflection on the benefits of participating in these activities were not included in the analysis. Before analysis for the purposes of this publication all data was anonymized. Participant response citations used in the article were translated to English by researchers, trying to preserve the opinions expressed by the participants as much as possible.

The analysis of the selected answers was performed using the qualitative content analysis method (Schreier, 2014) with the aim of defining the categories for grouping the benefits mentioned by the participants. In order to maintain objectivity in the analysis of the research data, researchers first grouped the responses of individual participants individually and defined their own analysis categories, then compared the obtained data and agreed on a common understanding for categorising data. As a result, 10 categories were defined, according to which all participant responses obtained were grouped.

Results

One of the questions raised in this research is whether teachers are interested in participating in informal professional development activities that are carried out online. The data obtained in this study show that a total of 1153 participants applied for participation in 13 “Emergency methodological assistance” events. Although not all participants took part in the online conversations, it can be concluded that the interest of teachers in this type of professional development in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is high.

The obtained data show that the number of participant applications for each event is different, where 59 was the smallest, while 110 was the largest number of participant applications (Fig. 1). Such differences can be explained by of several factors, such as the number of teachers who teach the specific subject in schools; content issues that have been proposed for discussion during the participants' meeting, as well as the period of time when the event has been organised – the number of applications during the school year is higher than it is at the end of the school year.

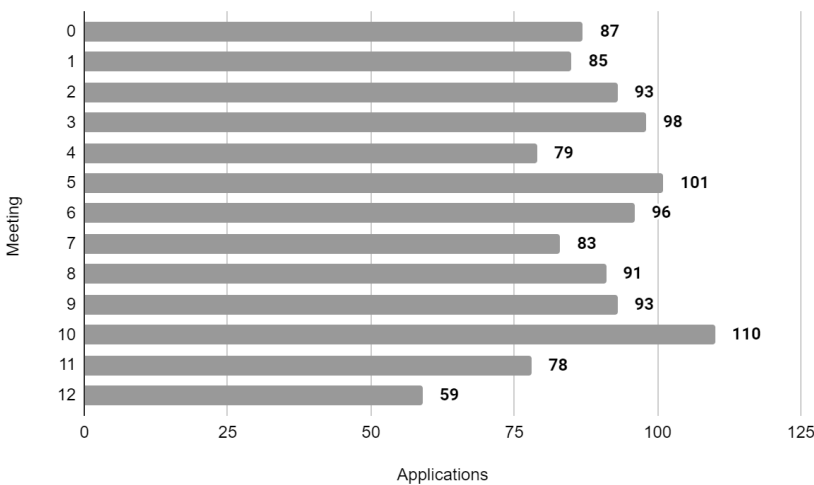


Figure 1. Amount of applications for each of the learning events

The second question raised in this research is what are the benefits for teachers from participating in the professional development activities of “Emergency Methodological Assistance”. According to the data obtained in the study, the benefits mentioned by the participants can be classified into 10 categories:

1. professional conversations, sharing experiences, opinions, advice;
2. learning and work process organization;
3. learning materials, resources, ICT;
4. a sense of community;
5. belief that cooperation is a solution to common problems;
6. new valuable experience for professional development;
7. developing learning materials;
8. confidence in their work;
9. belief that professional development is needed;
10. inspiration for further work (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Participants' benefits from attending learning events

The obtained data show that the most frequently mentioned benefit for participants from participation in professional development events of this format is the opportunity to participate in professional conversations with colleagues, to listen to the experiences of other colleagues and to share their own experiences, as well as to exchange opinions and advice. 182 participants have emphasised this in their reflections (Fig. 2).

I liked the fact that I could talk with colleagues who teach “my” subject, share experiences and insights.

During the conversations with colleagues, I gained confidence in the direction I have chosen for teaching my subject. Also in these conversations new ideas arise that can be implemented in my work.

The second most frequently mentioned benefit for the participants is related to the acquisition of new ideas for organising learning. Reference to such benefits can be found in the reflections of 123 participants.

(...) we all drive in the same direction, faster or slower, but we drive. I highly appreciate this opportunity to learn together (...). We created a great lesson plan on the Reformation in 40 minutes. Super teachers!

I learned how to work with the [subject] syllabus and create a thematic plan. My benefit is really significant – I understood how to plan. I appreciate the opportunity to hear the experiences of my colleagues, which I will be able to use in my own work. Thank you!

Almost half as many participants – 67 – indicate in their reflections that their benefit is related to the acquisition of new learning materials and resources for use in work with students. It is evident that these events have been beneficial for teachers for obtaining information tested in practice and immediately usable teaching methods and materials for organising learning.

The task created by [a colleague] about verbs in songs will be useful for me. I will definitely use materials of the book publishing house “Liels und mazs” (...).

I found out about websites where I can look for information and ideas for my lessons. (...) It was valuable to meet, surely such meetings should be organised more. I found out the answers to some questions that were relevant to me.

An important benefit for the participants is also related to the fact that participation in the “Emergency Methodological Assistance” events has given teachers a sense of belonging to a wider professional community. This is clearly illustrated by several participants’ comments.

My benefit today is supportive conversations with colleagues, support and feeling of a safe shoulder.

(...) Although online, a colleague’s shoulder is, nevertheless, an important support mechanism.

Considering the fact that the events were attended by participants from different schools, belonging to a wider community of education professionals is promoted in this way.

I appreciated the fact that today I had the opportunity to talk with colleagues from other schools and share experiences, (...) and obtaining the feeling that we are all searching for solutions.

Although such a benefit appears in the answers of only 50 participants, it is important to emphasise that the participants of the event also indicate as a benefit that they have strengthened their belief that the cooperation of teachers is a solution to common challenges. This is especially important in the context of Latvia, where teachers have started the implementation of the improved curriculum in conditions where all teaching aids and methodological materials are not available, thus there is also a greater risk of encountering various types of professional challenges.

I appreciate that by putting our heads together we can achieve much more. Thank you! Cooperation and optimism – my benefits from these events.

In conversations with my colleagues, I found out that [our] problems are similar and together [we] can solve a lot.

The different benefits from participating in these collaborative events can be explained by the fact that the events were devoted to different topics and content issues, and in each of them different formats of teacher collaboration were used. Thus, for example, in one of the events, teachers jointly created thematic plans for the implementation of the curriculum, while in another, they shared their personal examples of good practice in connection with the implementation of the improved curriculum. This means that teachers' answers about the benefits of participating in these activities could depend on what their individual goals of the participation have been and whether they have met their learning needs during the collaboration with other colleagues.

On the other hand, one of the main risks for the professional development of teachers in this format was the learning interdependence of the teachers, because the learning outcomes for individual teachers were directly dependent on the involvement of other participants, their desire to cooperate and share their experiences and materials. There was also a risk that not all the participants have had relevant prior professional experience in the topics discussed during these events, thereby limiting the learning opportunities and potential benefits for other teachers.

Conclusions

The interest of teachers in participating in informal professional development activities online is high, as evidenced by the number of applications received for participation in the "Emergency Methodological Assistance" cooperation events organised by the Friendly Appeal Cesis State Gymnasium. This could be explained by the fact that, in the context of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the introduction of the improved curriculum, teachers in Latvia require additional support from other professionals who face similar challenges.

Specific ideas for their work as well as the possibility to share their own professional experiences with colleagues are mentioned as main gains by participants of the "Emergency Methodological Assistance" events. This indicates that this form of learning is a way for education professionals to learn from their own and others' experiences, gain the ideas tested in the practice for improving professional performance, and meet their individual learning needs. Furthermore, the participants emphasise the importance of collaboration with other professionals in solving common problems and thus formation of a sense of community.

The results of this study show that informal professional development, implemented online, can provide an opportunity for education professionals to get to

know colleagues from other schools and learn from their experiences. As a result, this format of professional development has the potential to influence not only teacher performance, but also attitudes and beliefs because data of the research shows that one of the benefits for teachers from participating in the “Emergency Methodological Assistance” events have been a sense of belonging to the wider professional community. Among other benefits of participation in the “Emergency Methodological Assistance” events, participants mention a strengthened belief that professional development is necessary, and cooperation is an effective solution towards solving the common challenges that teachers face when performing their daily duties.

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