

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE NORDIC AND BALTIC COUNTRIES. THROUGH SEMI-ONLINE TEACHER TRAINING AND RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes and analyses a semi-online format of international cooperation and further education of university teachers. Thanks to the Nordplus scholarship, seven universities in the Nordic and Baltic countries have been able to meet at seminars and discuss their work in the framework of Nordic-Baltic cooperation. Instead of traditional conference settings, the new semi-online format enables participants to create learning materials together and develop joint research. The format also allows participants to delve deeper into analyzing the specifics of their work, compare the modus operandi at their university with that of the others, experience and see work at different universities. Joint learning materials are created and published, the cooperation is analyzed at different levels and research is published together. We sum up the principles of cooperation and its format. The method is ethnographic research: descriptive analysis approach.

KEYWORDS

Teacher training through semi-online cooperation, International cooperation and material preparation, Motivation

1. INTRODUCTION

The positive co-factors of a self-leading professional definitely include astute choices of further education. In our article below, we introduce an enticing way we have found for carrying this through: the Nordplus-supported visit-your-colleagues format with study-visits, meetings and further education trainings in different Nordic and Baltic countries.

We developed this cooperation on the basis of concepts that are similar to blended learning (work individually; share online; meet for live meetings & discussions). Our team includes six universities from different Baltic and Nordic universities in Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Iceland. The cooperation has kindly been supported by the Nordplus scholarship scheme supported by the Nordic countries, with their main office in Reykjavik, on Iceland.

By now, we have successfully finished two joint projects, and embarked on two consecutive cooperation projects. In the paper below we describe the projects' format, results and opportunities for teacher development as "*semi-online (or blended) teacher training through international cooperation*".

While blended learning in itself is nothing new, and can be used for any field, including methodology and further education, we suggest that having an international scope, where study visits and in-depth personal analyses of one's role and work environment form an integral part of the project, is a case to be highlighted for positive inspiration for others. The meta-analyses combined with personal introspection, 1:1 tutoring and mentoring, and colleagues' advice on different layers of professional life, at different stages of it, is an incredibly valuable tool of our model. This is why we have decided to share this experience on the conference on the possibilities of e-learning in Porto.

The following brief paper has two main foci: practical and theoretical. The form and results will be analyzed:

1. The format of the meetings and our products: the commonly created learning materials and joint publications;

2. The benefits of such cooperation – as the theoretical-methodological model of one possible set-up forms (“blended teacher education for international cooperation”) for modern teacher development,

The methodology is ethnographic research: describing and analyzing an ongoing process (“composed of work in progress reports or fresh developments”) as suggested for “short papers” at this conference (<https://www.elearning-conf.org/call-for-papers/>).

2. “BLENDED TEACHER TRAINING” FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The quick changes in our modern lives and lifestyles also bring along the necessity to teach somewhat differently than some time ago. Even though the cornerstones of good teaching – friendliness, support, clear structure, and quality teaching – have remained the same, the teacher’s role is oftentimes even more of that of an advisor. Also, life has become more international. We have international students from many different countries of the world, we attend numerous scientific conferences in different countries, and concepts and approaches in methodology, values and principles seem to evolve, develop, and change sometimes in months.

At the same time, deeper introspection and capacity to analyze one’s own values, role, goal and methods are needed more than ever. It is exactly during many changes and “crosswinds” that staying true to your course and having clear and balanced views of your role, foci, possibilities - can support one to function efficiently and purposefully, at the same time developing. In our earlier research we have shared some thoughts both on student e-learning (Mullamaa 2009, 2011, 2015) and emotional balance and learning (Mullamaa 2016, 2018) as well as the teachers’ (Mullamaa 2020, 2022).

Teacher personal balance has been pointed out also by both internationally acclaimed research in language studies (e.g. Brophy 2004, Dörnyei 2001) as well as practitioners’ journals (e.g. IATEFL journal *Voices*). A good balance both in personal and professional lives is also a recipe for greater motivation (Schuz 2007, Reeve 2009) and achievement in popular psychology (cf. e.g. Goleman 2013).

This background suggests that the continuous introspection, self-analysis and further education, as well as discussions with one’s colleagues, and international experience can be supportive for professional and personal development and balance. Thus, in addition to the formal teacher training events, and different international conferences – which are all very good, inspiring and supportive for the teacher’s self-development – we felt that an additional format might be needed.

Inspired by this, we decided to apply for a Nordplus grant and sketch a vision for cooperation that would include a small number of colleagues for intensive, frank and deeply analytical get togethers, for analysing the specifics, difficulties and bonuses in our everyday teaching. We presume that cornerstones of a well-balanced professional in teaching include good personal and professional life constituents (positive outlook on life, capability to solve problems, ability to see the big picture, knowing and applying different methodologies, good communication and mentoring, as well as counselling skills, empathy, stamina, etc.). If the personal and professional skills and values match, this is beneficial for teaching, and the general atmosphere for learning in class, which is of paramount importance for good learning. In the implicit way, regular meetings with colleagues to discuss one’s role and teaching, may improve the above.

On the theoretical, more analytical level, this form of cooperation also enables participants to analyze and negotiate their role as university teachers. It helps one support the work process, but also conceptualize and reconceptualize the profession in the light of the new developments, find balance for one’s professional self in the discussions with colleagues, and reach the conceptual, academic, and emotional balance that are necessary constituents of motivation in their professional lives. The Nordic-Baltic context with the similar, yet somewhat different organization cultures offer additional perspectives to participants who also are experts in the field, and extra, meta-level research is conducted on our cooperation, Nordic-Baltic communication styles and principles.

More specifically, we have developed something, that could broadly be called “blended teacher training for international cooperation”. In addition to the obvious benefits such a model may have in different situations where it is difficult to meet IRL (as we remember from the global situation a few years ago), it also gives teachers a. the possibility to experience different work cultures and environments in different countries and universities, b. exchange views with colleagues in these contexts and c. grow both academically and personally through Socratic conversations, introspection, and analyses of one’s own context and others’ “case studies”. The project was granted, and the work could begin.

2.1 Nordplus International Meetings and Workshops: Format and Contents

Already from earlier contacts we had a good cooperation experience with some universities in Scandinavia and the Baltics. Now, we invited them into our two new projects – one of them: creating a textbook and Idioms word list, the other: on Methodology and teaching at a higher educational institution.

The universities gladly joined in, and we built up a format for meetings. This entails going round twice a year, visiting a different Nordic or Baltic university each time. The format we follow is the same:

1. The host is responsible for arranging the *further education training session* that takes place each time. The topics thus far have included: language learning theories: history and the modern dilemmas; The European Language Framework: new focus on language competencies; e-learning and the principles of safeguarding against digital perils. We have also discussed the principles of creating good textbooks, and will have seminars on student engagement and motivation.

2. In addition to the further education training session, each meeting includes a *visiting round of the hosting university*. We will see how teachers and students work, see the lecture rooms and exhibition areas, teachers’ joint working or resting areas, campus of the university and meet some colleagues of the hosting partner – thus getting a good overview of what everyday life looks at the respective university.

3. The third component is the *international meeting*. The meeting is for discussing our joint projects. Mostly, these have focused on creating joint learning materials. But an important part of the international meeting, beyond discussing our joint products, is the sharing on how one’s teaching is going, a briefing on the work environments and administrative arrangements.

3. a & b Especially during and after Corona times, when teaching was a rather solitary on-line project, the *sum up of some modus operandi at different universities*, as well as the creative solutions teachers might have had, provided good ideas and support for project participants. An additional topic is the increasing bureaucracy in some institutions, and here it may be comforting to see the parallels, and fruitful to suggest improvements. But also, the ventilation *and meta-level analysis of the administrative processes and hierarchies at different institutions* of higher education.

4. A necessary part of every person’s world view beyond the education, workplace, and academic and personal growth, is also the *geographical-cultural surroundings*, the spirit of the local university and university town, and how it influences us. Therefore, during our cooperation seminars we also have a glance of the recipient’s culture, some icons of their national lore and important cultural and societal phenomena for the country.

Based on these four tiers, the projects have developed efficiently and with glee.

2.1.1 Products and outputs

Each project we undertake has a real, “hands on” product, which is not only usable for project members but open for the wider audience. For example, we have created a good country-study material on Sweden: based on the well-known children’s book Nils Holgersson’s travels. Also, in our book (and digital material) the main character travels through the same areas of Sweden, but this time in modern Sweden.

In the framework of the “Idioms” project we are creating a list of specific Swedish idiomatic expressions with Estonian counterparts. Methodology project II creates a joint Icelandic-Estonian-Swedish-Latvian homepage with links to different articles, tips and further education possibilities for university teachers of Swedish. Right now, it is meant for internal use only, but as it grows and is tested by our members, we also plan to open it to the wider audience. Also, a joint collection of that relate to learning and methodology will be published.

2.1.2 A Well Balanced Professional

Already from our earlier articles (see e.g. Mullamaa 2018; 2020), we have pointed to the importance of the psychologically and mentally agile and well balanced professional also as concerns teachers. This is in tune with other research. According to Brophy 2004: 391-393), for example, “the efficiency as a teacher”, includes the strength and ability to have envision a broad picture of the purpose of one’s goals. Dörnyei (2001: 31) points to an important aspect in a student assessment study where “the participants considered the teacher’s own behavior to be the single most important motivational tool”.

My personal belief is here that a person, who has a good balance in the professional life and is also positive, achieving and glad in the personal one, can serve as a reliable inspiration and role model also for students.

In this, the semi-official discussions around one’s professional role, goals, possibilities for developing have been especially valuable in our cooperation. In a small round of like-minded professionals, trust is built and as our colleagues also represent the different stages at the academic career and age, the experience of the longer career is in dialogue with the enthusiasm of the young university teachers at the beginning of their teaching profession – a valuable focus to analyze any profession *per se*. All this enables one to be more confident and happy in one’s job and role. This in its turn, hopefully, wears off to the students, their ways of handling *their* tasks and roles with confidence and pro-actively.

2.1.3 Teacher development: benefits and methodological implications

In addition to the feedback we get from the immediate work environment, formal seminars and conferences we attend and present at, semi-formal discussions with like-minded colleagues in different cultural contexts can be beneficial and illuminating. This is exactly what our project cooperation has enabled us to do. We express our sincerest thanks to the Nordplus project which has approved our project ideas and allowed us to use, develop and modify this format.

The outcome is not directly measurable (yet). We could devise charts, numbers and formulae on how “satisfied” one is with their work due to the current affiliation with our project. Yet, the processes are still too fresh to chart them numerically. Would an arbitrarily denoted, say, “number 7”, e.g. – grant us more knowledge – than just a happy and balanced professional saying they “*feel supported and good*”? A matter of schools of thought, probably. Currently, at this stage of our project development, we follow the “self descriptions” of participants, and chart their comments which are rather informative and promising even without bringing the numeric determinants into the analysis. The current stage of our meta-analysis shows that the beneficial effect of the cooperation has been seen in participants’ everyday work motivation. They have also reported their balance is bigger thanks to the possibility of discussing things through at our international meetings.

3. CONCLUSION

In the article above we have taken a look at our semi-online, blended learning principle international teacher cooperation projects. Supported by Nordplus, our Nordic and Baltic partner universities have joined us in working out joint learning materials for students, creating an on-line methodology and teaching related data-base for teachers (work in progress), doing research and giving out a collection of articles on teaching our subject, as well as teaching and methodology in general.

In addition to the immediate products of joint cooperation between Iceland, Estonia, Sweden and Latvia (in earlier projects also Lithuania and Finland), the discussions and analyses of our profession, institutional and culture based communication, and the teaching principles at large – form an important part of this semi-digital international cooperation and teacher development model.

We have found the principles of cooperation to be useful at both these levels:

1. The practical one – leading to joint production of learning materials, digital data pools, booklets and on-line resources.

2. The cooperation and further development one – from joint international learning seminars to joint international meetings, which allow participants to ponder upon and develop the perspectives of their personal and professional roles, as well as experience both work and academic culture as well as the society and culture in our common Nordic-Baltic area.

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