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**A CASE STUDY OF IMPLEMENTING BLENDED LEARNING COURSES IN
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

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Abstract: *E-learning is seen as an effective option to deliver training to a large number of people, while taking into account their particular needs, expectations, and contexts. Benefits in costs and flexibility should not overshadow the concern about the learning effectiveness of such delivery modes. The implementation of a blended learning program in Romanian public administration offers the opportunity to formulate recommendations concerning trainers' and learners' support to facilitate the transition between traditional and blended learning programs.*

Keywords: *public administration, blended learning*

I. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Blended learning was recently found to be more effective than either face to face instruction or online learning separately, by a meta-analysis conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (Means et al, 2009). However, the implementation of a blended learning approach faces many challenges. For the purpose of this research, Graham's (2006, p.5) definition was adopted: "Blended learning systems combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction."

This study reports on the process of creating a blended learning program, as part of a project ran during 2010 – 2012 by the National Agency for Civil Servants (NACS) in order to enhance their learning offer to the civil servants, and ultimately the quality of the service the public administration provides to the citizen. The author was involved in the project as consultant working for the consortium that provided the technical solution. In this capacity I was involved in the project in the period March 2011 – March 2012, when the tools and content were developed and the programs were piloted.

The program included twenty blended learning courses that were created based on existing traditional, face to face, courses. The blended learning courses were piloted for five months with more than 400 participants with various backgrounds and levels of experience. Forty trainers were selected and trained extensively in order to create and to implement the program.

The research question this study focuses to answer is:

How can the process of transforming traditional courses into blended learning courses be improved in the context of public administration?

In order to answer the research question, a case study method was chosen, and the tools used for collecting data were surveys and interviews conducted with the trainers and the participants, and both quantitative and qualitative results from the pilot program. According to VanWynsberghe and Kahn (2007, p. 2), the case study is a "transparadigmatic and transdisciplinary heuristic that involves the careful delineation of the phenomena for which evidence is being collected". Since doing a case study does not imply the use of any specific research paradigm (indeed it fits several), the present case study will be explicitly placed within the paradigm of interpretive studies (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991, p. 5).

II. THE BLENDED LEARNING SOLUTION

Garrison and Kanuka (2004) define blended learning as a combination of “classroom face to face learning experiences with online experiences” (p. 96) designed in order to foster collaboration, cater for learners’ contextual needs, and offer flexibility. In this respect, the blended learning approach needs to leverage the affordances of technology with the possibilities provided by the pedagogy to respond to the needs and expectations of various groups of learners.

Traditionally, the courses provided to civil servants were organized as 5-day residential meetings, with all the associated costs of travel and accommodation, interruption of work for a week, and mismatch of schedules between the providers and the beneficiaries. The costs associated with the traditional delivery mode prompted the search for a more cost effective solution. Distance learning was the obvious choice, since it enables more people to be trained at an affordable cost, but distance was not the only factor considered, nor reduction of costs was the only benefit sought. As Collis and Moonen (2001) point out, flexible learning is not only about distance, it’s about offering choices to learners concerning the location of the course activities, the program (accommodating participants with various backgrounds and levels of experience), the interactions (whether to work in a group or not), the forms of communication, and the learning materials.

The heterogeneous nature of the target group of NACS leads to an increased emphasis on flexibility, in order to identify the option that would make the courses accessible to a wide range of civil servants.

The approach for this project was to work closely with the trainers (a team of two trainers having been chosen for each course topic) and design each course according to its particularities, within some general constraints. Each course emerged as a distinct combination of some of the following activities:

- One face-to-face activity lasting 2 days, placed in the second half of the program (that was a constraint from budgetary reasons)
- Several multimedia sequences, delivered as SCORM packages via a learning management system, covering around 18 hours of learning per course
- Individual projects learners will prepare and submit via the learning platform
- Discussions on the forum based on the course topics
- Tests to be administered at significant moments in the program (such as before the face-to-face session or at the completion of the course)

The working procedure for the design of the blended learning programs included 4 meetings with the whole group of trainers (totaling 13 days), and at least two meetings with each team to discuss the specific of each course. The whole group meetings aimed to familiarize trainers with the blended learning methods, to support them to use the blended learning platform and to develop the necessary competencies to facilitate the program during the pilot stage. The single team meetings were dedicated to the discussion of the transformation of course manuals in multimedia sequences, inclusion of exercises and case studies, and the design of the general structure of the course.

Each course was piloted for about one month. The initial number of participants was higher, but only 450 participants were selected for the face-to-face sessions and graduated the courses. During piloting, data was gathered about user activities and access to various course sections. Towards the end of the program, the learners were asked to fill in a feedback questionnaire. Trainers submitted their own feedback reports based on their discussions with the participants during the face-to-face meetings. Detailed analysis of the findings took place in the last plenary meeting with the trainers, in order to formulate recommendations to be implemented in the future and changes to be made to the tools and content developed.

The findings reported here are a subsection of the whole range of matters discussed and are not meant to be evaluative. The intention is to present some of the lessons learned and to formulate possible recommendations for further implementations that will extend this pioneering initiative.

III. FINDINGS FROM THE PILOT STAGE

The areas of discussion selected for this report were: how trainers should be supported to facilitate a blended learning program, the design of the program with a focus on communication and sharing of experience, and support to learners to organize efficiently their learning time and take advantage of the flexibility offered by the program.

3.1. Support to the trainers

Although the blended learning approach decreases the need for the trainers to travel and deliver live sessions, their time investment does not reduce proportionally. There is still a need to moderate forum discussions, offer feedback on projects, evaluate open-ended test questions, and all these activities typically take more time than trainers expected. Apart from that, participants usually direct all their questions to the trainers, including administrative and technical, so they should also act as a communication hub and re-direct the issues to the relevant persons.

In order for the program to function smoothly, technical and administrative support should be offered to the participants, and the trainers throughout the program. Although in Romania the e-learning sector is increasing, this development is somehow parallel with the training sector. There are relatively few trainers than can lead a blended learning program. Developing a continuous working relationship with the trainers can also have a beneficial effect on the quality of the program and the complexity of managing them.

Due to the novelty of being a blended learning trainer, with responsibilities that exceed the classroom, we included in the agenda of the whole group meetings several reflective sessions, where trainers could discuss the situations they were confronted with, how they approached them, what solutions they found, and discuss possible implications. Sharing experiences in such a way was beneficial from several perspectives. First of all, they realized they are not unique in experiencing the issues, and this insight gave them confidence. Second of all, they benefited from shared solutions and adapted their colleagues' approaches to their own contexts. Third of all, the feedback issued from these sessions was valuable in the ongoing development process.

3.2. Design of the program

During the pilot stage, feedback was collected in order to adapt better the program to the needs of the various target groups.

Figure 1 presents the integrated view of the participants concerning amount of information, amount of exercises, difficulty of exercises and tests, interactivity of multimedia sequence. On average, these factors were evaluated by the participants as being well calibrated. The qualitative comments of the participants showed an appreciation for case studies relevant to their professional context.

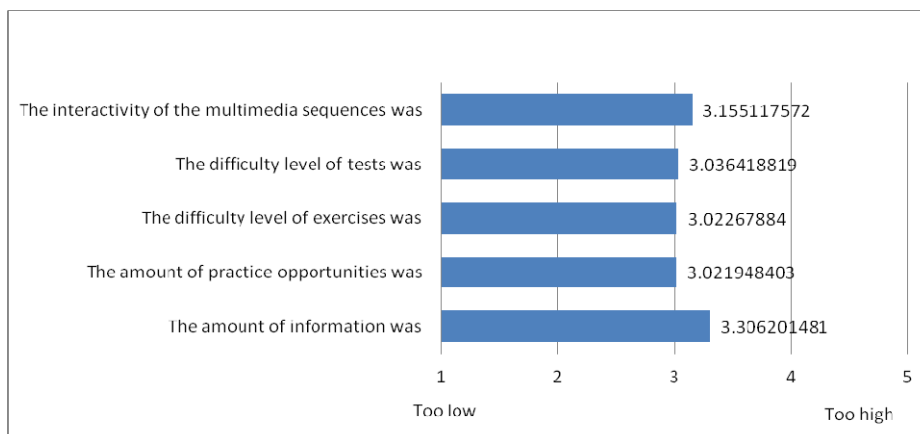


Figure 1. Participants' feedback on activities

Although participants came from different fields of work, from both central and local government, and had various backgrounds and levels of experience, their comments were quite similar

in content. They appreciated the flexibility given by the online delivery, but considered the face to face component to be absolutely necessary for effective learning. They requested that face-to-face sessions be longer (3 days instead of 2, given that the last day is also dedicated to travelling home) and some participants asked for an extra session at the beginning of the program. The possibility to share professional experiences and learn from each other was listed as a major benefit of the program, and the participants believed that knowing each other personally will enrich the communication they have via the forum during the online sections of the program.

3.3. Support for participants

It was anticipated that the transition from a traditional delivery mode to a blended learning delivery mode will bring about some difficulties for the participants to adapt to the new way of learning. Participants were asked whether they considered it difficult to study online, what kind of problems they encountered and how where these problems solved from their point of view. As an average, on a scale from 1 (total disagreement) to 5 (total agreement), the participants' agreement to the statement "It was difficult to study online" is situated around the average of 2.5. The distribution of answers is presented in Figure 2.

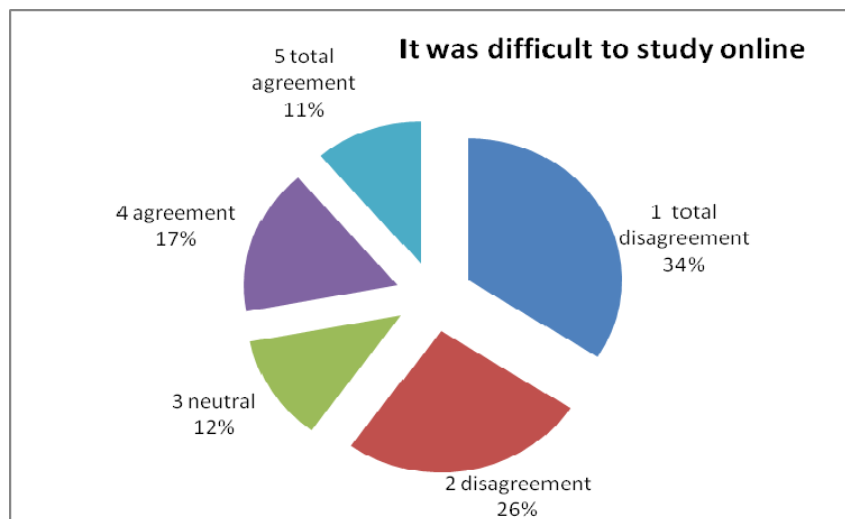


Figure 2. Distribution of answers to item "It was difficult to study online"

Subsequent investigations showed that two factors played a significant role in the participants' assessment of online study to be of medium difficulty: the lack of familiarity with e-learning platforms, and the difficulty in anticipating how much time they will need to invest in the course and organize it efficiently. The two issues are connected and the common concern is time. Having little time to invest in this program, participants need additional support in order to organize themselves effectively. Due to project constraints, trainers could not have an initial face-to-face meeting with the participants on the onset of the program, which would have had several benefits, amongst which the introduction of the tools used in the program. Such a meeting is highly advisable, in order to clarify program issues and reduce the amount of support needed later on.

Giving options and control to the learner has benefits, but it also allocates the learners a new responsibility, to manage the learning process by themselves. In this respect, technology can assist by providing personal scheduling facilities, and reminder and notification systems.

Another related issue concerns the support learners receive in their places of employment to access the blended learning system from work. The situation is not particular to Romania, it was documented as a concern when, for instance, the UK Civil Service became the beneficiary of distance learning programs (Talbot, 2009).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This paper describes lessons learned from a first initiative to implement blended learning as means of offering professional development opportunities to civil servants in Romania. Should this initiative be extended in time and perhaps scope, more profound investigations could be conducted regarding involvement of employers, technological versus educational requirements, learner experience and educational effectiveness.

Recommendations that emerged from the analysis presented in this paper include:

- There is a need to organize thorough administrative and technical support for both learners and trainers.
- Learners need to be assisted in order to have a smooth transition between traditional learning and blended learning, taking into account their new responsibility of organizing their own learning and become “e-learners”.
- There is no universal recipe for the right blend of various types of activities, but face-to-face sessions are very important, at least in the initial stages of implementing a blended learning program. At least two sessions should be conducted, one at the beginning of the program, to facilitate the communication and to familiarize learners with the technological tools that will be used during the program, and one towards the end of the program, to offer the opportunity to clarify open issues and to integrate the knowledge acquired during the program and apply it in practical and relevant exercises.
- Evaluate realistically how much time learners need to complete the course, as well as how much time trainers need to facilitate the online process, including forum interventions, feedback for projects, grading, monitoring the learners, etc.
- Facilitating the development of a community of practice for the blended learning trainers, where they can reflect upon and discuss the situations they face in their professional activity can lead to innovative and shared solutions.

As more e-learning or blended learning initiatives will be implemented, the need to design a framework for evaluating such programs will be necessary. Experiences from countries where distance learning programs were already implemented can be used in creating such frameworks (Yunus & Salim, 2008).

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