TEACHER TRAINING AND SUPPORT DURING PANDEMIC COVID-19: THE CASE OF GENERAL JONAS ŽEMAITIS MILITARY ACADEMY OF LITHUANIA

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, which challenged higher education institutions to organize the teaching process, makes one shift from face-to-face to distance learning, ensuring the highest level of education. The study aimed to determine the attitudes of teachers toward their readiness to teach students at a distance and the support of the institution during a pandemic. Teaching at a distance faced great challenges for teachers, who became responsible for keeping students motivated to learn. The pandemic forced teachers to adapt their lectures to distance learning in a short period by implementing distance learning technologies that were not relevant to many before the pandemic and to experience the positive and negative aspects of distance learning. Distance learning has become a much more demanding effort and emotional burden than classroom training. On the other hand, an educational establishment is challenged to meet the needs of teachers working remotely, to make their activities purposeful, to develop their potential, to promote cooperation at work, and not to lose the attitude of teachers' organizational identity. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to promptly assist teachers in securing the acquisition of challenging new competencies and other necessary support to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to perform their tasks effectively both in the audience and in society now and in the future.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; teacher training for distance learning; institutional support for teacher; distance learning study.

1 INTRODUCTION

Educational establishments must always respond to ongoing changes determined not only by constantly evolving technological advances, media, and social networks but also by some unforeseen circumstances. And the COVID-19 pandemic is one of them. It engulfs not only one concrete country or region but the whole world; moreover, it alters both economic and sociocultural relations among community members, as well. To make sure educational institutions work efficiently in such difficult times, it is of overarching importance to ensure and promote higher education teachers' communal activities and continuing learning. The Lithuania's National Education Strategy for 2013–2022 [1] sets forth the aim of reaching such a level of teacher community that it is largely comprised of reflective, competent, and task-oriented educators headed toward professional development. Nor less important is the issue of teaching and learning process which is characteristic of dynamic social interaction between groups and individuals. Professional learning community urges educators to share their experiences of dealing with educational issues, to establish a knowledge basis, as well as to develop and implement innovations [2]. We need to acknowledge that higher education teachers' professional development, learning from each other, commitment to common values, and motivation affect both the students' academic outcomes and the overall organizational culture of educational institutions. Research on higher education teachers' professional domain showcased that educators have a certain relationship with their professional sphere, academic milieu, scientific disciple, students, and information and communication technologies [3].

The pandemic situation has forced educational institutions, on the one hand, to really quickly modify their strategies to integrate digital technologies into teaching, learning, and organizational practice to as a considerably large extent as possible, but on the other hand, to ensure the possibility for all educators to develop their digital competences since it is directly associated with the ability to communicate through information technologies, thereby revealing the person's competence in this sphere. The facets of digital competence are as follows: cyber security, personal information management, browsing the internet, digital citizenship, ethics and decision-making, accumulating a substantial body of knowledge from websites and virtual environments, as well as communication in such environments [4].

In Lithuania, e-studies and distance learning system are being highly promoted. Consortium of the Lithuanian Distance Education Network (hereinafter referred to as LieDM Consortium) is playing an active role in the afore-mentioned activity: it unites national higher education institutions for common activities, and these institutions cooperate their financial resources and efforts by sustaining and developing the infrastructure of e-studies and distance learning in the country. LieDM Consortium provides service for and grants its members centralized access to both Zoom video conference meetings and Moodle virtual learning environments, organizes online training events and other general activities. At present, it is made up of 16 members and 13 associated members. In the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, LieDM Consortium has arranged synchronously and asynchronously general online trainings for the representatives of all levels of the entire national education system in order to reflect upon a feasible consistent training of digital competence for educators from general education schools and those of higher education and establish proper conditions for broader collaboration as well as for exchanging personal experience by utilizing information technologies. It must be pointed out that the pandemic situation has confirmed the existence of a rift one endeavors to eliminate between secondary schools, higher education institutions, and scientific research by integrating more coherently the scenarios of both formal and informal learning as well as by applying technologies and such methods which students will be more likely to come across at universities [5].

In the formation of educators' digital competences and their ability to use information technologies, it is of paramount importance to provide educators with coherent support – that is, help adults learn autonomously [6]. On the one hand, the support provided enables educators to apply different decision-making techniques and choose such tools and means which are expediently used in the educational process, but on the other hand, it empowers them to bear the responsibility for the results of the skills they have acquired.

The employee's perceived organizational support [7] is related to the assessment of how the organization fulfils his emotional and social needs. It is the support provided by colleagues and managers that plays a pivotal role in understanding how employees feel. If organizational support realizes an employee's needs, his job satisfaction, motivation, community, organizational identity, and loyalty to the organization increase. The support offered to teachers by organizations to quickly engage in online teaching is particularly important [8].

With the emergence of the first surge of the COVID-19 pandemic and with the announcement of a nationwide quarantine, the General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania (henceforth referred to as MAL) undertook urgent means to organize an educational process for cadets of full-time studies and listeners of part-time studies respectively and transfer it onto Moodle, a virtual learning environment. Educators were tasked with creating, within a short time, virtual learning environments for students. Distance teaching required a great deal of effort, emotional strength, and time in comparison to traditional (face-to-face) teaching in a classroom setting. Interpersonal consultations between educators, their collaboration, exchange of experience in using educational digital technologies, personal search for the various possibilities to learn and enhance their digital competencies have gained momentum. To incentivize the educators' productive activities and predict future trends, the MAL Commandant issued an order stipulating the requirements for an attested e-learning environment. It was expounded that within a couple of years one would fully shift toward the stage where every study subject in a virtual learning environment will be in accord with the said requirements. These requirements are high, and a part of the educators have already been committed to providing drafted and attested distance teaching environments for their subjects in 2021.

The COVID-19 situation enables one to quickly adapt to and make use of the approved teaching methods, as well as take a lively interest in innovations in this domain. At the moment distance learning at MAL is conducted synchronously, asynchronously, and in a blended way.

2 METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was performed to investigate the MAL educators' preparation to teach students online and organizational support. The aim of the study was to determine the educators' attitude toward their readiness to teach students online as well as toward the institutional support they receive during the pandemic. The object of the research is distance learning at MAL during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to thoroughly examine the respondents' perspectives and their experiences during the pandemic, the qualitative research method was chosen, that is, a semistructured interview. With the help of this research method, we can gather information about past events, uncover new meanings, and divulge experiential differences and idiosyncrasies [9]. Nine MAL educators participated in the qualitative study.

Research participants were selected on the basis of the following criteria: at least five years of experience in teaching at a university-type school; at least three years of experience working at MAL with cadets and part-time students; working at MAL at least on a half workload; different departments of an organization which are related with the implementation of study programs; representatives of different academic disciplines: humanities, natural and social sciences. The afore-mentioned criteria for selecting research participants are associated with the specifics of working at MAL.

Interviews with research participants were conducted in accordance with the recommendations to the researcher [10]. Every participant could choose when they wished to take part in the research. Individual interviews were performed in a virtual environment via Zoom to create a most favorable milieu of trust and mutual understanding during quarantine. At the start of the interview, every informant was introduced to the aim of the research and its constraints. The informants' anonymity was ensured whilst conducting the research and analyzing its results: both the names and identities of the educators who participated in the research are coded in compliance with the provisions of personal data protection. The thematic analysis is used for data analysis.

3 RESULTS

3.1 The educator's potential value to learn and its assessment

The first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic and the announced quarantine revealed that the vast majority of MAL's educators who partook in research were not properly prepared to lecture online; that is, they lacked in elementary skills to conduct activities on Moodle and Zoom platforms. During research only three informants (KA22, KA26, KA29) noted that they had participated in trainings focused on the possibilities of working with Moodle, for "[…] there was not such a need as we had encountered this problem for the first time" (KA23). Two informants (KA22, KA26) pointed out that "[…] I have been using Moodle quite a while" (KA26). All research participants emphasized that rapid transition toward distance teaching and creation of e-learning environment caused a great deal of stress to educators, and a workload increased: "there has been a considerable challenge for all of us to develop, within a couple of weeks, our competences and enhance our skills and go over to this form of teaching" (KA23), "labour costs are markedly higher since one must prepare more tasks, constantly check assignments […]" (KA24), "[…] if you wish to present teaching material in a more interesting and interactive way […] students are keen on […] become more involved in the subject, and it is far easier to keep students' attention, yet it requires a plenty of time […]; one must spend time preparing for lectures and cannot lecture without being prepared" (KA27). This reveals the educator's perception of personal responsibility in order to organize the process of distance teaching as well as possible. All the informants accentuated that they had noticed fluctuations in the cadets and students' motivation for learning: "I think it is convenient for students to learn online, but the motivation to work remotely and work live are, in my opinion, two different things" (KA22). Six participants (KA22, KA24, KA26, KA27, KA28, KA29) indicated that learners' motivation to study online decreased, but at the same time it was noted that "[…] it depends on a group of students: there were motivated groups; there were less motivated ones; there were uninterested students; and there were those who were inclined to work more [...]" (KA24).

From January to April 2021, being a member of LieDM Consortium, MAL was offered a series of teacher training courses: MS Teams training (for beginners and advanced learners), Zoom training (for beginners and advanced learners), Moodle online training (for beginners and advanced learners), and training "Creating an Interactive Content on MOODLE using H5P activities"; moreover, MAL's educators were invited to participate in the seminar "Organizing Exams and Assignments Remotely" during which teachers from different higher education institutions shared good practices on how to promote active student engagement in online classes. All study participants confirmed that they participated as far as possible in all online trainings organized by LieDM Consortium during quarantine. Two informants (KA28, KA24,) partook in additional trainings outside MAL: "I participated in online trainings independently for my own money [...] which, in my mind, were significantly more useful, because they were more detailed, more comprehensive with independent tasks. Apparently, they required more involvement [...]" (KA24). The informants (KA21, KA22, KA23, KA27, KA28) positively assessed the possibility of receiving and using training videos to develop their skills to work and teach remotely, emphasizing that practical skills need to be developed on their own with time and attention: "I received information about what a program can do [...], but how to do it [...], I need to figure it out myself [...], and it also takes time" (KA21). It should be noted that although the proposed trainings were virtually assessed very positively: "[...] I am very pleased with the activities of LieDM Consortium" (KA22), some

questioned whether they corresponded to the needs of higher education institutions: "[...] well, some of the material is of interest and can be used in classes, but not all [...]; the examples provided were not suitable for university-level teaching materials, more for that of secondary schools, I would say, and not even for grade 12. We always select such samples and then require that the prepared teaching materials [...] meet our level. And the examples had to conform with our level [...]" (KA26).

3.2 Teacher support and its evaluation

Research participants shared their experiences. Analyzing the results of semistructured interviews, it became apparent that not all educators were provided with technical means (computers, headphones, cameras) when teaching cadets and students online. One informant noted: "I receive everything I need" (KA22); another (KA28) applied for a computer and was equipped with it; two educators (KA23, KA27) were convinced: "I did not ask for technical support, but I believe if I applied, I would receive it" (KA23). Other five informants' experiences were not that consistent: "I work with my computer [...], and no one gives me anything [...] I applied for [...] a microphone – the answer was that there were not any. I asked for a headset and received no answer [...]" (KA25); "I have my computer to work with and use my internet [...], my phone" (KA24). One informant requested support from the MAL administration: "I wish the Academy could see that people use their resources [...], their computers, their software, their mobile phones [...], and I wish the Academy would evaluate [...] compensate [...]" (KA23).

The informants (KA21, KA22, KA23, KA24, KA25, KA26, KA28, KA29) reacted particularly negatively to the situation wherein they did not have access to the Zoom license during the second surge of the pandemic: "It is bad that educators do not have a Zoom license [...], and they have to join student groups [...] sometimes they fail to connect to meeting rooms [...], a better work was organized during the first quarantine when tying Zoom to the instructor" (KA24), [...] disconnected from that license [...] I applied for one and was told that not everyone would receive it [...], but there are classes going on – apparently, there should be enough for those who deliver lectures, because not all teachers have modules at the same time [...], and a group link did not work [...], but I managed to resolve this issue with one colleague – he shared his invitation link [...] it disturbs cadets, and we disturb each other [...]. I think that every teacher must be granted licensed access before teaching the module" (KA25).

Seven informants noted that during the quarantine period there was a "constant sharing of experience and that [...] was very useful" (KA23); however, it was mostly indicated that mutual support was shared "[...] informally [...] not all educators tend to share their experiences willingly [...] in an informal environment [...]" (KA27). Research participants who exchanged their experiences treat mutual support and help positively, emphasizing the special importance of mutual communication: "It is important not only to discuss business issues [...] simple human support, or just chatter – sometimes, is crucial, too [...]" (KA28). Since in most cases mutual support occurred in the circle of close colleagues – in groups of three (or four) people, the informants thought that seminars would be of great avail for all educators in which they could share their experiences "and that the specialist could answer certain questions [...] sometimes you do not know whether your level of competence is insufficient here if you are facing difficulties [...], whether other colleagues are also facing the same difficulties [...]. Needless to say, the second thing is that it is always much more expedient to share that good practice in a wider circle and listen to some expert opinions or advice [...]" (KA24).

The majority of the study participants (KA8, KA22, KA23, KA25, KA27, KA29) positively assessed the activities of the person being responsible for support in developing MAL teachers' digital competences as well as their information technology skills: "The person in charge responded very quickly" (KA22); "it is great to communicate [...], and the support provided is comprehensive [...] can explain and, if necessary, send [...]" (KA23).

4 CONCLUSIONS

The results of the research showcased that MAL educators were given the possibility to learn and develop their digital competencies. Those partaking in the study positively gauged the seminar and training – set forth by LieDM from January to April 2020 – for users with different levels of competency. What became clear was that newly acquired digital competencies were essential for educators, in that the former helped the latter surmount some unexpected challenges posed by the pandemic as well as by the transition to online teaching. MAL educators emphasized their personal responsibility and the need for autonomous learning.

The support MAL educators receive to implement an educational process online by applying necessary resources must be improved. On the one hand, the administration should be interested in what resources educators need. But on the other hand, educators themselves should more actively express their individual and general expectations. One maintains that educators being willing to expand their skills whilst utilizing distance learning platforms collaborate in small groups of three (or four) people, help each other, and understand the importance of organizing seminars during which they could share their experiences with a wider cycle of colleagues and administration representatives.

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