

# A community of practice approach to building capacity for teaching on blended programmes



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## Aims

New entrants to teaching in HEIs, especially those “lying at the nexus of academia and practice,” (Barradell et al 2018, p. 90), need professional development to ensure the smoothness of their transition to blended and online teaching and learning. Mary Immaculate College (MIC) in Limerick runs blended postgraduate courses in Autism Studies in partnership with the Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) in Armagh, on which tutors from the centre write and deliver the content as subject matter experts (SMEs). We developed two short courses providing an introduction to the essential skills required in online classrooms, in line with findings from the literature, that further development is required for this cohort of external “practitioner tutors” (Kusumowidagdo 2019, p. 78). MIC staff completed these courses and were thus empowered to act as change agents with the SMEs, creating a community of practice (Peacock & DePlacido, 2018), around best practice in blended and online teaching and learning.

## Findings

Following engagement with the two professional development (PD) short courses, the MIC team members were empowered to take the role of change agents within the partnership, wherein current best practice approaches and guidelines in blended learning were shared with the subject matter experts (SMEs). This reflects the degree to which engagement with PD activities facilitated collaborative learning, strengthening and adding to the knowledgeability of the existing community of practice between the members of the partnership (Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor, 2015). Further, it allowed for dialogue and discussion across professional boundaries, wherein the programme co-ordinators, e-moderator, and SMEs integrated and applied the knowledge gained from PD activities when engaging in programme planning. Specifically, the team took a more student-centred approach to the activities to be included in the autism studies modules. By integrating a wider range of activities (Salmon, 2013) into the programme than had been initially planned, more focus was placed on the goals of increasing student engagement, facilitating deeper student learning, and encouraging students to demonstrate their learning across a range of domains e.g. knowledge acquisition, investigation, collaboration, and discussion (Young & Perović, 2015).

This approach to PD aligns with the Typologies of Professional Development Activities as set out by the National Forum (National Forum, 2016). Within this framework, professional learning activities span both accredited and non-accredited domains. Please see the “Typology of Professional Development Activities” section to see how our PD corresponds to the National Forum framework, and how the ways in which the MIC staff members’ actions in this case reflects the way in which adopting a critically reflective stance to one’s own professional development pathway can facilitate the embedding of new approaches to teaching and learning across a partnership. Establishing collaborative learning and practice across such professional boundaries within an online learning environment can be vulnerable to challenges, potentially arising from lack of clarity regarding the shared roles and collective interests of the partnership (Bawa and Watson, 2017). It is particularly encouraging that the approach to PD adopted within this project allowed for a successful navigation and negotiation of such boundaries, ultimately enabling the team to heighten their focus on ways in which student engagement with activities (Salmon, 2013) can foster a sense of a learning community for the students.

## References

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## Impact

This project outlines how partnership between HEIs and external agencies in the delivery of blended programmes reveals a unique necessity for a facilitation of engagement with PD. In this case, two MIC staff members engaged in structured, non-accredited PD (National Forum, 2016), targeted specifically at supplying a broad foundation for those who are new to teaching online. These two staff members were able to take in this broad base, refine it for the particular circumstances of the programmes run by the partnership, and, utilising a community of practice approach, encourage small, incremental steps toward further implementation of new practices in terms of the blended aspects of the programmes with their partners from the MCA. This provides an affordance for peers within this type of partnership to build confidence by offering “informal, collegial support” (Peacock & DePlacido 2018, p. 72).

Critically, within a partnership such as this, there is a clear onus on the members of the academic institution to remain current within the field of blended and online learning, in order for this knowledge base to be disseminated and shared amongst all members. There is a further necessity for both partnering institutions to afford team members sufficient opportunity for engagement with PD. This facilitates a collaborative approach to programme delivery which is responsive not only to student needs, but also to the emergent professional development needs of all members of the partnership.

## Typology of Professional Development Activities

Non-Accredited			
1. Collaborative Non-accredited (informal)	2. Unstructured Non-accredited (non-formal)	3. Structured Non-accredited (non-formal)	4. Accredited (formal)
Learning from these activities comes from their collaborative nature	These activities are independently led by the individual. Engagement is driven by the individuals’ needs/interests. Individuals source the material themselves	Organised activities (by an institution, network or disciplinary membership body). They are typically facilitated and have identified learning objectives	Accredited programmes of study (ECTS or similar credits)
Examples – Conversations with colleagues, peer networking, peer observations, online blogs/discussion forums	Examples – Reading articles, following social media, self-study, watching video tutorials, keeping a reflective teaching journal/portfolio, preparing an article for publication	Examples – Workshops, seminars, MOOCs, conferences, summer schools, structured collaborative projects	Examples – Professional Certificate, Graduate Diploma, Masters, PhD, EdD in: Teaching and Learning, eLearning, Leadership in Education; Education Policy
Typology as applied to the case study			
Example – The MIC team members shared their learning from the structured, non-accredited short PD courses, and their own independent unstructured, non-accredited self-study with all members of the partnership	Example – On completion of the structured, non-accredited PD short courses, the MIC team members were prompted to further upskill in the field of blended delivery and engaged in independent self-study	Example – MIC team members completed the REAP project PD short courses	*Not relevant in this case

Adapted from the NF Table 1: Typology of Professional Development Activities