

Enhancing Contemporary Teaching Skills to Address the Changing Role of Teachers as a Result of the Long-Term Social Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Education has changed in many ways with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The traditional teaching methods were challenged by the pandemic, hence, teachers had to adapt to new teaching methodologies, offer their courses virtually, arrange attractive digital learning environments, assess student progress online, keep students motivated and engage them digitally in a meaningful and pedagogical way. Sri Lanka has long had a strong institutionalized direct instructional teacher education culture through which teachers were trained for face-to-face instruction, however, Covid-19 related pedagogical challenges require the empowerment of teachers with contemporary teaching skills.

This paper is a qualitative content analysis of the potential of the new Teacher Education program designed as a collaborative EU co-funded Capacity Building project CONTESSA, the Contemporary Teaching Skills for South Asia (<https://contessa-project.eu/>) to fulfill the needs of teacher education at present. The analysis was on the appropriateness of content and utility of instructional design to meet the challenges of teaching-learning that might continue in the post-Covid-19 context. The teacher education curriculum which is a comprehensive package of five modules is found to have potential design features of modules that were identified in terms of continuity of teaching design, delivery, and assessment, facilitation of the role of technology for learning and teaching cum strategic actions for blended learning, and the focus on student-centered and inclusive education. It can be concluded that the approach developed through CONTESSA is having progressive features to address the long-term effects to the teacher education and intended outcomes of the teacher education programs such as: improving digital teaching skills, and critical skills, improving the transition of learners at critical stages and of learners at risk, improving the progress of learners with special needs or migration backgrounds.

A recommendation is made to incorporate these open-source teacher education modules into preservice and in-service teacher education programs in Sri Lanka and South Asia and develop other parallel modules on similar frameworks

Keywords: *Digital teaching, teacher education, contemporary teaching skills, curriculum development*

Introduction

Covid-19 has presented many higher education teachers (HETs) with the challenge of offering their lessons digitally. As recent studies have shown, the majority of HETs were largely unprepared to make the shift to online teaching when the COVID-19 pandemic began and had difficulties adapting to new teaching methodologies, modifying their course structure,

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arranging attractive digital learning environments, assessing student progress, keeping students motivated and engaging them online in a meaningful and pedagogical way. Higher education students (HESs) faced challenges as well. Due to teacher time constraints and a lack of face-to-face engagement, students have received less personalized feedback and fewer assessments of their individual work thereby providing them with a low level of understanding of their learning progress. They also face multiple learning formats designed by teachers who have not been trained in online course design, making the materials ineffective in the digital space. (Gabriels, W., & Benke-Aberg, R. 2020; Marinoni, G., van't Land, H., & Jensen, T. 2020; Tang, T., Abuhmaid, A.M., Olaimat, M., Oudat, D.M., Aldhaeabi, M., & Bamanger, E. 2020; Hummel, S., Sheehan, B., Monirith, L., Munasinghe, D.M.W., Thilakarathna, S. 2021h)

These findings show that digitization of higher education (HE) is experiencing an unprecedented rise due to the COVID-19 crisis and herein lies enormous potential for new paths of student-orientation, individualization and the orientation towards special needs fostering a common sense of equity and inclusion. Pedagogical practices have been greatly affected by the advancement of science and technology during the pandemic crisis. In order to use digitization in a learner- and target-oriented way however, it is important to look at real requirements and risks for the HE system in order to derive the greatest benefit from the opportunities that arise. The education systems can only face Covid-19 related educational challenges if they offer their students the best possible (digital) study conditions and HETs the necessary tools and digital expertise for their professional pedagogical responsibilities. By improving the teaching skills of teacher trainers and (future) teachers, we can achieve lasting individual and societal changes (e.g., enhanced self-determination, critical thinking and tolerance). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were increasingly expected to utilize digital technologies in the classroom to help students succeed. After the pandemic began, these expectations soared as physical learning environments migrated to virtual spaces. Therefore, the investment in digital teacher training and development has made this priority more imperative than ever before. However, digitization is not a solution in itself and it must be applied to competence-oriented as well as teaching and learning-centric needs. Accordingly, teacher quality has a direct positive impact on student success. CONTESSA has been designed with this consideration at the forefront.

Objectives and Method

CONTESSA is an Erasmus+ project funded by the European Commission's Capacity Building in Higher Education branch. The project is led by Dr. Sandra Hummel, University of Graz (Austria) who is the first author of this paper and aims to further the development of teaching skills in Asia working with Sri Lanka and Cambodia through carefully selected partnerships with institutions of higher education and local educational organizations.³ The project development was collaboratively done by the University of Colombo (Sri Lanka), Open University of Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka), University of Cambodia (Cambodia), and Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia (Cambodia).⁴ The second author of the paper is the National Coordinator of the project for Sri Lanka.

The intent of this study was to analyse the potential of the new Teacher Education program designed as a collaborative EU co-funded Capacity Building project CONTESSA, the

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Contemporary Teaching Skills for South Asia (<https://contessa-project.eu/>) to fulfill the needs of teacher education at present especially in the post-Covid-19 context in Sri Lanka and in general in Asia. The project

A qualitative content analysis was conducted in order to investigate the potential and impact of the new teacher education program provided through CONTESSA. The content was analysed using grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss 2008). The analysis was on the appropriateness of content and utility of instructional design to meet the challenges of teaching-learning that might continue in the post-Covid-19 context. Based on the content A thematic analysis was carried out for the systematic, intersubjectively comprehensible description of content-related and formal features of the CONTESSA programme. The focus of the analysis is primarily on the pedagogical content in view of educational challenges related to Covid-19.

Findings: Thematic content analysis of Contemporary Teaching Skills for South Asia, CONTESSA

The CONTESSA faces gaps for HE teacher education that have opened up during the COVID-19 pandemic and worked out adequate solutions for advancing contemporary teaching formats in the HE sector. Since digitization is not a solution in itself, the project design for this project was guided by rather pedagogical than technical questions such as: Which innovative approaches and practices for further improving HE teaching and learning need to be developed, offered and implemented into the HE systems to ensure effective (digital) transformation processes during and also after the COVID-19 crisis? What do HE teachers need to be equipped with the necessary skills to leverage the current and emerging challenges and to enhance their professional practice in face-to-face, hybrid and digital environments?

CONTESSA integrates lessons learnt from the past two years in which the educational system was bound to adapt to the new pandemic-related requirements (Vithanapathirana, M., 2021). It provides approaches to learning and teaching with a wide range of didactic methods, target-oriented and learner-oriented planning, provide examples of how to establish concrete lifeworld references and offer real case-studies and video of classroom situations (Hummel et al. 2021e). Self-reflexion and individual professionalisation processes are a main focus of the two core elements this new didactic programme consists of – namely:

a) A Train-the-Trainer programme that supplies teacher trainers with the skills and information needed to transfer knowledge to teachers and trainee teachers

To arrive at a more modern form of teacher education, first of all teacher educators as one main target group have to be addressed. A comprehensive train-the-trainer programme allows teacher educators to become acquainted with contemporary educational theories, approaches and methods, including the following topics:

- Planning teaching and learning for student teachers
- Enhancing pedagogic professionalization processes
- Supporting individual student development
- Mentoring
- Assessing student learning
- Trainer tutorial

b) A one-course for teacher training with five open access online modules focusing on integral contemporary teaching skills

Five online-modules that serve as a comprehensive teacher education programme for the achievement of contemporary teaching competences are developed that are made up of fully worked-out contents and tasks. The modules for teacher education contain key elements that include contemporary teaching methods and aim at improving the teaching skills of student teachers, such as the following (Hummel et al. 2021c):

- Building Blocks of Primary Education
- Excellence in Teaching: Profession-Specific Competences of Primary School Teachers
- Learner-Centred Primary Education: Enhancing Co-Created Learning Processes
- Embracing the Differences: Pedagogic Approaches to Diversity, Heterogeneity and Special Needs
- Digital Teaching and Learning

The online modules include:

- Audio files for theoretical content mediation
- Practical case studies for problem-based learning
- Specific tasks for reflection on the contents
- Compulsory as well as freely selectable additional literature
- Individual editing formats for transfer to the teachers' own lessons
- Creating a teaching portfolio as a development tool for individual teaching skills

Educational long-term impacts of the CONTESSA programme

In the investigation of the potential and impact of the new teacher education program provided through CONTESSA, a number of categories emerged. Successive categories were formed through an alternating and repetitive process of data collection and analysis that yielded the following themes in view of the acquisition and development of teaching skills related to the challenges of the educational situation during and after the Covid-19 pandemic:

Communication, presentation and media competence

One of the central research outcomes substantiated with CONTESSA is that teachers are systematically guided on how to explain things in a clear and concise way and to take into account the relationship level to the learners. Presenting information illustratively and effectively – also in virtual learning environments – is treated as a key skill in getting your message across and therefore considered as fundamental for distance learning. Presentation skills and media competence are integrated as central components for contemporary learning and teaching situations and are practically applied in the various pedagogical assignments of the CONTESSA modules. This interlinkage between theoretical foundation and practical application is a basic requirement of the educational challenges due to Covid-19.

Creating learning arrangements

The analysis revealed that teachers are enabled to acquire knowledge regarding methods of creating stimulating teaching-learning settings in terms of spatial and also social arrangements – also in virtual environments. The involvement of learners in virtual environments who are

not considered as 'receptacles' of knowledge but of individuals who create their learning actively and uniquely is considered as one of the most fundamental potentials of the CONTESSA programme with long-term effect on education.

Accompanying individual learning processes

An effective teacher is always a mentor and accompanies individual learning processes. The CONTESSA acknowledges the consideration of learning difficulties, individual learning conditions, developmental requirements as well as learning motives and how they can be considered in classroom situations in the CONTESSA programme.

Making life-world references

Making real-world connections and referring to the life-concepts of the students is important in achieving comprehension-oriented learning processes. Ways to make life-world references are addressed in the theoretical and practical approaches of the CONTESSA modules which is also considered indispensable for successful in-person as well as remote teaching and learning scenarios.

Enhancing the ability to engage

CONTESSA introduces various paths for teachers to find engaging resources and materials for learners allowing them to acquire comprehensive and deep knowledge, formulate target-oriented assignments and opt for methods allowing the students to develop skills and competencies in an individualized and differentiated way (Hummel et al. 2021f).

Ability to empower

Teachers acquire the ability to empower students to think critically, be innovative, creative, adaptable, passionate, and flexible. They learn to encourage them to be able to solve problems, self-direct, and self-reflect. CONTESSA equips pedagogues with methods for online arrangements encouraging learners to deal with learning content in a highly differentiated way.

To sum up, the results of the qualitative content analysis of the CONTESSA programme yielded the following educational long-term impacts:

- Delivering a 'step-change' in the development of critical skills, knowledge and competences to provide the foundations for participation in work and society
- Improving the transition of learners at critical stages in the education and training system
- Increasing the use of ICT in teaching and learning as flexible learning paths for individual development
- Improving the learning experience and the success of learners: Increase the quality of early years to deliver a better learning experience for young children
- Improving the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs
- Improving the progress of learners with migration backgrounds

Furthermore, it can be highlighted that the CONTESSA programme pays particular attention to the specific ethnic and cultural characteristics of the target groups in both partner countries. In order to reach all teachers, also those with weak English language skills, the materials provided by CONTESSA was translated from English into Khmer for Cambodia and into Sinhalese and Tamil for Sri Lanka and videos have been provided with subtitles in the mentioned languages. This is considered as central for an inclusive online course.

Summary

CONTESSA includes educational diversifications as needed during and after the corona crisis with the potential to fundamentally change the nature of education in the long term. It opens up new paths for a teacher education programme that builds upon the latest research findings in the field of higher education didactics. This project is centred on curriculum development and provides innovative learning and teaching tools, methodologies, and pedagogical approaches including learning outcomes and ICT-based practices by means of flexible learning paths. A comprehensive train-the-trainer programme, as well as five modules for the mediation of teaching skills to student teachers and in-service teachers, has been developed. They include contemporary elements of a teacher education setup according to the acquisition of today's key competencies that pupils require in order to be capable of leading a self-determined life.

The didactical skills strengthened through the CONTESSA project enhance the comprehensive teaching and learning experiences for both students and teachers. Through the activities and assessments of CONTESSA, teachers will understand, practice, and learn to apply their pedagogical and digital competencies in real-life scenarios through a virtual environment thereby significantly impacting the learning paths of their students.

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