

Exploring Context as an Amplifier or Filter in Implementing Blended Teaching in SBAE

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Introduction and Conceptual Framework

In the consensus model of teacher professional knowledge and skills (TPK&S), Gess-Newsome (2015) identified teachers as free agents with the ability to “embrace, reject, or modify new knowledge, skills, and practices” (p. 34). A teachers’ beliefs, orientations, prior knowledge, and context all act as amplifiers or filters when a teacher is presented with new knowledge (Gess-Newsome, 2015). In general, amplifiers and filters mediate the transition from professional and content specific knowledge to classroom practice (Gess-Newsome, 2015). For example, as teachers encounter new instructional strategies, such as blended teaching, contextual variables such as infrastructure, administration, and school community, among others, can act as amplifiers or filters as teachers seek to transfer their new knowledge into practice. Drawing on the definition of blended learning established by Horn and Staker (2015), *blended teaching* can be defined as the purposeful integration of a formalized online and face-to-face instructional program that incorporates student choice and personalization which can be achieved through an awareness of how time, place, pace, and path impact student learning.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers discussed how their blended teaching practice was amplified or filtered by contextual factors impacting their SBAE classrooms, specifically how school administration supported or hindered the adoption and implementation of blended teaching and learning.

Methods

This study was part of a larger project that employed a phenomenological approach, seeking to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of a shared experience or phenomenon (i.e., blended teaching) by several individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Using the TPK&S framework and relying specifically on the concept of amplifiers and filters (Gess-Newsome, 2015), we explored how five SBAE teachers who self-identified as blended educators discussed the impact contextual factors had on their blended teaching practice. Each participant engaged in hour-long, semi-structured interviews in which they were asked several questions regarding their beliefs and practices about blended teaching. Data were transcribed and coded in two rounds following steps outlined by Saldaña (2009). We drew on Lincoln and Guba’s (1986) criteria for trustworthiness and on Berger (2015) and Malterud (2001) to tend to reflexivity.

Findings

The SBAE teachers who participated in this study identified that there were important contextual factors that amplified their blended teaching knowledge and skills. The contextual factors frequently discussed included infrastructural support and support from administration and school districts. The infrastructural support the participants referenced most frequently was access to computers in their classrooms. Each of the SBAE teachers in this study had one-to-one computing available in their classrooms. Blended teaching requires teaching and learning to happen, in part, in an online setting. As such, student access to computers, particularly one-to-one computing, becomes a critical contextual and supportive component of blended teaching.

Participants also identified instances where support from their school administration and school districts was an important part of being able to practice blended teaching. One participant,

Nancy, discussed how her school district was in the process of implementing blended learning when she was hired:

When I was hired, I had a principal who was very supportive and said, 'We really want some change in the program, and we want you.' Because, at my last school, I had dabbled in blended learning, but it was a much larger district. And so, when I came here, we journeyed into...blended learning together.

Similarly, Jill recounted how the environments between her first and second school impacted her ability to explore and try new things in her teaching practice, such as blended teaching:

So, the first six years of teaching, I was in a newer building in an up-and-coming district, and they were very into performance, which puts a lot of pressure on a new teacher who's just trying to learn how to manage a kid that doesn't want to do work, or learn how to plan a good lesson. A job opened up that was closer to home, and that district very much focused on the opportunities we can get for kids. We don't care, you have flexibility to do that, how you want to do that...but that's what we want, is opportunities for kids. And it took a couple years for me to be okay with that flexibility and freedom.

When Jeremy's school district started talking about moving to one-to-one computing, he decided that he wanted to be a part of the conversation and his administration supported him in that; he wanted to be one of the decision-makers:

When it became apparent to me that computers were going to be the way we started teaching, and I started seeing districts around us go one-to-one, I started hearing those conversations here in our school district...if we're gonna do it, I want to be one of the people that decides how we do it. I don't want to be told how to do it. I want to figure it out and be part of the group that says, hey, here's the best way to do it.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the TPK&S model, Gess-Newsome (2015), identified context as one of the potential amplifiers and filters leading to decisions that influence classroom practice. The SBAE teachers in this study spoke to the importance of context, particularly the support they received and how it impacted their ability to adopt and implement blended teaching in their classrooms. This type of support ranged from one-to-one computing, which has been widely adopted because of the pandemic, along with administrative support in providing an environment that allowed teachers the ability to be flexible and seek teaching and learning opportunities that benefited students.

The contextual amplifiers and filters that SBAE teachers use to accept, reject, or modify knowledge of blended teaching merits additional investigation of how support (e.g., infrastructural, administrative, community) received or denied could potentially be a gatekeeper for further adoption and implementation of blended teaching in SBAE. We recommend that further research is needed to better understand the contextual factors that impact how SBAE teachers can either amplify their knowledge and skills related to blended teaching or how context acts as a filter of their blended teaching knowledge and skills. Additional qualitative research could illuminate the nuances of context related to the adoption of blended teaching in SBAE. Quantitative research methods could be used to multiply and diversify SBAE teacher participants who represent a wider range of career stages, geographic locations, and program sizes to further examine blended teaching amplifiers and filters at the profession wide.

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