

How Finland is moving Geography into the future?

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The need for distance learning possibilities in a sparsely populated country such as Finland is great. As education has begun to shift from the traditional classroom to the technological web, more and more eLearning courses have become a part of the curricula both at schools and in universities. The value of eLearning lies in its flexibility in the delivery of course material (Khalifa & Lam, 2002). Students are allowed to learn in their own way to determine their own path through the material available (Barua, 2001) and to learn things at their own pace (Chen, 2002). We should create material which supports the development of independent study skills and helps students in their individual and autonomic studying processes. The potential benefit of understanding how attitudes and conceptions of students fit teaching ideas is enormous.

The methods of delivering an eLearning curriculum and the resultant teaching processes are complicated. They are new and very different from those used in traditional class teaching. Influential factors for eLearning processes are the ICT infrastructure such as computer labs and access to the network, management support, and the school culture. In addition to the university and school teachers' own readiness and their preferences for meeting face-to-face, the students' and their parents' preparedness are also crucial. Student preparedness includes the items related to students' and parents' preparedness, as well as access to the Internet; and teachers' preparedness includes the items related to teachers' willingness and degree of readiness for ICT – and also for other new teaching strategies and methods in Geography education. To move our educational practices forward, we will need an understanding of the students, as well as a willingness to experiment with new teaching and learning models. Teachers' pedagogical skills, attitudes, and general competences vary a lot, and the pedagogical skills and ICT skills of the university and school teachers need constant reinforcement and updating. Kankaanranta (2005) has written

“Innovative Finnish classrooms should promote active and independent learning and provide students with competencies to search for, organize, and analyze information, and communicate and express their ideas in a variety of media forms. The innovative classrooms engage students in collaborative, project-based learning in complex and real-world problems”.

There are a small number of educational collaboration projects between Finland and other countries. These kinds of projects are important when promoting cultural understanding, cultural sensitivity and intercultural competence among participating students and teachers and the establishment of international network by means of new information and communication technologies. Consequently, it seems that the most viable way to achieve desirable educational goals is through building up a network of resources and expertise as well as encouraging collaboration between students and teachers at a global and local level. It is also important to open up the classrooms to external influences in various ways, especially through involving different participants such as parents, scientists, and business professionals in the daily work of schools. Nevertheless, the schools themselves have to make an effort to ensure the continuous development of infrastructure and pedagogically relevant use of ICT (Kankaanranta, 2006). Robert B. Kozma (2005, p. 133-134) argue that Finland's educational approach is successful, because it is based on broad and decentralized decision making and collaborative knowledge creation. It is also characteristic of the Finnish approach that decisions on the curriculum and instruction are made by local schools and teachers. Kozma continues his analysis in saying that this kind of distributed effort is coordinated by the vision of a Finnish information society, in which technology and information sharing support economic growth and social development.

Future research should focus more closely on examining the reasons behind, and the factors motivating, the enjoyment of teaching, studying and learning Geography. There are also other important questions which need to be addressed. One of those is: what exactly do we know about the learning processes and the results of technology-rich learning environments.

References

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