

Workshop Proposal

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Title of Workshop

Students' Basic Psychological Needs in Blended Teacher Learning Groups During COVID-19

Intended Audience

This workshop has three target groups: educational researchers, educational professionals (teacher trainers), and students (student teachers).

Workshop Description

Teacher Learning Groups (TLGs) are social configurations in which student teachers (henceforth: students) learn together with peers, teacher trainers and teachers through social interactions (Doppenberg et al., 2012). Due to the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, blended education has developed quickly. Blended education combines contact learning with distance learning (Müller & Mildenerger, 2021). This workshop aims to shed light on how blended meetings interfere with the fulfilment of students' basic psychological needs in TLGs. We also want to find out how to facilitate TLGs to support students' basic psychological needs in times when social distancing is necessary or when blended education is convenient (e.g., to enhance the accessibility of education).

The likelihood of study success increases when students are motivated for their studies (Howard et al., 2021). Study motivation is enhanced by learning environments that support students' basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, relatedness, and competence) (Ryan & Deci, 2020). These needs can be met in TLGs as learning in TLGs is brought about by an autonomous, intrinsic learning need, where the direct applicability of the acquired knowledge increases students' competence in relation to others (Vrieling-Teunter, de Vries, et al., 2021).

However, important preconditions to fulfil students' basic psychological needs are related to the TLGs social configuration (i.e., social patterns of group constellation, behaviour, and thinking). The social configurations of TLGs can be mapped to three dimensions (i.e., practice integration, long term orientation and goals, and shared identity and equal relationships) (Vrieling-Teunter, Hebing, et al., 2021). Earlier research shows, for example, that working equally in an informal atmosphere – as described in the dimension of shared identity and equal

relationships – is positively related to students’ basic psychological needs (Vrieling-Teunter, de Vries, et al., 2021).

It was common for TLGs to convene physically on a regular basis. However, this has abruptly changed due to COVID-19. Because of the COVID-19 measures imposed by the Dutch government (e.g., strict isolation measures), TLGs had to switch constantly between contact learning and distance learning, often at the last moment, and went (partially) online for their meetings. The expected change this has constituted in the social configurations of TLGs, may put the preconditions to meet the fulfilment of students’ basic psychological needs under pressure. This expectation is in line with students’ perception of reduced fulfilment of their basic psychological needs in general within educational institutes in the Netherlands and other Western countries during COVID-19 (e.g., Vermote et al., 2020). In this workshop we present the results of an exploratory study on how students perceive the social configurations and basic psychological needs in TLGs during COVID-19.

We examined the relationship between social configurations and basic psychological needs of students in TLGs through a convergent parallel mixed-methods pre- and post-test design (Creswell, 2014). The students (n = 91) participated in TLGs for one academic year organized within four different primary teacher training institutes in the Netherlands. Data was gathered at the start (October/November 2020) and at the end (May/June 2021) of the academic year. Since the four teacher training institutes were facilitated differently in their TLG key elements (i.e. composition, goals, frequency, duration, guidance, and assessment of the meetings), we had the opportunity to investigate: (a) in which ways students experienced a variety in social configurations of TLGs during COVID-19 and (b) the extent to which TLGs’ social configurations were related to students’ basic psychological needs. The variables social configuration and basic psychological needs were assessed qualitatively through the use of interviews and quantitatively employing two online surveys: the ‘Dimensions of Social Learning Questionnaire’ (Vrieling-Teunter et al., 2020) and the ‘Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale’ (BPNSFS; Chen et al., 2015). The latter we will explain in more detail during the workshop.

In semi-structured interviews, 14 students from across the four institutes reflected on their perceived social configurations and basic psychological needs in TLGs at the time of COVID-19. This reflection showed that blended TLG meetings can be made worthwhile for students, but students also expressed the hurdles that are specific to working in TLGs when social distancing is necessary. For example, TLGs met the fulfilment of the need for **autonomy** as students experienced freedom of choice in how they could achieve their **goals** as part of the ‘Long term orientation and goals’ dimension. However, some students had to postpone or modify their goals because TLG activities were delayed or cancelled because of COVID-19 measures: *“Doing research in elementary schools ... was very difficult during the lockdown” (Institute C)*. A second example is that TLGs met the fulfilment of the need for **relatedness** as students experienced **reciprocal relationships** as part of the ‘Shared identity and equal relationships’ dimension while working together with TLG members with various professional backgrounds during contact learning. Students pointed out that the presence of reciprocal relationships made them eager to learn together at times of COVID-19. However, students also noticed a formal atmosphere between TLG members when working together online during distance learning. While working online, students missed informal moments such as chatting or joking: *“There are fewer of those little moments to catch up on the weekend or other things” (Institute C)*. A final example is that TLGs meet students’ fulfilment of the need for **competence** during online TLG meetings, for example, by exchanging **practical experiences** in subgroups (e.g., Breakout Rooms) as part of the ‘Practice integration’ dimension. Students highlighted that this way of working made them feel capable to complete assignments for their education or internship. On the other hand, some students experienced too little time for exchanging practical experiences during online TLG meetings. The online meetings in (sub)groups were for instance organized only sporadically or very briefly or the students missed the exchange of practical experiences with the entire TLG group. *“It’s actually more about the things they [students] encounter ... than what you would normally want to exchange. There’s no room for that” (Institute D)*.

Overall, the results of this exploratory study reveal the importance of facilitating relevant preconditions (e.g., providing time and space for informal moments during online TLG meetings) to enhance the fulfilment of students’ basic psychological needs in TLGs at times when social distancing is necessary or when blended education is convenient. We believe this is a relevant topic for research and practice, seeing as blended learning will likely become the norm in higher education.

Participant Engagement

To involve participants during this workshop we will create a setting that allows workshop participants to experience first-hand what it is like to work together in a blended TLG. Workshop participants will participate simultaneously physically (onsite workshop participants) and online (offsite workshop participants). We will recreate an online meeting of a blended learning-themed TLG, centred around the phase of analysis and exploration – the first phase of Education Design Research (McKenney & Reeves, 2018) – which is the method used in most of the TLGs that were part of this study. Workshop participants will be assigned the role of student, and will be asked to engage in a Group Wisdom activity (i.e., mapping a digital group concept) to visualize which topics they value in order to arrive at a common focus for the recreated TLG. To secure enough participants in both modes, particularly online we will engage student teachers from our institutions to participate in this workshop. We will share what our research findings indicated concerning the difficulties students encountered while working blended on the analysis and exploration phase in the TLGs design process. Subsequently, we will challenge workshop participants to use Padlet for generating ideas on how feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence can be stimulated in a blended TLG. Supplementary to our recommendations, this may lead to additional recommendations for teacher training institutes to facilitate the social configuration of TLGs when organizing social learning (partially) online in order to meet the basic psychological needs of students.

Participant Outcomes

By participating in this workshop (pre-service) participants:

- will gain an understanding of the relationship between social configurations and basic psychological needs of students in TLGs during blended education, and
- will receive concrete recommendations for facilitating the social configuration of TLGs to support the basic psychological needs within educational formats when organizing social learning online.

Workshop Alignment with Conference Themes

This workshop addresses the theme of ‘Debates and emerging issues in Networked Learning (e.g., the future of lifelong learning, hybridity, post-digital education, sustainability)’, as it focuses on the emerging practice of networked learning in a blended educational setting. As working and learning in TLGs is conducive to motivation, and student motivation is one of the key issues in (partially) online education, blended learning in TLGs merits scholarly attention as well as awareness of practitioners.

Workshop Process/Activities

During the workshop, active online strategies will be used so that both onsite and online participants can cooperate:

1. Introduction: who is participating (digital pins on a map);
2. Prior knowledge of the participants concerning facilitating student motivation in TLGs (poll via Mentimeter);
3. Previous study: Student motivation in TLGs (Vrieling-Teunter, de Vries, et al., 2021): sharing and exploring guidelines for student facilitation (Padlet);
4. Blended learning-themed TLG: workshop participants work together in a blended recreated TLG (Group Wisdom activity);
5. Present study: Students’ basic psychological needs in blended TLGs during COVID-19: sharing and exploring additional guidelines (Padlet);
6. Take-home message and networking session (open mic).

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