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Digital education and teacher training program in Barbados

March 30, 2021 por [Sabine Rieble](#)

This blog was written jointly with [Virpi Heinonen](#) who is responsible for the cooperation initiatives and projects in the Latin America and the Caribbean at Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Finland. We work closely together with our partners to provide Finnish higher education know-how to the region.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, from March to June 2020 schools were closed in Barbados and education services were disrupted, affecting nearly [57,530 students](#). The new academic year started in Barbados (September 21, 2020), while schools in Barbados were expected to implement a hybrid model including face-to-face classes in small groups. However, the [recent surge in COVID-19 infections](#) in the country pushed back on this decision, and now all classes are conducted in the online modality. In this context, new digital skills and distance learning pedagogies are of paramount importance for teachers to maintain continuity of learning.

The emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic required teachers to use distance learning modalities. In response to this, the Ministry of Education, Technological and Vocational Training of Barbados (METVT), together with Tampere University of Applied Sciences ([TAMK](#)) from Finland, and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), implemented a teacher training program on digital skills and e-pedagogies. The courses had a strong component on mentoring and professional development.

This teacher training program was an amazing opportunity to work with fellow educators from Barbados during the months of October to December upscaling local teachers' digital skills at classrooms. The program, aimed at implementing proven digital methods with a highly practical approach to their local schools, has been implemented in Finland as a continuous education program during years with great success and good results. In Barbados, in a very similar manner, the program helped the participants to become familiar with the tools and opportunities of digital pedagogy and use them in respect to the content of the subject being taught. The modality was 100% online, and the participating teachers and the METVT officials expressed satisfaction with the training. The collaboration received from the METVT, the technical teams, and the teachers were key factors for this initial training and overcame the time difference between Barbados and Finland.

A total number of 120 Barbadian teachers were trained to pedagogical use of free online digital tools in a relatively short time and using deep Finnish know-how in the subject. In the first two cohorts of 30 teachers each, the training happened at a very intensive pace getting together each day of the week. We quickly found out that this pace, was quite overwhelming to the teachers that had to keep on running their regular classes, and somehow this compromised their learning process. That is why, for the following two cohorts, we decided to change the pace of the classes. The participants of the two following cohorts joined online once a week, instead of each day of the week. This allowed the participants to have more

time to practice and implement the newly learned skills in their teaching. Everyone's ability to be flexible and adapt, proved to be the common tone of work for those behind the scenes and the actual protagonists, the teachers.

The feedback from the teachers participating in the Digital Education course was both inspirational and heart-warming because they were committed, enthusiastic, and motivated to learn about the possibilities of digitalization. *"I was amazed by the amount of free digital tools which can be incorporated into the teaching and learning process to make lessons more engaging, purposeful and impactful"*, concludes one of the participants.

Of course, we also had some challenges. Possibly the most important was the quality of [network connections](#) for both teachers and students in the island. There were also some initial challenges finding a timeframe for the synchronous online session because of our 7-hour time difference, an issue that was easily fixed with flexibility from all parties.

The TAMK University was in charge of the delivery of the teacher training program, with a team of six skillful teachers led by [Sanna Ruhalahti](#) and [Sisko Mällinen](#). . These two experts were also mentoring the local implementations to further contextualize the impact of the training. Mentoring was provided to the participating teachers to ensure they are equipped to train other teachers to deliver their respective courses. Mentoring session included in the program helped the participants in building contextualized solutions for their home institutions. Mentoring sessions used during and after the program provided the space where the knowledge is anchored and taken into practice by the participants. These more informal colleague to colleague sessions in small development groups provide an opportunity to discuss and reflect on the learning and receive honest feedback from the mentors for these local projects and ideas.

Peer learning from each other was probably the highlight with these local development works that teachers delivered at the end of the course. Participants needed to learn about sharing ideas and materials more openly, to fill a gap to encourage the culture of sharing. The best reward for the Finnish mentor Sanna was the applied development tasks, where teachers showed their own competence development on a completely new level. She also concluded that participants were able to learn something new about the work of their peers. There is still some work to do strengthening teachers as in a learning community to empower those in a teaching profession and deepen the knowledge in understanding digital pedagogy.

One of the unexpected findings for us was that the teacher community would need common meeting places, e.g., on a subject-by-subject basis. Time to work with peers was another finding as every teacher seemed to work alone most of the time. In the current context, there is no in person teamwork or team teaching among peers and no encounters across school boundaries. We look forward to continue our journey with the Barbadian teachers and work together on these issues to find innovative solutions.