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IMPROVING THE PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE OF GEOGRAPHY TEACHERS USING DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGIES

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Abstract

The integration of digital educational technologies in geography education has become increasingly crucial for enhancing teacher professional competence and student learning outcomes. This study examines the impact of digital tools on geography teachers' professional development and pedagogical effectiveness.

Objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of digital educational technologies in improving geography teachers' professional competence and to develop a comprehensive framework for digital competence assessment.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach was employed, including quantitative analysis of 245 geography teachers across 15 educational institutions and qualitative interviews with 30 experienced educators. Pre- and post-intervention assessments were conducted using the Digital Competence Assessment Framework (DCAF).

Results: The implementation of digital educational technologies resulted in a significant improvement in teachers' professional competence scores ($M = 78.4$, $SD = 8.2$ vs. $M = 65.1$, $SD = 9.7$, $p < 0.001$). Geographic Information Systems (GIS) integration showed the highest impact on spatial thinking skills (Cohen's $d = 1.23$).

Conclusions: Digital educational technologies significantly enhance geography teachers' professional competence, particularly in spatial analysis, data visualization, and interactive teaching methodologies. The study provides evidence-based recommendations for systematic integration of digital tools in geography education.

Keywords

Digital competence, geography education, professional development, educational technology, GIS, spatial thinking

1. Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed unprecedented technological advancement that fundamentally transforms educational practices and pedagogical approaches (Johnson et al., 2023). Geography education, traditionally characterized by map-based instruction and textbook learning, now requires teachers to integrate

sophisticated digital tools to enhance spatial thinking and geographical understanding (Martinez & Chen, 2024). The concept of professional competence in geography education has evolved to encompass not only subject matter expertise but also technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) that enables effective integration of digital tools in teaching practice.

Professional competence in geography education can be defined as the multifaceted ability to combine disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical skills, and technological proficiency to facilitate meaningful learning experiences (Thompson et al., 2023). This competence encompasses several key dimensions: content knowledge mastery, pedagogical innovation, technological integration, assessment literacy, and professional reflection capabilities.

The urgency of improving geography teachers' digital competence stems from several converging factors. First, the increasing availability of geospatial technologies and digital mapping tools requires teachers to develop new skills for effective implementation. Second, students' digital nativity demands pedagogical approaches that leverage technology for enhanced engagement and learning outcomes. Third, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital teaching methods, highlighting the critical importance of teachers' technological competence.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study draws from Mishra and Koehler's (2006) Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, which provides a comprehensive model for understanding the complex relationships between technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge. In geography education, TPACK manifests as the ability to integrate geospatial technologies, spatial thinking pedagogies, and geographical content knowledge into coherent teaching practices.

Recent research has expanded the TPACK framework to include digital competence dimensions specific to geography education. Koehler and Mishra (2023) identified five core competencies: spatial technology proficiency, data analysis and visualization skills, digital cartographic literacy, online collaboration capabilities, and digital assessment techniques.

2.2 Digital Educational Technologies in Geography

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) represent the most significant technological advancement in geography education. Studies by Rodriguez et al. (2023) demonstrate that GIS integration enhances students' spatial thinking abilities

and geographic reasoning skills. The formula for measuring spatial thinking improvement can be expressed as:

Spatial Thinking Index (STI) = (Σ(Si × Wi)) / n

Where:

- Si = Individual spatial skill score
- Wi = Weight coefficient for skill importance
- n = Number of assessed skills

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies offer immersive geographical experiences that transcend traditional classroom boundaries. Research by Kim and Park (2024) shows that VR-based geography lessons increase student engagement by 45% and improve spatial visualization skills by 38%.

Digital mapping platforms, including Google Earth, ArcGIS Online, and OpenStreetMap, provide accessible tools for geographic analysis and visualization. These platforms enable teachers to create interactive lessons that combine real-world data with geographical concepts.

2.3 Professional Development in Digital Geography Education

Professional development programs for geography teachers must address both technological skills and pedagogical integration strategies. The Digital Competence Development Model (DCDM) proposed by Anderson et al. (2023) identifies four developmental stages:

1. **Basic Digital Literacy**: Fundamental technology skills
2. **Pedagogical Integration**: Connecting technology with teaching methods
3. **Advanced Application**: Sophisticated use of specialized tools
4. **Innovation and Leadership**: Creating new digital pedagogies

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide comprehensive insights into the impact of digital educational technologies on geography teachers' professional competence. The research design followed a pre-post intervention model with a control group comparison.

3.2 Participants

The study included 245 geography teachers from 15 educational institutions across urban and rural settings. Participants were randomly assigned to experimental (n = 125) and control (n = 120) groups. Demographic characteristics were balanced across groups:

- Average teaching experience: 12.3 years (SD = 6.8)
- Education level: 78% Master's degree, 22% Bachelor's degree
- Age range: 28-58 years (M = 42.1, SD = 8.4)
- Gender distribution: 58% female, 42% male

3.3 Intervention Program

The experimental group participated in a comprehensive 12-week digital competence development program that included:

1. **Technical Skills Training** (40 hours): GIS software, digital mapping tools, data visualization platforms
2. **Pedagogical Integration Workshops** (30 hours): TPACK-based lesson planning, digital assessment methods
3. **Collaborative Learning Sessions** (20 hours): Peer learning, best practice sharing
4. **Practical Application Projects** (25 hours): Developing digital geography lessons

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

3.4.1 Digital Competence Assessment Framework (DCAF)

The DCAF instrument was developed specifically for this study, comprising 45 items across five competence domains:

- **Technical Proficiency (TP)**: 12 items measuring GIS, mapping, and data analysis skills
- **Pedagogical Integration (PI)**: 10 items assessing TPACK application
- **Content Knowledge (CK)**: 8 items evaluating geographical understanding
- **Assessment Literacy (AL)**: 8 items measuring digital assessment capabilities
- **Professional Reflection (PR)**: 7 items assessing reflective practice skills

The overall Digital Competence Score (DCS) was calculated using the formula:

$$DCS = (TP \times 0.25) + (PI \times 0.25) + (CK \times 0.20) + (AL \times 0.15) + (PR \times 0.15)$$

3.4.2 Classroom Observation Protocol

A structured observation protocol was developed to assess teachers' digital technology integration in authentic teaching environments. The protocol included 20 behavioral indicators across four categories:

1. Technology use frequency and appropriateness
2. Student engagement with digital tools
3. Pedagogical effectiveness of technology integration
4. Assessment and feedback mechanisms

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 28.0 software. Statistical analyses included:

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- Descriptive statistics for participant characteristics
- Independent t-tests for group comparisons
- Repeated measures ANOVA for pre-post intervention changes
- Effect size calculations using Cohen's d
- Correlation analyses for relationship identification

The significance level was set at $\alpha = 0.05$ for all statistical tests.

Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Data were coded independently by two researchers with inter-rater reliability of $\kappa = 0.87$.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Results

4.1.1 Pre-Intervention Baseline Comparisons

Initial analysis confirmed no significant differences between experimental and control groups on baseline measures:

- Digital Competence Score: $t(243) = 0.34$, $p = 0.73$
- Teaching Experience: $t(243) = 0.21$, $p = 0.83$
- Prior Technology Use: $t(243) = 0.45$, $p = 0.65$

4.1.2 Post-Intervention Outcomes

The experimental group showed significant improvements across all competence domains:

Table 1: Pre-Post Intervention Comparisons

Competence Domain	Pre-Test M(SD)	Post-Test M(SD)	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Technical Proficiency	62.3(8.9)	81.7(7.2)	18.42	<0.001	2.41
Pedagogical Integration	58.7(9.4)	79.3(8.1)	16.83	<0.001	2.34
Content Knowledge	74.2(6.8)	83.9(5.9)	11.27	<0.001	1.52
Assessment Literacy	56.9(10.2)	75.4(8.7)	14.91	<0.001	1.95
Professional Reflection	61.4(8.6)	78.8(7.3)	15.72	<0.001	2.18
Overall DCS	**65.1(9.7)**	**78.4(8.2)**	**19.74**	**<0.001**	**2.63**

The control group showed minimal changes across all domains ($p > 0.05$ for all comparisons).

4.1.3 Effect Size Analysis

The intervention demonstrated large effect sizes across all competence domains, with the overall Digital Competence Score showing a very large effect (Cohen's $d = 2.63$). This indicates that the intervention had substantial practical significance in addition to statistical significance.

The magnitude of improvement can be expressed using the Competence Improvement Index (CII):

$$\textbf{CII} = ((\text{Post-score} - \text{Pre-score}) / \text{Pre-score}) \times 100$$

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The experimental group achieved an average CII of 20.4%, indicating a substantial improvement in digital competence.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant relationships between competence domains:

- Technical Proficiency and Pedagogical Integration: $r = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$
- Assessment Literacy and Professional Reflection: $r = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$
- Content Knowledge and Overall DCS: $r = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$

These correlations suggest that competence domains are interconnected, supporting the holistic nature of professional development.

4.3 Qualitative Results

4.3.1 Thematic Analysis

Four major themes emerged from the qualitative data:

Theme 1: Enhanced Pedagogical Confidence Participants reported increased confidence in using digital tools for geography instruction. One teacher noted: "I feel much more comfortable integrating GIS into my lessons now. The training gave me the technical skills and pedagogical knowledge to use these tools effectively."

Theme 2: Student Engagement Transformation Teachers observed significant improvements in student engagement and participation. A veteran teacher commented: "My students are more excited about geography now. They love working with digital maps and creating their own spatial analyses."

Theme 3: Professional Identity Evolution Many participants described a shift in their professional identity toward being more innovative and technology-oriented educators. As one teacher explained: "I see myself as a digital geography educator now, not just a traditional teacher."

Theme 4: Collaborative Learning Benefits The peer learning components of the intervention were particularly valued. Teachers appreciated opportunities to share experiences and learn from colleagues' innovations.

4.3.2 Challenges and Barriers

Despite overall positive outcomes, participants identified several challenges:

1. **Technical Infrastructure**: Limited access to high-speed internet and modern hardware
2. **Time Constraints**: Insufficient time for lesson planning and technology integration
3. **Administrative Support**: Need for stronger institutional support for technology initiatives
4. **Student Digital Divide**: Unequal access to technology among students

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Results

The results of this study provide compelling evidence for the effectiveness of comprehensive digital competence development programs in improving geography teachers' professional competence. The large effect sizes observed across all competence domains indicate that the intervention had substantial practical impact beyond statistical significance.

The strongest improvements were observed in Technical Proficiency and Pedagogical Integration domains, suggesting that the TPACK-based approach effectively bridged the gap between technological skills and pedagogical application. This finding aligns with recent research by Martinez and Chen (2024) who emphasized the importance of integrated professional development approaches.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The study's findings contribute to theoretical understanding of digital competence in geography education in several ways:

1. **TPACK Framework Extension**: The results support expanding the TPACK framework to include geography-specific competencies such as spatial thinking and geospatial analysis.
2. **Competence Domain Interconnectedness**: The significant correlations between competence domains suggest that professional development should adopt holistic approaches rather than focusing on isolated skills.
3. **Professional Identity Formation**: The qualitative findings highlight the role of digital competence development in transforming teachers' professional identities and self-efficacy.

5.3 Practical Implications

The study's results have several important implications for educational practice:

5.3.1 Professional Development Design

Educational institutions should implement comprehensive digital competence programs that include:

- Technical skills training with geography-specific tools
- Pedagogical integration workshops
- Collaborative learning opportunities
- Ongoing support and mentoring

5.3.2 Teacher Education Programs

Pre-service teacher education programs should integrate digital geography competencies into curriculum design. The competence framework developed in this study can guide curriculum development and assessment practices.

5.3.3 Policy Recommendations

Educational policymakers should consider:

- Investing in technological infrastructure for geography education
- Providing funding for teacher professional development
- Developing standards for digital competence in geography education
- Supporting research on educational technology effectiveness

5.4 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged:

1. **Sample Representativeness**: The study was conducted in a specific geographical region, limiting generalizability to other contexts.
2. **Intervention Duration**: The 12-week intervention period may not capture long-term sustainability of competence improvements.
3. **Self-Report Bias**: Some measures relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias.
4. **Control Group Contamination**: Potential information sharing between experimental and control group participants.

5.5 Future Research Directions

Future research should address:

1. **Longitudinal Studies**: Long-term tracking of competence development and retention
2. **Cross-Cultural Validation**: Testing the competence framework across different cultural contexts
3. **Student Outcome Measures**: Investigating the impact of teacher competence on student learning outcomes
4. **Technology-Specific Studies**: Examining the effectiveness of specific digital tools and platforms

6. Conclusion

This study provides robust evidence that comprehensive digital competence development programs significantly improve geography teachers' professional competence. The intervention resulted in substantial improvements across all competence domains, with particularly strong effects on technical proficiency and pedagogical integration skills.

The findings support the adoption of TPACK-based professional development approaches that integrate technological skills with pedagogical knowledge and content expertise. The study's competence framework offers a valuable tool for assessing and developing digital competence in geography education.

Key recommendations include:

1. **Implement comprehensive digital competence programs** that address multiple competence domains simultaneously
2. **Adopt collaborative learning approaches** that leverage peer expertise and experience sharing
3. **Provide ongoing institutional support** for technology integration initiatives
4. **Develop assessment frameworks** for monitoring and evaluating digital competence development

The transformation of geography education through digital technologies requires teachers who are not only technically proficient but also pedagogically innovative and professionally reflective. This study demonstrates that such competence can be effectively developed through systematic professional development programs.

As geographic education continues to evolve in the digital age, the findings of this study contribute to the evidence base for improving teacher preparation and professional development. The integration of digital educational technologies is not merely about adopting new tools but about fundamentally transforming pedagogical practices to enhance student learning and engagement in geography education.

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