

Aristeia Leadership: A Catalyst for the i²Flex Methodology

What it takes to ingeniously enact blended learning in K12 international schools

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Abstract

In response to the global educational reform we have developed a new education paradigm, the Global Morfosis paradigm which has been implemented at the American Community Schools of Athens (ACS Athens) Greece for the past decade. This dynamic paradigm consists of three inseparable, interconnected, and interrelated components: the Educational Philosophy of Morfosis (Μορφωση), the i²Flex Delivery Methodology, and the Aristeia (Αριστεία) Leadership Approach. Morfosis is defined within the 21st century framework, as a holistic, meaningful, and harmonious educational experience, guided by ethos (Gialamas, 2014). The vehicle to implement Morfosis, is the i²Flex (isquareFlex), a non-traditional learning methodology that draws on the fundamentals of blended learning, and integrates face-to-face and technology-supported instruction with faculty-guided and independent student learning, aiming at developing higher order cognitive skills within a flexible and inspiring learning design (Avgerinou, 2104). The Aristeia Leadership approach is defined by its two essential components (a) the establishment of an *Authentic Leadership Identity* (ALI), and (b) the creation of a *Collective Leadership-Partnership Approach* (CPA) (Gialamas, Pelonis, & Medeiros, 2014).

Keywords: *Aristeia leadership, i²Flex, global morfosis, blended learning, K12*

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An Education Reform at the Onset of the 21st Century

With the advent of the 21st century, it has been recognized that the world has developed in such diverse directions and created new and particularly complex demands for citizenship, college and careers, that it is no longer possible for old learning environments — associated with old learning paradigms — to accommodate them (Avgerinou, 2014).

The new reality has led to the development of a new vision for 21st century learning (Dede, 2010; LEAP, 2007; NCREL & the Metiri Group, 2003; OECD, 2005; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006, 2009, 2011). The Partnership for the 21st Century Skills framework (2006; 2009; 2011), the most detailed and widely adopted of all aforementioned, emphasizes that in addition to core subject knowledge, such skills as information and communication, inter-personal and self-directional, as well as being well versed with the technologies of this millennium (Figure 1), both from the consumer and the producer's standpoints, are critical in order to prepare students as life-long learners to successfully cope with the demands of the ever changing world of the post-industrial era of information revolution.

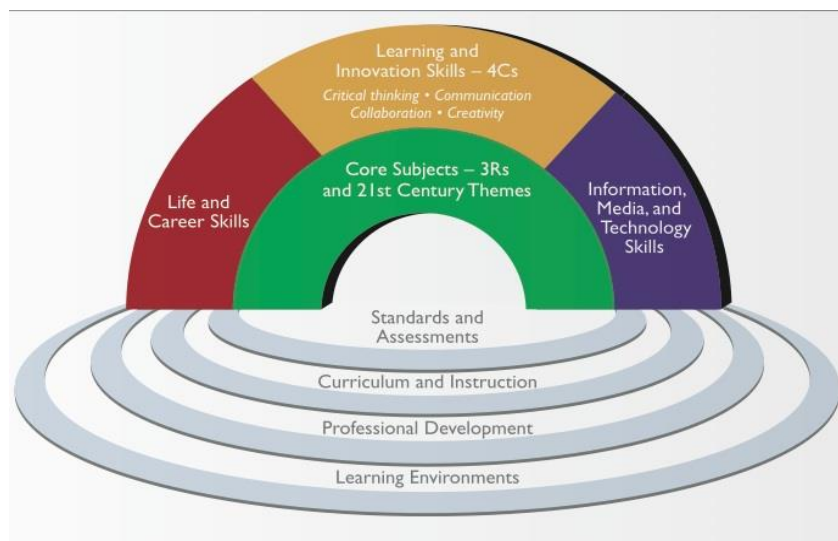


Figure 1. 21st Century Student Outcomes and Support Systems (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011)

For these learning outcomes to be achieved it is not sufficient anymore to “confine” teaching in the intersection between knowledge and pedagogy, that is, solely to apply Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)- a term coined by Shulman (1986; 1987). Schools need to seriously invest in, and systematically capitalize on the affordances of new technologies thus pay specific attention to Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPCK), defined as the interaction of technology with both pedagogy and content (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). More so than ever before, schools are now called to utilize more learner-centric pedagogies with specific focus on the newly emerged, unique profile of the *digital learner* (Prensky, 2001).

Indeed, over the past decade we have increasingly witnessed systematic endeavors toward a student-centered integration of new and emerging educational technologies. These have resulted in the exponential growth of online and blended learning in both Universities and K12

schools (Davis & Niederhauser, 2007; Rice, 2012; Watson, Murin, et al., 2010). The culminating point of all efforts related to online (and blended) learning was their salutation as the *disruptive force* that can transform the factory-like structure of today's educational institutions (Avgerinou, 2014). Hence, Clayton Christensen, Harvard Business School Professor who coined the term of art *Disrupting Innovation* (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2011), argues that by 2019 50% of all high school courses will be delivered online.

The Educational Philosophy of Morfosis

The American Community Schools of Athens (ACS Athens) Greece is deeply aware of the fact that the traditional educational approaches followed by K12 academic institutions cannot serve their learners' diverse needs as effectively anymore. As a K12 international school, ACS Athens is also affected by an idiosyncratic set of factors such as lack of a prescribed curriculum, multicultural environment, high faculty mobility, high student mobility and ensuing rolling admissions, which has a critical role in the overall planning and modus operandi of the school. In addition, ACS Athens is a strong supporter of the notion of complete alignment among school learning outcomes, university and market needs (Avgerinou, 2014).

Given these characteristics, and in response to the afore mentioned global educational reform, ACS Athens has developed its own education philosophy, Morfosis (Gialamas & Pelonis, 2009)-- a central tenet of Classical Greek education-- which is defined within the 21st century framework, as a holistic, meaningful, and harmonious educational experience, guided by ethos. Morfosis as an *outcome* is housed under the broader concept of Global Morfosis. Morfosis as a *process* is implemented via a concerted effort that is school-wide and action research-based, to integrate face-to-face and technology-supported teaching and learning (i²Flex) with Institutional Leadership.

One might then ask, what kind of leadership an educational institution needs in order to make Global Morfosis an institutional reality. The authors propose that the type of institutional leadership needed to achieve such an authentic, significant, yet challenging goal is Aristeia Leadership, that is, an advanced form of Innovative Leadership (Gialamas, 2012; 2014).

Aristeia Leadership

Aristeia Leadership is the evolution of the Innovative Leadership (Gialamas, 2012; 2014) which has been defined as the continuous act of effectively engaging all members of the institution (constituencies) while utilizing their differences, energies, inputs, and diverse qualities for all constituencies of the institution but primarily for the benefit of the students. (Gialamas, 2011, 2014; Pelonis & Gialamas, 2010).

According to Gialamas (2014), this type of leadership has four dimensions:

- a. *interpersonal*: Inspiring all constituencies to strive for excellence
- b. *setting standards*: Establishing the standards for good conduct; serving as a model for meeting these standards

- c. *servicing humanity*: Ensuring the emphasis of the education offered by the institution, is placed on the entire civic spectrum, while stemming from both social interest and commitment
- d. *establishing a partnership* between the leader and her/his leadership team

The Innovative leadership provided the foundation for the formation of the Aristeia Leadership and the establishment of its two defining dimensions, namely (Gialamas, Pelonis, & Medeiros, 2014):

- a. the Authentic Leadership Identity (ALI), and,
- b. the creation of a *Collective Leadership-Partnership Approach* (CPA).

As regards the ALI, we turn to Socrates, and apply a central tenet of the Socratic philosophy – that living a meaningful life begins with the quest to *know oneself*. Thus:

Authentic Leadership Identity = (Life Experiences and Individual Characteristics) + Personal Leadership Identity

Life Experiences and Individual Characteristics

According to Gialamas, Pelonis, and Medeiros (2014), the process of understanding where we come from and how life has affected and shaped our personalities, life choices and approaches to living is important in developing and defining a leadership identity. We do not exist void of our experiences, and our experiences and perceived views of the world to a great degree define our leadership approach.

Therefore knowing oneself, at this level, is a necessary first step in creating the leadership vision and defining its philosophy of education. It is also the force that will guide decision-making, establishing relationships, and ensuring that the institution is a healthy, thriving entity within the community, capable of moulding healthy individuals who will become tomorrow's leaders, global citizens with a commitment to serving humanity.

Personal Leadership Identity

As Gialamas et al. (2014) propose, within this personality framework, we must identify clearly our principles and values, knowing very well which are absolutely non-negotiable. Once defined, these are the fixed guides that point us in the direction of achieving our vision. By principles, we refer to specific ways of behaving — a general way of conducting ourselves. Values are best described as the standards of our actions and the attitudes of our hearts and minds that shape who we are, how we live, and how we treat other people.

Next, we must also clearly define our professional goals through a similar process of self-reflection and revision: where do we want life to take us, and how can we participate in this co-creative process? These are the questions a leader must continuously ask in order to revise, fine-tune and refine his/her leadership approach. Finally, as the last step in establishing a leadership identity, the leader must clearly identify his/her personal goals, adopting a holistic approach to

life and leadership by ensuring that personal and professional goals align and do not conflict with or undermine one another.

Creating a Collective Leadership- Partnership Approach

Establishing such a leadership includes the following stages (Gialamas et al., 2014):

- i. Establishing a partnership based on common principles and values, and complementary personal and professional goals in life;
- ii. Distributing authority and decision making;
- iii. Outlining clearly the type, magnitude and areas of authority;
- iv. Supporting and encouraging team members in using their decision making authority;
- v. Reflecting continuously on the partnership in order to adjust the distribution of ownership of decision making;
- vi. Motivating members of the leadership team to reproduce this model in their work with members of their own teams;
- vii. Fostering the same model of collaborative leadership in the classroom to empower students to pursue the kind of learning necessary to develop the intellectual, social and moral autonomy we have defined as essential 21st century human skills.

Partnerships and collaborations ensure that there are checks and balances, that other individuals participate in the decision making process and that there is a comprehensive support system in place to ensure that the institution thrives and functions at the highest possible level of achievement. They also create a greater pool of knowledge, experience, expertise, questions, ways of knowing and approaches to problem solving that make the sum greater than the individual parts. It is crucial that all members of the leadership partnership share a belief in the institutional vision and are committed to striving towards reaching common goals.

Last but not least, one must understand that the adoption of Aristeia Leadership entails a willingness to accept and live with a certain amount of risk, because innovation and change involve taking risks with new ideas that have not been tried before and thus could fail (Gialamas, 2014).

i²Flex: Delivering and Shaping the Morfosis Educational Philosophy

As mentioned earlier, the other critical component driving and facilitating the effective implementation of Morfosis Educational Philosophy, is i²Flex (isquareFlex), a non-traditional learning methodology that has been organically developed by the ACS Athens community of learners (Avgerinou, Gialamas, & Tsoukia, 2014). The i²Flex methodology integrates technology-supported, student independent learning that is guided and monitored by faculty with face-to-face learning. The main goal underlying the implementation of this learner-centered methodology in systematic, pedagogically sound ways, is the development of higher order cognitive skills as these have been specified in Bloom's revised Taxonomy (Anderson &

Krathwohl, 2001), within a learning design framework that is inspiring and flexible regarding time, pace, place, and/or mode.

Through linking high quality teaching and high quality courses with the collaborative, networked, information-rich environments that are a hallmark of the information age (Davis, et al., 2007 in Avgerinou, 2013), i²Flex draws firmly on the research and practice of blended learning (Clayton Christensen Institute, 2011; Hopper & Seaman, 2011), as this has been applied in the K12 across the US and beyond. Ultimately, i²Flex aims at cultivating and expanding students' 21st century skills, while empowering them to function as *architects of their own learning* (per the ACS Athens' vision), while at the same time facilitating their successful preparation for their higher education studies, as well as their future roles both as professionals, and global citizens.

The independent inquiry that students are required to conduct under the close monitoring of ACS Athens faculty, as well as the flexibility of continuously and dynamically shaping the relationship among time, pace, place, and mode, are the two hallmark features of i²Flex, and the ones that differentiate it from other types of blended learning.

During the 2012-13 school year a few faculty experimented with i²Flex. In the following year, a comprehensive, more sophisticated pilot plan was developed that extended and expanded the program's implementation. Thus, several i²Flex classes were piloted in 2013-2014 both at the Middle School and Academy (High School), representing a variety of content areas, instructional design models, and levels of technology integration. The i²Flex participating faculty regularly attended individual consultations (Figure 2), and group professional development sessions relevant to blended teaching and learning. Their courses were designed and reviewed according to benchmarks for online course design in the K12 that were developed by Quality Matters® (2011-2013). Students of participating i²Flex classes, but also administrators and parents were educated about the i²Flex methodology.

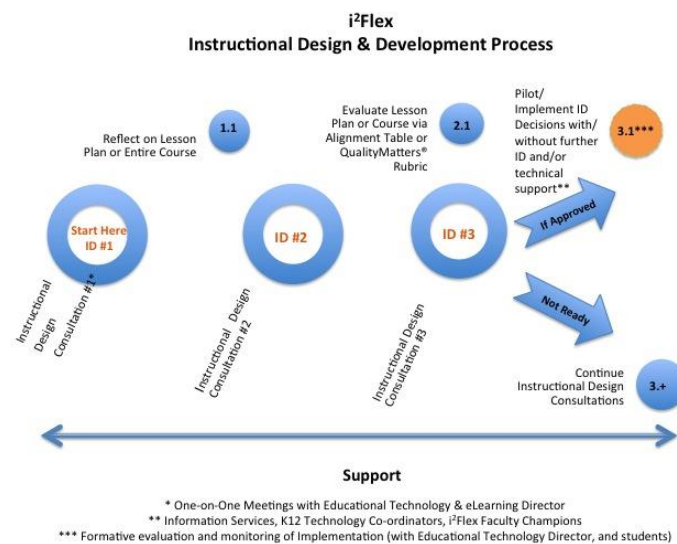


Figure 2. Instructional Design and Development Process for i²Flex Participating Faculty and their Courses

The Praxis of i²Flex

But what does it really take to ingeniously and competently design and enact i²Flex teaching and learning in K12? What essential resources, mechanisms and processes are necessary for such a school-wide, profound change to succeed? Our experience indicates that the following components need to be firmly in place:

- a. *technology infrastructure* to support the needs of i²Flex implementation at all levels;
- b. *administration, faculty, and staff* training and development (relevant, personalized, and sustainable);
- c. *curriculum* (adjustments as necessary to fit the i²Flex methodology);
- d. *leadership* (i.) to convince the constituencies about the educational value, and potential of the i²Flex methodology; and, (ii.) to support the i²Flex integration (first through communicating and educating all school constituencies about it, and subsequently through supporting in particular the faculty to implement the school-wide change).

ACS Athens has been implementing i²Flex since the academic year 2012-2013, through the following process that also illustrates the utilization (role and sequence) of the aforementioned components:

- a. After the careful consideration of the technical requirements such as efficiency, effectiveness, capacity, and speed, the appropriate investment was made in order to establish a technical infrastructure that correctly fitted the above criteria.
- b. An educational technology professional specializing in instructional design and development for eLearning was hired (*Director for educational technology and eLearning*). Her role was to perform various needs assessments that would inform her subsequent design and delivery of professional development primarily for faculty; offer personalized consulting sessions to i²Flex faculty so they could design, implement, and evaluate their courses; develop various i²Flex-related policies and procedures, including faculty performance indicators; oversee, and guide the educational technology and eLearning initiatives that support teaching and learning across ACS Athens; evaluate i²Flex courses according to the QualityMatters® standards for the K12; provide leadership and vision for academic technology across the school and beyond; serve as a resource on trends, research, applications, and effective practices related to the use of educational technology and eLearning in the various school programs; and, educate students, parents, administrators, staff and the larger practitioner as well as scholarly community about the educational benefits of i²Flex.
- c. Faculty champions decided what curriculum aspects were best delivered face-to-face or in combination with web-based delivery. This work required the development of specific types of lesson plans including specific instructional activities and assessments.

Administrators in addition to understanding the educational aspects, were trained so they could initiate the development of a faculty performance tool appropriate to address all elements of teaching via the i²Flex methodology.

- d. The leadership of ACS Athens presented, explained and received the Board of Trustees' approval and support to implement i²Flex. Then, the methodology was presented to parents in small, informal groups followed by formal presentation focusing on the needs of each of the three schools (Elementary, Middle, and High School). Similarly, small group presentations and discussions took place with faculty, at department meetings, in division meetings, and then during meetings of faculty per school. For Middle and High school students, the presentation took place in school-wide assemblies followed by class discussions. As typically change creates resistance, ACS Athens leadership supported and encouraged the faculty in particular when things did not go according to plan. Hence, the faculty felt confident and secure to continue piloting this initiative in a positive and accepting climate. The leadership repeatedly enlightened the parents and students about the benefits of this innovative approach.

Close to 25% of ACS Athens faculty participated in the first stage of this initiative. In the current academic year, all faculty have adopted the i²Flex template in the design of their Moodle course sites, while at the same time 50% of the faculty have taught according to the i²Flex methodology. It is anticipated that next year, all current and incoming ACS Athens faculty will fully implement i²Flex in their classes.

Recommendations

Despite the fact that the i²Flex methodology is still in its infancy, and data collection and analysis is not completed yet, recommendations may already be attempted with regard to (a) the process that needs to be in place, but also (b) the factors that need to be considered so that such a methodology can be successfully adopted.

Process

According to Pelonis and Gialamas (2010), "It is easy to change policies, structures, curriculum, and management approach, but it is difficult to change how the members of the institution think and behave" (p. 76). Thus, the presence of an innovative institution leader is essential. The leader must begin with the understanding of the existing culture of the institution which is typically defined by its history, policies, management style, and, most importantly, the thinking and behavior of its constituents.

Factors

The following are recommended as the most critical factors for such a methodology to be successfully adopted:

- a. An institutional culture that is embracing, fostering, but most important supporting, change and innovation

- b. A commitment to technology for educational purposes, and, most important, a commitment to thinking differently must be present.
- c. A commitment to continuously educating faculty, students, parents, and administrators to internalize the *adaptive reasoning as the thinking process of improving teaching and learning*.

Conclusion

If the goal of education is to successfully prepare students for the future, we cannot continue educating them in ways that address education and market needs of the past. The world has changed exponentially in ways that are not always easy to understand so as to accurately predict the needs of the future, and prepare students accordingly. Thus, an educational reform is not only necessary, but also critical in bringing about drastic changes in educational curricula as well as the way these are implemented.

Educational technology should be approached as an integral part of shifting to a different level and trajectory of thinking and learning. In particular, our focus should be how teaching and learning could be meaningful, relevant, and transformational for the learner; but also, how this thinking can utilize all the benefits of *world wide innovations* for developing critical thinking, for promoting creativity and most importantly for cultivating wisdom and ethos. Besides, the ultimate responsibility of Academic Institutions should be to prepare tomorrow's leaders in order to serve humanity with noble purpose and ethos.

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