

PERSPECTIVE OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY: MOVING TOWARDS A BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyse the engagement of satisfaction and motivation of a learning community with regard to extensive use of blended learning (BL). Blended Learning involves teaching techniques using technological tools and online materials to enliven classroom teaching. Instructors need to adapt the methodology used in the classroom with the view of inculcating up to date teaching pedagogy. The study is conducted among participants in a Teaching and Learning Course delivered using both face to face and blended formats. An analysis is made of instructors' perception of a BL environment. The research group involves 10 instructors from various departments who are under-going the Teaching and Learning Course. The results of the study could lead instructors to motivate students in their engagement and attitude towards a given task by implementing BL in the subjects. This study would indicate that BL depends not only on the quality of the course and the virtual environment; it also involves using tools that could motivate students' attitude towards a given task.

Key Words: Blended Learning [BL], Perception, Reflection, Instructional Technology, Student autonomy, Online Forum

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of BL is a combination of face-to-face teaching techniques and online interactive collaboration, which allows students to pace their learning (Graham 2006; Yen and Lee, 2011). Many researchers have explored the benefits and the negative impacts of introducing BL in the classrooms. Many institutions of higher learning in the South-east regions have introduced Blended Learning (BL) methodology in the classrooms. However, very few have researched about its implementation in South-east Asian countries. When introducing BL, it

is important to balance the components and the methodology to reach the objectives of the concerned subject. Learners benefit when the blend of face-to-face and online resources are planned properly (Guzer & Caner, 2013). Swail (2002) reiterates, 'rules are changing, and there is increased pressure on institutions of higher education to evolve, adapt or desist'(p.16). The need for the introduction of BL is supported further by Garrison and Vaughan (2008). They stress that BL is an approach and design that merges the best of traditional and web-based learning experiences to create and sustain vital communities of inquiry. Many higher educational institutions are quietly positioning themselves to harness its transformational potential.

CAUSES FOR THE EMERGENCE OF THE BLENDED LEARNING DESIGN

- i. Advances in communication technology, especially with the advent of the Internet, has given rise to the necessity for the BL design.
- ii. Furthermore, institutional budget constraints, with an increased focus on research and the growth of class sizes has resulted in a commensurate loss of contact hours with educators. Thus, the emergence of a BL environment.
- iii. Recognition and dissatisfaction with the quality of the learning experience in higher education have resulted in the transformation leading to blended approaches to learning.
- iv. The Blended Learning model is also 'being adopted rapidly in higher education due, in part, to changes in societal perceptions, the development in educational technology options, and a growing emphasis on student engagement.' (Love et al., 2014)

Researchers have explained the key factors in the success of this methodology. The key factors include need of financial support, involvement of senior management and the availability of personnel with technological knowledge and appropriate skills (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Other factors include learners' needs, which include their expectations and level of development. These factors should be considered when planning the BL modules (Bliuc et al., 2007; Harris et al., 2009). Lopez-Perez et al., 2011) reiterate that BL decreases student attrition and increases the passing rate. Besides flexibility for the learner, BL encourages student autonomy, reflection and ability in research (Sharpe et al, 2006). Researchers have further pointed that even though BL includes many benefits improved learning outcomes should be the main reason to consider the implementation of this method (Mitchell & Honore, 2007).

INSTRUCTORS' PERCEPTION

The community of learners and instructors are aware of the need to upgrade their skills. BL opens the door for individuals to be able to access education especially due to the flexibility of time. This flexibility of time allows learning adults to obtain educational certification while working (Matukhin and Zhitkova, 2015). Instructors are optimistic about BL as it adds an extra dimension to learning as it is able to blend time, place and media. It offers new possibilities to include activities that students can access and which collaborates the use of technological tools (Littlejohn and Peglar, 2007). Nevertheless, Chmiel et al., supported the view that a BL methodology should include face to face interaction to allow students in the completion of the requirements within a semester (2017). Research on BL

completed by Lopez-Perez et al. (2011) noted a correlation in the decrease in the attrition rate among students and an increase in the number of passes.

The diversity of electronic component of the blended course opens new possibilities for new material presentation in an understandable form. Blended delivery system allows students to learn and access material in a variety of modes – an important feature since students often vary in learning styles (Kaur, 2013). Blended learning makes it possible to vary the pace of new material study and self-work. A great variety of tasks in the online component of the blended course contributes to the elimination of knowledge gaps. The instructors are very optimistic about BL as it adds extra dimensions to learning because the blend of time, space and media offers new possibilities as to the sort of activities students can carry out and the ways they can collaborate using available electronic tools (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007).

CHALLENGES

Institutions need to consider the negative impact when including BL on internal practices, culture and infrastructure. There are many factors that can hinder the success of BL, such as return on investment (ROI), quality of learning content, accreditation, the involvement of instructors in online learning and the integration with the operational system. Besides, constant monitoring would be needed to measure the benefits of implementing BL (O'Neill, Singh and O'Donoghue, 2004). Moskal, et al., (2013) reported on a meta-analysis involving over one million students. They believed that the instructor's ability to facilitate learning, his or her communication skill, and his or her respect and concern for students are the most important factors that contribute to satisfaction in BL courses. The biggest obstacle is in developing a cost-effective programme.

In addition, innovation in technology-based language education such as mobile-assisted learning enables teachers to develop learning activities that motivate student engagement and learning. Although the availability of mobile technology use is acknowledged, teachers need to develop lesson plans to effectively integrate mobile technology into learning activities in classrooms. This would require support and training of teachers (Ekanayake & Wishart, 2015; Gedik et al., 2012; O'Bannon & Thomas, 2014).

'Instructors mostly expressed frustrations or wariness about facilitating student-student interactions in online discussion forums, but several also described difficulties pertaining to instructor-student interactions.' The relative anonymity of their online students and another perceived challenge of online instruction, which is time management appear to be great obstacles in this blended format of teaching. Several instructors struggled with the expectation and pressure of maintaining constant communication with their students (McGuire, 2016).

2. THE STUDY

LOCATION OF STUDY

Nilai University is a private university situated in Putra Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. It offers a wide range of programmes. BL is included in the methodology by educators. In 2016 the institute took a stronger stand of including BL in all subjects.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study includes a questionnaire, which was given to 10 instructors to note perceptions of the use of BL in the classroom. Among the 10, 9 are locals and 1 international. The 5 males and 5 females include 6 senior lecturers and 3 lecturers with no previous teaching experience. 2 lecturers belong to the 40 and above age group. The teaching experience ranged from 1 – 23 years.

The questionnaire included items on three sections: perception, satisfaction and challenges. The questionnaire is an adaption of the Blended Course Faculty Survey (Biggs et al., 2001). A qualitative analysis of the reflective journals of lecturers who are from various fields of study and are currently completing the Post Graduate Certificate Course, were recorded and interviews were conducted with 3 lecturers who have currently implemented BL.

The researchers aim to note the views of educators in the following key areas:

- i. Lecturers' views in the implementation of a BL environment;
- ii. Lecturers' challenges in the implementation of a BL environment.

4. FINDINGS: QUESTIONNAIRE

Items 1 to 6 required the educators to give their views while implementing BL in the classroom. Items 7 to 10 explored the challenges faced in implementing a BL environment.

LECTURERS' VIEWS

Item 1, explored the number of students that could be acceptable for lecturers to use BL methodology in a classroom. An even number of lecturers were able to use BL methodology with 20 to 25 students and above 25 students. There is very little literature which informs of an ideal number of students. Most researchers explain the content and needs of students (Sajith and Shantakumari, 2015). 6 of the respondents felt that if given a choice they would definitely consider teaching a course in the blended format. The rest of them stated they would probably consider teaching a course in the blended format. It could be assumed that lecturers who had more experience in teaching were confident when handling a large number of students.

Item 2, used the Likert's scale that ranged from very satisfied, generally satisfied, neutral, generally dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied. All the lecturers were satisfied with the response of students when using the BL methodology. 1 lecturer chose very satisfied. The respondents rated the quality of the educational experience as good. The lecturers are very optimistic about the BL format since it blends time, space and media and diversifies activities that students can carry out and because it included a variety of ways in which students can learn collaboratively using electronic devices (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007). Item 3 did not apply to the lecturers as it asked for further explanation that may 'contribute most to your dissatisfaction. All agreed that they were satisfied when BL was used. This correlates with most of the research done regarding BL and satisfaction (Banerjee, n.d.).

The comments recorded by the lecturers under item 6 – How would you rate the quality of the educational experience using BL compared to the face to face format? – was that students understood concepts better and responded more when MOODLE was used. However, 2

lecturers felt both BL and face to face methods brought the same response from students. This also corresponded to the response for Item 8 – regarding the amount of response. This correlates with the research done by Ommundsen, et al., (2005); Wang and Holcombe (2010). They stated that self-regulated learning influenced learners’ motivation, which led to better learning skills. Learners were willing to spend more time learning. One of the respondents was of the opinion that ‘ Students become interested in the topic and a series of experiences influences each student positively and individually’. One lecturer informed that the interaction decreased when BL was used. The reason given was the students lacked study skills to be independent learners.

According to one of the respondents, ‘Students get more learning concepts and experience and are more engaged and excited to prepare beforehand and present compared to the traditional method where they passively sit in the classroom.’ The blended learning format facilitates students to learn and access learning materials in a variety of modes and this is very important since each student has a different learning style (Kaur, 2013). Most of the respondents also rated the quality of interaction in the blended class as compared to face-to-face course as better and good. Only 2 mentioned that the quality of interaction was about the same. The lecturers felt that their interaction with students in the blended format is good and students participated actively throughout the blended learning session.

INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY

All the respondents have used instructional technologies in their blended class. 8 of them were currently using social networking – twitter, facebook and myspace and 2 of them are planning to use these. 7 lecturers communicate via chat and video conferencing and 2 of them are planning to use tools for interacting with their students concerning academic matters. 8 lecturers use plagiarism detection software like turitin.com and web Assign and 2 of them are planning to use this and are interested in this. The respondents also use other forms of instructional applications, such as Kahoot, peri, Quizie, Whatsapp and Edmodo. Other forms of pedagogy are field trip exploration, use of MOODLE, webinars and podcasts. According to Palloff and Pratt(2013), ‘the online classroom is a potentially powerful teaching and learning arena in which new practices and new relationships can make significant improvements to learning.’ Blended learning is an approach and design that blends the best of traditional and online learning experiences to give rise to crucial communities of inquiry (Newman, et. al., 2004).

CHALLENGES

The respondents felt that the only drawback in the blended format of teaching is the limited WIFI connection and technological equipment that needs to be upgraded. One of the respondents felt that the amount of interaction has decreased owing to attitude of students who wish to be spoon-fed. They were not independent and lacked the independent study skills. At the same time ‘Diversity in, students’ culture and their experiences in technology may lead to further challenging issues for blended learning design‘ (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). This means that lecturers would spend more time handling individual student needs. This would increase the lecturers’ stress levels as they would need to find methods and materials to help individual students. One lecturer informed that at least two hours were spent each day using social media channels to address individual student problems.

JOURNAL ENTRIES

One of the lecturers felt the need to integrate a more peer based facilitative learning environment as opposed to the guided learning model, though this can only be more effective at the point where students have a working knowledge of the software. This lecturer expounds that designing a peer based session where students explore the simulation tasks by themselves and discuss and peer review with a more facilitative lecturer presence will be the best pedagogy. Moreover, these sessions could also be improved through online podcasts and forums to strengthen the lesson outcomes. This would also facilitate communication and collaborative efforts amongst students and upgrade their confidence in the acquired skills. The lecturer also stressed on the practical aspect of the subject matter as it would be relevant to industrial application in a more impactful manner.

Another lecturer felt that sessions with his students could be further improved by having an online presence so that students can revisit the discussions at their own leisure via the recording made on online podcasts or video stream. Video stream also enables participation of external industrial advisors who can access their vast industrial experience to provide pointers to problems faced by students. Recording the class as a podcast or recording the entire session via a video and uploading the material on MOODLE would also ensure that students can access the material after class and jog their memory on the lessons learnt in class (Newman, et al., 2004).

An Engineering lecturer is of the opinion that to strengthen students' conceptualization of the application of the skills learnt, a short industrial webinar or industrial working demo of the skills that are about to be learnt should be included. This helps them to visualize and envision the practical benefits of the skills learnt for their future career. The lecturer felt that his utilization of interactive media and online content in his teaching lends authenticity to his lessons.

According to one of the lecturers, 'One of the most widely used platforms that I employ is "kahoot", a free game-based learning technology that allows me to create quizzes online that can be answered by students using their smartphones' (Pallof & Pratt, 2013). This is a social learning platform whereby students are required to utilize modern devices available to them to interact for collaborative learning. In this era, for the new generation, smart phones are a daily necessity. Likewise, online social media if correctly monitored can be utilized for more extensive learning objectives. Instead of the usual PowerPoint presentation, the lecturer uses "Prezi", which features a map like schematic overview that allows to pan between topics at will, zoom in on desired details and a lot more features that are novel to students. The lecturer emphasises that, 'traditional face-to-face teaching and learning has its positive impact, but this generation of learners would be more suited to a blended learning format'.

All the lecturers agreed that their strength lie in their ability to engage students in a discussion through blended learning and providing face to face as well as online constructive and formative feedback. They also plan online games to nurture thinking out of the box. Students also enjoy having online reading assignments. This is contrary to the findings by Mc Guire, (2016) where lecturers faced challenges when monitoring online forums. Besides the instructors use other methods like flipped classes, gallery walk, advanced 'speed-dating' and mind maps.

Lecturers noted that most students gave positive feedback about the online lessons because it is quite easy for them to attend to these online classes wherever they are. Quizzes

and discussions are conducted online and the lecturer needs to be alert to every single posting and respond appropriately. These activities are also graded. Tech-savvy students can connect with students from across the globe to play or connect with peers to compete for improved scores. They are able to do this when they sign up in Edmodo for online activities. From the journals it was clear that BL appears to be an integral part of these lecturers' pedagogy.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

3 lecturers were randomly chosen for the interviews. The lecturers spoke on the positive impact, challenges and gave recommendations on improving BL when used in the classroom to make it more effective.

POSITIVE IMPACT

All agreed that that when BL was used in the classroom, it improved participation among the students. The weaker students were also motivated to interact and gave comments. One lecturer informed that it was easier to implement the 'flipped classroom' technique. Students were excited to be able to use their hand phones to find sources and updated information. The feeling of self-esteem increased especially among the weaker students. Besides, BL allowed the students to upload their comments at any time. This developed their independent learning skills. Meaningful activities allowed students to reflect, gather information and apply it to solve problems. Besides, the questions could be adapted to the personal needs of each student. This concurs with the information stated by Brook (2015) regarding the 'Flex model'.

CHALLENGES

2 lecturers mentioned that occasionally the speed of the internet service provider was slow and this created wastage of time. All lecturers agreed a smaller classroom was easier to manage. One lecturer informed that the initial planning, posting and moderating took a lot of time as not all students responded within the time frame that was given. Students responded to videos but a drop in participation was noted when reading materials were posted online (Pierce and Fox, 2012). The other drawback was that as not all students read the article before class; it was difficult to plan group discussions or presentations as the students were not prepared.

RECOMMENDATIONS BY LECTURERS

All three informed that the criteria for assessment should be planned ahead and students need to be informed about the requirements. They also stated that technological tools needed regular maintenance and so the concerned institute must be prepared for overhead costs. Keeping ahead and updated was necessary for the implementation of BL in a classroom (Department of Education, 2012).

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study various recommendations can be made with regard to the implementation of BL in the classroom. First of all, lecturers' assessments of BL projects should use reflections (both from students and instructors). The institute would need to keep in mind that instructors need to be updated on current software available in the market and arrange for updating their skills with training from time to time. Collaboration and peer review among instructors would encourage and give support to the instructors as changes would need to be made regularly. The infrastructure should be constantly monitored and updated. In addition, assessment criteria must be made transparent and feedback should be included so learners can adapt to the changes. Only by taking such steps can student engagement improve and instructors gain "better outcomes" (Maarop & Embi, 2016). A major weakness of the study is it included only instructors who were in the Teaching and Learning course. Further study should include all lecturers in the institute. Another area of research could include the perspective of the learners. This could include subject and the level of the students – first semester students compared to final semester students (Vo, et al., 2017). Finally, it should be noted that all the lecturers reiterated that BL has been included in their pedagogy and this has helped to make the lesson fun and engaging.

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