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Construing Experience of a Blended Learning Course Through SWOT Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The new technologies in the era of 3.0 have explored novice and innovative practices in the higher education. Now, the teaching and learning is not restricted to Chalk and Board but it is carried out through Discussion Boards, Blackboard, Wikis, Blogs and the likes. These technological tools are now being adopted across the globe and have made teaching-learning process more efficient, effective, socialised, well-organised and truly professional. Blended learning can be defined as the harmonious blend of online learning and face-to-face learning with an intention of providing education with flexibility, techno-ability and limitless design possibility. This paper provides a SWOT Analysis of the blended course, designed and developed during pursuing PGDEL Programme of IGNOU. The study also attempts to present the lessons learned from the course and suggestions for implementing blended learning course effectively.

KEYWORDS : Blended Learning, Online learning, SPSS, SWOT, Experiences

1. Introduction

The new technologies in the era of 3.0 have explored novice and innovative practices in the higher education. Now, the teaching and learning is not restricted to Chalk and Board but it is carried out through Discussion Boards, Blackboard, Wikis, Blogs and the likes. These technological tools are now being adopted across the globe and have made teaching-learning process more efficient, effective, socialised, well-organised and truly professional. E-learning and Blended learning are employing these technological tools in the delivery of educational contents to the learners.

Blended Learning is the use of both classroom teaching and on-line learning in education (Collins English Dictionary)1. Hofmann (2011), explains that 'the idea behind blended learning is that instructional designers review a learning program, chunk it into modules, and determine the best medium to deliver those modules to the learner'.2 Thus, Blended learning can be defined as the harmonious blend of online learning and face-to-face learning with an intention of providing education with flexibility, techno-ability and limitless design possibility. Singh Harvey (2003) emphasized that blended learning mixes various event-based activities, including face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning, and self-paced learning3. Thus, blended learning helps in creating a student-centric, personalized learning environment which is more constructive and productive and which achieve results at comparable lower cost (Horn et al., 2011).4 Thus, the blended learning is fostering endless possibilities of teaching and learning in the digital age.

In this background, a short blended learning course was developed on Introducing SPSS to Beginners. The course was delivered to few learners for a month to assess the feasibility of the course and to gain insight into developing and delivering a blended learning course.

This paper provides a SWOT Analysis of the blended course designed and developed during pursuing PGDEL Programme of IGNOU. The study also attempts to present the lessons learned from implementing the course and suggestions for implementing blended learning course effectively.

2. About the Course

Research involves scientific and inductive thinking and fosters development of logical habits of thinking and organization. In recent years, exploring the research output in every field of study has been treated with an increasing concern among the researchers. Scholars require an adequate knowledge of not only the statistical tools to analyze the data but they also need the capacity of logical reasoning and understanding of methodology to formulate the problem and research it. With this background, the course intended to strengthen not only the concepts of research methodology but it also aimed to equip the scholars with the skills in data- gathering, information- analysis and presenting it in the desired format using SPSS.

2.1 Content Development Strategy

Contents in the form of Self Learning Materials were provided as e-contents to the learners. Educational Advisor Model was adopted for developing contents. Video and audio lectures were also recorded and posted on the website as a part of e-contents. Reference links were also provided to the learners for further learning.

2.2 Technologies used

The course was based on the following technological aspects-

i. Involves high level demonstrations of the hands-on experience using Big Blue Button.
ii. Software specifications and availability-IBM SPSS Statistics 21, for learners Trial versions free downloadable.
iii. Adopting the existing LMS (Moodle) (PGDEL) as a host server to offer this hands-on course online.
iv. Strong internet connectivity for offering this course.
v. Use of Open Source Softwares for developing multimedia contents.
vi. Discussion Forums, Blogs, chats, etc. using LMS for promoting social interactions among the learners.

2.3 Basic Framework for the Design of the Course

A diagrammatic representation of the role and responsibilities of the learners and facilitator for this e-learning initiative is presented as under;

Chart 2.3.1 Role and Responsibilities of learner and facilitator

The entire course followed a PDCA Cycle of planning and designing the course curriculum, media and technologies required for developing e-contents in the form of audio and video lectures and self learning materials as pdf documents for learning. The course was delivered in a span of approximately one month in which virtual classes were organized, learning outcomes were assessed. Both formative and summative assessment was used for assessing learning outcomes of the learners. The evaluation started with a questionnaire which was uploaded on the LMS.

Chart 2.3.2 PDCA Cycle for course development and delivery

The course attempted to follow four main theories for its designing. They are mainly Behaviourism, Cognitivism, Constructivism and Connectivism. In designing the curriculum of the course and its delivery, best of the learning devices from all the four theories were taken with an approach for deep and transformative learning. Further Models/ Theories were also referred for designing instructional design for online programme-

- Gordon (1997)-Linked Approach to learning. While designing online programme links was provided in online material for in-depth study.
- ADDIE Model- It helped in identifying statement of learning objectives, selection and ordering of content, learning activities available resources, assessment strategies and teaching learning strategies. Actual development of instructional activities was done on the basis of the analysis .The above was effectively implemented. Evaluation was carried out for both the performance of the learners and the effectiveness of the design.
- I Care Model (Introduction, Connect, Apply, Reflect, Extend) – Reflection was majorly considered while designing online programme in terms of learning experience, knowledge gained learning journals, units test etc.

3. SWOT Analysis

The SWOT analysis is a technique of assessment in which strength and weaknesses existing within a project can be matched with the opportunities and threats operating in an environment. SWOT analysis for this course was assessed in the terms of its development and delivery. It helped in exploring possibilities for new efforts and helped in providing solutions to the problem.

Strength	Weaknesses
• Course provided flexibility in terms of place, pace and duration of study. • Interactive virtual classes were given in Big Blue Button. • Active participation of learners with the facilitator during classes in synchronous learning environment. • Audio-Video lectures were made available in LMS for grounding with the techniques and methods of data analysis and interpretations using SPSS. • Self learning materials were given to the learners in easily downloadable pdf document. • Application oriented course designed for helping researchers in analyzing data scientifically. • Learner centric instructional design. • It provided a platform to interact with other learners exploring the new areas of research study. • Self paced hyper media design and pedagogical ideas for self directed learning. • Suitable technological aids adopted for applying instructional theory to its pedagogic use. • Careful selection of instructional themes well suited for web based instructions. • To reduce cognitive overheads, orientation, navigation and user-interface adjustments were incorporated. • Integration of available resources and cultivating the context and the environment that allows students to access the best material available. • Face to Face workshop was also organized as part of blended learning approach for availing the advantages of classroom learning and to have a robust hands-on experience of the software. • Blended learning has made possible to customize teaching learning process as per the requirement of the learner. • Guest lectures from experienced faculty were organized to reinforce lateral and critical thinking among the researchers. • Both formative and summative assessment was used for assessing learning outcomes of the learners. • Sound Infrastructural and Technological support of the University. • Hybrid environments have the potential to increase and extend instructor-student and student-student connectivity and to build relationships even more than traditional or online courses.	• Delayed implementation of the project. • Project was not able to adhere to the desired schedule. • Learners were reluctant in attempting assignments and quizzes as frequent reminders were given for completing the assignments. • There was a noticeable time gap between planning and implementation of the project. • Online presentations by the learners were skipped due to time overruns. • High Expectations from the maiden online learners. • Dropouts were reported during the delivery of the course. • There was not much participation in Discussion Forums which deprived the interactivity among the learners. • Collaborated work was not posted as there was hardly any interactivity among the learners. • High ambitious planning while developing the course. • With both family and work responsibilities, most of the learners felt that it was a great challenge for them to allocate suitable time on coursework every evening after a long day of work. • Lot of changes was noticed as there was the time gap between the project course framed and implemented. • Only few learners opted for all TMA, CMA,DF and Miniproject.
Opportunities	**Threats**
• Researchers can develop themselves as freelance trainers for workshops and training. • The course may enhance quality of research study. • Community of practice (Etienne Wenger's 2002) may be established which can work for research projects and consultancy. • After learning this course commercial applications of SPSS are possible. • Advanced Level of online course may be developed from the experiences gained from the beginner's level. • The course can be offered in collaboration with other private institutions and universities to have wider reach. • The online program meets interoperability and appropriate access for learners with special professional needs.	• Rapid changes in digital technologies. • Open Source Statistical Softwares are available which can pose threats in the time to come. • Coping with new versions of SPSS in itself is challenging. • Training and workshops of merely five to seven days may attract prospective learners. • Continuous upgradations are required in the course contents

4. Lessons Learned

On the basis of experience gained from the course, the following were inferred;

- Blended learning has a potential to render classroom teaching in a virtual environment. It is a complete package which includes message boards, discussion forums, knowledge management tools, virtual classes which can foster learning as well as interactivity for collaborative learning.
- Number of softwares both open source as well as proprietary are available in the digital world which have the potential to use digital technologies in instructional design and development which can augment or sometimes replace classroom teaching.
- Blended learning ensures educational equity for all learners with complete transparency of rendering education to the learner's community right from virtual teaching to the assessment of their learning outcomes.
- More significant and responsible role of a teacher as facilitator is required in terms of development and delivery of contents for academic as well as training programmes.
- Blended learning may also inculcate cognitive, intellectual, rational, critical and writing skills among the learners.
- Blended learning helps in transformative learning as learners can explore, try, learn, fail and then re-learn.
- Blended learning has possibility of overcoming the weaknesses and limitations of e-learning as well as has a strong prospect of absorbing advantages of online learning in its delivery.
- Integration of classroom teaching/ face to face teaching with online teaching allows more effective use of technological didactic tools.
- Blended learning provides wide-ranging contents to the diverse students spread all over the globe thereby bringing the world at vishva kutumbakam.

5. Suggestions and recommendations

From the experiences gained from the project work, the following recommendations are made:

- Blended Learning is effective for the courses which requires practical or hands-on training and is significant in achieving the expected learning outcomes.
- Posting of contents in LMS should be in synchronized with the pace of learning.
- Facilitators certainly have to explore new methods of bringing more interactivity among the learners for collaborative work and mutual learning.
- Induction or orientation session may be organized before starting with the virtual classes and formal teaching as it may steer communication among the learners during the programme. Further, it may also be helpful in orienting the learners with the tools and techniques of digital technologies.
- Large numbers of open source softwares are available in the digital world which can bring more vibrant teaching and learning and build more creative cognitive domain. As a facilitator one can explore these softwares and may customize as per the requirement of the programme.
- Multimedia lectures should also be supported by the self instructional material as it may substantiate deeper learning.
- Facilitators need to certainly explore motivational support strategies for bringing vigour and self regulation in the learners.

This report will generate discussions for future facilitators to explore new technologies or operational measures which can overcome the problems reported in the study.

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