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Blended Learning in The College of Engineering: Why Now?

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ABSTRACT

Blended Learning refers to a mixing of different learning environments. The phrase has many specific meanings based upon the context in which it is used. Blended learning gives learners and teachers a potential environment to learn and teach more effectively. Definitions of blended learning range from some so broad that practically any learning experience that integrates some use of educational technology might qualify, to others that focus on a specific percentage combination of online curriculum and instruction in a face-to-face setting. By upending the structure of undergraduate courses, blended learning not only harnesses the convenience of online lectures, but helps students benefit from a sturdy educational principle. Blended learning produces the same or better learning outcomes at the same or lower cost than other learning modalities.

KEYWORDS : Online learning, Traditional learning, Blended learning and Pedagogical Strategy for Blending.

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning is "the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p.96). It aims at combining two delivery modalities: face-to-face, and eLearning in order to provide an effective and efficient learning experience, thereby having the best of both instructional worlds (Kumar 2012). Such kind of combination helps in catering to different students' learning styles (Ho et al. 2006), increasing learning effectiveness, convenience, and widening access to education (Graham 2009). Moreover, blended learning makes courses more accessible to a growing and diverse student population, for example, those preferring to learn at work, at home or between places with the appropriate technology (Glogowska et al. 2011; Kumar 2012).

ON-LINE LEARNING

The purpose of a live online session is to gather the group of learners in a live online environment, before and/or after the in-person learning seminar. The goal(s) of the instructional design of the live online can include:

- Preparing the learners
- Reviewing key content to ensure understanding
- Participating in content application exercises or scenarios
- Extension of the blended learning beyond the live seminar content
- Anyone can participate, regardless of their location or distance.
- Helps to ensure that the learning is applied on the job.

Benefits of Online Learning

Today's college students lead blended lives. In fact, if we loosely define the term blended to mean "partially virtual, partially tangible," then we can safely say all our lives have steadily become more and more blended. We access our news online, we pay bills online, we communicate through e-mail and social networks. People with Internet access go first to the web for information. We access the world via smart phones; why not access education that way too? At its simplest, blended learning courses are those in which a significant amount of seat time, that is, time spent in the classroom, is replaced with online activities that involve students in meeting course objectives. According to its classification scheme, blended courses have between 30% and 79% of activities online, face-to-face courses can include up to 29% of online activities, and fully online courses can include up to 20% of face-to-face activities.

Blended Learning Implementation Guide

"Blended learning is about transforming the learning experience for students through the effective use of technology," said Ellis. "The guide will help decision-makers understand key choices about strategy, infrastructure, devices, software, professional development, and continuous improvement." Blended-learning courses offer students the convenience of a hybrid learning environment comprised of online technology and personal contact with each other and the professor. Thus, blended learning could bring together the best of both classroom and online strategies (Graham, 2005). This combined approach aims to maximize the positive features of each delivery mode, in particular by offering the means for discussions seen as critical to the thorough understanding of course materials (Collopy, & Arnold, 2009; Hara, 2000). Blended learning is argued to be particularly suited to courses that involve significant computer laboratory classes (Djenic, Krneta & Mitic, 2011)

- Create Conditions for Success
- Plan
- Implement
- Improve

PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY FOR BLENDING

Pedagogical design for a blended course is both the most important and most challenging task. Integration of the online and in-class activities is key for the online learning to have the most relevance and is too often overlooked in blended courses. What one does in and outside the classroom must be connected. But what should be done in these areas? With more of the core learning occurring outside the classroom, there are opportunities for formal and informal approaches to class meetings. Formal activities might include workshops, coaching, mentoring, lecturing, debate, or active learning tasks such as group work, problem-solving, simulations, case studies, or role-playing. Informal activities might include creating small group conferences, ad-hoc work teams to work on self-directed investigations of problems, or as an opportunity to engage in self-directed active learning tasks.

Blended learning is best understood as spanning a continuum that covers a wide spectrum of activities between conventional face-to-face interactions and those that are fully online. As shown below, elements of face-to-face and online approaches may be blended to a smaller or greater extent, depending on a range of contextual factors and pedagogical decisions. Blended learning approaches vary according to such factors as: discipline, year level, student characteristics and needs, and course or program learning objectives. The following ideas may be useful to guide your thinking about ways in which you might start or further develop your use of ICTs to enhance your students' engagement with learning.

Conventional
Face-to-face---------Blended Learning---------- Fully online

Learning is most effective when an appropriate blend of pedagogical strategies is used at both course and subject level. That means that jumping on the latest bandwagon, or applying a single strategy across your whole course will seldom be successful. Similarly, just because one course uses a particular teaching approach successfully

doesn't mean that all our courses should make the switch. An appropriate blend means that it suits your learning context - your discipline, your students and yourselves, as academics and teaching staff.

Strategies for Teaching Blended Learning Courses

- Start with Learning Goals
- Create Ways for Students to Learn Before Class
- Create Ways for Students to Learn In Class Create Ways for Students to Learn After Class
- Use Multiple Forms of Communication
- Encourage Collaboration
- Utilize Online Resources
- Utilize Both Low and High Stakes Grading
- Seek Assistance from Professionals
- Stay Organized

TRADITIONAL LEARNING

Traditional education is defined as teacher-centered delivery of instruction to classes of students who are the receivers of information. Traditional schools generally stress basic educational practices and expect mastery of academic learning in the core subjects of math, reading, writing, science and social studies. Public schools generally follow this educational model, although charter schools can offer a more flexible educational approach. Other alternatives to the traditional public school include independent schools that operate outside the public school jurisdiction, religious schools, home school and online learning. Since many factors come into play when choosing a school, it's wise to look not only at the educational program, but also at social atmosphere and availability of support services. Traditional schools are most common nationwide and can offer quality instruction along with the benefits of federal- and state-mandated regulations and laws.

INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

"Inquiry" is defined as "a seeking for truth, information, or knowledge -- seeking information by questioning." Individuals carry on the process of inquiry from the time they are born until they die. This is true even though they might not reflect upon the process. Infants begin to make sense of the world by inquiring. From birth, babies observe faces that come near, they grasp objects, they put things in their mouths, and they turn toward voices. The process of inquiring begins with gathering information and data through applying the human senses -- seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling.

Faculty's Role in an Inquiry Classroom

- She/he plans ways for each learner to be actively engaged in the learning process.
- She/he understands the necessary skills, knowledge, and habits of mind needed for inquiry learning.
- She/he understands and plans ways to encourage and enable the learner to take increasing responsibility for his learning.
- She/he insures that classroom learning is focused on relevant and applicable outcomes.
- She/he is prepared for unexpected questions or suggestions from the learner.
- She/he prepares the classroom environment with the necessary learning tools, materials, and resources for active involvement of the learner.

The Faculty Facilitates Classroom Learning.

- She/he teacher's daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly facilitation plans focus on setting content learning in a conceptual framework. They also stress skill development and model and nurture the development of habits of mind.
- She/he accepts that teaching is also a learning process.
- She/he asks questions, encouraging divergent thinking that leads to more questions.
- She/he values and encourages responses and, when this response convey misconceptions, effectively explore the causes and appropriately guides the learner.
- She/he is constantly alert to learning obstacles and guides learners when necessary.

The importance of inquiry learning is that students learn how to continue learning. This is something they can take with them throughout life -- beyond parental help and security, beyond a textbook, beyond the time of a master teacher, beyond school -- to a time when they will often be alone in their learning.

CONCLUSIONS

The final blend that will be considered here concerns mixing pedagogic approaches. At a general level this, too, falls prey to the critique that cases of any duration will inevitably blend pedagogic approaches, leaving the term redundant. It might be possible to challenge the boundary between these 'forms' of pedagogics in terms of the cut-off level of intensity that marks an approach as being of one type or the other. There are two consequences related to blended learning, Firstly there is the question of why different intensities of approach should be blended. What is the purpose of seeking to incorporate low-intensity pedagogies? Is this to create space for reflection, or because they are cheaper? Secondly, there is the matter of terminology. This blending is not about learning per se; it is thus misleading to call it 'blended learning'. Instead, if a term must be used, this should be abandoned in favour of 'blended pedagogics' or even 'blended teaching', or (to maintain a student focus) 'learning with blended pedagogies'.

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