Blended learning: Is there evidence for its effectiveness?

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This symposium will focus on how academics are using blended learning practices in a range of contexts and discuss the process of becoming effective practitioners in this new field of ICT-facilitated education. The discussion will be based on the research of panel members which is now published in a new edited collection of international research, "Effective Blended Learning Practices: Evidence-Based Perspectives in ICT-Facilitated Education." A range of perspectives will be presented on effectiveness in pedagogical contexts and also new emergent settings such as communities and professional learning.

Keywords: Blended learning. ICT-Facilitated learning, Evidence based

Introduction

Blended learning practices are becoming the basis for much of today's academic teaching, research, collaborative writing, course design and professional learning. Though the term *blended learning* is becoming widespread in use and is often used to describe student learning through traditional face-to-face teaching integrating some online teaching, its application to all academic and professional practice extends the term *blended learning practices* and requires a more complex definition. Key issues are:

- how academics are using blended learning practices in a range of contexts and
- their process of becoming effective practitioners in this new field of ICT-facilitated education.

The symposium draws on the research of the panel members who have authored chapters in a new edited collection of international research edited by the panel organisers, "*Effective Blended Learning Practices: Evidence-Based Perspectives in ICT-Facilitated Education.*"

Panel composition and topics

Elizabeth Stacey, Deakin University – Introduction and overview

The term blended learning was defined and the rationale for the symposium discussed. The complexity of blended learning and its features and the issues involved in its integration into teaching and learning was introduced and overviewed in relation to the topics covered in the book. This introductory overview raised key questions that were then discussed by panel presenters.

Philippa Gerbic, Auckland University of Technology – Teaching and learning strategies

Online discussions offer a different discussion medium from face-to-face discussions and creating an effective pedagogy which enagages campus-based students is a challenge. This research investigated campus-based student perspectives about online discussions using a case study approach. It highlighted the need for complementarity of online and face-to-face media and the need for explicit integration in the course, and especially in the classroom. Key influential features arising from the CMC medium and the learning design are presented and recommendations for practice are provided.

Bill Anderson and Mary Simpson, University of Otago – Teaching and learning strategies

A teacher education programme previously taught in distinct on-campus and distance forms was redesigned to take advantage of the affordances offered by a blended learning approach. The redesign process described here drew on three areas – the research and practice base of adult learning, knowledge of and experience with the design of learning communities, and the findings of research activities focused on the original distance form of the programme. The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) enabled blending of technologies, media, modes of delivery, and learning activities and was central to the redesign process. The redesign process and implications for blended learning in teacher education programmes are discussed.

Julie, MacKay, Canterbury University – Establishing communities

In terms of work-related professional development, blended learning may be reconceptualised as a complex blending of socially constructed experiences which enable participants to optimise connections between formal online learning and authentic work in communities of practice. This particular project which investigated teachers' experiences of online professional development found that even pragmatic, purposeful and limited participation in the online learning community contributed to meaningful learning experiences. While teachers remained peripheral members of the online community they remained actively involved in their daily work and situated their learning in their own contexts without difficulty.

Cathy Gunn, University of Auckland – Teacher transitions and professional learning

Blended learning represents a significant departure from either face to face or fully online learning experiences" (Garrison & Kanuka 2004). The current trend towards blended learning is fuelled by a combination of pedagogical, practical and strategic factors. Professional development must therefore interact with a complex combination of separate, yet interdependent factors. An approach pursued at one institution used design-based research and an accredited tertiary teaching program, thus acknowledging the context specific nature of best practices. What other ways can university teachers be empowered to develop an effective blend of face to face and online activity?

Gayani Samarawickrema, Deakin University - **Teacher Transitions and Professional learning**

Systematic adoption of blended learning practices is complex as it depends on a series of contextual factors. Institutional environments have their unique social and political contexts and their own policy frameworks, technology, work practices, training programs, funding grants and faculty structures. Understanding the power and politics that inter relate these assists with the understanding of introducing blended learning approaches to the institution. An institution-wide qualitative research study conducted in a large multi-campus Australian university forms the basis of this study which found that the technology impacts on the institution and its practices, and in turn the institutional context shapes the adoption and use of the technology. The study showed that introducing blended-learning is disruptive, imposing challenges at all levels across the institution. The presentation will review these challenges and discuss its impact on teaching staff.

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