Learner experiences of online learning in a blended learning situation: Different cohorts, different needs

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This paper discusses a key finding of a recent study of learners' experiences of blended learning in a case involving multiple cohorts of students in a single degree program. The theme of differing experiences across learner cohorts is discussed. The presentation includes quantitative data drawn from student surveys. The findings and discussion highlight considerations for teaching academics, academic developers and program administrators related to the implementation of blended learning.

Keywords: blended learning, learner experience, undergraduate, higher education

Introduction

As institutions increasingly employ blended learning to cater to diverse and dispersed student cohorts, evidence from early experience with blended learning becomes ever more important to inform ongoing improvement of blended learning programs (Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, & Francis, 2006). In particular, the experiences of learners have been a valuable source of information for teaching academics, program leaders and academic developers (e..g., Bird, 2004; Carswell, Thomas, Petre, Price, & Richards, 2000; Thorpe & Godwin, 2006).

This paper focuses on preliminary findings from a formative evaluation of the experiences of learners in a blended learning situation. The findings suggest differences between three cohorts of students defined by a combination of their physical location and the particular blend they experienced. Quantitative data drawn from student surveys highlight learner experiences and draw out a key theme related to the differences between student cohorts, namely, that students in the different cohorts had distinctly different experiences blended learning within the same program. While this finding is consistent with other published finding which highlight

the highly contextualized nature of successful blended learning (Sharpe, et al., 2006), it raises a number of discussion points for academic developers, teaching academics and program directors to consider in the implementation of blended learning in programs with multiple cohorts of students. The discussion foreshadows ongoing work on this study related to the continuing analysis of qualitative data collected as part of this study.

Context

The study in question was conducted within a four-year undergraduate degree program in an Australasian university. The program had historically been delivered in three parallel forms across two modes, including a) on campus at the university's main campus, b) on campus at a regional site and c) externally, via correspondence and online distance education. As a result of a program review, an extensive redevelopment of the program was undertaken involving extensive re-conceptualisation of the program in terms of structure, content, approaches to teaching, and all aspects of individual course designs. In particular, this development included the implementation of blended learning in which all students shared key features of the program including online learning environments for each course, a common set of learning materials and a program-wide online learning community. One intended outcomes of the redevelopment was to increase the similarity of learners' experiences across the program and reduce the likelihood of inequity in the experiences of students.

Notably, blended learning within the program including blending of both (a) approaches to learning and teaching and (b) modes of delivery to produce different blends for each cohort. Each individual course was redeveloped to create blended approaches which sought to produce the best learning outcomes for students. Regarding delivery, students at the main campus got face-to-face delivery from course coordinators for all contact sessions plus online learning between sessions. Students at the regional campus got face-to-face sessions from a combination of course coordinators and tutors for many/most contact sessions, plus online learning for some contact sessions and online activity between sessions. External students got online learning as the primary form of contact with one another and course teaching staff.

Methods

At the midway point of the four-year development process, a formative evaluation was undertaken to gauge stakeholder experiences with the implementation of blended learning. The evaluation aimed to identify (a) aspects of blended learning which were successful, as determined by the quality of stakeholder experiences and (b) opportunities to improve blended learning in the program based on negative stakeholder experiences. Data on student experiences with blended learning in the program was collected in three phases: a survey open to all students which produced a set of initial themes; interviews with a small group of volunteers and a focus group discussion with all interview volunteers. A preliminary analysis was conducted at the conclusion of each phase to identify key themes and inform the ongoing process. After the completion of all phases, a more comprehensive analysis was conducted to identify strengths of the early program developments as evidenced by positive learner experiences and opportunities for adjustments in the implementation of blended learning.

The findings in this paper are limited to the results of the student survey and preliminary analysis of student responses. The survey instrument was constructed to focus on key features of blended learning implemented in the program, including the new format of learning materials, the online learning environment, assessment structure, program content, views on blended learning and learner support. The findings are presented below with respect to the emergence of themes related to patterns in student demographics, student experiences of online components of the program and student views of blended learning.

Findings

The preliminary data analysis highlighted a number of key differences in student experiences within the whole program cohort which segmented the cohort into three groups based on the mode of enrolment: Internal (main campus, hereafter MC), Internal (regional campus, RC) and External (EE). In short, members of each of the three cohorts had seemingly very different experiences of blended learning within the same program. Selected findings are presented below (Table 1) including demographic features, student experience with online elements of the program and student views on blended learning. For the survey, the total number of students in the program was 178, with 46 survey responses recorded for a response rate of just under 26%. Notably, many of

the comparisons made below are within each cohort, which included 20 in the MC, 14 in RC and 12 in EE. Percentages in Table 1 are expressed as a percentage of students in that cohort for each response.

Demographic differences

One unanticipated finding in the formative evaluation was the difference in the ages and educational background of students from the three cohorts. The MC group tended to be school leavers with 75% of that group in the 18-20 year old category and 60% of them attending university immediately after secondary school or a gap year. The RC group were split mainly between two groups: 20-25 year old group (38.5%) and an over 35 group (30.8%) and had either had time off before university study (35.7%) or completed bridging study after not completing secondary school (21.4%). The EE group was clearly older with 58.3% over 35 years of age and 54.5% having time off between secondary school.

Experiences of online components

The three groups were also divided on their experiences with online learning as part of blended learning in the program. Table one below summarises the results of student experiences with online learning against a four-point Likert scale of agreement including 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'weakly agree' and 'disagree'.

There were clear differences between the cohorts in terms of whether they felt comfortable studying online. Students in the MC and EE groups reported being generally comfortable learning online. In response to the statement 'I feel comfortable learning online', 80% of the MC group agreed and 83.4% of the EE group agreed or strongly agreed. In the RC group, 37.5% disagreed and 37.5% only weakly agreed. Online interaction was also seen to have different values to the different cohorts. While 75% of the EE group agreed or strongly agreed that online interaction was a useful way to work with others in the program, over half of the MC (75%) and RC (64.3%) had weak agreement or disagreed with the statement. A greater number of the EE (50%) and MC (50%) groups agreed or strongly agreed that communication was easy in the online environment, while over half of the RC group weakly agreed or disagreed with that statement. Further, there were questions from all groups about whether sharing and discussion in the online environment works well. In terms of specific learning activity, 100% of the EE group agreed that online learning promotes critical and creative thinking while 57.1% and 21.1% of the RC and MC groups, respectively, disagreed with that statement.

Student views on blended learning

Overall, there were mixed views of the value of online learning and, separately, blended learning. While 70% of the MC group and 75% of the EE group agreed or strongly agreed that the online environment helped them succeed, 38.5% of the RC group only weakly agreed and 30/8% disagreed with that statement. While there was strong support for blended learning in the EE group (91.7% agreed or strongly agreed) and moderate support in the MC (73.7% agreed) group, over 70% of the RC group either weakly agreed or disagreed with the notion that blended learning had enriched their learning in the program.

Table 2- Student experiences with online learning in the program

		MC	RC	EE
I feel comfortable learning online	Disagree	10.0% (2)	35.7% (5)	0.0% (0)
	Weakly Agree	10.0% (2)	35.7% (5)	16.7% (2)
	Agree	80.0% (16)	21.4% (3)	41.7% (5)
	Strongly Agree	0.0% (0)	7.1% (1)	41.7% (5)
The online environment helps me succeed in the program	Disagree	10.0% (2)	30.8% (4)	0.0% (0)
	Weakly Agree	20.0% (4)	38.5% (5)	25.0% (3)
	Agree	65.0% (13)	30.8% (4)	50.0% (6)
	Strongly Agree	5.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	25.0% (3)

Communication is easy in the online environment	Disagree	0.0% (0)	28.6% (4)	16.7% (2)
	Weakly Agree	50.0% (10)	35.7% (5)	33.3% (4)
	Agree	40.0% (8)	35.7% (5)	50.0% (6)
	Strongly Agree	10.0% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Online interaction is a useful way for me to work with others in the program	Disagree	25.0% (5)	42.9% (6)	0.0% (0)
	Weakly Agree	50.0% (10)	21.4% (3)	25.0% (3)
	Agree	25.0% (5)	35.7% (5)	41.7% (5)
	Strongly Agree	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (4)
The online learning environment makes me feel that I'm part of a community	Disagree	20.0% (4)	42.9% (6)	0.0% (0)
	Weakly Agree	45.0% (9)	28.6% (4)	33.3% (4)
	Agree	35.0% (7)	28.6% (4)	50.0% (6)
	Strongly Agree	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	16.7% (2)
Online learning promotes critical and creative thinking	Disagree	21.1% (4)	57.1% (8)	0.0% (0)
	Weakly Agree	42.1% (8)	21.4% (5)	0.0% (0)
	Agree	36.8% (13)	21.4% (5)	75.0% (9)
	Strongly Agree	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	25.0% (3)
Sharing and discussion in the online environment works well	Disagree	15.8% (3)	50.0% (7)	16.7% (2)
	Weakly Agree	36.8% (13)	35.7% (5)	50.0% (6)
	Agree	31.6% (6)	7.1% (1)	25.0% (3)
	Strongly Agree	15.8% (3)	7.1% (1)	8.3% (1)
The online environment promotes interpersonal connection	Disagree	22.2% (4)	42.9% (6)	16.7% (2)
	Weakly Agree	38.9% (7)	35.7% (5)	58.3% (7)
	Agree	38.9% (7)	21.4% (3)	16.7% (2)
	Strongly Agree	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	8.3% (1)
Blended learning has enriched my learning	Disagree	10.5% (2)	35.7% (5)	0.0% (0)
	Weakly Agree	15.8% (3)	35.7% (5)	8.3% (1)
	Agree	73.7% (14)	7.1% (1)	75.0% (9)
	Strongly Agree	0.0% (0)	7.1% (1)	16.7% (2)

Discussion

First and foremost, the data in Table 1 shows notable differences in the quality of student experiences experienced by the three cohorts. These are perhaps unsurprising due to the practicalities of the three forms of blended learning which emerged from the development process. Differences in the structuring of (e.g., the combination of face-to-face and online activity) and support for (e.g., in-person teaching staff vs. online teaching staff vs. peer support in the online community) learner activity between the three cohorts might be expected to produce different experiences (Ellis, Goodyear, Prosser, & O'Hara, 2006; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). However, given that one of the aims of the program redevelopment was to redress perceived differences (i.e. inequities) between the experiences of students in the former version of the program, the finding that student experiences can be divided according to the location of the students and the associated blend they experience within the program is troubling. Further, it suggests that the re-development has been, to some degree, unsuccessful in improving equitable access to and experience within the program.

Notably, the survey results also highlighted previously unrealized demographic differences between the three cohorts which the authors are using to help give meaning to the differences in their experiences. For example, the MC group was the youngest group and the one most recently experienced with education in schools. This may have provided them with different experiences and expectations of the use of technology in the blended learning within this program. The RC group seemed to be older and (presumably) had more life experience than the MC group, but perhaps also had less recent experience with success in formal education. This could indicate different experiences and expectations for the use of technology than the MC group. Moreover, the fact that they had chosen to study on campus at a regional site lends some insights into their needs and expectations for in-person face-to-face contact and may help explain their negative experiences with and views of online and blended learning or the relative utility value they placed on the use of technology in the program (Christensen, Anakwe, & Kessler, 2001). The EE group was the 'oldest' group and this may imply more life experience than the other groups. Although the survey did not canvass their motives for external study, their choice to study externally was likely made in light of other demands in their personal lives. Presumably, this affected their expectations of interpersonal interaction and face-to-face activity, perhaps making them more accepting of online or blended delivery with (relatively) higher amounts of online interaction (Dabbagh, 2007). These factors and the resulting effects on student needs, expectations and experience underscores the need for a thorough front-end analysis for development projects such as this in order to inform practical decision making as part of the design and development process (Gagne, Briggs, & Wager, 1992).

In general, the results from the student survey suggest that students in the MC and EE groups are generally, albeit not universally, having positive experiences with blended learning in the program. However, in the RC cohort, the results are mixed and suggest a more generally negative experience, particularly with respect to *overall comfort with online learning*, *ease of use of the online environment*, *perceived value of online interaction* and *perceived benefit from blended learning*. These results indicate some degree of dissatisfaction with blended learning amongst students in the RC group.

Looking forward

The survey results raise a number of questions about the nature of the reported differences between the cohorts' experiences of blended learning in the program. In particular:

- *What expectations of blended learning did learners in each of the cohorts bring to the program? How have those expectations been met (or not met)?*
- *How are the expectations of teaching staff different across the blends experience by each cohort? How might this affect student activity and experience?*
- *How are the needs of learners related to the groupings suggested by the three cohorts? Are members of one cohort more (or less) prepared for online learning? What demographic features shape those needs? How can those needs best be addressed in future versions of the program?*
- *Do the differences in reported experiences indicate issues of equity within the program, across the three suggested cohorts? Do students have equitable access to teaching staff, feedback, support, learning materials and other key elements of the program?*
- *What are the differences in activity (as opposed to experience) across the three cohorts?*
- *What factors within the university's control (e.g. program orientation, division of labour amongst teaching staff, production of learning materials) are producing differences in the learners' experiences?*
- *Are the differences in student experience producing differences in student performance?*

These questions and the issues which underpin them were included in the later phases of data collection for the formative evaluation process within the program. At the time of writing those analyses were not yet finalized and will be reported at a later date.

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