Facilitating holistic growth in a blended program: Students reflect on what worked and why

Ruth Smith
Counselling and Family Studies Programme
Bethlehem Tertiary Institute, Tauranga, NZ

The ability or otherwise of flexible learning environments to facilitate whole-person growth and transformation has been attracting increasing research interest. This article shares initial findings from an ongoing project that seeks to identify key factors from a faith-based, blended Diploma of Counselling programme which students identified as significant in their self-perceptions of holistic change. Two aspects – 'gristy' online discussions and the onsite intensives – are explored more fully. The article addresses a perceived gap in the literature by giving focus to participant responses as they share their perspectives, seeking to identify helpful practices as well as challenges in the facilitation of holistic growth and transformation among students in blended learning settings.

Keywords: Blended; personal growth; transformative education; online discussion; on-campus intensive

Introduction

How does, or can holistic growth and transformation be facilitated within students' lives through blended programmes? Some authors (e.g. Diekema & Caddell, 2001) believe that true life change can only happen in a face-to-face environment. In contrast, others (e.g., Heinemann, 2005; Steele, 2004) argue that technology can, in fact, support the transformation process. This study-in-progress looks at aspects of a blended programme from the perspective of its graduates, highlighting key contexts in which they felt holistic transformation occurred, and important factors in that process.

One key factor in transformative education is participation in a community of learning, for it is alongside and sometimes through others that deep change can occur. Parker Palmer (1993) asserts the necessity of authentic relationships in community to effect substantive change. For him, learning does not occur in settings more reminiscent of monastic seclusion (Browning, 2004). For those who take faith-based or holistically transformative e-education seriously, this presents a real challenge. As Roels (2004) expresses it:

> [Faith] educators have an abiding desire to take the whole person seriously, teaching head, heart and hand to work together. We will need to think long and hard about how we provide the equivalent to the communal and face-to-face components of embodied teaching that enrich…intellectual analysis, discernment, compassion, integrity and service. (p. 465)

Some argue that when it comes to holistic education, a careful blend of on-campus and online learning can bring together the 'best of both worlds'. Interestingly, Rovai, Baker and Cox (2008), in a study comparing traditional classroom, blended, and fully online higher education learning environments, found indications

> that blended courses can produce a stronger sense of community among students than either traditional or fully online courses (p. 16).

One strategy is to design assignment work that encourages personal formation. Coe (2000) argues for marrying theory with what he calls "soul work" (p. 99), since intellectual inquiry alone will not transform.

This could happen through personal reflective journalling, for example, or assignments that require more than just cerebral interaction with the material (TenElshof, 2000). Ebersole and Woods (2001) encourage:

> self-disclosure…. Whenever possible give participants the opportunity to share the kinds of personal expressions that provide a well-rounded picture of who they are (p. 211).

Online discussions, whether specifically assessed or not, are also seen as potentially powerful towards holistic growth, provided groups are sufficiently small to support intimacy of sharing (Ebersole & Woods, 2001). When online forums work well, they may in fact produce much deeper and richer discussions than are possible face-to-face (Heinemann, 2005). As Steele (2004) points out:

> the threaded discussion can be an effective tool for helping students to process information, to debate ideas, to teach and learn from one another, and - sometimes - to grow in faith (pp. 505-506).

The asking of 'gristy' questions that discourage platitudes is a vital aspect of this. "Strategies that foster dialogue are crucial", maintains Vogel (2008, p. 326). In an earlier article she maintains:

> Teaching is in large part the asking of probing questions. Sharing does not mean giving others our answers... The final produce is not so valuable as the process that leads us through the desert and to the oasis. (1991, p. 117)

Such open, challenging dialogue, of course, requires a safe environment. Tonkin (2004) and Vogel (1991) highlight the necessity for a "hospitable space" that offers "tolerance, forgiveness, and affirmation" (Vogel, 1991, p. 105). Parks Daloz (2000) talks about the need for a

> climate of safety in which people feel free to speak their truth, where blaming and judging are minimal, where full participation is encouraged... (p. 114).

Background

The writer has been teaching in a small, faith-based Private Training Establishment (PTE) in New Zealand since early 2000. Approximately half the students now study in flexi or blended programmes, meaning that their study is web-supported. One of the institution's core values is spiritual and personal transformation, and the question arose if or how that was being experienced in our primarily online programmes.

When there were two years of graduates from the flexi Diploma of Counselling programme, it seemed an opportune moment to explore this further. It felt important to discover if, how and where holistic transformation and growth happened for these students. Many reported informally that their lives and understanding were significantly altered through their time of study, but this needed further verification.

There seemed in the literature to be a distinct lack of the 'student voice', and the author wanted to include this vital element to the ongoing conversation. For this reason, the article includes verbatim samples from across the participant responses. A key motivator was to try to find out if there are ways to design courses so as to better facilitate this vital transformation work. Even while trying to discover keys, however, the author was well aware of many intangibles that could also be part of the transforming process in students' lives. As Vogel (1991) expresses it:

> Human transformation is ...both work and gift. It cannot be understood without allowing for mystery even as we seek to understand the processes that foster it (p. 50).

Methodology

Potential participants were scattered all over NZ, so the researcher opted for a questionnaire designed to take up to 30 minutes to complete. Application was made for Institutional ethics approval, and granted. The decision was made to only survey students that were fully 'flexi' – that is those who studied without doing any papers onsite. The project is anticipated to be ongoing, as increasing numbers complete their programme. Only those who had already graduated were approached to avoid any conflict of interest for current students. The questionnaires were to be answered anonymously, and replies sent directly to a named member of our Administration, who opened and collated them. Student response was taken as informed consent. Twenty out of the possible twenty-nine responded (69%).

Heinemann (2006) maintains that many researchers have utilised self-reported measures of student learning so, like him, the assumption was made that students would be able to comment reliably regarding the focus of the study and evaluate how they felt they had changed. For the purposes of the project, Stella Ma's (2003) definition of holistic transformation was used:

> one's growth towards spiritual maturity, which is reflected in one's relationships with God, self, and others (p. 321).

The ten-question survey sought to investigate where and how holistic transformation might have happened. Was it in any particular year, papers or assignment type more than others? Did it come through the actual content of papers, the readings, online discussions, or personal interactions with lecturers or classmates? How significant was the biannual one-week long onsite intensive to this? For teaching staff wishing to help facilitate this transformative work, what insights might we gain?

Findings

Holistic transformation throughout the years of study

All respondents were clear that significant personal transformation had occurred during their programme of study. There were commonalities in the patterns of growth they perceived throughout the three years. Most saw their first year as one of growing understanding of faith and their personal spiritual journey. They commented on being challenged in their thinking, developing a greater knowledge of their faith, and a deeper understanding of people.

> Being treated as an adult, the openness of thinking demonstrated by the tutors made a big difference. I experienced [ ] as a 'safe place' to be. I was challenged in my thinking and yet not told how or what to think. (Jo – all names used are pseudonyms)

A number commented on year 1 in terms of starting the process of self-awareness and spiritual growth. It also saw the initial formation of a community of learning, building trusting relationships together, and learning to respect differing perspectives – each of these evidently enhanced by their time onsite.

Year 2 was seen by many as a year of integration and extending previous foundations. For some this was the most difficult year, either through personal or family mishap, or the highlighting of personal or faith issues that they needed to face.

> Year 2 was more of an integration year whereby who I am became integrated into who I am as a counsellor which included the way I manage clients' beliefs as well as maintaining my own. ..I began to consider how I can get along with others without it being compulsory that we think the same way. (Sam)

Year 3 was perceived as a year of consolidation of things learned in previous years, and emergence as a confident, faith-integrated, beginning professional.

The significance of online discussions for in-depth transformation

All papers in the programme have a requirement for participation in online forums that includes responding to and interacting with the postings of others. One year one, first-semester paper gives almost a third of the total credit to these discussions, which may help generate a pattern of participation that other papers then benefit from. Respondents gave substantial feedback on this aspect of their programme. Several saw these as the most significant contributor to their personal transformation and growth because of both the level and depth of discussion with other students and feedback from lecturers. Participants mentioned how the discussions helped them to integrate their beliefs into what they were learning, while also having to consider others' views.

> These often served as stepping stones to growth by stimulating my mind to think in different directions as I considered the perspectives of other students. (Chris)

On the whole respondents appear to have felt 'safe' to share, an essential factor - though one commented:

I found it difficult when certain people who seemed to have very set and closed-minded ideas shared their faith experiences. In these situations I felt as though I could not be totally open about my thoughts and perspectives. (Jo)

They certainly perceived the discussions as a key component in the building of a community of learning, an area of clear focus in transformative literature (e.g., Swan, 2002; Vogel, 1991).

[Over the 3 years] we had moved from corresponding with strangers on the forums to a new community of caring people. (Kelly)

Several mentioned ways in which they felt online discussions surpassed what could occur in face-to-face contexts. They highlighted the opportunity in asynchronous discussions for a more considered, reflective response; the ability to share more openly as there is time to think first before posting; the potential to share more personally about things that could be embarrassing if they could see others' reactions; the ability of quiet students to be 'heard' - unlike face-to-face contexts where often the keen or more forthcoming students hold the floor and others sit in silence; and allowing students to contribute at their own pace. All these aspects helped to form an environment where holistic change could occur.

I enjoyed the forum discussions as they challenged us into actually taking a position on something. Sometimes it was neither right or [*sic*] wrong but it did force me to think about what I think…and why. (Pat)

For many, these discussions provoked a level of engagement with and challenge to their faith perspectives that they had not previously encountered.

The significance of the onsite intensives for personal transformation

The second most significant factor that emerged in the study was the critical importance to participants of the onsite intensives. The majority signalled these as being highly significant in terms of holistic development and growth. Banks (1999, p. 172, as cited in Heinemann, 2005) agrees that onsite experiences give students opportunity to see a transformative lifestyle modelled in a day-to-day way, particularly by faculty. "Truth must be embodied as well as articulated, incarnated as well as revealed" (p. 284), he maintains. Coe (2000) concurs that theory on its own will not transform lives: "Our talk in the classroom needs to have feet" (p. 95). The participants resoundingly agreed.

These experiences were the highlight of my studies. (Sam)

Something very special about these. Definitely touch the heart and soul… (Kim)

Key areas that were highlighted included the value of onsite intensives for building non-virtual relationships with others – just having time to chat! Blier (2008) notes the value of this also in community building. During these times trust was developed, allowing students to receive and give significant personal challenges to each other as the years continued and relationships deepened, which led to growth. Some felt deeply valued through connections with lecturers outside of class. Others appreciated having opportunity to practise vulnerable sharing in order to develop skills they had been learning on their own; felt inspired by the ongoing changes and growth they observed in each other; valued having their thinking challenged, and inaccurate assumptions about others dispelled. Meeting people 'in the flesh' at times turned out to be different to expectations, as some classmates proved to be deeper than anticipated.

The onsite intensives were experienced as a 'safe place to be'. Seeing how a particular tutor handled controversial or 'difficult' student contributions was one example mentioned. Their time onsite also allowed them to observe transformative life and love being modelled by tutors and others, as well as the more expected professional skills.

Other aspects identified as relevant to holistic transformation

1) The significance of interactions with lecturers
The majority of the respondents identified interaction with lecturing staff as significant in their holistic development. Specifically, they appreciated staff who believed in them, were encouraging, modelled in practice what they were teaching, and were honest, transparent and open – including sharing some of their personal and faith struggles and doubts. Online interactive aspects that were specifically valued in the

lecturer role included contributing regularly on forums, giving feedback, and introducing other perspectives.

2) The significance of 1-1 interactions with other students
Most of the respondents identified interaction with other students as significant for their spiritual development. Some of their responses were specific to online interactions, while others valued the onsite times. They seem to have particularly appreciated the growth value of engaging with differing perspectives

> …with no judgement in sight but lots of humour. (Lee)

> I valued the input of [students from other spiritual persuasions] very much, and believe they brought some very valuable and important perspectives and thoughts to our discussions and group dynamic. (Jo)

3) The significance of course content and readings
Respondents felt these also contributed to the transformative process, as Fleischer (2006) also highlights. However, one could argue that the same may be true in a traditional classroom. One comment made that related specifically to online learning, though, was to do with the level of depth of reflection that was part of flexi students' reading:

> Flexi allowed time to read articles then put something online and then be able to discuss it with others and therefore to develop ideas further (or find shortfalls). (Lee)

It would be rare or non-existent (in our situation anyway) for on-campus students to have the same time (or inclination!) to grapple together and critique the ideas raised in the readings from both personal and faith-based perspectives over such an extended period or with such frankness and depth.

4) Specific assignments
Some specific kinds of assignment were mentioned as being significant to holistic growth. Personal reflective journalling, which in some papers was written and others more visual, was one key example cited. These challenged students to engage with their learning at a deeper, more personal level. Other assignments included as part of their criteria a personal and faith-informed response to the topic. This agrees with the literature's encouragement to ask students for more than a theoretical, cerebral response.

> The reflective… assignments contributed …most to my growth. (Jo)

5) All papers contributed to holistic growth
Perhaps unexpectedly, all papers in the programme were named as having specifically contributed to the participants' holistic development. This was a surprise to the researcher, who might have anticipated some papers with a more stated faith focus as having more impact than others. It was therefore pleasing to hear evidence that faith-integration was perceived by respondents in all aspects of their programme.

Identified areas of hindrance to personal growth and transformation

Respondents were also invited to identify any things that they felt had hindered their holistic development or personal transformation in the programme. A number of areas were mentioned, including personal issues, strongly opinionated classmates, and the challenges of juggling multiple life priorities. Two that relate more closely to learning online were the momentum and morale-draining feelings of isolation which were sometimes linked to slow responses from tutors, and online assignments – particularly group ones – that posed significant logistical difficulties.

Respondent suggestions regarding holistic transformation in the programme

A 'blue-skies' question was asked inviting respondents to suggest ways in which they felt this area of holistic transformation could be enhanced throughout the programme. Suggestions made seemed to focus primarily on the area of intentionality. E-educators who seek to facilitate transformative programmes need to keep that in mind throughout and structure accordingly. Participants noted this could include the availability of personal mentors, personal accountability and sharing, and the inclusion of specific activities seen as valuable for their transformative potential such as guided reflection, ritual, and focused readings. All of these could be effected

online. Some suggested journalling a record of their growth and development over the years taken to complete the programme, timetabling short periods of retreat perhaps even during an intensive, and allowing students space to share more deeply about areas of holistic change.

Discussion

A number of key areas stood out to the author from the responses given. The participants were clearly grateful for the opportunity to engage in a blended programme that allowed them to access study from points all over the country. For most of them, relocation in order to study on-campus was impractical because of their own or their partner's work or wider family commitments. What was surprising was how critical a role in terms of their perceived holistic development they felt the onsite intensives had played within their overall programme. One aspect that the writer had not appreciated before was the importance of these for seeing transformative living – over and above the usual professional skills - modelled by faculty. For example, there were comments about one staff couple's verbalised respect for each other; receiving hospitality in a lecturer's home; and observing how a staff member interacted respectfully in class with a belligerent student. The researcher was also struck by comments relating to the cumulative benefit of these onsite experiences, each time building increased depth in relationships and trust with both students and staff. The congruence of answers relating to perceived patterns of student growth and development from year to year was also somewhat unexpected.

It was interesting to note, from the respondents' point of view, how ongoing in-depth online discussions continued to build on the relationships and trust levels that had been fostered in the onsite intensives, resulting in a feeling that they were receiving the 'best of both worlds'. The depth to which they seemed to engage with the course material, readings and ideas appeared to outstrip what might be the usual experience for onsite students. For all papers in the programme active, regular and interactive participation in the discussions were part of the 'terms' to successfully complete. At least one gave significant credit to these discussions based on the quality and a required minimum number of interactive responses linked to their readings, personal experience and evaluation of both from a faith perspective. Many of the respondents voiced their sense of safety in sharing at deep and vulnerable levels in online forums as well as during onsite times. This is a key factor in the ability of students to engage with ideas and more personal issues that affect transformation potential. The blended nature of the programme seemed to build helpfully in this regard, with the onsite experiences fostering genuine trust, relationships, personal interaction and sharing which then continued and was enhanced in their online community.

Giving careful consideration to choice and expectations of assignment tasks appears to be another key factor when seeking transformative experiences for students. Those that engage at deeply personal, reflective levels alongside or even as part of more cerebral, theoretical ones seemed to be particularly significant.

These early findings seem to agree with the literature about areas where online study can 'win out' over face-to-face, particularly as linked to online discussions. The opportunity or even requirement for every student to take part affords quiet students voice; students from other language backgrounds have opportunity to hone their language before 'putting it out there'; students with disabilities meet others at the level of ideas shared, rather than by how they look or sound. All are given the chance to reflect more deeply before posting so that discussions can be richer, sometimes more vulnerable, more personal, and ultimately more worthwhile. This suggests that online or blended programmes may have the capacity to be more effective in facilitating holistic transformation than on-campus ones, perhaps particularly benefitting those who might be overshadowed in traditional contexts.

Hearing that all papers in the programme had been significant in the participants' sense of spiritual development and growth was encouraging, and important. If educators desire to see evidence of student transformation in our work, it is important that all engage in seeking to integrate relevant elements throughout all aspects of our programmes.

Conclusion

"Transformative learning is by no means inevitable," notes Parks Daloz (2000, p. 104). Of course, that could be said of any context of teaching and learning – more traditional as well as blended options. However, early indications would appear to suggest that significant holistic change can transpire for students whose study is primarily off-campus and online, with some on-campus interactions in an effective blended 'mix'.

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Author: Ruth Smith, Counselling and Family Studies Programme, Bethlehem Tertiary Institute, Tauranga, NZ. Email: r.smith@bethlehem.ac.nz