Chapter 8
The Blended Learning Environment in Higher Education:
The Tutor and Student Perspective

Ellen Boeren
University of Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the author's experiences with blended learning, both as a tutor and as a student at a British Russell Group University. The chapter starts from the importance of encouraging an autonomy supporting learning environment, featured within self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the first part of the chapter, definitions of blended learning will be briefly reviewed. Secondly, the role of the learning environment will be explained, drawing upon previous research on learning environments undertaken by Darkenwald and Valentine (1986), mentioning the importance of the learning environment within motivational theories. Thirdly, results of a critical analysis on the own teaching and learning practice will be conducted, comparing the perspective of being a tutor and being a student. Finally, recommendations for future teaching practice will be discussed, before concluding this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the author's experiences with blended learning, both as a tutor and as a student at a British Russell Group University and starts from the importance of encouraging an autonomy supporting learning environment, featured within self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In the first part of the chapter, definitions of blended learning will be briefly reviewed. Secondly, the role of the learning environment will be explained, drawing upon previous research on learning environments undertaken by Darkenwald and Valentine (1986), in which the importance of the learning environment will be linked to motivational theories. Thirdly, results of a critical analysis on the own teaching and learning practice will be conducted, comparing the perspective of being a tutor in several post-graduate courses, and of being a student in a post-graduate programme

based on a range of dimensions measuring the quality of the learning environment. Finally, recommendations for future teaching practice will be discussed, before concluding this chapter.

BLENDED LEARNING

Definitions and Contexts

In this chapter, blended learning refers to the use of online and face-to-face elements within a specific course (Thorne, 2003; Ward & LaBranche, 2003). Blended learning must thus not be confused with distance learning, which takes place outside the face-to-face classroom, but in which learners can learn within their own time and space, nowadays mostly through the use of the internet (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). While blended learning can also refer to the mix or variation of instructional tools, without necessarily using the internet, blended learning, in this chapter, refers to the combination of face-to-face with online learning through the use of a Virtual Learning Environment. Nowadays, Virtual Learning Environments are widely used within British universities, although various systems exist, which will be explained later in this chapter. A Virtual Learning Environment is defined by what was known as the UK Joint Information System Committee – nowadays JISC – (JISC, 2000) as *'the components in which learners and tutors participate in 'on-line' interactions of various kinds, including on-line learning'* (Weller, 2007). JISC is the leading body on enhancing the use of digital technologies in post-compulsory education and research, and offers support to Further and Higher Education institutions in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Therefore, their definitions are widely used within the UK higher education context.

Thinking about the blending of face-to-face and online elements, there is a need to understand how the various forms of instruction differ from each other. Face-to-face teaching offers the high-

est level of interaction, as both the students and the tutor are within the same room, however, it does not give students the opportunity to choose when and where to learn. Using other educational media might increase this level of independence, but might lower the opportunities for interaction. However, blended learning combines both features, and can therefore help in structuring the learning process on the one hand, but supporting autonomy on the other hand.

Based on previous research, Macdonald (2008, p. 41) came to a summary on the use of different learning formats, including campus-based approaches, distance learning approaches and campus plus distance learning approaches (see Table 1)

Synchronicity is possible through the use of face-to-face lectures or workshops, but also through video and audio conferences or conversations through the telephone. It is highly likely that distance learning students have chosen for distance learning in order to follow their own pace and in order to fit their learning activities within their own schedule, combining learning with other activities, like work and family care. Therefore, synchronicity might be hard to achieve. Media ideal for asynchronous contact include wikis, blogs and forums. These tools give users the chance to post items whenever it suits them, without expecting an immediate response.

Exploring this combination of face-to-face with online learning, nowadays, in higher education, we can conclude that many universities offer courses in a blended learning format. But how do we perceive this evolution, and what is the added value of offering blended learning? Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) in Zong (2013, p. 8) outlined six reasons for the use of blended learning: *'(1) pedagogical richness, (2) access to knowledge, (3) social interaction, (4) personal agency, (5) cost-effectiveness, (6) ease of revision'*. While these are six separate reasons, some of them inform each other. Pedagogical richness links together with the social interactions, as students can use

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