

Chapter 7

The Role of Librarians in Blended Courses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the intersection of instructional design and implementation, blended learning, ICT literacy, and academic librarians within higher education. Using the TPACK, pedagogy 2.0, and community of inquiry models, the chapter explains how librarians can help academic instructors design blended courses that effectively address physical and intellectual access to a wide variety of resources, especially digital materials, in order to optimize student learning.

INTRODUCTION

Learners today can experience higher education in various delivery methods. One of the newer modes is blended learning, which tries to optimize learning by building on the advantages of both face-to-face and online environments. However, academic success depends on students' ability to navigate and engage meaningfully in these environments: to be ICT (information and communication technology) literate. Librarians can play an important role in these efforts.

BACKGROUND

Blended Learning

Increasingly, educators offer instruction in a blended or hybrid mode. That is, the learning experience consists of a blend of face-to-face and online interaction. This blending can assume several forms: face-to-face sessions occurring in computer labs, primarily face-to-face with links to online discussion and assignments, a rotation between face-to-face and online class sessions, mainly online with on-site instructor support or tutoring, primarily online with optional face-to-face activities (Kipp & Ebooks Corporation, 2013). The following definition of blended learning has been accepted by many professionals in the field:

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A formal education program in which a student learns: at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace; at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home; and the modalities along each student's learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience. (Christensen, Horn & Staker, 2013)

Blended learning has gained popularity for several reasons: it mitigates the constraints of time and space, it provides more flexibility for instructors and students in terms of convenience (such as commuting and time management), it maximizes multimodal learning styles, it accommodates different students' needs (e.g., English language learners who may experience difficulties in "live" oral discussion, visually impaired students), frees up physical space for additional use by other groups, it facilitates educational interaction and learning outside of face-to-face class time, and it facilitates digital competency. Furthermore, blended learning scales well: from a single activity or training module to a course, program, or even institutional mission.

On the other hand, these positive qualities require tech-savvy instructors who understand blended learning. Otherwise, both students and instructors may become frustrated, and lose academic ground. In that respect, blended learning changes the nature of instruction. It neither models "the sage on the stage" nor the "guide on the side." Instead, it supports the role of instructor as facilitator and learning environment "orchestrator." Moreover, the instructor needs to demonstrate flexibility in adjusting the experience based on student evidence of learning – or lack of understanding and learning (Clark & Clark, 2015).

Thus, a vital key to effective blended learning consists of purposeful instructional design that takes advantage of each delivery mode. What aspects of learning can students do independently at their own time and pace? For instance, students can read and watch online sources such as articles and video, and they can write and share critical essays and self-reflection pieces online. In contrast, what learning activities require face-to-face interaction? For instance, initial introductions, group brainstorming, and role-plays are best handled in real time in the same physical space.

In addition, instructors need to make sure that learners have the technological ability to access and make use of online resources; such efforts might include pre-assessments of learner skill, scaffolded resources and activities to level the technological "playing field," and provisions for alternative resources and assessments for learners to demonstrate subject matter competence. In short, instructors need to design learning environments that optimize the learners' efforts and needs.

Instructional Design

As implied above, blended learning requires thoughtful and effective instructional design. Yet, what exactly is instructional design? Informally, it may be considered as curriculum or course development; its specific meaning remains vague to a degree. Some definitions of instructional design follow:

- A systematic process used to develop educational programs in a consistent, reliable manner.
- A reflective and iterative process involving aligned and congruent analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation (Reiser & Dempsey, 2018).

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