

Chapter 14

When Cultures Meet in Blended Learning: What Literature Tells Us

Chun Hu

University of Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a literature review of the blended learning projects that involved learners from different cultures. The studies reviewed essentially addressed two issues: the feasibility of cross-cultural blended learning and learner differences in such a learning environment. While the studies overwhelmingly reported the benefits of using the Internet to create opportunities for students to learn with peers from other cultures, they also highlighted issues of cultural impact on learner behaviors. Learner differences reported included approaches to asking questions, collaborating with others and preferences in the way they made use of technologies. Patterns emerged from the review, implying some design considerations for planning cross-cultural blended learning. It seems that successful cross-cultural blended learning programs need committed teaching teams who make decisions on curriculum choices, learning tasks and assessments, and which technology tools to use; and who skillfully handle issues of language barriers, project management, and preparation of learners.

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning, also referred to as flexible learning and hybrid learning, is becoming a norm on our campuses. Growing numbers of teachers use information and communication technologies (ICT) to complement conventional face-to-face lectures/seminars. Although some ICT tools such as multi-

media resources have long been used in teaching/learning, only in the last decade has the Internet been increasingly integrated into teaching and learning process. Teachers use learning management system (e.g. Blackboard, WebCT) to manage course documents, to distribute course materials, and to conduct synchronous chats and asynchronous discussions. Students use discussion forums to share ideas and to collaborate in projects; and they use chat and email to communicate with peers and instructors.

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More and more teachers and academics initiate collaborations with their counterparts in other schools/universities at home and abroad in order to provide additional learning opportunities for their students.

Blended learning is more than a combination of two media: instructor-led and technology-led activities. The notion “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964) appears inappropriate to describe technology use in education, as we all know from our own experiences that medium of instruction itself does not necessarily affect student learning. Take face-to-face instruction - our most familiar instructional mode - for example. Not all teachers are created equal in terms of their abilities of bringing effective learning experiences to students. Successful teachers are more likely to be those who skillfully select and structure their teaching methods that motivate learners and relate learning experiences to learners’ knowledge-levels, interests and needs (Yoon & Lim, 2007). Effective blended learning depends more on teachers’ instructional design and methods than their technical skills. “Methods are necessary and unique, but media are not” (Cobb, 1997, p. 24).

Through a literature review, this chapter intends to provide academics, teachers, researchers and professionals who are interested in involving teachers and students from different cultures in their blended learning activities with an introduction to the research development in the area. Specifically, the chapter will present a summary of relevant research studies; their underpinning theoretical frameworks, methodologies used, and examples of the projects involving learners and teachers from culturally diverse backgrounds across geographic and time zones. Attempts are made to draw inferences from the literature reviewed on design considerations for planning cross-cultural blended learning activities. The chapter is divided into four sections: (1) background - rationale, sources of the studies to be reviewed; (2) summary of the studies reviewed - theoretical frameworks, examples of cross-cultural

blended learning projects, methodologies used and design considerations inferred; (3) future trends; and (4) conclusion.

BACKGROUND

For the purpose of the discussion, a definition by Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) on blended learning is adopted. The purpose of “blended learning approach is to find a harmonious balance between online access to knowledge and face-to-face human interaction” (p. 228). Blends of blended learning may involve the mixing of online and face-to-face learning activities, student or instructors with a number of goals including pedagogical richness, access to knowledge, and social interaction (p. 231). Blended learning share a similar component with distance learning, i.e. information and communication technology. Distance learning, according to the U.S. Department of Educational Research and Improvement, is “the application of telecommunications and electronic devices which enable students and learners to receive instruction from some distant location” (Bruder, 1989, p. 30). However, blended learning is not the same as distance learning and does not have a vital element of Keegan’s (1988) definition of distance learning, i.e. “the quasi-permanent separation between teacher and student throughout the length of the learning process” (p. 10).

When Cultures Meet in the Internet

The rapid penetration of the Internet ushered in an era where educational activities can be conducted on a global stage involving teachers and learners from different cultures and nations. Education has become global in terms of its diverse student population due to the flexible delivery system of online learning (Jarvis, 1999; Mason, 1998). With increasing interactions among teachers and teachers, teachers and students, students and students from different cultural backgrounds, un-

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