Chapter 48
Introducing a Teaching Innovation to Enhance Students' Analytical and Research Skills:
A Blended Learning Initiative

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ABSTRACT

The term "blended learning" has gained considerable interest in recent years as a description of particular forms of teaching combined with technology. This chapter reports in some detail the experience of a small group of undergraduate learners as they progress through their Bachelor course at University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD) in the United Arab Emirates. In particular, this study looks at discussion forum approach as a blended learning initiative and what that entails to the learners in terms of making the subject more interactive and enhancing students' analytical and research skills. From the findings, a conclusion has been drawn regarding the role of the Blackboard tool in learning by helping students to obtain a deep sense of understanding of how to operate in a virtual team despite the challenges.

INTRODUCTION

In psychology and education, a common definition of learning is a process that brings together cognitive, emotional, and environmental influences and experiences for acquiring, enhancing, or making changes in one's knowledge, skills, values, and world views (Illeris, 2000; Ormorod, 1995).

Many other theories consider that the Human learning is a social process. In fact, learning is not an isolated activity (Hung & Nichani, 2001) and interaction and collaboration between learners is a major enabler of the knowledge construction paradigm (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992).

A combination of traditional learning within the classroom and Web-based learning is called blended learning. It is the mix of face-to-face

instructions and online interactions between the students and teacher to optimize the learning outcome. It is considered more effective than only face-to-face learning or fully online learning as it makes the teaching learning process more interactive and allows regular feedback.

This case study examines how undergraduate students pursuing Bachelor of Business Administration and Bachelor of Commerce, majors Finance and Accountancy, enrolled in International Trade Theory and Policy subject, worked collaboratively in small work groups on assignments over a period of thirteen weeks. Particular focus in this chatper is given on how to make the subject more interactive and inculcate analytical and research skills in students by using discussion forum approach of blended learning.

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows: Section 1 reviews relevant research on blended learning and its impact on students' learning. Section 2 describes the application of discussion forum as a tool to optimize students' learning. Within this section, the outcomes, rationale, assessment and the findings of the study are discussed. Section 3 suggests certain future research directions. The final section concludes the chapter.

BACKGROUND

Blended learning is facilitated by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning, and founded on transparent communication amongst all parties involved with a course (Heinze & Procter, 2004).

According to Hisham *et al.* (2006), the definition of Blended learning is varied and contrasting. Some studies (Whitelock and Jefts, 2003; Alavi and Gallupe, 2003; Arbaugh, 2005; Peterson, 2003) referred to Blended learning as the integrated combination of traditional learning with Web-based online approaches. Singh (2003) defined Blended learning as models that combine various delivery modes.

Blended learning is being used as a combination of face-to-face learning including hard copy study materials and online learning with a variety of online resources (Bawaneh, 2011).

Many works have focused on the definition of the main functions of blended learning systems and we choose here to mention the classification of (Siemens, 2004):

- Different levels of permissions for users (students, teachers, tutors, administrator, visitor).
- Search functions (simple search and advanced search).
- Multimedia application for digital material.
- Collaborative workspace.
- Knowledge share and reuse.

Blended learning can combine the positive aspects of the two learning environments; classroom based learning and e-learning (Bonk & Graham, 2006). According to Rastegarpour (2010), blending learning provides various benefits over using any single learning delivery medium alone. Learners not only learn more, their interaction and satisfaction improves. Moreover, several linked options for learners; in addition to classroom training increases learning. According to Citera (1988), shy students are more likely to participate in an online discussion because it is less intimidating than speaking up in class.

According to Doiron (2006), blended learning approach was successful in encouraging individual participation. Statistically significant high correlations were found between performance and posting frequency. For Karayan and Crowe (1997), and Smith and Hardaker (2000), the advantage of a discussion forum, as opposed to the traditional face-to-face class discussion session lies in its asynchronous nature, which allows for wider student participation and offers them more time to process their thoughts.

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