

Chapter 3

Blended Learning and Distance Education: Enablers and Barriers

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of online technologies generated the belief that traditional print-and-post distance education would be transformed. The need for a compromise between the conventional face-to-face workshop sessions and online learning led to a new approach to teaching and learning called blended learning. Blended learning has become a popular method for the delivery of distance education, however, it has not always delivered on its promised potential. This chapter investigates various enablers and barriers of blended learning and highlights their significance.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of online technologies has the potential to transform traditional education (Bennet, Agostinho, Lockyer, & Harper, 2009). Presently, many educational institutions are struggling to provide economical distance-mode education. Availability of PCs, the Internet, and other developing technologies are expected to allow students choose and review material at their own pace (Eklund, Kay, & Lynch, 2003). Online technologies are considered tools to effectively access students across borders. This increased connectivity can link students with the centers of learning in efficiently, effectively, and economically (Van Dam, 2001). Despite its potential to revolutionize the delivery of learning, technology has not fulfilled its potential (Brabazon, 2002). A number of students studying online expressed dissatisfaction with the offerings of learning platform (Bersin, 2004; Moore & Fetzner, 2009; Moore & Kearsley, 2011; Radwan & Leeds, 2009). The educators have responded by analyzing different models of delivery of online learning to come up with an improved model that could help achieve better outcomes for learners (Holley & Oliver, 2010; Levine & Sun, 2002).

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Blended learning model has emerged as a solution to fulfill the need for a hybrid learning model that combines conventional and online learning (Rogers, 2001). Blended learning is a teaching and learning environment that integrates face-to-face and computer-assisted learning (Stracke, 2007). The benefits of both mediums are well established in literature (Miller et al., 2004; Singh & Reed, 2001). This model offers the most effective elements from both traditional and the e-learning medium. The delivery of blended learning tends to be offered as a 'one-size-fits-all' model (Rossett, Douglass, & Frazee, 2003). Many studies (Irlbeck et al., 2006; Rossett et al., 2003; Rye, 2009) have claimed that model will not contribute to successful learning experiences for students. This chapter investigates students' perceptions of blended learning designed to meet their individual needs as they participate in various blended learning courses offered by different UK universities. This research is intended to contribute to an understanding and appreciation of the enablers and barriers for learners in a flexible blended learning environment. The questions used in research instrument for this research are designed to understand why students' perceive different aspects of a blended learning model perceived as enablers or barriers to learning through distance education. After introduction, section 2 provides a literature review followed by discussion of research design in section 3. Section 4 provides discussion of findings. Section 5 provides concluding remarks. Limitations of the study and areas of further research are discussed in Section 6.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on blended learning continues to grow, but still remains limited with a lack of effective research into the area of learner engagement (Halverson et al., 2014). The overall experiences in relation to blended learning are reported to be positive. There exist gaps in students' experience of blended learning. This study uses the definition of blended learning provided by Garrison and Vaughan (2008) and Tselios, Daskalakis and Papadopoulou (2011). According to them, blended learning refers to integrating valuable aspects of both conventional and non-conventional methods of learning where the interaction between teachers and students can take place with or without the use of technology. Blended learning can combine different methods of learning (such as face-to-face and online methods) to create different ways of learning (Wu, Tennyson & Hsia, 2010; Lim, Morris, & Kupritz, 2014). Blended learning can 'blend' different forms of instructional technology and classroom teaching. Tselios et al. (2011) develops the claim that blended learning can integrate advantages of online and traditional learning. The findings of De George-Walker and Keefe (2010), Vaughan and Garrison (2005), and Daouk, Bahous, Bacha, and Blessinger (2016) lend support to the claim of Tselios et al. (2011). According to them, blended learning goes beyond the simple integration of conventional and non-conventional methods of learning. Vaughan and Garrison (2005) argues that effective blended learning leverages strengths of both conventional and non-conventional methods of learning to facilitate achieving greatest learning outcomes for students.

El Mansur and Mupinga (2007) argue that students enjoy certain aspects of blended learning including schedule flexibility, interactivity, and availability of teachers. Garrison and Vaughan, (2008) extends this argument by saying that blended learning increases the quality and quantity of interaction among students and teachers. The findings of Pinto de Moura (2010) and Akhter (2015) lend further support for this argument. They found that 24-hour online availability of teacher combined with physical presence of teacher in the classroom provides new level of interaction that students found beneficial.

According to Li-Ling (2011), blended learning can bridge the gap among teachers and students and among students. Qiuyun (2008) extends support to this argument by saying that blended learning

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