

Chapter 73

Blended Learning in China: At the Crossroads

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ABSTRACT

Sprouted in the late 1970s, with the direction and support of the Chinese government and the participation of private institutions, blended learning in China has developed quickly and massively. By reviewing the origin, evolution, and current practices of blended learning in the contexts of elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities in China, the authors examine the problems, controversies, and issues raised. While the Chinese government still may play an important role in blended learning in the future, private institutions' involvement, learners' motivation, and learning ideology could become more important in promoting and implementing blended learning. How best to use the current educational system and resources to further promote blended learning in China is a challenge to educational practitioners and policy makers. Blended education in china is at the crossroads.

INTRODUCTION

There is a long history of integrating technological achievements or other media into the educational process. Supervised correspondence studies can be found as early as the 1920s at an innovative school in Benton Harbor, Michigan (Bonk & Graham, 2006). Telephone, radio, television, cassettes, video tapes, compact discs, and the Internet all have been introduced into the traditional face-to-face classes in the 20th century. Educational practitioners have been seeking strategies and solutions to use these technologies in classroom settings to obtain better learning outcomes. Serving the largest student population in their countries, the Open University (OU) in the United Kingdom, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), and the Radio and TV University system (RTVUs) in China are well-known examples of assimilating technology advancement with education. Terms such as “technology-medicated,”

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“mixed-mode,” “hybrid,” and “blended” have been used to specify this technology-integrated learning style—often interchangeably—although in this chapter the term “blended” is used.

With a population of over 1.3 billion and the emergence of different technologies, the Chinese government has been striving to apply technology in various industries and professional fields. The education system in China is always listed first among those integrating technology due to its nature; the need is great, but there is a shortage of resources and support. Issues such as what technologies were used, why and how they were used, and what the outcomes were have been questioned by researchers, practitioners, parents, and even students. By reviewing the development and practices of blended learning in various contexts in China, the authors point out the controversies, issues, and challenges of blended learning in China.

BACKGROUND

Surveys and evaluations indicate that technologies have been blended successfully in education all over the world. Yet the meaning and elements of “blended learning” have changed over the decades due to technological advancement and practitioners’ understanding. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000), “learning” is defined as “the act, process, or experience of gaining knowledge or skill” (p. 997), and “blend” could be defined as “to combine (varieties or grades) to obtain a mixture of a particular character, quality, or consistency” (p. 196).

As mentioned, the practice of blended learning can be found as early as the 1920s, whereas the term “blended learning” can be found in common use after 2000. In fact, blended learning has been defined from various points of view focusing on the technological platform, the core components, and the learning environment. Still, a straightforward definition of the term can be hard to reach. Norm Friesen, in his *Report: Defining Blended Learning*, suggests the following definition:

“Blended learning” designates the range of possibilities presented by combining Internet and digital media with established classroom forms that require the physical co-presence of teacher and students. (Friesen, 2012, p.1)

Emphasizing the virtual environment, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) defined blended learning as an instructional design where face-to-face and online (mediated) learning were thoughtfully fused in educationally meaningful ways. However, Richey (2013) believed the core of blended learning was about integrating synchronous and asynchronous. Additionally, instead of defining blended learning, Bonk and Graham (2006) delimited “blended learning systems” as combining face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction.

Psychological theories have also been used by researchers to provide a theoretic foundation to blended learning. Behaviorism and cognitive constructivism have been applied to the blended learning process to interpret methodologies and outcomes. Psychologists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky believed that “knowledge is largely determined by how it is learned” (Kazdin, 2000, p. 10), and technologies such as visual models and communication applications could help people acquire important skills, understand difficult concepts, or enhance communication (Kazdin, 2000).

Blended learning is an imported concept to Chinese educators, although it may have been carried out previously under different titles such as correspondence learning, spare-time learning, or even distance

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