Chapter 76

"We Had a Blast!":
An Empirical Affirmation of Blended Learning as the Preferred Learning Mode for Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

As many important issues pertaining to blended learning within the Sub-Saharan African context remain unexplored, this study implemented a blended learning approach in a graduate level course at a private university in Ghana, with the objective of exploring adult learners' attitudes, experiences and behaviors towards this learning approach, as well as their perceptions towards blended learning in general. Forty-eight graduate students participated in the study as they engaged in a six-week long blended learning course. Qualitative research methods were used to gather data which were analysed using grounded theory coding techniques, descriptive statistics and content analysis. Findings reveal high levels of student engagement and satisfaction with the learning processes, and an overwhelming endorsement of blended learning as a preferred mode of learning. Implications of these findings for further research and practice are discussed within the context of technology adoption and use in the Ghanaian and Sub-Saharan African higher education contexts.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Blended or Hybrid Learning is an approach to learning where Internet technologies are strategically integrated into face-to-face learning activities so as to facilitate student learning and thus achieve learning objectives (Graham, 2006). Allen & Seaman (2013), however, point out that a course can be categorized as blended if 30-79% of the proportion of course content is delivered via the Internet. Due to its exponential growth over the past decade following the increased adoption of educational technologies by institutions worldwide, blended learning is now being described as the "new normal' in higher education (Norberg, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2011),

This increasing uptake of blended learning is not surprising, given that it is a mode of teaching that integrates the information-access methods of a web-based environment with the social aspect of face-to-face environment (Delialioglu & Yildirim, 2007), and thus eliminates time, place, and situational barriers, whilst facilitating quality interactions between teachers and students (Kanuka, Brooks, & Saranchuck, 2009). Blended learning also has the potential of assisting higher education instructors to transform predominantly teacher-centered instructional strategies to learner-centered approaches (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Furthermore, pressure is being exerted on higher education institutions to educate more students with fewer resources (Lack, 2013), and blended learning is known to be one such cost-effective strategy (Lothridge, Fox, & Fynan, 2013; Maloney et al., 2015).

As Graham et al (2012) point out, however, whilst some institutions have over a decade of experience with strategically promoting blended learning, many others are just beginning to explore institutional adoption and implementation. The latter is particularly applicable to most institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) that are grappling with financial constraints, low Internet bandwidth availability, high bandwidth costs, limited and unreliable power and communication infrastructure etc. (Asunka, 2013). Under these conditions, widespread implementation of blended learning is a considerable challenge. Consequently, research works aimed at establishing the effectiveness and validity of this mode of learning, particularly within the SSA context are quite sporadic, with many important issues remaining unexplored. It is therefore not surprising that there are presently no clearly accepted standards for blended learning in higher education within the developing world context, and institutions are presently at several stages of transitioning to this learning approach (Graham, Woodfield & Harrison, 2012).

It is against this backdrop that this study applied a blended learning approach in a graduate level course at a private university in Ghana, with the objective of exploring students' attitudes and behaviours as they engaged in blended learning processes, and also their perceptions of this instructional approach after experiencing it for the first time. Learning outcomes by way of student performance and satisfaction were also assessed. The expectation is that findings will help provide insights into how mature students in a typical Sub Saharan African higher education institution perceive this "novel" learning initiative, and thus contribute towards the evolution of best-practice strategies for implementing blended learning within the SSA higher education context.

The study adopted a qualitative approach as it considered the experiences and perceptions of those being studied as very crucial. As Marshall and Rossman (2006) point out, qualitative research is an inquiry process aimed at building a holistic understanding of complex social issues, and is characterized by data collection - typically within natural settings - in which the researcher acts as a key instrument. A qualitative approach considers the experiences and perceptions of those being studied as crucial, and thus focuses on context, uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic, and is fundamentally interpretive and emergent rather than tightly prefigured as pertains in quantitative approaches. Additionally, since the study involved a clearly delimited group of participants, case-study research design was adopted. A case study, defined by Wiersma (2000) as "a study characterized by an investigation of a single individual, group, event or culture" (p. 422), is an eclectic method that allows a range of data-collection techniques to be employed.

The specific data gathering methods adopted in the study were; direct observation, collective discussion, survey, retrieval of server logs of user activities and evaluation of learning outcomes in both the cognitive and affective domains. As a quasi-experimental study in which learners' attitudes, behaviors, needs and desires were being investigated, it is believed that these methods afforded the researcher the

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