Chapter 14
Transcending Barriers Towards Effective Blended Learning Horizons

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Abstract

The chapter highlights the changing nature of blended learning (BL). In addition to this, the chapter provides various pedagogical considerations drawn both from the research literature and the analysis of effective practices. Thus, by examining specific challenges and opportunities concerning the design, development, and assessment practices in BL scenarios, the chapter unveils a proposal for effective instructional, organizational, and learning decision making. It also makes a call for opportune dissemination of blended learning practices and projects both nationally and transnationally, with the intention of offering an ample and steady scope to scaffold and support educators, learners, and other agents to ensure quality and sustainability of the blended endeavors across time.

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning (BL) is multidimensional in its nature. From conceiving it as a trend, an approach, a system, and even as a blend of instructional methods (Graham, 2006; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Young, 2002; Driscoll, 2002; Rossett, 2002), the term has conveyed a diversified conceptualization along time. The combination made possible through BL has not only joined the best of both worlds (F2F and online), as Graham (2006) posed, but has also opened doors to re-signify the way in which educational purposes and outcomes are traced, by gauging new interaction modes facilitated by technologies. More than a decade ago, Mayadas (2006) predicted that by 2010 individuals would be hard pressed to find a course that was not blended, which is at present, evidently true.

Thus, agents involved in BL initiatives, have witnessed the hasty growth of the field, its widespread impact across contexts and hemispheres, leading to the fact that in the present educational contexts almost

everything is blended. BL development has naturally been assisted by the emergence, increase of use, and availability of digital learning technologies (Bonk & Graham, 2005), facts that can be viewed both as opportunities and as threats. Opportunities, for those who believe in the fosterage of student-centered pedagogies that can better address students' learning, personal and academic needs, as well as nurture lifelong learning in and outside the classroom. Threats, given that a careless planning and design of BL initiatives, does result in failure to adjust and/or adapt strategies that cater self-access self-paced and self-managed learning. Such threats pose barriers to satisfaction, engagement and productivity, and can take place at the course, program and/or institutional level (Cuesta Medina, 2018).

Educational institutions often ignore the potential behind BL to increase rates of learning and in the future, generate smooth transfer to workforce scenarios (Collis, Bianco, Margaryan, & Waring, 2005; Lothridge, Fox, & Fynan, 2013). It may be argued that if students are satisfied with their learning gains they are more likely to excel at their skill development pathways, more motivated and likely to manage their learning, and more open to create team-building skills that will allow them to build collaboration among their circles and communities. However, efficient scaffolding in role adjustment (generally aided by instructors) can help alleviate students' feelings of lack of support, anxiety, and/or frustration, helping learners to succeed in cognitive, social and teaching presence domains (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2004). Even at the present time, several studies conducted in various disciplines demonstrate that providing high-value content in both settings (face-to-face and online) enhances performance and BL constitutes itself a flexible approach to learning, with an enormous potential to be expanded beyond the classroom (Afacan, 2016; Hill, Chidambaram, & Summers, 2016; Shurville & Rospigliosi, 2009).

In the case of higher education institutions which have merged in the BL trend, multiple benefits can be reported, mainly represented in cost-reduction issues gauged through the replacement of technology for labor and physical facilities. F2F instruction and other non-instructional services—namely office spaces, maintenance and utilities—can certainly overcome constraints of time and capacity in educational settings. BL allows for curricular flexibilization in so diverse accommodations of courses, concerning time, delivery modes, and staff availability can be generated. All in all, the costs of personnel, facilities and other operating service matters can be reduced through a BL plan, while the institution increases student enrolments in courses, and plays an avant-garde role in academic arenas.

Although the aforementioned panorama is a promising one, new defies can be posed in regard to quality and sustainability issues. Parry (2011) reported—after an analysis of the panelists' views in the 2011 Sloan Consortium's annual conference—that online programs mean significant "upfront costs" for technology, training and instructional designers. However, such investment "can pay returns, only once these programs have grown to the point that they take advantage of the economics of scale" (para. 9). The reduction of expenses mean a reduction in the cost of instruction, and can be seen as a future savings to the institution and the students, who, can undoubtedly benefit from new services that aid their learning process at a lower-cost, higher coverage and asynchronous/synchronous access opportunity. Nevertheless, quality needs to be monitored and solid improvement plans hosted by the institutions, national ministries and boards of education, supported by accreditation entities should include programs to support blended instruction initiatives aimed at guaranteeing the provision of high quality and updated services across educational sectors.

It is of utmost importance that faculty be efficiently trained to ensure that the design components are specifically aligned for skill-, attitude-, or competency-learning (Valiathan, 2002; Hofmann, 2014, Cuesta Medina, 2018) so that students can effectively engage in online components, find clear expectations and purposes to develop their academic activities (Salmon, 2002), and at the same time be easily involved in

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