Chapter 1
Transforming Pedagogy in Uncertain Times:
Blended Learning in a First-Year University Context

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a study carried out in a New Zealand university during 2021. The study investigated the perceptions of first-year tertiary students as they adapted from an in-person context to a blended learning format as a result of pandemic restrictions. The study used the community of inquiry model (CoI) as a framework seeking to explore the teaching, cognitive, and social presences in the blended format. The CoI instrument was adapted to survey the students, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the findings. Findings indicate the students had positive perceptions of the blended format, and there is support for the presence of a community of inquiry in a blended context. There are implications for universities post-pandemic in terms of student satisfaction, teacher workload, and teacher professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Almost 20 years ago, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) argued "that blended learning is an effective and low risk strategy which positions universities for the onslaught of technological developments that will be forthcoming in the next few years" (p.

24). At that time, few envisioned that a pandemic would hasten the adoption of such technological developments. However, beyond the pandemic, it is important to understand *why* teachers might seek to utilise blended learning in a university setting where an in-person format is long accepted and well utilised. The global uptake of learning technologies during the pandemic presents a unique opportunity to investigate the role of blended learning in teaching and learning.

At the University of Otago, a large first-year, first-semester Education Studies course provides an introduction to university study. In 2020, this course moved quickly from in-person teaching to a fully online environment due to a pandemic lockdown. The course was adapted to include a blend of synchronous and asynchronous activities. The learning outcomes, course content, and the two written assignments remained, but the usual methods of teaching and assessing in-person changed. The Learning Management System (LMS) became central to course administration providing a weekly guide to learning, lecture recordings, slides and activities. Lectures were recorded either in-person or by videoconferencing software depending on social distancing limits. Workshops (tutorials) took place in-person or by videoconferencing. The aim was to keep the course design simple, tasks readily accessible, and to provide flexibility without overloading the students.

The teaching team were somewhat surprised by the outcomes of the experience. Both in the course evaluations and anecdotally, students reported feeling pleased with their progress, as evident in their results and perseverance with the courses (Robertson, 2020). As the teaching team adapted delivery, they began to question their pedagogical practice and in particular, how future teaching and learning experiences might be designed. They were eager to take new skills and technologies forward by adapting the program and delivery to suit a blended learning approach. Also seen as advantageous was the way this approach might enable teachers and students to flex quickly in response to the frequent disruptions to in-person teaching. In November 2020, a study was designed to investigate the potential of blended learning in transforming the first-year learning experience. In 2021, as the study took place, the teaching program continued to be disrupted frequently as the country responded to the pandemic with various public health measures.

This chapter begins with a definition of blended learning, then provides a discussion of teacher and student perceptions of blended learning, and the Community of Inquiry (Garrison et al., 2000). The research design of the study follows, along with presentation of the study findings. Lastly, the findings are discussed and the implications for blended learning in a university context considered.

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