Chapter 2
Experiences and Perceptions of Learner Engagement in Blended Learning Environments:
The Case of an Australian University

Linda De George-Walker
University of Southern Queensland, Australia

Abdul Hafeez-Baig
University of Southern Queensland, Australia

Raj Gururajan
University of Southern Queensland, Australia

P. A. Danaher
University of Southern Queensland, Australia

ABSTRACT

One of the most significant challenges in learning and teaching is to maximize successful and sustainable learner engagement. The growing literature about blended learning environments and technologies provides plenty of scope for an interrogation of the intersection between learner engagement and blended learning. This chapter takes up that interrogation by presenting the case of the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. The chapter focuses on three postgraduate courses offered by the institution: two in the Faculty of Business and the other in the Faculty of Education; and each course representing a different position along the continuum from blended to fully online. The chapter presents a detailed examination of all three courses in relation to design, development, and management, informed by a conceptualization of blended learning as it intersects with learner engagement. Several types of evidence are deployed in evaluating the courses against the assembled information about experiences and perceptions of learner engagement and blended learning communicated by students, academic staff members, and program administrators. This evidence suggests some significant implications for the ongoing theorization of blended learning, how its effectiveness can be maximized, and what its connections with learner engagement are and should be.

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges in learning and teaching, regardless of delivery mode, is to maximize successful and sustainable learner engagement, whether with fellow students, teaching staff members, content, context, or the educational technologies being used to provide the instruction (Guthrie, 2001; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; McFadden & Munns, 2002; Zyngier, 2005). The complexity of this challenge derives partly from a lack of consensus in conceptualizing learner engagement (Butler-Kisber & Portelli, 2003; Vibert & Shields, 2003; Zyngier, 2008), and partly from the difficulty of establishing a direct, one-to-one correspondence between different types of inputs and the desired output of learner participation and achievement. This is certainly the case in exploring learner engagement with various educational technologies, including educational software (Bangert-Drowns & Pyke, 2001, 2002) and simulations (Davies, 2002).

The burgeoning scholarship about blended learning environments and technologies provides plenty of scope for an interrogation of the intersection between learner engagement and blended learning. Elements of that literature include efforts to define blended learning (Driscoll, 2002; Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003), to explore examples in corporate, multinational, workplace, and higher education contexts (Bonk & Graham, 2006), to elicit strategies for making it effective (Rossett, Douglis, & Frazee, 2003; Singh, 2003), to maximize its facilitation of a sense of community (Roval & Jordan, 2004), and to elaborate its transformative potential (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Provisionally, for the purpose of orienting the discussion in this chapter, we take Graham's (2006) account of the historical emergence of blended learning as the convergence between face-to-face and computer mediated learning environments as the starting point – although, as we shall see, by no means the finishing line – in defining blended learning.

It is therefore timely to bring together these two streams of literature, as the chapter seeks to do. For example, it is important to integrate claims about the educational benefits of blended learning with evidence gleaned from contemporary case studies about how learners and other stakeholders view the enactment of blended learning in specific educational programs. Likewise it is necessary to highlight strategies garnered from that evidence as being demonstrably effective in moving from theory to practice in maximizing learner engagement in blended learning environments.

The chapter takes up that challenge by presenting the case of the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Australia. The chapter both links with and builds on current publications about the case site (Danaher, Gururajan, & Hafeez-Baig, 2009; Hafeez-Baig & Danaher, 2007a, 2007b) by focusing on three courses offered by the institution and not previously canvassed in those publications. As Table 1 indicates, the courses exhibit considerable diversity: while all three are postgraduate, two are located in the Faculty of Business and the other in the Faculty of Education. Furthermore, the courses occupy different positions along the continuum from face-to-face to blended to online: one course blends face-to-face, distance and online delivery; one blends distance and online delivery; and one is mainly online, with some face-to-face provision (the latter as potentially contrasting and/or overlapping with the other two courses).

What these three courses have in common is a commitment to enhancing learner engagement in varied combinations of learning environments. Indeed, the variety of the selected courses – in relation to paradigm, subject matter, and assessment – is helpful in illustrating the multiple ways in which blended learning can be implemented to facilitate learner participation and achievement.

The chapter's four objectives are as follows:

(1) to outline a skeptical but hopeful conceptualization of blended learning gleaned from

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