

Chapter 3

Instructional Leadership and Blended Learning: Confronting the Knowledge Gap in Practice

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ABSTRACT

Dewey's concept of experience as an active engagement with a process of action, feedback, and reflection permeates the setting of the case reported in this chapter. The case involves an initiative to engage a group of experienced teachers and school administrators (in the context of a doctoral level course) with reading and reflecting on a vision of the future of education in a professional learning community permeated by the experience of blended learning. While the blended learning was heavily weighted towards face-to-face meetings, issues relating to the integration of technology with education became experienced realities for the group members. These issues included pre-service teacher education, equitable access to online resources, and the creation of an environment in which contemporary approaches to curriculum, teaching, and learning can flourish.

INTRODUCTION

Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2008) argued persuasively that the traditional K-12 educational model is on the verge of a renovation so comprehensive that it amounts to something of a revolution. They typified the emerging educational model as “learner centered,” and focused on the central mediating role of online resources in enabling the management and delivery of learner-specific approaches to

education. Blended learning retains the benefits of face-to-face social interaction with fellow learners while taking full advantage of the affordances of the online environment like ubiquitous access and virtual presence.

The exploration reported in this chapter was motivated by a belief that instructional leadership is an essential element in steering the implementation of blended learning in the K-12 setting. The perspective of this chapter is that contributions to the present and forthcoming discussions of the role of blended learning and the evolving educational

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model will be most credible if they emanate from instructional leaders' lived professional experience and expertise. The credibility of educational leaders' contributions is challenged by the contested concept of "digital natives" (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2007; Prensky, 2001a; Prensky, 2001b), in that many of those currently in instructional leadership positions are less comfortable with technology than the younger teachers and, particularly, the students. This generational difference gives rise to an imbalanced pedagogical situation and can result in the type of discordance between words and actions so pungently summed up as "the multi-prong problem" on a recent blog post:

I have found it increasingly annoying to hear from on high that we need to integrate more technology in our classroom.... (We have to) still (use) old standbys because we don't have the time to use and troubleshoot our way through technology. (We have to make) worksheets by copying and pasting by hand. (We have to build) test questions from book programs that only work on PCs or OS 9 on (sic) macs. (We want) to use videos from the Internet only to find they are blocked. (We want to) post information to a Web site or build (our) own Web sites (only) to find that FTP is blocked, or that online-services are clunky, restrictive, and cumbersome. (Arizpe, 2008)

The larger question of the integration of digital technology and education illustrated by Arizpe (2008) is not limited to just the United States. Distilling educationally related questions with respect to information and communication technology (ICT) across the broad sweep of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the Center for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI, 2008) asked "how far does, and should, (ICT's) potential to personalize learning get exploited, whether in schools or in other places where learning can take place?" (p. 57).

The CERI (2008) question invokes one of the crucial advantages of the revolution foreseen by Christensen et al. (2008): learner-centered education. The Christensen et al. perspective is supported by a range of findings. For example, Howell, West, and Peterson (2008) declared that "one of the latest education innovations to go mainstream (was) online education" (Howell et al., 2008, ¶ 1). To support their claim, they cited figures from the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) that suggested that enrollment in online courses totaled 45,000 in 2000—a figure which had grown to 1 million by 2007. Of these online courses, according to Howell et al., 70 percent were pitched at the high school level.

Along similar lines, Zandberg, Lewis, and Greene (2008) found nearly a 60 percent rise from 2002 to 2005 in the number of students enrolled in technology-based distance education programs in the U.S., with the total number of students growing from 317,070 to 506,950. Although the "technology-based" label includes prerecorded video, and interactive voice technologies (among others), Zandberg et al. found that "among districts with technology-based distance education, 41 percent reported (using) two-way interactive video and 40 percent reported (delivering) Internet courses employing asynchronous computer-based instruction" (p. 44). Commenting on likely future trends, Zandberg et al. (2008) cited the United States Department of Education Office of Educational Technology in noting that "online (Internet-based) technology is considered by some policymakers to be the cornerstone of the educational landscape of the future" (p. 3). In this regard, Singleton-Rickman (2008) reported, that "Alabama's high school students, beginning next year, will be required to pass a distance learning class in order to obtain their high school diplomas" (¶ 4) and that, "across the 16 states that make up the Southern Regional Education Board, there are about 200,000 students taking online courses" (¶ 13), including 77,000 students in Florida.

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