Chapter 6
Virtual Reality or Virtually Real:
Blended Teaching and Learning in a Master's Level Research Methods Class

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the enabling effect of using blended learning and synchronous internet mediated communication technologies to improve learning and develop a Sense of Community (SOC) in a group of post graduate students consisting of a mix of on-campus and off campus students. Both quantitative and qualitative data collected over a number of years supports the assertion that the blended learning environment enhanced both teaching and learning. The development of a SOC was pivotal to the success of the blended approach when working with geographically isolated groups within a single learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, educational reform has become a catchword in the Anglo-American world, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and England and Wales, as well as in the Confucian Heritage Areas such as Mainland China, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Of particular interest is the remarkable consistency of political statements to the effect that in order for a nation to remain internationally competitive, its education systems must focus on producing skilled graduates for the workforce and

that henceforth, educational reform will ensure that any particular country will become "a smart state" or a "clever country."

Across the world, the educational reform measures being implemented are surprisingly similar. On the implementation side, educators are placed in a pivotal position and are required to take up the work of designing high-quality teaching and learning for students to meet standards set by governments including demands for increased use of technology. Lankshear and Snyder (2000) point out, teachers [at all levels] are pushed to adopt Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in their teaching. National leaders frequently pronounce

that since societies are changing, so also should education (Hargreaves, 2003; Kelly, 2004). The rhetoric usually includes statements to the effect that in the "Information Age," the skills of the populace needed for national (economic) survival must adjust accordingly. There is almost always reference (at least until the full ramifications of the U.S. sub-prime mortgage crisis were felt) to international competition in "global markets."

Perhaps because of the perceived economic benefits of technologically mediated pedagogies, educators themselves have often adopted new technologies with sometimes breathless enthusiasm. Hartman, Dziuban and Moskal (2007), for example, assert the impact of the World Wide Web attributes of ubiquity, interactivity, multimedia capability, multilingual capacity, multiplatform capability, multi-protocol capability and synchronous and asynchronous communication on learning. However, despite the undoubted benefits and future potential of the virtual world to enhance education, there are signs that some equilibrium in expectations may be returning with Jasinski (2007) suggesting that there may be a shift from the "e" and back to the "learning" with e-learning seen as just one of a suite of useful models to explore in enhancing professional educational practice leading to what has become known as "blended learning."

This chapter presents a case study of the development and impact of a Master's level research methodology unit (officially coded as *EDN611: Professional Applications of Research)* in the Faculty of Education at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia. Professional Applications of Research is a core unit in a number of the Faculty's suite of Master's courses and is intended to help students to become critical professional consumers of research reports. The development of this unit in recent years illustrates many of the stages in the emergence and development of blended learning implied above.

BACKGROUND: THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CLIMATE IN WHICH THE UNIT WAS INITIATED

The economic and political climate that formed the backdrop and in some measures the catalyst for the development of the blended learning environment has been summarized by Singh, Atweh and Shield (2005). These authors identified the Australian Government policy document *Our Universities. Backing Australia's Future* (Nelson, 2003) as of particular interest in terms of teaching and learning. This document listed a number of significant problems facing Australian universities at the time that are still current, particularly:

- considerable increases in course provision costs;
- access to increased resources in the longer term, including those from additional income streams;
- significant duplication in some university activities and course offerings and far too many units across universities and faculties with very small enrolments;
- under-representation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- large numbers of students not completing university studies (approx. 30%); and
- over-enrolments of students leading to overcrowding and adverse impacts on quality. (Nelson, 2003, p.10)

The document then moved on to present a vision statement of reform underpinned by four key principles. These were as follows:

- **Sustainability**: Maximum opportunity given to institutions, consistent with public accountability and social responsibility, to develop innovative responses to rapidly changing environments in teaching and learning.

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