

Chapter 12

The Significance of the Reflective Practitioner in Blended Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the introduction of blended learning on a part-time higher education programme for mature students. The interpretive work draws on four action research cycles conducted over two years with two student cohorts. Discussion is based on observations, staff and student focus groups and interviews examining the students' expectations and experiences. The initial focus of the action research was on the introduction of technology into the teaching and learning experience. However, the advantage of an interpretive approach is allowing the findings to determine the course of the research. During the first action research cycles, the focus of the research changed from the use of technology in blended learning to the role of the practitioners involved. The authors advocate the key role of reflective practitioners in facilitating blended learning and suggest that action research is a useful framework.

INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom (UK) Government has recently decided to shift its emphasis from getting 50% of 17 to 30 year olds into higher education to educating the overall workforce (Gill, 2008).

This results in the targeting of those in work who are willing to engage in higher education, and is in line with international developments where adults have to continue developing in order to remain competitive in the global world economy. In the UK, the move to target the labour market as a source for education is exemplified by the "Higher Education at Work" consultation docu-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0053-9.ch012

ment (Department for Innovation Universities & Skills, 2008). This document outlines some of the key challenges facing part-time students, who tend to be adult workers and have families and other commitments:

Employees have to balance commitments with work and family. But research suggests there are almost two million people in the labour market potentially prepared to access higher education. Higher education providers must develop new ways of working if they are to meet the potential market from employers and employees... (Department for Innovation Universities & Skills, 2008, p. 7)

The consultation document also acknowledges that higher education providers must adapt to the “new customer” and offer educational routes to engage with the potential market of employers and employees. Furthermore, there is a need for “demand-led skills” meeting the needs of individuals and employers (Lord Leitch, 2006). This political landscape inevitably demands continual development of higher education programmes.

One of the attractive methods of delivery that lends itself to part-time student education is blended learning (Heinze & Procter, 2008; Procter, 2003). Blended learning is often associated with flexibility for the learner whilst offering a structure that provides students with time frames and deadlines to manage their learning process. The flexibility is apparent in the reduced need for attendance at long face-to-face sessions, removal of associated travel to and from these sessions, and in the increased use of e-learning tools to facilitate the student learning process. Blended learning can offer advantages in comparison to learning which is exclusively by distance (i.e. distance learning) or exclusively online (i.e. e-learning). By retaining face-to-face sessions, blended learning programmes may allow more development of social learning, a sense of community and related

student-student support and staff-student personal support (Heinze, 2008; Heinze & Procter, 2006).

Despite the growing significance of blended learning, there is little in the way of programme wide research, a gap that this work attempts to address. The main question this research seeks to address is—What are the critical success factors of blended learning implementation?

This study relies on data source triangulation of both staff and students’ observations of a programme, focus groups and semi-structured interviews, thus enabling a critical appraisal of the practice and theory of blended learning.

This paper is structured as follows: first, we examine the literature that highlights the role of blended learning and how it impacts on the associated pedagogy. Second, an overview of the research method will be provided including the context within which a programme was developed. Third, data findings are outlined and discussed in relation to the literature. Finally, conclusions are drawn, limitations of the study are highlighted and future work in this area is suggested.

FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE

Blended Learning

Blended learning has existed for many years, where face-to-face sessions have been complemented with communication tools such as radio, telephone and television. Over the last ten years, as a result of mass access to the Internet, blended learning has begun to make a major impact on higher education. This impact has been supported by educational technologies such as Content Management Systems, for example Blackboard or Moodle, that enable a “Virtual Learning Environment”, where facilitators and students can interact and learn online. The interaction and learning activities are further enhanced by Web 2.0 tools such as wikis that allow a more efficient content

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