

Chapter 5.5

Implementing and Promoting Blended Learning in Higher Education Institutions: Comparing Different Approaches

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of the Internet, blended learning (online learning plus face-to-face learning) has become a model that more and more higher education institutions are intending to adopt. This chapter first compares various forms and expressions of blended learning adopted by different institutions around the world, and then reports on how blended learning has been implemented and promoted in the English Department at the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIED) using a variety of approaches. Here, a number of projects have been carried out over the past seven years, focusing on the conversion of traditional face-to-face modules into partly face-to-face, partly online modules. In addressing these developments, the Blackboard online learning management system, which has been adopted as the main platform for the delivery of blended learning at HKIED, is first examined. Then the design of a series of subject-specific Web sites to supplement the Blackboard system and facilitate blended learning is introduced. Finally, the implementation of innovative Wikibook projects is illustrated and discussed. Such Wikibook projects, where students are required to work in groups to write an academic textbook collaboratively online, are highly effective in promoting not only autonomous yet collaborative online academic reading and writing, but also online peer editing. This adds a new dimension to blended learning. Feedback from students shows that they greatly enjoyed the experience of collaborative academic writing through the Wikibook projects, and found that the wiki technology made peer editing much more efficient and effective. All the evidence suggests that blended learning has great potential as a vehicle for teaching and learning and is a notable current trend in higher education.

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GENERATIONS OF EDUCATIONAL DELIVERY MODES

Educational delivery modes have evolved through three generations: the first generation being the face-to-face and print-based mode; the second generation involving the frequent use of Radio (audio), Television (audio-visual), and Computer (data and image manipulation) technologies; and the third generation, the current one, requiring the incorporation of all the above features into a blended learning environment (face-to-face plus online) where interactivity is highly emphasized. This mode of learning can be termed Distributed Learning. Distributed learning is “part of a trend to use a mix of delivery modes to complement face-to-face classroom learning opportunities. Part of this mix usually includes the use of multimedia learning opportunities and participation in online activities, as well as working with print-based sources” (White, 2003, p.31). The blended learning delivery mode, which has been frequently discussed in the literature in recent years (Larson & Keiper, 2002; Pearson, 2006; Ng, Yeung & Hon, 2006; Xie, DeBacker, & Ferguson, 2006; Condie & Livingston, 2007; Smith & Kurthen, 2007), is the focus of this chapter, and is explored in detail in the sections that follow.

COMPARING DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO BLENDED LEARNING

In different parts of the world, blended learning has been implemented in various formats in schools and higher education institutions. To obtain an overview of current practices in blended learning, a number of sample cases are discussed below.

Sample Case in South Africa

At the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, two undergraduate psychology modules

adopted a blended learning approach (Thatcher, 2007). In the first initiative, a course website entitled ‘Cognitive Ergonomics’ was developed. The earlier versions of the site contained only “background construct definitions, links to related websites, course outlines, assignment details, a notice-board, and a questions and answers section” (Thatcher, 2007, p.349). Later versions refined the notice-board to lecture-by-lecture notes and also introduced example questions and model answers to tests and assignments, and posted student assignment marks (Thatcher, 2007). As for the second initiative, both a website entitled ‘Cognition’ and a blog were used. The reason for using the blog was that blogging was becoming a popular means for people to post ideas, thoughts, or articles on the Web and to receive feedback on these postings. As Thatcher (2007, p.350) puts it, “a blog is a cross between a website and a discussion forum (if the feedback facility is activated).”

A formal website evaluation undertaken in 2006 revealed that students found the question and answer section, the notice board, and the past test and examination papers to be most useful. They also appreciated that they were able to communicate with the lecturer outside scheduled consultation times. The lecturers gave the impression that they were available 24 hours a day to deal with students’ queries, and the students valued the fact that vital course information could be communicated immediately to a geographically dispersed class. They found that the online medium was particularly useful in conveying unambiguous content (Thatcher, 2007).

Sample Case in Singapore

A polytechnic in Singapore applied blended learning in a program called “the Speaker’s Program” (Fang, 2007). In this program, the face-to-face sessions comprised a two-hour session once a week, followed by a three-hour project presentation session at the end of the program. The online sessions, which were managed through the

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