

Chapter 6

An Exploratory Study of Blended Learning Activities in Two Classes

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ABSTRACT

Though there are a number of research studies on the adoption of a blended learning approach to enhance learning, few comparative studies have examined the use of this approach for inter-class activities. Two undergraduate classes at different levels of study participated in an online discussion, an online debate, and two face-to-face debates. Data were gathered for triangulated analysis from a questionnaire that solicited participants' opinions, from focus group meetings, and from tracked statistics provided by the learning platform. The tracked statistics showed that the participants often read online postings but not many of them expressed their opinions online. Both the responses to the questionnaire and the opinions expressed in the focus group meetings showed that they preferred a face-to-face approach to an online learning approach. Furthermore, the students embraced the opportunity to interact with another class when preparing and having face-to-face debate.

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning is used in many higher educational institutions. There is no agreed-upon definition, but the term is commonly used to describe a teaching approach that incorporates technologies to complement regular face-to-face teach-

ing (Alonso, López, Manrique, & Vines, 2005; Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). Blended learning offers the convenience of online environments without sacrificing the benefits of face-to-face meetings (Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004). A blended learning approach not only makes use of more than one delivery mode, but also involves a combination of different modalities or delivery media (Harden & Hart, 2002). Furthermore, it

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enables students to learn outside of the classroom or away from the campus (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007). For example, educators can ask students to complete online quizzes prior to class so that they can have a better understanding of the students' knowledge of a topic. On the other hand, educators can also teach some key concepts during class and ask students to participate in online discussions on controversial issues after class. Indeed, the word "blend" describes the greater flexibility, responsibility, and control that students have with regard to their learning activities (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004); collaborative learning among participants; and the sharing of ideas and provision of support throughout the learning process (Boyle, 2005).

Many researchers describe only the merits of e-learning without comparing face-to-face and online activities. It is not surprising that the results are mixed as "evaluating the quality of blended learning experiences is no easy matter, as technologies typically support only part of the learning processes that the students engage in" (Ginns & Ellis, 2007, p. 54). In this paper, the author addresses this research gap by examining if online activities are better than face-to-face activities for two classes of undergraduate student teachers, and if interacting with another class can add value to students' learning. The following section reviews the pertinent literature on online learning and the mixed findings on blended learning. This review will be followed by a discussion of the research setting and findings of the current study. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn and future research directions will be suggested.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The great expansion in the use of the Internet that began in the mid-1990s changed the landscape of the publication, dissemination, and exchange of information. Internet resources are now easily available for learners to learn at their own pace and in their own time (Wong, Kamahis, & Tang, 2006),

and publications on the web can be very different from those on paper. Digital materials can include simulations, games (Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999; Laurillard, 2002), web-based video clips, and digital stories (Hur, 2009). The Internet not only provides vast resources for learning but also offers various online communication channels. For example, wikis, online chat rooms, and discussion forums provide simple and convenient opportunities for single or multiple users to discuss asynchronously (at different times) or synchronously (at the same time) so that learners from different backgrounds and diverse locations can share their opinions and extend learning outside of the classroom (Ng, 2010a). Lai and Ng (2010) adopted a discussion forum as a platform to facilitate peer learning and assessment between two classes of student teachers. The majority of the participants expressed their enthusiasm for this new experience and affirmed that they did not encounter any obstacles in creating and commenting on virtual presentations (Lai & Ng, 2011). Participants had to assume the roles of initiator and co-participant in online learning processes (Collis & Moonen, 2001). In other words, the teaching and learning became a shared experience. Good e-mentors need to adopt both proactive and reactive strategies; that is, they need to know when and how to provide expert input and act as a learning peer, and when to remain silent (Wong & Looi, 2010). Indeed, learners consistently rate communication and support from educators and other learners as being a major influence on their learning (Fredericksen, Pickett, & Shea, 2000; Sims, 2003).

Research conducted by many different researchers (Lehtinen, Hakkarainen, Lipponen, Rahikainen, & Muukkonen, 2007; Muukkonen, Hakkarainen, & Lakkala, 2005; Ng, 2010b) has revealed that online learning can (1) increase the level of learner involvement and provide incentives to learn, which can lead to a wider and more complete understanding of the subject knowledge (Eleuterio & Bortolozzi, 2004); (2) facilitate learners to discuss their subject matter in greater

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