

Chapter 3

Ten Rules of Thumb in Blended and Flexible Learning: A Study on Pedagogies, Challenges, and Changing Perspectives

John M. Rafferty

Charles Sturt University, Australia

Jenni Munday

Charles Sturt University, Australia

Janet Buchan

Charles Sturt University, Australia

ABSTRACT

As emerging Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are increasingly being engaged as pedagogical tools, the role of traditional academic values might be overlooked. This chapter highlights some of the challenges faced by educators as they reconcile their own pedagogical reasoning with the engagement opportunities presented through ICTs. It also reports on a study that followed the introduction of three blended-mode university subjects into teacher education programs over several years. The research resulted in identifying ten considerations for an effective pedagogy to use for flexible and blended learning, and it identified ten organizational limitations of applying good pedagogical practices in pursuing blended-mode learning. The chapter also provides an example of the benefits of engaging a heuristic inquiry process when developing pedagogy. It is argued that a heuristic inquiry process provides a framework that allows for a variety of important perspectives to be recognized and acted upon.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) provide universities with opportunities for teachers and students to interact in new and exciting ways. Tools such as blogs, podcasts,

vodcasts, wikis, twitter, and asynchronous/synchronous forums are all part of the continuing array of ICT platforms and devices used as tools for teaching and learning. The development and advance of educational technology expands opportunities for communication and learning. The

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business-oriented institutional configuration of western universities looks to electronic technology as a primary means of ensuring pedagogical practices become more effective and efficient. However, while opening opportunities for interaction these same advances also bring with them fundamental questions relating to the ability of universities to adequately support innovation and use of ICTs, the nature of teaching and learning, and the needs of students (Marginson, 2007; Steck, 2003). The progressive availability of new educational technology has had a profound influence on how learning is conceived, designed, developed and organised.

This paper describes how in 2005 three educators embarked on a ‘scholarship in teaching’ study to try to improve the educational experience of tertiary education students through engaging emerging technologies (Buchan, Rafferty, & Munday, 2009). The primary aims of the study were to develop an effective pedagogy for flexible and blended learning and to examine the values and limitations of blended learning opportunities offered through technology-enhanced learning experiences. The investigation required the educators to develop innovative use of technology and to address those fundamental questions raised earlier. From the results of the investigation two important sets of considerations emerged. These were: ‘Considerations for an effective pedagogy for flexible and blended learning’ and ‘organizational limitations and implications of blended learning in practice’. While these perspectives emerged from within the context of a single institution it is felt that they have lasting and global application.

SETTING THE SCENE

At the start of the study in 2005 there was no established definition of flexible and blended learning at Charles Sturt University (CSU), the university within which this study took place. This is consistent with the research at the time

with a multitude of interpretations of blended learning seen across the literature (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). The CSU Strategy 2007–2011 (CSU, 2007) focused on establishing CSU as a leader in flexible learning and as part of this the Flexible Learning Institute was established. Together with this came attempts to try to get a common, operational, definition of blended and flexible learning. The interpretation of blended and flexible learning with which the researchers began in 2005, however, was a personal one and not necessarily shared by the university as a whole.

To me the word ‘blended’ emphasises the different aspects I try to bring to my teaching. So if I’m teaching internally now I’d try to provide resources for students to continue their learning outside of the classroom and when I’m preparing DE material I’m trying to put a bit more of myself in there. (Jenni Munday)

Blended learning, in the way I approach it, is really breaking away from traditional lecture and tutorial modes and engaging other technologies and protocols to establish a level of communication that is advantageous to learning ...I think it can be summed up as just a change in challenging the traditional lecture/tutorial approaches that we have. (John Rafferty)

Charles Sturt University is a regional, mixed mode university in New South Wales with approximately two thirds of its students enrolled through Distance Education (DE). The multi-campus nature of the university provides significant challenges for providing good learning experiences for on-campus (internal) students in the face of increasingly limited staffing and student demands for flexibility in the way they would like to learn. There are five main campuses spread across several hundred kilometres with several smaller campuses and study groups in metropolitan centres as well campuses in China and Ontario. Since 1998 all DE subjects have been fully online supported and

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