

Chapter XIII

Case Studies of ICT–Enhanced Blended Learning and Implications for Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws on a collective case study of six faculty members working in ICT-enhanced blended learning environments at a large regional university in Australia. The chapter identifies seven dimensions of the blended learning environments created by each teacher, with a particular focus on four of these dimensions – the teacher, the online, the resource-based learning and the institutional support dimension. The research showed how individual faculty members worked to blend their courses through their overall approaches to course planning, their focus on combining the strengths of both the face-to-face and the online learning environments, and their eagerness to shift their pedagogical approaches to accommodate the best features of both the face-to-face and the online environments. The chapter makes recommendations for professional development for teachers that is effective in preparing them for creating and working in blended learning environments and suggests areas for future research in the area of blended learning.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on a recent study (Wilson, 2007) of six faculty members working in blended learning environments in campus-based contexts

in a large regional university in Australia. The case-based study examined how information and communications technology (ICT) was used by each of these faculty members, all early adopters (Rogers, 2003), to enhance their face-to-face

teaching, and how this use contributed to an understanding of blended learning within higher education in Australia. This chapter begins by defining key terms used in the study and throughout the chapter. It examines ways of analysing and defining blended learning environments (BLEs) by focusing on the scope, nature, and purpose of the blend adopted by individual teachers across their courses. The study is located within a qualitative field of inquiry, and the rationale is given for the choice of case study as both the product of the research and the research strategy for the study. The case study design is discussed and the individual teachers who participated in the study are introduced.

The chapter presents the findings from the study within a framework of the distinctive dimensions of the BLEs created by the faculty members. It focuses on four of these dimensions —the teacher, the online, the resource-based learning (RBL), and the institutional support dimensions. A portion of the chapter makes recommendations regarding the professional development required for faculty members to support their use of blended learning. The chapter discusses some implications arising from the study and makes recommendations for areas for future research in the area of blended learning.

BACKGROUND

In this chapter blended learning is defined as a mix of face-to-face and ICT components, united through a carefully considered learning design, combining a mix of formats, media and activities. Implied in this definition is a need to blend the strengths of both the face-to-face and the online learning environments, including the pedagogical approaches best suited to both, or, as Garrison and Vaughan (2008, p. 6) stress, combining “the properties and possibilities of both to go beyond the capabilities of each separately.” Overall, the

dominant arguments for blended learning in higher education resonate with the rationale for the move towards flexible learning and flexible delivery in the 1990s: improved pedagogy, enabling courses to become more student-centred and less teacher-directed; increased access for students and flexibility in terms of time that students needed to be on-campus; responding to the diversity of students needs; enhancement of the campus experience; the demands of a global education marketplace; and increased cost effectiveness (Graham, Allen & Ure, 2003).

Institutional research on blended learning conducted by Canada’s Collaboration for Online Higher Education and Research (COHERE) group concluded that faculty members blended their courses to achieve “a more flexible, efficient, accessible, and varied learning experience for their students” (Cook, Owston & Garrison, 2004, p. 348). This Canadian research found that institutional success in the implementation of blended learning required broad organisational support and incentives for staff, such as workload allocation and recognition and reward schemes. In one US research study (Christensen, 2003), while it was found that blended learning was an effective strategy when seeking to implement constructivist pedagogy, it still presented significant challenges in terms of time demands placed on individual faculty members. A study published a year later (Dziuban, Hartman & Moskai, 2004) affirmed that faculty members adopting blending learning also experienced more demands on their time, while at the same time they became more facilitative in terms of their teaching approach, and more focused on course design.

The definition of ICT adopted throughout the study is attributed to Mason and Rennie (2006, p. 60) who used the term broadly to mean “any hardware or software, or even any activity that is related to the use of computers for the generation, storage, transmission and retrieval of information in an electronic format.” A key focus of this chap-

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