

Chapter XVI

Conclusion

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ABSTRACT

The conclusion draws together the main themes identified under the sections of the book with a synthesis of the recommendations presented by the chapter authors which connect the outcomes of these research studies with practical suggestions in all aspects of blended learning practice. It identifies and discusses future trends and implications for learning as well as areas of further research.

INTRODUCTION

The chapters of this book have provided a series of research-based perspectives which present, individually, cohesive accounts of blended learning and its practice. In this conclusion we have added an additional perspective in the nature of a synopsis or synthesis of the many themes which have been discussed and developed within this volume of research. We now provide a more holistic view of blended learning as a stimulus

for reflection and further research rather than as a generic view of blended learning.

We begin by identifying some important concepts from the research presented in this text. A discussion of some of the key challenges which emerge from this research follow with a summation of suggestions for effective blending learning practice in each of the three contexts reflected as separate sections of the book. Implications for learners, teachers and universities will be discussed and the chapter concludes with some recommendations for further research.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH CONCEPTS AND THEMES

The practice of ICT-facilitated blended learning has been discussed in this book in multiple settings and from diverse evidence bases. The book provides further confirmation of the complexity (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004) of blended learning, which is now occurring in a wide range of sites, such as universities and workplaces and which involves not only traditional students as learners but also teachers and other workers as they engage in formal and informal forms of professional learning in various communities that are connected through some form ICT. As newer technologies like podcasts, e-labs and mobile personalised learning environments are introduced they create new affordances for learning beyond those of learning management systems.

The research base in this text has been predominantly qualitative with an emphasis on case studies. Given the current emerging state of knowledge about blended learning, qualitative approaches can be very productive because of their descriptive and interpretive ability. Such approaches here are able to represent learners', teachers' and others' experiences of blending learning practices and provide insights into the way the participants made sense of the new learning environment. While we don't make generalisations from this research, we expect that readers of this text will be able to determine for themselves the relevance of the research and recommended practices.

It is noteworthy that a variety of case study approaches were documented and these included both individual and collective cases, longitudinal and retrospective studies and a cross-case analysis. The strength of the case study methodology as it is used here is that it supports the investigation of the complexities of blended learning by providing a situated research methodology. We have attempted to build on this and create further relevance for readers by including recommendations for practice.

One other feature of many of the research investigations in this book, is that they were insider accounts. While we are aware of the problems which might arise due to the researcher's familiarity with their context, the idea of the researcher being embedded within the research setting has a long tradition within qualitative inquiry and is also characteristic of much of the research on technological innovation and pedagogy. In our view, in the blended learning context, such a position is beneficial because it has the potential to deepen contextual understanding of the setting and its processes, values and relationships.

The research in this book has drawn on a wide range of literatures and theoretical frameworks. As well as the literature on blended learning and associated areas of online and e-learning, discussion of variation theory and the differences between face-to-face and virtual environments and especially the role of social presence are particularly valuable discussions. One concept that has been widely and deeply considered within this text is that of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and the associated idea of learning communities and the Community of Inquiry (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008). This reflects the level of interest in this socio-cultural concept and its explanatory potential in both the fields of technology and learning. Other valuable literatures drawn on by the researchers include actor network theory, activity theory, adult learning principles, design-based research and the experience of learning literature, all of which provide a broad foundation for further knowledge building, reflection and practical application.

Section 1: Strategies for Teaching and Learning

The first section of this book focused on ICT-based blended learning and teaching as a pedagogic practice within many university courses. Apart from the corporate sector, universities were amongst the first learning sites to introduce blended

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