

Blended Learning as a Transformative Design Approach

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INTRODUCTION

It is becoming clear that blended learning has the potential to transform higher education (Bonk & Graham, 2006; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Garrison & Vaughan, 2007). With the acceptance that higher education must more actively engage students in meaningful learning experiences, institutions of higher education are exploring blended learning course and program redesigns. The status quo with a reliance on the lecture to transmit information is being seriously questioned. The focus here is on exploring blended learning as an innovative approach to the design of teaching and learning in higher and distance education. Strategic action plans for the adoption of blended learning approaches will also be outlined.

BLENDED LEARNING DESCRIBED

The promise of blended learning is to combine the strengths of face-to-face and online learning. Considering the innovative nature of blended learning, any description of blended learning must reflect the transformational potential of the concept. It is crucial to emphasize that blended learning is not just a technological enhancement of more traditional approaches such as the lecture. In short, it is not simply layering on technological options to inherently deficient face-to-face educational practices.

From this perspective, the key assumptions of a blended learning design are:

- Thoughtful integration of face-to-face and online learning
- Fundamentally rethinking the course design to optimize student engagement
- Restructuring and replacing traditional class contact hours (Garrison & Vaughan, 2007)

These assumptions reflect a new way of thinking about higher education. There are no arbitrary prescribed proportions of face-to-face and online experiences here. The defining feature is the purposeful focus to combine the best features of face-to-face and online collaboration to engage students in meaningful and worthwhile learning experiences. In essence, blended learning expands the range of educational possibilities and encourages educators to re-consider basic assumptions and approaches. As we shall see, blended learning represents a way of thinking and an approach that avoids traditional zero sum scenarios where more of one means less of another. The blending of face-to-face and online teaching and learning create the conditions where educators can have, concurrently, interaction with independence and effectiveness with efficiency.

While the conceptual understanding of blended learning may be relatively easy to grasp, the range of possibilities and practical design challenges are complex. The important distinguishing feature of blended learning concerns the pedagogical possibilities created for specific purposes through the creative integration of face-to-face and online learning.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

The focus of blended learning is not on the enabling technology. The true potential of blended learning is the educational possibilities that technology affords. Blending is about the effective integration, fusion even, of face-to-face and online learning depending on the educational need and purpose. As such, there is virtually an infinite range of possibilities. Notwithstanding this reality, we begin by providing three generic scenarios that provide a concrete vision of the possibilities of a blended learning design.

Scenarios

The three scenarios are large enrolment courses, small class courses and limited access courses. (For a more detailed description and discussion see Garrison & Vaughan, 2007) These courses encompass the major design challenges faced by higher education institutions. The first scenario reflects the work of Carol Twigg and the PEW Course Redesign project which has demonstrated that large enrolment courses may have the greatest pay-off for blended course redesigns (Twigg, 2003). These are typically large enrolment introductory lecture classes with little opportunity for interaction with the professor or peers. The core challenge is to redesign a large lecture class to be more engaging while maintaining or reducing the time commitments for the professor. The first step in this process is to critically re-evaluate the role of the lecture. Typically this means eliminating one or all of the lectures to be replaced with more engaging online tutorials, discussion and help rooms, self-assessment as well as face-to-face work groups, labs and opportunities to engage the professor or TAs for individual help. When a lecture is retained it is used to introduce and structure the curriculum and core ideas. During the lecture class, students do not sit passively. They have the opportunity to periodically interact in small groups and may report back through personal response systems. In a blended design, the lecture is seen as a motivational activity that provides coherence and structure.

The second scenario applies to small and medium sized classes often used to deliver second and third year courses. These blended learning redesigns can be managed with modest investment of time and resources. Typically they use Internet and communications technology to access course content and create communities of inquiry focused on active learning and problem solving that values critical and creative thinking processes and outcomes. While more effective and efficient use of the professor's time may be the goal, the primary benefit is that students approach their learning collaboratively and in a deep and meaningful manner. Combining face-to-face and online discussions makes possible the inclusion of all students in meaningful discourse that is simply not possible in a face-to-face context due to time and personality constraints. Much of the course may be focused on applying content acquired through the website (using pre-recorded lectures

and documents) and through small group collaborative assignments and projects.

The third scenario addresses the needs of continuing education courses that are not easily accessible to working professionals. The challenge is to address issues of access, convenience, and experiential learning without sacrificing the integrity of a higher education experience. Such courses may benefit from an extended face-to-face class perhaps on the week-end, followed by monthly evening classes or synchronous lectures using technologies such as Elluminate Live. The key is to design the learning experience such that students have time to apply concepts in their workplace, reflect upon the results, and maintain contact with the class through online forums. Participants in such courses invariably report that this approach is more useful, satisfying and convenient.

Certainly three scenarios do not do justice to the full range of possibilities; however, they should give some insight into how traditional classrooms can be fundamentally transformed using blended learning designs. Moreover, these scenarios are based upon collaborative-constructivist approaches to learning (Garrison & Archer, 2000). This philosophical perspective has been operationalized through the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000) and applied rigorously to the blended learning context (Garrison & Vaughan, 2007). It is worthwhile to briefly explore what a collaborative-constructivist perspective means for blended learning course designs.

Framework

An organizational framework provides the advantage of coping with the complexity of blended learning practice. A "framework not only provides a means to shape practice but also to reflect upon and make sense of outcomes" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2007, p. 13). The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework consists of three core elements – social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. Each presence is essential to a community of inquiry. The presences are operationalized with specific categories and indicators. The presences overlap in the sense of being interdependent. Each influences the others and develops progressively over time. Considerable research has confirmed the validity and importance of the framework and an understanding of the role of its constituting elements (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

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