

Chapter 48

Exploring the Experiences of Students and Professors in a Blended Learning Graduate Program: A Case Study of a Faculty of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the current experiences of students and professors in a Faculty of Education graduate program that has adopted blended learning. It was also intended to uncover some of the enablers and constraints faced by faculty administration in implementing a university wide blended learning initiative. Using a qualitative case study research design, a large faculty of education in a mid-sized university in Eastern Ontario, Canada was the site of the investigation. A constant comparative data analysis technique was used on three data sources, namely: key informant interviews, artefacts and field notes. Results indicated that the graduate student has specific learning requirements that necessitate attention to certain aspects of this new teaching method and that professors who teach in a blended learning format are working towards meeting the needs of such students. Enablers and constraints from an administrator's perspective in further developing blended learning are also addressed.

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INTRODUCTION

Mixing traditional methods of teaching in higher education such as face-to-face teaching and on-line teaching is referred to as blended learning and is often seen as 21st century pedagogy for universities (Bates & Sangra, 2011). However, as Garrison and Vaughan (2013) suggest, even though the literature highlights many advantages of this approach for higher education, there has been some difficulty with large scale adoption on most Canadian post-secondary campuses. The question remains, then, as to why implementing blended learning approaches in higher education institutions has still proven to be daunting.

According to Owston (2013) it is now clear that blended learning has the potential to transform higher education as the reliance on the transmission model is being seriously questioned. It is also apparent that blended learning is not just a technological enhancement of more traditional approaches such as the lecture. As Bleed (2001) points out, blended learning does not mean bolting technology onto a traditional course or using technology to teach a difficult concept. Instead, blended learning should be viewed as an opportunity to redesign the way that courses are developed, scheduled and delivered in higher education through a combination of physical and virtual instruction; “bricks and clicks”.

Garnham and Kaleta (2002) also report that the goal of these redesigned courses should be to join the best features of in-class teaching with the best features of online learning to promote active, self-directed learning opportunities for students with added flexibility. In a similar vein, Vaughan (2010) believes that at the heart of blended learning redesign is the goal to engage students in critical discourse and reflection. The author further states that the objective is to create dynamic and vital communities of inquiry where students take responsibility to construct meaning and confirm understanding through active participation in the inquiry process. If this type of teaching redesign is so vital to learning progress, how do students, especially graduate students, experience blended learning?

In an effort to understand the nature of higher education and how blended learning innovation can be adopted in a medium sized university, this study sought to understand the lived experiences of graduate students and professors in an institution that is offering a new blended learning initiative. Although there is a paucity of research specific to graduate students, the article, nonetheless, begins with a focused literature review drawn from the literature on undergraduate students, professors and institutional goals in the adoption of blended learning practices. This is followed by a brief description of the conceptual framework that was used in the study and the research questions that guided the investigation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Perceptions and Outcomes in Blended Learning Approaches

Students’ learning outcomes in blended learning courses are mostly influenced by students’ perceptions of these courses. For instance, drawing from the students’ experiences from eleven blended format courses in a Canadian higher education institution, Owston, York, and Murtha (2013) examined the relationship between student perceptions in blended learning courses and their in-course achievement. The authors were interested in assessing students in four areas that are considered to be vital for the university. These areas are: overall satisfaction with blended learning, convenience offered by blended courses, level of engagement, and perceptions of learning outcomes in blended learning courses. Students’ final grades from blended learning courses were used to determine their achievement level. The results indicated

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