

Chapter 1

A Blended Approach to Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the effectiveness of a blended approach to teacher education through the use of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) framework. Data was collected from students and faculty involved in the program via online surveys, focus groups, and the use of an editable Google Doc. The study participants provided recommendations for improving the quality of the blended program through the use of digital technologies based on the five NSSE benchmarks. For example, student and faculty interactions outside of the classroom could be enhanced through the use of web-based synchronous conferencing tools (e.g., Skype) to establish ‘virtual’ meetings and office hours.

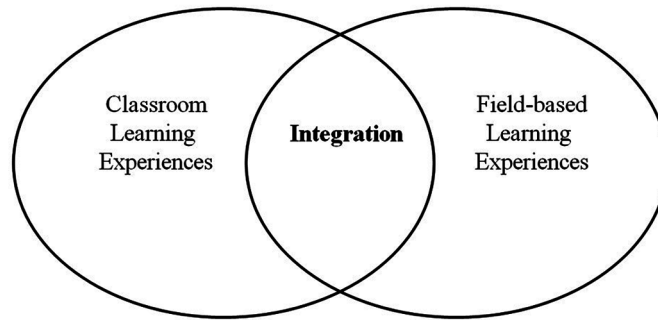
INTRODUCTION

The idea of blending different learning experiences has been in existence since humans started thinking about teaching (Williams, 2003). The recent infusion of web-based technologies into the learning and teaching process brings this term into current consideration (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Clark, 2003). These technologies have created new opportunities for students to interact with their peers, teachers, and content.

Blended learning is often defined as the combination of face-to-face and online learning (Sharpe et al., 2006; Williams, 2002). Ron Bleed, the former Vice Chancellor of Information Technologies at Maricopa College, argues that this is not a sufficient definition for blended learning as it simply implies “bolting” technology onto a traditional course, using technology as an add-on to teach a difficult concept, or adding supplemental information. He suggests that blended learning should be viewed as an opportunity to redesign how courses are developed, scheduled, and delivered through a combination of physical and virtual instruction: “bricks and clicks” (Blead, 2001). Joining the best features of in-class teaching with the best features of online learning that promote active, self-directed learning opportunities with added flexibility should be the goal of this redesigned approach (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002; Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007; Norberg, Dziuban, Moskal, 2011). Garrison and Vaughan (2008) echo this

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Figure 1. Teacher education approach to blended learning



sentiment when they state that “blended learning is the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches and technologies” (p.148). A survey of e-learning activity by Arabasz, Boggs & Baker (2003) found that 80 percent of all higher education institutions and 93 percent of doctoral institutions offer hybrid or blended learning courses.

Most of the recent definitions for blended courses indicate that this approach to learning offers potential for improving how we deal with content, social interaction, reflection, higher order thinking, problem solving, collaborative learning, and more authentic assessment in higher education potentially leading to a greater sense of student engagement (Graham, 2006; Mayadas & Picciano, 2007; Norberg, Dziuban, Moskal, 2011). Dziuban, Moskal and Hartmann (2013) further suggest that “blended learning has become an evolving, responsive, and dynamic process that in many respects is organic, defying all attempts at universal definition” (p.4).

In this research study on teacher education, the authors define blended learning as the intentional integration of classroom and field-based learning experiences through the use of digital technologies (Figure 1).

STUDY CONTEXT

Mount Royal University is a four- year undergraduate institution located in Calgary, Alberta, Canada (<http://www.mtroyal.ca/>). In fall of 2011, the University launched a new Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program, a four- year direct entry B.Ed. degree with an emphasis on connecting theory with practice through early, consistent, and on-going field experiences (<http://www.mtroyal.ca/bed/>). In the first two years of the program, students have a core education course each semester that meets once a week with a twenty- or thirty- hour field-placement. In the third and fourth years of the program, the students have extended field placements connected to program of studies courses and a capstone experience designed to integrate theory (of the coursework) and practice (of the field experiences) (Table 1).

To facilitate opportunities for communication and reflection between the classroom and field-based learning experiences, the institution has adopted the use of *Google Applications* (<http://google.mtroyal.ca/>); *Gmail* for communication; *Google Docs* (<http://tinyurl.com/bedjournal>) for reflective journaling; and *Google Sites* (<http://tinyurl.com/bedportfolio>) to construct a learning portfolio throughout the program.

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