Expanding the Terrain of Online Higher Education Through Active Blended Learning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As institutions harness the growing mobility in the lives of students and recognize the expanding terrain of possibilities by incorporating innovative active blended learning approaches, it is imperative to reimagine education itself. Connectivity and active blended learning can open doors for focused interactions, fostering deeper understanding through synchronous and asynchronous learning. The level of attention given by programs to active blended learning can sometimes portend success – programs with strong strategies and methods find ways to flip classrooms, deploy practical skill-based experiences, and design rigorous engagement initiatives. How can more programs take advantage of active blended learning methodologies and approaches to engage communities of inquiry for collaborative learning across borders?

INTRODUCTION

What is possible within the geography of our minds when we remove the geography of borders to allow for active blended learning (ABL)? A thriving virtual agenda is creating immense opportunity for educators to innovate. As institutions harness the growing mobility in the lives of students and recognize the expanding terrain of possibilities by incorporating innovative ABL approaches, it is imperative to reimagine education itself. Connectivity and ABL can open doors for focused interactions, fostering deeper understanding through synchronous and asynchronous learning. The level of attention given by institutions to ABL can sometimes foreshadow success - programs with strong strategies and methods

find ways to flip classrooms and deploy practical skill-based experiences and rigorous engagement initiatives. How can more program administrators, faculty, and students take advantage of ABL methodologies and approaches to engage in virtual spaces to experience collaboration beyond their campus?

Online programs utilize innovative technologies and creative programming to design inclusive spaces for Academic Nomads, contemporary students who, due to personal, professional, or academic circumstances, lead a mobile lifestyle and participate in education through a variety of sources and flexible modalities throughout their academic career (Gargano & Throop, 2017). In addition, online programs mean military-affiliated students can complete their mission, graduate students can conduct research in the field or overseas, and executive students can travel the globe on business, all while completing their coursework, interacting with a thriving digital agenda, and earning a degree. Faculty can share lessons learned from ongoing projects, participate in professional development opportunities, and network at conferences while still engaging with students in the online classroom from wherever their work situates them at that moment in time. ABL programs allow Academic Nomads and faculty to participate in discussions, engage in problem-based and team-based learning, and collaborate with individuals in various time zones and on campus. Used effectively, this means that on a daily basis students are being exposed to different perspectives, worldviews, and realities, expanding their understanding of world affairs and illuminating multiple perspectives on a myriad of topics. The potential for learning is unprecedented.

The evolving landscape of higher education and the lived experiences of Academic Nomads demand innovation. The tools, technologies, and techniques afforded by ABL are increasingly being recognized for their ability to expand the terrain of academic possibilities farther than ever previously conceived. Thoughtful program design using ABL implements technology with a focus on human interactions throughout all modalities.

This chapter examines how one higher education program reimagines the possibilities at the intersection of higher education and online learning by grounding the program in ABL. An international relations program at a private mid-sized liberal arts university in the United States fosters a community of inquiry and recognizes student mobility through its innovative approach to learning. Reconceptualizing the classroom and reimagining technology, this chapter illuminates specific ABL strategies at the program level, presents concrete examples of engagement through ABL spaces, highlights the complexities of implementing ABL, and offers insights and strategies for sustainable ways ABL addresses shifts within the field of higher education. Embedding ABL throughout academic coursework and student programming is critical to the program. Opportunities to co-create knowledge, apply content to real-life situations, and collaborate are guiding pillars for the ABL curricular and co-curricular spaces infused throughout the program.

This chapter first provides context for the development of the program by briefly illuminating relevant trends in online higher education. The evolution of active learning and blended learning discourses that merged to create the ABL field are briefly outlined. Then a portrait of Academic Nomads, who reside at the intersection of online higher education and ABL, is presented. The complexities of establishing and administering an ABL program in higher education are explored through an examination of curricular and co-curricular aspects of the program. Recommendations and lessons learned are shared, before the chapter concludes with additional opportunities for research.

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