

Active Blended Learning in an Undergraduate English for Academic Purposes Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter presents a multi-method qualitative study of an active blended learning (ABL) activity in an undergraduate English for academic purposes program at a North American university. The purpose of the study was to understand how instructors facilitated ABL in five online book clubs. The community of inquiry (CoI) framework is used to analyze the comments and posts in the book clubs. This data is discussed with data from interviews with three case study students and four book club instructors and data from a CoI student survey. The findings indicate that instructor book selection, questions, scaffolding strategies, modelling, and manner significantly mediated student perceptions regarding their engagement, participation, and interaction in the ABL activity, specifically whether students scaffolded each other's learning, read extensively, and practised academic reading strategies. Implications of how instructor pedagogy mediated student perceptions about their participation and learning in the ABL activity are then presented.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the teaching and learning in an active blended learning (ABL) activity that was introduced into the curriculum of a 24-week undergraduate English for academic purposes (EAP) program at a major North American university. Each year approximately 120 international students, the large majority of whom are Chinese nationals aged between 18 and 21, complete the program. The curriculum is designed to equip the students with the necessary academic English skills to prepare them for undergraduate study in English in the university's Faculty of Arts and Science. The curriculum focuses on critical thinking as well as English language and composition skills. The ABL component takes the form of online book clubs integrated into the syllabus of a face-to-face critical reading and writing course

in the EAP program. The initial purpose of the book clubs was to encourage extensive reading outside the classroom and beyond the usual academic texts. Research into the effects of extensive reading on second language learners has demonstrated significant benefits in student reading and writing ability, most notably speed and comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and affective gains such as increased student motivation to read, and increased enjoyment of reading (Cho & Krashen, 1994). Within academia the reading to write process is especially important as reading for academic courses demands written responses in the form of note taking, paraphrasing, and analyzing and synthesizing information from texts.

The present study focuses on book clubs and investigates how teaching and learning was mediated in the ABL activity. To do this student posts and comments were collected and analyzed. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 1999) was used to conduct a content analysis of the students' posts and comments. The CoI framework is an established tool for the analysis of blended learning (see Akyol & Garrison, 2011; Halverson et al., 2014). Furthermore, because the CoI framework considers teaching, social, and cognitive presences to analyze students' collaboration, critical thinking, and knowledge construction (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), it is an appropriate tool for the analysis of ABL. The CoI data are analyzed with the data collected from multiple interviews with three case study students who participated in the book clubs, interviews with their book club instructors, and survey data collected from book club students in each of the book clubs. These data are examined to establish how instructor pedagogy influenced the ABL in the book club activity. More specifically, the study considers the following questions: (1) How did instructors facilitate ABL in their book clubs? (2) What aspects of instructor pedagogy fostered student engagement, peer-learning, and learner autonomy in the book clubs? In doing so, pedagogic approaches that promote ABL and knowledge construction in undergraduate EAP learning are identified and best pedagogic practices are discussed.

BACKGROUND

The increasing use of ABL in tertiary education courses requires educators to better understand what ABL pedagogy is and how it impacts instructional decision-making and design. However, active learning and blended learning are pedagogic practices that are often simplified or misunderstood. Therefore, it is useful to briefly review these terms to clarify how they combine to form ABL, before reviewing the pertinent CoI literature and outlining the germane aspects of the Facebook book club activity.

Defining Active Blended Learning

Bonwell and Eison (1991) provide a broad working definition of active learning as “anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” (p. 2). Active learning is different from more passive forms of learning, such as attending lectures, because students are involved in sense-making with one another and engaged in the learning process. Prince (2004) identifies three generally accepted methods of active learning that are similar but often conflated: *collaborative learning*, *cooperative learning*, and *problem-based learning*. Although the details of these forms of active learning may differ, they all promote active learning in small peer-groups and, when implemented properly, can enhance student motivation and autonomy, and develop students critical thinking capabilities.

Similarly, blended learning has both broad and more detailed definitions. The term is commonly understood as the practice of using both online and in-person learning experiences at the activity, course,

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