

Chapter 5

Blended Learning for Adaptation to Needs

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning is an instructional method that opens the channels of communication in the learning process so that there are increased communication strategies. This chapter discusses two different approaches to using blended learning as a way of adapting to program needs. In one example, pharmacy instruction is provided by top faculty to distance sites. In another example, blended learning is used to reduce instructional costs and increase student enrollment in a graduate program in the humanities. The differences in approaches are because of the different purposes for the use of blended learning. Blended learning can be useful in this time of dwindling resources and budget constraints as a method for improving instruction designed to reach more students and distance locations.

INTRODUCTION

Blended Learning may be the traditional learning method of the future. Blended learning has been called a “total mix of pedagogical methods, employing a combination of diverse learning strategies, both with and without the use of technology” (Verkroost, Meijerink, Lintsen, & Veen, 2008, p. 499). In essence, blended learning combines traditional learning methods with technological support. Some educators believe that blended learning can

be a way to optimize effective instruction (e.g., Balram & Dragicevic, 2008; Ho, Lu, & Thurmaier, 2006; Mason, 2005). Blended learning—sometimes called hybrid or web-assisted learning—is as diverse as the faculty and institutions that support the combination approach (e.g., Lee, Yeh, Kung, & Hsu, 2007; Schober, Wagner, Reimann, & Spiel, 2008). Typically, one or more technological elements—individualized e-instruction, self-paced e-instruction, asynchronous e-instruction, synchronous e-instruction—are combined with face-to-face instruction. For the discussion in this chapter, blended instruction is defined as teaching that uses

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a combination of traditional face-to-face and computer-mediated communication.

The purpose of this chapter is to present ideas about how to employ blended learning to adapt to the particular instructional context. By considering examples, implementation possibilities for blended learning are discussed. In one example context, a professional program in pharmacy uses blended learning so that faculty and staff can offer the program on another campus. In another example context, a graduate program in the humanities uses blended learning to adapt to student needs and increase student enrollment in a new and growing program. In both examples, the use of blended instruction has offered a valid approach in a time of fewer resources to hire full-time faculty. The chapter includes an explanation of the type of technology used, the way blended learning has been configured, and questions about the future applications of blended learning. The chapter offers answers to this question: How can students, faculty, and administrators adapt blended learning to achieve goals for their particular contexts?

BACKGROUND

This section will consider historical information that has led to blended learning. In the professional pharmacy example, technology use has evolved over many years through the leadership of Information Technology (IT) and Academic Affairs. In the graduate humanities example, the university developed two administrative branches of instruction—onground and online—which operate separately. Blended learning has become a challenge that requires collaboration between two different administrative units.

Across higher education contexts around the world, the lack of institutional support and financial restraints have prompted universities to seek ways to improve and transform education (Vega-Jurado, Fernandez-de-Lucio, & Huanca,

2008). Given the global economic crisis, more institutions may turn to blended learning. Sometimes blended learning is considered little more than a way of updating education, while in other cases, it is considered a way to provide financial support to an institution (Boyle, 2005). Clearly, blended learning is more than the old distributed learning modes of correspondence courses or televised courses and more than the one-way teacher lecture course.

Optimally, blended learning should improve both face-to-face and online instruction. The model of blended learning—which uses technological support rather than replacement of traditional instruction—holds promise for student learning (Condie & Livingston, 2007). Enrollment in distance education courses is exploding (DeNeui & Dodge, 2006), sometimes to the point of seeming out of control with limited faculty training or supervision, faculty beyond of their comfort zone, and other concerns. So in a time when the quality of e-courses is sometimes questioned, blended learning has become an increasing popular way of improving the quality of online instruction (e.g., Boyle, Bradley, Chalk, Jones, & Pickard, 2003; Oravec, 2003; Schweizer, Paechter, & Weidenmann, 2003). Concurrently, resources for education are dwindling during the economic hard times, so blended learning may be a stimulus that takes advantage of the resources available, encourages faculty creativity, and adapts to students with special needs (Marschark, Sapere, & Pelz, 2008).

From the perspective of the communication scholar, technology channels are intertwined with potential for new ways for faculty and students to interact. Scholars in other fields conceptualize the concept of communication differently from scholars of communication (Fraser & Schalley, 2009), but for people who study communication, everything about mediated learning includes opportunities to improve communication. E-learning has changed communication in education, for example, particularly from the standpoint of so-

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