Chapter 18
Comparing IT and Non-IT Faculty and Students’ Perceptions on Blended Learning

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ABSTRACT
The successful implementation of blended learning depends on many factors, but the interactions between academics and students far outweigh technology and all other factors put together. However, so far, no satisfactory research has been conducted relating to teacher education or to providing a comprehensive analysis on academic and student teachers’ perceptions. For the purpose of this study, thirteen academics were interviewed or attended focus group meetings to share their views on blended learning. Some of them were classified as information technology (IT) academics whilst others were not. The academics had a very positive attitude towards the concept of blended learning and there were no notable differences between IT and non-IT academics. Their findings are also cross referenced with findings from students who participated in a questionnaire survey. There were a total of seventy student teachers, who participated in the survey. Forty-four of them were regarded as IT students whilst the rest was regarded as non-IT students. These two groups of students gave high ratings on most of the questionnaire items. There were some minor differences between the two groups of students but the differences were not very statistically significant. These thought-provoking findings not only serve as practical and beneficial information for The Hong Kong Institute of Education, but they also serve as an invaluable source of knowledge and information for all individuals in the field of teacher education.

INTRODUCTION
Information Technology (IT) has presented a new environment for learning and teaching worldwide since the rapid development of the Internet started in the mid 1990s. IT plays a vital role in the modern world by providing easy access, flexibility and simplicity of communication, supporting multimedia presentations and enabling communication virtually, with anyone, anywhere in the world. IT has
presented a new arena for learning and teaching, by permeating all aspects of our daily lives. Most universities in developed countries have invested large sums of money in different electronic learning (e-learning) initiatives (Alexander, 2001). Some universities offer online courses, whilst some adopt e-learning tools to complement regular face-to-face lectures.

The author is an academic who educates student teachers. It is inappropriate to replace regular lectures wholly, with online studies for educating student teachers who require good communication skills, interpersonal skills and subject knowledge. Yet it is perceived that there is a need to adopt technology in teaching and learning, in order to enable student teachers to learn contemporary pedagogies and skills through experiential learning. Therefore, a blended learning approach, which means effectively combining face-to-face teaching and learning with e-learning, appears to be the best teaching approach. In fact, there is no agreed definition of blended learning and yet, blended learning usually means to learn through a combination of digital and physical resources and media.

Blended learning provides educators with an additional platform to apply further new teaching strategies and thereby, better equip our future teachers with abilities and skills for independent and life-long learning. The teachers in turn then cultivate these same abilities and skills in their students at schools. However, extra effort needs to be expended by teachers to gain and achieve the positive impact imparted by blended learning. Myers, Bennett, Brown & Henderson (2004) suggested that “these opportunities also increase substantially the time and energy required of faculty to achieve the potential of online learning environments” (p.79). Therefore, the author attempted to uncover the perceptions of both academics and students on blended learning.

The following section will be on pertinent literature research, followed by research findings and discussions. Finally, the conclusion, recommendations and suggestions for future research directions are then made. However, both the literature and research will concentrate more on the e-learning side, as there are far too many face-to-face teaching approaches.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Koschmann (1996) suggests that we are “currently witnessing the emergence of a new paradigm in IT research” (p. 10). He further suggests that this newly emerging paradigm is built on the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and communication science, which focus on language, culture and the nature of the social setting. Indeed, there are different approaches to adopting IT in education and the main advantage lies in the flexibility and convenience of these approaches. IT plays an important role in supporting learning, such as the provision of information in multiple modes, utilizing technologies as mind tools, and scaffolding conversations virtually with anyone in the world (Jonassen, 2000; Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999). Communication exchanges such as e-mail, wikis and discussion forums provide a flexible and convenient arena for single or multiple users, to discuss a range of topics, synchronously or asynchronously. Messages can be stored, edited and retrieved easily at the discretion of users, without the requirement of sophisticated software. Furthermore, electronic communications enhance learning by enabling students with diverse backgrounds and from differing locations, to obtain and subsequently offer multiple perspectives and solutions to various problems (Lipponen, 2002). In fact, a number of researchers (Applefield, Huber, & Moadlem, 2000; Muukkonen, Hakkarainen, & Lakkala, 2005; Scardamalia, 2002; Woodruff, Brett, MacDonald, & Nason, 1998) have also found that learning environments facilitate student-centered learning.
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