

Chapter 1

Academic Development Perspectives of Blended Learning

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ABSTRACT

Technological advances in every aspect of today's higher education environment create a forum for academic developers to re-examine existing delivery methods for professional development. Within the context of this case study, the term 'academic developer' is taken to encompass the role of learning technologist. In order to be responsive and accommodate the changes, traditional instruction methods are being extended to encompass the range of Web 2.0 tools available. Debate is ongoing in the area of blended learning as to the ultimate effectiveness of technology integration. Through exploration of the experiences of two academic developers involved in the design and delivery of accredited professional development programmes for academic staff in Ireland, the case is made for an effective balance in pedagogical and technological intervention. Both were experienced in delivery of face-to-face instruction, had different levels of experience in online teaching and worked collaboratively with academic staff. Experience from the two case studies suggests that a prerequisite for embedding blended learning strategies in learning and teaching is that the instructors recognise the need for appropriate holistic academic development to provide them with not only an understanding of how best to use the technologies, but fundamentally for enhancing their understanding of how to develop effective blended learning environments.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0939-6.ch001

INTRODUCTION

Introducing learning technologies to higher education programmes raises questions about staff roles and the organization of academic development practices. Indeed, over the past decade, many higher education institutions are integrating multimedia and more recently, web 2.0 technologies into teacher education and academic development programmes albeit with varying degrees of success (Leonard & Guha, 2001; Kell et al., 2009). This paper discusses the findings from two case studies evaluating the effectiveness of blended delivery strategies by two centrally supported educational developers who work with academic staff in providing specialized support.

To be truly effective, academic development programmes need to engage the academic/faculty staff in learning as professionals. Within a blended environment, this includes learning experiences grounded in both classroom and virtual practice and guidance to develop as professionals in each. Many academic developers encompass the role of learning technologist and work collaboratively with academic staff (Oliver, 2002). The findings of a study by Ooms et al. (2008) offer an opportunity to further understand this type of role, and the value of a staff development model that supports situative professional development.

As there are still conflicting messages from the literature on the effectiveness of blended learning, [not all studies report positive benefits from the ongoing mixing of technologies with classroom teaching], the main concern of this chapter is to seek clarity on this issue, within a pragmatic lens; this realistic perspective is important as many higher education institutions today are not immune from a range of economic problems and as a result, the metrics for excellence within blended learning may require redefinition.

Initially the terminology on blended learning is clarified in the chapter and by extrapolating from current case study practices; it reveals a need for effective scrutiny of the power of blended

learning strategies within the field of academic development. Secondly, a synopsis of current research into blended learning is provided, with a particular emphasis on new forms of conceptual frameworks and methodologies being brought to bear in the field. A third section explores the heart of the chapter by deconstructing the power that blended learning can offer academic development practice through the discussion of two case studies. Finally, the chapter concludes with a look forward into what the future of blended learning holds for such professional development programmes.

Inherent in all this are the technological and pedagogical challenges that exist within the field, and it is important to raise debate about blended learning as well as disseminate best practice through case studies such as this. Recognising that international blended learning conferences and symposia are only in their early years, it is anticipated that this chapter will contribute to the ongoing development of a common learning and teaching discourse about blended learning strategies in use in higher education today.

BACKGROUND

This chapter will discuss the findings from a comparison between two case studies evaluating the effectiveness of blended delivery strategies by two centrally supported academic developers who work closely alongside academic staff in providing specialized support. Case 1 is from a blended two year part-time programme, the MSc Applied eLearning, which is open to academic staff from across Ireland. The programme is intended for professionals with an interest in eLearning in higher education and industry practice, including eLearning specialists and co-ordinators, researchers, teachers, tutors and lecturers, trainers in commercial enterprises, policy makers and managers, who want to explore the possibilities for training, education and knowledge transfer through information and communications technology.

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