What is Considered ‘Blended Learning’ in Higher Education?

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore and critically compare the various definitions given to blended learning, primarily within the area of Higher Education. It starts with a general description of blended learning and its main characteristics, along with the reasons underlying its popularity and the criticism against it. The concepts of ‘blended learning’ and ‘blended teaching’ are compared and contrasted, while possible synonyms and various definitions are presented and analysed. Moreover, the absence of definitions in various papers is also commented, and, finally, opportunities for further research in the subject are identified.

Keywords: Blended Learning, E-Learning, Face to Face Learning, Higher Education, Hybrid Learning, Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL), Unblended Learning

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning is a rather popular concept - most educators proudly announce that they are fully committed to blended learning in their teaching activities. The increasing popularity of blended learning is not surprising – the term is, after all, a “buzzword” (Chew & Jones, 2009: p.378; Graham, 2006: p.4), and it is considered “the most logical and natural evolution of our learning agenda” (Thorne, 2003: p.16).

The existing literature in this area is quite extensive. The supporting literature of this paper is selected on the basis of being the most frequently cited in blended learning - related papers. Consequently, the papers cited here are chosen with the intention to chart not only the wide spectrum but also the various ends of blended learning’s –frequently conflicting – extant definitions.

“We are, as a species, blended learners” says Eliott Masie (cited in Carman, 2005: p.1), while Graham (2006: p.7) observes that “Although it is impossible to see entirely what the future holds, we can be pretty certain that the trend toward blended learning systems will increase. It may even become so ubiquitous that we will eventually drop the word blended and just call it learning”.

Nevertheless, Graham is one of the many researchers who express their concern over the ambiguity that exists about the meaning of the term ‘blended learning’ (Graham, 2006; Ocak, 2011; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005; Osguthorpe &
Graham, 2003; Parchoma, 2011; Thorne, 2003). It’s not that a definition is not available; on the contrary, there are so many – and sometimes conflicting – definitions for blended learning that render the term ambiguous and unclear. Moreover, as it happens with several terms, blended learning may have different connotations to different people (Driscoll 2002; Chen 2009).

While reviewing the effectiveness of distance learning in Higher Education, Phipps and Merisotis (1999) made an interesting classification of distance education systems. They suggested that the blending of technologies could be seen as the “third generation” of distance learning systems; the first generation characterizes distance learning by correspondence, which, as So & Brush point out lacked the element of interactivity, and the second generation the use of a single technology at a time (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999: p.26; So & Brush, 2008). Classifying education systems as ‘generations’ automatically implies the presence of evolution; therefore, blended learning may be seen as the natural result of the evolution occurring in education systems.

Several factors can be considered as contributing to this evolution. Wong and Tatnall (2009) associate the emergence of blended learning to three major changes in higher education as these were identified by Garrison and Vaughan (2008), i.e. developments in information and communication technologies (ICT), changes within higher education institutions, and acknowledgement of the limitations of the existing teaching and learning methods. In the next section the attributes of blended learning along with its advantages will be analysed.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF BLENDED LEARNING**

The popularity of blended learning is related to the many advantages that become apparent when blended learning is compared to face-to-face or pure e-learning techniques. Both Garrison and Vaughan (2008, p. 3) and Garrison and Kanuka (2004, p. 104) talk about blended learning leading to an improved “learning experience”. Garrison and Kanuka further elaborate on this maintaining that “Blended learning can begin the necessary process of redefining higher education institutions as being learning centered”.

Several researchers support that, since blended learning can provide the benefits of online learning and at the same time maintain the advantages of face-to-face learning, it is superior to any single form of learning; some of them prove this with empirical evidence (Young, 2002; Osguthorpe & Graham 2003; Rovai & Jordan 2004; Harding et al 2005; Garrison & Vaughan 2008; Chen 2009; Kim et al., 2009; Lopez-Perez et al., 2011). Both from the students’ and from the educators’ point of view, blended learning is perceived as more flexible, efficient, effective and pedagogically richer (Graham, 2006; McGovern & Barnes, 2009; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Singh & Reed, 2001). Students seem to find blended learning courses easier (McGovern & Barnes 2009). Garrison and Kanuka (2004) argue that students feel they can express any disagreement or concern more freely and also that they can concentrate on the concepts taught without the distractions of the traditional classroom. Moreover, the communication through online forums appears to trigger more thoughtful discussions due mainly to the permanent nature of the asynchronous communication and to the extended time availability (Meyer, 2003).

Blended learning enables the administrators of educational institutions to realize that online learning is not just a tool to attract and serve additional students, but, combined with their traditional learning tools can also support their existing students (Garrison & Vaughan 2008).

From the perspective of both the instructors and the educational institutions, blended learning is considered as more efficient – again, when compared to either face-to-face or pure e-learning - since it significantly reduces the development cost and time (Singh & Reed 2001). As opposed to the other techniques, the
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