

Chapter 5

Factors Predisposing Academics towards the Use of Blended Strategies: A Model

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ABSTRACT

Universities are investing considerable resources into blended learning as an institutional strategy to respond to pressures of uncertain economies, increasing globalisation, and the changing expectations of cohorts of digitally savvy students. However, the widespread adoption of effective blended teaching practices has generally not been achieved. A greater understanding of academics' blended teaching practices is needed to facilitate the uptake of effective blended practices on a larger scale. By exploring how various factors influence academics' use of technology with face-to-face teaching, the study makes a contribution to the understanding of academics' blended practices. The study described in this paper uses a mixed method, two phase methodology to develop a predictive model of blended strategy use. A major finding of the study is gender differences in factors predisposing academics towards blended strategy. Factors predisposing academics towards the use of blended in strategies in current practice were found to be: perceived usefulness (but only for male academics), higher education teaching experience, and self-efficacy (but only for females). Significant factors influencing academics' intentions for future blended practice were found to be: perceived usefulness, current use of blended strategies and, for female academics, perceived feasibility.

INTRODUCTION

Significant strategic investment is being made by universities into the use of technology for teaching (Bonk & Graham, 2006; Bonk, Kim, & Zeng,

2006; Graham & Robison, 2007). The focus on technology in teaching is largely an institutional response to a number of factors including pressures of globalization, increased focus on quality teaching and learning, and the needs and expectations

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of cohorts of digitally savvy students. As a result of the strategic focus on technology for teaching, the majority of academics are using technology to some degree in their teaching. However, only a minority of academics are successfully combining technology with their face-to-face teaching to provide effective, high quality learning experiences through the use of blended approaches (Collis & Van Der Wende, 2002; Graham & Robison, 2007; Driscoll, 2002; Hoffman, 2006). The majority of academics are using technology with face-to-face teaching mainly for reasons of efficiency and flexibility. Whilst efficiency and flexibility are important considerations for coping with larger, more diverse student populations, the success of blended approaches as an institutional strategy rest largely on the widespread adoption of effective blended teaching practices - which has generally failed to occur (Graham & Robison, 2007).

One reason why effective blended teaching practices are not being widely adopted is that using technology together with face-to-face teaching is a complex undertaking. Using technology in teaching requires significant course redesign, usually involving the creation of new learning activities and reconsideration of assessment methods (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Although most academics are well-versed in teaching in traditional settings but they may need to acquire the knowledge and skills to fully exploit the potential of technology to provide effective learning experience. Against this context, the need to provide appropriate professional support to facilitate the use of effective blended teaching approaches is self-evident. The research described in this paper is not concerned directly with the provision of professional support. Rather, the research is concerned with seeking base knowledge that will contribute towards the development of more effective professional support.

The premise underlying the research is that professional support needs to effect a connection to existing practice to facilitate the critical analysis of existing beliefs and assumptions that academics need to undertake if they are to

transform their practice. Hence, understanding the factors shaping academics' blended learning practices is fundamental to the provision of the professional support needed to facilitate the uptake of effective blended practices on a larger scale. Unfortunately, existing blended learning literature provides meager insight into academics' blended practices (Torrissi-Steele & Drew, 2013). The research described in this paper thus stems from the need to better understand academics' blended teaching practices.

In an effort to contribute to a greater understanding of academics' blended teaching practices, the present study aims to identify factors which predispose academics to use technology to create blended strategies by developing a model predicting academics' *current* and *intended future use* of blended strategies. A review of relevant literature together with a conceptual framework enabled the proposal of research model. A mixed methods, two-phase methodology was then used to develop the model. In the first phase, a survey instrument was designed and distributed to academic staff within Griffith University. Using the data collected from the survey, regression was used to refine the theoretical model. In the second phase of the study, survey respondents were purposefully selected, on the basis of quantitative results, to participate in interviews. The qualitative data from the interviews was used to support and enrich understanding of the quantitative findings.

But First – What is meant by ‘Blended Learning’?

Before describing the study, it is important to consider what meant by the term ‘blended learning’ in this instance of research. A simple, broad understanding of the term ‘blended learning’ is that it refers the use of technology together with face-to-face teaching. However, to clearly distinguish between uses of technology with face-to-face teaching that are considered blended learning and those which are not a more precise

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