

Chapter 44

How Do They Fare?

Learning Achievement and Satisfaction with Blended Learning for Traditional-Age Undergraduates at Moderately Selective Colleges

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning is proliferating rapidly in higher education across the United States. However, this learning environment may pose new challenges to learners at moderately selective colleges who are normally found to be low in autonomy. A quasi-experimental study was conducted to examine the learning achievement and course satisfaction of this group of learners in two sections of a course, with one being blended and the other a face-to-face. The results, shown in this chapter, reveal that instructional mode does not have a significant effect on learning achievement and course satisfaction; however, a further examination into the course structure, dialogue, and learner autonomy suggests that low structure and high dialogue can help reduce transactional distance and a synchronous format for the online component in a blended course is highly recommended. In addition, coaching and scaffolding learner autonomy is indispensable for learners at moderately selective colleges and should be considered in the design and implementation of online learning.

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning is proliferating rapidly in higher education across the United States due to its prominent benefits, including flexibility, acces-

sibility, and integration of traditional pedagogical benefits of face-to-face learning and potentially transformative learning enabled by emerging technologies (Kaleta, Skibba, & Joosten, 2007; Vasileiou, 2009). The most recent 2012 Pew

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Survey on the future of higher education with over 1000 academic experts and stakeholders suggests that 60% are expecting a transition to hybrid classes by 2020 (Quitney, Boyles, & Rainie, 2012). Blended learning, incorporating the best of both worlds, is expected to transform teaching and learning in higher education and is predicted to become the predominant model in course delivery in the near future.

The blended learning environment, with different rhythms and forms of interaction between students and instructor, as well as between students, between students and learning materials, may pose new challenges to traditional-age undergraduate students with moderate academic performance who have been found to be low in academic motivation and self-discipline (Beck, Rorrer-Woody, & Pierce, 1991; Fulk, 2003; Kim & Keller, 2008). In the United States, 800 institutions are considered somewhat selective, accepting between 50% and 75% of their applicants, with an additional 400 less selective institutions that accept over 75% of their applicants (College Board, 2013). Given this backdrop, a large number of students attending colleges in the United States are moderately selective. Is blended learning, which may require relatively higher levels of motivation, engagement and self-directed learning skills (Abulibdeh & Ishtaiwa, 2012; Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Piggott, 2011; López-Pérez, Pérez-López, & Lázaro, 2011), an appropriate learning environment for this group of learners?

A number of research studies exist on the subject of blended learning in various settings and formats, which reveal mixed results regarding student learning achievement and perceptions of blended learning (Ashby, Sadara, & McNary, 2011; Foulger, Amrein-Beardsley, & Toth, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Many existing studies, however, have been conducted at large universities but do not make any reference to level of selectivity of the institution (Hoyt, 2003; Kenney & Newcombe, 2011; López-Pérez, Pérez-López, & Lázaro, 2011; Uzun & Senturk,

2010), others are conducted with graduate students who are dominantly non-traditional adult learners (Falloon, 2011; McLaren, 2010), no specific research has related to blended learning for traditional-age undergraduates at moderately selective institutions. Moore's (2013) theory of transactional distance postulates that the difference in perceptions and understanding between students and instructor (i.e., transactional distance) is a function of three factors: (a) structure (i.e., course design), (b) dialogue (i.e., interaction), and (c) learner autonomy (ability to work independently). In a blended learning environment, where transactional distance may increase due to the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learners, and between learners in a relatively lower-touch, less relationship-oriented environment, students must possess the ability to function autonomously so as to be successful. As Moore (2013) noted, "a common cause of failure, or at least of courses falling short of expectations, is a failure to design the balance of structure and dialogue that is appropriate for a particular student population and subject field" (p.71).

This chapter is aimed to fill a gap in current distance education research by addressing a prominent subset of the general higher education population. A quasi-experimental study was designed to examine the learning achievement and course satisfaction of undergraduates at a moderately selective college in two sections of the same course, with one implementing a blended learning environment and the other implementing a traditional face-to-face learning environment. Students' course satisfaction in both learning environments will be examined in relation to their perceptions of the course structure and dialogue, and their levels of autonomy, which will be further examined by relating to their satisfaction. The results will help higher education administrators make wise and ethical decisions when adopting blended and online education. Likewise, the results will inform faculty in designing blended courses so as to achieve an optimal balance between course structure, dialogue, and learner autonomy.

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