Chapter 4
Learning about Blended Learning through Students' Experiences:
An Exploratory Study in Postgraduate Guidance and Counselling Programs in a University with Campuses in Australia and Singapore

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ABSTRACT

The digital age together with the political and economic agenda to make higher education more accessible and cost effective are challenging teaching academics worldwide to rethink and redesign their pedagogical practices. The challenges include how to respond to increasingly diverse twenty first century learners who demand flexibility, and the requirements of a more service driven economy. For a program to be successful in higher education's current learnscape, teaching and learning need to optimise students' experiences and learning outcomes. The exploratory study discussed in this chapter investigates seventy-three postgraduate students' experiences with blended learning in guidance and counselling programs in one Australian university with an offshore branch campus in Singapore. The study aims to inform the future design and delivery of teaching and learning within blended learning spaces with a focus on pedagogical practices for student engagement. As such, it contributes to the body of knowledge about learning design that enhances student learning experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Both the Ernst and Young's "University of the Future" report (2012) and The New Media Consortium Horizon Higher Education report (2014) have recognised the digital age as a key driver in higher education institutions for twenty-first century learners. The emergent corollaries include: global mobility, the changing demographics of student candidates, the political and economic agenda making higher education more accessible and cost effective. These have coincided with a mushrooming availability of rapidly changing learning technologies. The upshot has been that technology-enhanced learning is more appealing to an increasingly diverse and more flexibility-demanding group of students within higher education (JISC, 2009; Shroff & Vogel, 2010).

The challenge is for teaching academics to implement programs that align with the demands of higher education institutions, which meet all the students' diverse learning needs and which intelligently employ the ever-changing technology. The goal is to maximise student engagement in order to achieve the highest outcomes. For programs to be successful in the current learning environment, Jordan (2015) finds that there needs to be a clearly articulated vision. Evaluating the current learnscape is an imperative precursor.

The chapter commences with a wide-ranging review of the current literature on blended learning, including a focus on counsellor education. Blended learning is where face-to-face classes are complemented, or fused, with web-based, online learning materials (El-Mowafy, Kuhn, & Snow, 2013; Garrison & Vaughan, 2011; Keppell, Suddaby, & Hard, 2011; López-Pérez, Pérez-López, & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2011). The context and the methodology for the study is then introduced. Findings and discussion follows, including the translation of research learning into practice. The limitations of the study and future research concludes the chapter.

BACKGROUND

Blended Learning

Blended learning is often defined as a combination of traditional and online teaching designs. Traditional approaches typically refer to face-to-face, synchronous teaching experiences in the form of lectures, workshops, tutorials and seminars (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). These traditional designs are distinguished from those approaches utilising technology, such as enhanced, online and blended learning experiences (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). At the pedagogic core of traditional methods are key elements where students learn by: reading materials (e.g., textbooks and lecture notes); guided self-teaching (developing reading lists); independent study (assignment and exam preparation); engage in personal communication (through contact with other students and lectures); use of audio-visual materials (such as films); and, learning by traditional academic teaching methods (seminars, lectures and other classes) (Peters, 2001).

Blended learning approaches contain the same pedagogic core as those in traditional approaches and provide a vehicle for thoughtful integration of the synchronous (traditional face-to-face) and asynchronous (internet assisted) learning activities (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Therefore it is not a simple combina-

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