A Pathway Towards Implementation of Blended Learning in a Medium Sized Canadian University

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ABSTRACT
As blended learning increases in higher education, there still remains a dearth of empirical evidence that focuses on how institutions actually adopt such initiatives. The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore the key factors that led to the adoption and implementation of a blended learning initiative in one medium sized Canadian university. Three research questions guided the study that was nested in the Community of Inquiry framework. Data sources included a total of 83 semi-structured interviews with students, professors, and administrators; 32 student and instructor artefacts and documents and three sets of researcher field notes. Findings indicate that a university-wide initiative needs to integrate both the lived experiences of undergraduate and graduate students in blended learning which are very different. Adoption also recognizes that as professors come to understand the meaning of blended learning, their knowledge needs and teaching practices change. These changes need to be reflected in as training is developed. In addition, widespread implementation involves several critical factors that happen at both the institutional and individual faculty level. The discussion focuses on several key markers that need to be considered along a university-wide pathway towards blended learning.

KEYWORDS
Blended Learning, Community of Inquiry, Hybrid Courses, Institutional Adoption, Instrumental Case Study

INTRODUCTION
As Norberg, Dziuban and Moskal (2011) so aptly put it, blended learning will become the “new normal” in higher education course delivery. The old lecture model of teaching is no longer relevant given that a new demographic of student has now arrived in post-secondary education who are adept in using online and mobile technologies. In addition, these new millennial students are now demanding a better quality of teaching and learning than in the past. However, blended learning is a complex idea. At its very simplest form blended learning is a combination of traditional face-to-face classroom activities and technology-mediated instruction. But the complexity of this new pedagogical model becomes even more apparent due to the vast number of blends which can be achieved. According to
Carbonell, Dailey-Hebert and Gijelaers (2013), this implies that blended learning assigns different weights to different instructional methods in the classroom and online learning activities. From a teaching perspective, this can be very challenging as it requires instructors to re-examine their current teaching style along with the plethora of learning options that are now available before redesigning their courses. Despite the benefits of using this approach, Vaughn (2007) maintains that resistance still remains a major obstacle for adoption of blended learning at the instructor level. Similarly, Halverson, Graham, Spring, and Drydale (2012) mention that although many studies have investigated the effectiveness of blended learning at the individual course level, very limited research is available that provides guidance for institutions. Therefore, the scope of this study was to explore the key factors that led to the implementation of a blended learning initiative at a medium sized Canadian university.

FOCUSED LITERATURE REVIEW

Moskal, Dziuban and Hartman (2013) make an important case stating that the implementation of a successful blended learning program requires alignment of student, faculty and institutional goals. This focused literature review will attempt to address these three related areas in order to lay the groundwork for the extent of the study.

Student Perceptions, Satisfaction and Learning Experiences With Blended Learning

As blended learning becomes an integral part of most higher education institutions, students’ perceptions and experiences in these technological environments has been gaining more attention as central viewpoints in this new domain of research. Acknowledging the significance of students’ learning experience in blended learning environments, Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) situated “educational experience” at the centre of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework where teaching, social, and cognitive presences shape learners’ experiences and perceptions.

This framework has inspired several investigations on the student learning experience. For example, a recent study by Szeto and Cheng (2016) focused on exploring students’ online and face-to-face social presence experiences in a blended learning course by measuring the frequency of indicators for social presence as identified in the CoI framework. Twenty-eight students were divided into two equal groups where one group attended the traditional face-to-face classrooms while the other group simultaneously joined the same session via a videoconferencing method. To explore social presence in the face-to-face and online groups, the authors focused on the two main indicators of the concept: emotional expression and group cohesion.

Findings suggest that although students in the online component reported receiving too much attention during the questioning period which followed the delivery of content, providing them with real time participation allowed them to feel a sense of community. Furthermore, different types of interactions were identified as a crucial part of group cohesion. While student-student interaction was the most utilized communication type within the face-to-face group, student-instructor interaction was mostly used with the online group. These results seem to suggest that teaching presence is better demonstrated through a higher number of student-instructor interactions rather than student-student interactions in online sessions.

In another recent study, using a qualitative case study approach, Garner and Rouse (2016) investigated the most influential factors influencing pre-service teachers’ perceptions related to the efficacy of teaching and learning approach used in a blended learning classroom. The findings of the study suggested that the social presence during the online learning interactions was the most influential factor in shaping students’ perceptions of their learning experience. The findings also suggested interpersonal communication in the online portion of the blended learning format as a crucial aspect of social presence.

Smyth, Houghton, Cooney, and Casey (2012) also studied students’ experiences of blended learning across a range of newly developed postgraduate nursing programmes. The authors reported
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