

Chapter 10

A Model for Discussing the Quality of Technology-Enhanced Learning in Blended Learning Programmes

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comprehensive model for supporting informed and critical discussions concerning the quality of Technology-Enhanced Learning in Blended Learning programmes. The model aims to support discussions around domains such as how institutions are prepared, the participants' background and expectations, the course design, and the learning process. The research that supported the design of this model was framed by a Grounded Theory method, combining different approaches to empirical data collection with a review of evaluation models on aspects of the quality of Online and Distance Learning. Throughout the paper, arguments are made that Higher Education institutions need to be more critical with regard to the use of Technology-Enhanced Learning, and to support it as a counterpart to face-to-face learning and teaching. The model provides a framework for teachers in Higher Education to reflect and discuss the quality of Technology-Enhanced Learning in their Blended Learning programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Quality Assurance systems for assessing the quality of traditional face-to-face programmes and online/distance learning programmes have been seen, until now, as two different entities. Higher Education institutions still consider both modalities with different levels of quality (Allen & Seaman, 2013) different standards of evaluation (Jara & Mellor, 2009; Masoumi & Lindström, 2012; Zhao, 2003), and apply different procedures for supporting the evaluation. However, the majority of Higher Education

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5472-1.ch010

programmes today are offered in a Blended Learning modality (Volungeviciene, Tereseviciene, & Tait, 2014), combining face-to-face with a sort of online learning and teaching. When evaluating the quality of these programmes, and as there is a discrepancy between the Quality Assurance systems for both models of delivery, there is a natural tendency to use quality procedures that focus on the face-to-face provision. There are preconceptions suggesting that the learning process quality is more capable of being evaluated in face-to-face moments, where the teacher's presence is more visible. Thus, when evaluating these Blended Learning programmes few questions are being directed towards the learning and the teaching delivered online. Interestingly, perceptions of the level of responsibility of those delivering content face-to-face and those delivering online are also different although it may happen that the person is the same. The most common situation in Blended Learning is that those that design and deliver activities face-to-face and online are the same person, but their role changes according to the context, from lecturer to instructor, from teacher to facilitator. For this particular paper, we designate those responsible for designing and delivering content in a Blended Learning programme as Higher Education teachers. The model presented was developed aiming to support this group of practitioners when designing and delivering Blended Learning programmes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The most common definition of Blended Learning suggests a mixture between the face-to-face and the online learning and teaching, where online can mean almost everything that is done by students and the teacher using a digital format (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, & Francis, 2006). Latchem (2014) refers to this plethora of meanings of the online learning and teaching by suggesting a continuous line of evolution: at one end one has the translation of didactic texts or presentations to a digital format with little opportunities for engagement, while at the other end one has a scenario where knowledge and learning are created by students.

A UCISA (Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association) report (Walker et al., 2014) suggests that the use of online learning and teaching in different Higher Education institutions in the UK is still largely confined to the access to external web based resources or digital repositories, e-submissions, and the use of software for detecting plagiarism. Student-centred strategies such as asynchronous collaborative working tools, peer-assessment and e-portfolios, are far from being the mainstream (less than 25% of teachers are using one of these strategies in their teaching). The same conclusion was found in a recent in-depth study, using learning analytics (van der Sluis & May, 2015). The study provides evidence that teachers involved in Blended Learning programmes were using Learning Management Systems not to design learning activities but to distribute resources and to manage assignments submissions. The number of wikis, blogs or discussion forums created was again sporadic. The research found evidence that teachers delivering Blended Learning courses are not reflecting on the different characteristics of the online delivery, rather they focus on transposing what they teach face-to-face to the institutional Learning Management Systems (van der Sluis & May, 2015).

Learning Management Systems providers and institutional directives also do not help to promote better online delivery. They focus on administrative/repository-based tasks, as employment of these is considered more cost effective than supporting pedagogical activities. Pedagogical activities are still seen as somewhat difficult to implement online and with a lower value to students. Allen and Seaman (2013) found that a third of management bodies in US Higher Education institutions, which provide programmes

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