Chapter 49
Teacher Conceptions and Approaches to Blended Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides Australian perspectives on blended learning. An overview of the ways in which the concept of blended learning is interpreted in the Australian higher education is presented. This is followed by a discussion of the results of research carried out at one Australian University about teachers' conceptions on blended learning and their approaches to design and teaching in higher education. On the basis of twelve interviews with teachers, some important factors are analyzed pertaining to pedagogical, technological, interface, evaluation dimensions as well as resource support, management, ethical and institutional. Research results indicate that teachers consider their subject's learning objectives and apply the technologies and approaches that will work best for their students following the eight dimensions of blended learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

Learning Management Systems (LMS) provide the opportunity to deliver blended learning approaches that combine a mix of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) with various learning resources and delivery methods. Blended learning is seen as a link between teachers, students and classrooms located in different places to enhance learning. It has been widely argued in the literature that there are four main advantages while incorporating the blended learning approach into teaching practice: greater flexibility of time; lack of dependence on the time constraints of the teacher; time for reflection; and meeting different needs and learning styles. The younger generations according to Prensky's (2010) "digital natives" use online technologies for their social and informational activities whilst older generations use these technologies less so. Furthermore, students engage in ways they prefer according to their preferences, interests or abilities. This chapter provides Australian perspectives that examine

blended learning issues for teachers and students. Research findings from twelve interviews carried out with teachers from an Australian university, who have had a recent experience using the blended learning approach in their subject design and teaching in Engineering, Design, Business and Information and Communications Technology disciplines in academic pathways programs at the undergraduate level. An academic pathways program is a program of study that allows students to progress from one qualification to another where the first course is recognised as an entry requirement and provides advanced standing to the second. For example, Diploma of Information Technology (Unilink) provides a direct pathway to second-year university. The aim of the study was to advance the body of knowledge in two aspects. Firstly, by applying previous theoretical frameworks developed to understand conceptions and approaches to teaching (Kember & Kwan, 2000); and using the web (Roberts, 2003) and blended learning (Gonzalez, 2009; McConnell & Zhao, 2006). Secondly, how components from Khan's E-Learning framework affect teachers' approaches to integrating pedagogy and content knowledge using blended learning environments.

BACKGROUND

Over the past twenty years the introduction of the Internet and the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) that enhance knowledge and performance have been integrated into many university courses (S. Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Pérez, 2008). Within higher education, Kanuka and Kelland (2008) reflect that:

Higher education literature on e-learning technology is replete with research that tinkers with, and then tests the effects if, instrumental practices. The ultimate aim is to determine once and for all, what works and what does not – passing by the questions of why (p.61).

In Australia most universities have incorporated learning management systems such as Blackboard into their teaching practices (Ellis, Goodyear, Prosser, & O'Hara, 2006; Ellis, Steed, & Applebee, 2006) to support teachers in delivering material to students.

As Prendergast (2004) argues:

Too often considerations about information technology have become the dominant factors in many strategies adopted by academic institutions. This has resulted in a rich information technological environment that fails to capture, motivate or retain learners (Prendergast, 2004, p.2).

Brabazon (2002) supports this view, by stating that: Teachers and teaching are being challenged and undermined through the Internet. Learning is not technologically dependent. It is reliant on commitment, interest and passion (p.17).

For the purposes of this book chapter, blended learning is defined as learning activities that involve a combination of face-to-face interactions and technologically mediated interactions between students, teachers and learning resources (Bliuc, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2007). In blended learning teachers who use a learning management system can share course materials, syllabus, opinions and online assessments as well as use e-mail, discussion boards, calendars, blogs, journals, along with traditional face-to-face activities such as lectures and tutorials.

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