Moving From Passive to Active Blended Learning:
An Adopter's Experience

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter is a reflection on practice that resulted in the incorporation of an active blended learning approach in courses which the author facilitates for transnational students. These courses were popular, received very favorable student evaluations, and seemed successful in delivering their learning goals. However, there was a growing realization that the dynamics of these courses could be enhanced and made more effective in terms of student engagement. There was also a concern that the "blending" in the course designations might be more of an administrative classification than a thoughtful combination of the best features of distance online learning and face-to-face instruction. The chapter details the author's reflection on practice in course design and facilitation. It reviews the identification of areas of concerns and missed opportunities in these learning environments. Finally, the chapter considers the implementation and result of actions taken to revise and reposition these courses through an active blended learning paradigm.

INTRODUCTION

Being mindful of self, either within or after experience, as if a mirror in which the practitioner can view and focus self within the context of a particular experience, in order to confront, understand, and become empowered to act towards resolving contradiction between one's vision of desirable practice and one's actual practice to gain insight within a reflexive spiral towards realising one's vision of practice as a lived reality and developing professional identity. (Johns, 2017, p. 3)

The focus of this chapter is primarily on reflective practice. Reflective practice is a critical and essential process for those who design and facilitate distance teaching and learning environments. It involves an ongoing personal assessment of what we teach, of how we express our core philosophies of teaching and learning, and of the extent to which we realize our desired educational objectives.

Sometimes, reflection takes place within the active flow of teaching and learning, when we confront the unanticipated and use our inventory of accumulated knowledge and skills to reframe the problem, reconsider it from differing perspectives, and resolve the issue: *reflection-in-practice* (Schön, 1983, 1987). Sometimes, reflection takes place at the end of a course, when we think back on what has been and consider the success, limitations, or failings associated with that teaching and learning experience: *reflection-on-practice* (Schön, 1983, 1987). In either case, we consider moving along a different pathway to better actualize what we believe to be significant and valuable in the teaching and learning encounter.

During such reflection, I encountered active blended learning (ABL) serendipitously on the website of the University of Northampton, where it was promoted as an effective way of creating and sustaining student engagement (Palmer et al., 2017). I understood ABL as a move from *passive* blended learning in which the various affordances provided by the separate components of the course are *actively* blended by the facilitator to provide a richer and more engaging learning environment. Through purposeful integration and interconnection, the course facilitator unifies the separate elements of the course in order to provide a learning space that exploits the synergistic potential of these combined elements. The "active" in ABL applies both to the intent of the course designer and the response of the learner, who can be more actively engaged in the new and more expansive learning space. The concept of ABL, and the ways in which it was being used at the University of Northampton, resonated strongly with me and suggested a possible solution for my course concerns.

There was no distinct "problem" associated with these courses: they were well received by students. As a course designer and facilitator, I was familiar with the process and the dynamics of student-centered distance learning. I was also sensitive to communication, participation, and interaction in culturally diverse online learning environments (Starr-Glass, 2014, 2016, 2019). Nevertheless, I wanted to revisit prior experience and established practice to better understand *what* I had been doing and *why* I had been doing it to better appreciate not only what *had been* but what *might be*.

This chapter is structured as follows. The next section examines the consequences of distancing learners and considers the potentials and possibilities that blended learning provides. The following section examines the context of this present reflection on practice, identifying areas for improving blended learning environments. Solutions to these perceived problems are explored and an explanation given as to why ABL was adopted as a central dynamic in the restructured courses. This section also provides feedback, comments, and shared experiences from learners in the redesigned courses. The penultimate section considers future research that might be of importance and the chapter ends with a holistic review of the project and its outcomes.

Background

The traditional model in higher education has been that teaching and learning are conducted in-person and in real time through different modalities (lectures, seminars, tutorials, etc.). This model, derived from the medieval universities of Europe, has many supporters among faculty and students. Changing expectations and altered lifestyles, however, have resulted in a widespread reconsideration and reconceptualization of this traditional model. In particular, most colleges and universities have complemented

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