

Universal Design for Learning and Active Blended Learning: A Phenomenological Exploration of Their Overlap in a Master's Program of Educational Leadership

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines active blended learning and universal design for learning in context within the lived professional experience of the author. The tension between both of these approaches to teaching and learning is first analyzed and explored through a series of vignettes. In the second stage, an analysis is carried out to identify ways in which the tension between both paradigms can be resolved by practitioners in higher education. The final stage of the chapter conceptualizes this empirical reflection and offers a model that can be used in professional development activities with faculty to guide them seamlessly as they attempt to reconcile these 21st century imperatives of teaching and learning in one progressive, cohesive, and coherent discourse.

CONTEXT AND INTRODUCTION

Active Blended Learning (ABL) is a pedagogical approach which, within Higher Education (HE), focuses on allowing students to construct meaning within first-hand experiences both inside and outside the classroom (ILTHE, 2019). It blends experiential learning theory, flipped classroom practices and rich technological integration to produce an innovative teaching and learning philosophy which breaks away from the traditional lecture format (Godlewska et al., 2019). It is particularly well adapted therefore

to graduate programs in Educational Leadership, which seek to support mid-career teachers as they engage in meaning-making both in class and in their work environments, around the challenges of school leadership. The author was immediately drawn to this model as program head of such an MA. ABL also fits with ease within the institutional teaching and learning model embraced in his institution, which promotes values such as ‘experiential and participatory’, ‘socially innovative’, and ‘openly practiced’ (Royal Roads University [RRU], 2019). This phenomenological experience is framed within a Canadian context, and many of the observations and analyses presented are pertinent to a North American landscape. However, they will have some relevance to most HE practitioners in Global North countries.

The teaching and learning model adopted by the author’s institution also promotes accessibility and values such as ‘inclusive and diverse’, ‘supportive’ and ‘respectful of Indigenous Peoples and traditions’. The author’s lens concerning the implementation of these values has traditionally been Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The UDL lens supports instructors as they design delivery and assessment for maximum flexibility and accessibility (Kennette & Wilson, 2019). Although both ABL and UDL initially appear compatible, it became rapidly clear to the author, as he supported a team of instructors through the implementation of the institutional pedagogical model, that there were also specific areas of tension between both lenses. ABL indeed is solidly grounded in constructivist theory and is therefore promoted as student-centered teaching, but constructivist approaches in the classroom are not inherently accessible and inclusive. The chapter examines this tension and suggests solutions.

TENSION BETWEEN ABL AND UDL

The chapter describes, explores and analyzes areas of tension between ABL and UDL identified by the author in his role supporting a team of instructors. The chapter synthesizes the existing tension, and subsequently explores the possible resorption of this tension and the merging of both models. It then seeks to conceptualize ways to blend both approaches in a consistent and sustainable discourse with instructors during professional development (PD).

Theoretical Foundations of ABL

ABL is the product of a coming together of several contemporary paradigms in pedagogy. It draws extensively from constructivist theory in the sense that the learner is seen as central in the construction of knowledge and that the role of the instructor is that of a facilitator (Ahmad & Schreurs, 2012). Little directive teaching takes place within ABL. It also draws from the concept of active learning, a more loosely defined concept, which combines constructivism, technology rich education as well as elements of collective intelligence theory (Cassidy et al., 2019). Within active learning approaches, the learner is constructing knowledge autonomously, doing so with technology as an affordance, and there is also an assumption that learners are tapping into and frequently contributing to the cloud of collective knowledge. ABL goes a little further than active learning in the way it explicitly integrates technology as an affordance for the construction of knowledge (Ma et al., 2019). It becomes intimately intertwined with technology and online learning. Technology becomes the tool which allows learning to happen well beyond the classroom boundaries (Geng et al., 2019; Godlewska et al., 2019). ABL allows students to take part in experiential activities well beyond the four walls of the classroom.

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