

Measuring the Success of Active Blended Learning

Shân Wareing

University of Northampton, UK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Active blended learning (ABL) is a defining aspect of the University of Northampton and has generated national and global interest. Within a few months of the author taking up a senior leadership position with the university, ABL was a significant positive factor in the university's ability to lock down the campus in response to COVID-19 and deliver education remotely. However, there is a scarcity of evaluation of ABL to provide evidence of the scale of its adoption in the university, its forms in different academic disciplines, its impact on different groups of students, and how to improve its effectiveness. Ideally, evaluation is always integral to pedagogic initiatives. It is however a reality that evaluation comes with challenges. This chapter explores why evaluation is so important and also so difficult. It proposes a way forward in the context of ABL by combining nationally available metrics with small-scale case studies.

INTRODUCTION

Active Blended Learning (ABL) is the University of Northampton's educational approach, which focuses on students' construction of knowledge, skills development and digital literacy. It draws significantly on Constructivism based on the work of Piaget (1957), Vygotsky (1978), Dewey (1938) and others, which has been described and developed extensively by many educationalists and theorists. McLeod's (2019) concise summary provides a useful synopsis. ABL is derived from versions of Constructivism that focus particularly on the development of confidence and skills through active learning and social learning. Its specific antecedents are theories of social learning (Dewey, 1938; Wenger, 1989), and practices such as Problem-Based Learning (Boud & Feletti, 1997) and Enquiry-Based Learning (Herman & Pinard, 2015). ABL unites these pedagogic approaches in a learning environment, which is both physical and virtual, combining face-to-face activities with synchronous and asynchronous digitally enabled learning. This creates a rich and flexible environment with the potential to support students effectively and efficiently, in a university campus designed specifically for this approach to learning. The University

of Northampton Waterside campus is digitally enabled, with spaces designed for collaboration, small group learning, and one-to-one conversations. Very little space exists on campus that is suitable for larger group meetings or lectures.

The pedagogic theory that underpins Active Blended Learning stacks up strongly; it is an exciting and convincing approach, which wins over hearts and minds of academic staff. However, little evidence of positive impact is available, either published externally or in 'grey literature' available internally within the University. This chapter explores the importance of evaluation, the challenges it presents, and proposes a way forward.

WHY EVALUATE?

The evaluation of educational processes is necessary to drive improvement, by identifying what works best and enabling information about the effectiveness of educational approaches to be shared amongst university staff and between institutions. As Gibbs (2010, p. 7) recognises: "There is clear evidence that educational performance and educational gains can be enhanced by adopting certain educational practices... Pooling data across such innovations... provides a valid basis to guide other institutions in the adoption of practices that are likely to be effective."

Evaluation occurs as a consequence of the desire to improve and of many other considerations. It can be used to confirm that the intended goals (whether of the university, the course, or the module) are being achieved and that the resources of time and money are being invested wisely and with good effect. Demonstrating that universities teach well and actively strive to improve the provision for which fees and grants are received is intrinsic to professionalism, whether that professionalism is academic, managerial, or in professional service areas. If an innovation works well, it should be shared widely, based on evidence of its effectiveness. If it works occasionally but not consistently, curiosity should drive further investigation of when and why it is effective, and refinement of practice. Universities need to know whether an innovation works for all students or only for some. They should hold themselves responsible for seeking pedagogies that reduce and do not exacerbate existing social inequalities. For illustration, UK higher education currently demonstrably fails to provide equal opportunities for all students to succeed. The attainment gap between White students and students from Black and Ethnic Minorities groups is one example of this (Cotton et al., 2015); lower completion rates for care experienced students and students estranged from their families is another (Bland, 2018; Costa et al., 2020; Sebba & Luke, 2019). As employers, universities have a responsibility to develop the capabilities of their staff; enabling those who teach to improve as educators is an important aspect of this. Furthermore, universities need to leverage evidence of educational success to attract students and to thrive reputationally and financially as an organisation. For all these reasons, evaluation of educational initiatives must be an intrinsic part of higher education.

THE CHALLENGE OF EVALUATION

Despite its importance, evaluation is often a neglected aspect of educational initiatives. Evaluation of educational projects, interventions and initiatives is frequently the least developed and satisfactory stage. Reasons include that evaluation can be an afterthought and consequently may not be integrated fully

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