

Chapter 97

Investigating Student Perceptions and the Effectiveness of K–12 Blended Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

While the growth of blended learning environments in higher education and non-educational settings has continued to increase in recent years, this has not been the case in K-12 settings. Recently, in an effort to explore the viability and effectiveness of K-12 blended learning environments, Florida Virtual School (FLVS) has been piloting blended learning communities in a number of their schools, providing opportunities to explore factors that influence the effectiveness of K-12 blended learning communities. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to report the results of a study designed to assess conditions that influence the effectiveness of K-12 blended learning communities, and to explore learner, instructor, course, and other factors important to successful blended learning communities. Findings will inform the design, development, and implementation of future K-12 blended teaching and learning environments in an effort to support and strengthen student achievement, the preparation of teachers to facilitate effective blended learning environments.

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BLENDED LEARNING COMMUNITIES

No study of blended learning communities (BLCs) can begin without a firm understanding of what blended learning can look like. Educational consultant Laura Kassner (2013) defines blended learning as “instruction that is a mix or blending of traditional face-to-face (f2f) and online components” (p. 1). Similarly, Horn and Staker (2011) have explained blended learning to include any learning that takes place when students are active, in part, at a brick-and-mortar school, as well as in an online environment where they have some degree of control over their own learning processes. These definitions are broad, which is appropriate for blended learning as, depending on the context, blended learning can implement one of several models, as well as a multitude of face-to-face and online pedagogical approaches and activities (Kitchenham, 2011).

For Florida Virtual School (FLVS), the course provider for the study which this chapter describes, a BLC is aligned with Horn and Staker’s (2011) definition of blended learning, with all instructional events occurring in a lab-based setting within a brick-and-mortar school. In this lab environment, students learn from a combination of online course events, a FLVS teacher, and face-to-face support of a facilitator or teacher within the lab (FLVS, 2013). In this preliminary study of one large, urban high school’s students in BLCs, survey data were collected and analyzed to provide insight into factors that affect student satisfaction due to their experiences with blended learning environments one or more times.

Studies have found that “learners’ intentions to continue to use blended learning were strongly influenced by their satisfaction” (Chen & Yao, 2016, p. 1667). A study of student satisfaction with their experiences in BLCs was therefore an important first step leading into the research team’s future studies because student satisfaction is likely to influence many important factors, such as course retention and successful completion. This study also provided information for the researchers’ next steps, as the team expands the scope of the study to include other BLCs, including not only survey data, but also observations and focus group interviews, in future semesters and years. Prior to delving into the current study, though, it is necessary to provide an overview of the available research on blended learning, which includes findings associated with student satisfaction and success.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As the prevalence of blended learning in K–12 settings is projected to increase, it is critical to explore factors that influence improved student achievement and satisfaction in these environments. Student satisfaction is paramount, as it influences a number of potential concerns in blended learning settings, including achievement levels and completion rates. Previous models in eLearning settings, including the expectation and confirmation model (Bhattacharjee, 2001), tend to have more of a technology-centric focus and provide limited examination of other factors relevant to student satisfaction in eLearning settings. Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, and Yeh (2008), however, presented a more comprehensive framework, extending the focus from technology-centric variables to provide a broader view of factors that influence student satisfaction with blended learning communities. These factors included learner, instructor, course, technology, design, and environmental dimensions. For our study, we adopted a modified version of this framework, omitting design dimensions (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use), because we felt the framework addresses these dimensions adequately within the other five factors influencing student satisfaction. A detailed explanation of each of the factors that the student survey covered follows.

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