

Chapter 31

Blended Learning Primer

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ABSTRACT

Whilst the potential of blended learning to provide cost effective and quality learning experiences in adult education is generally acknowledged, deciding ‘what to blend?’ and ‘how to blend?’ is challenging. The design and implementation of blended learning is specific to the learning situation. Given the range of possible learning situations and the wide array of possible tools there are virtually endless possibilities for the blended learning designs. Those first embarking on blended learning ventures are faced with the task of surveying the vast quantity of resulting literature to gain a fundamental understanding of the concept and its implementation. For those beginning to implement blended learning in adult education contexts, this chapter attempts to provide a starting point for further exploration. This chapter seeks to lay foundations for understanding the concept of blended learning by firstly defining the term, and then highlighting key design concepts by discussing appropriate philosophical foundations and instructional design principles. An overview of some of the existing models and frameworks for blended learning in adult education is then given. Finally, some of the advantages and challenges of blended learning are discussed and future directions and research issues are identified.

INTRODUCTION

In the ongoing pursuit of cost effective, quality teaching and learning practices in adult education contexts, blended learning has emerged as an option with significant potential. Both tertiary

educational institutions and corporate organizations are investing considerable resources into the implementation of blended learning environments for learning and training. The blended learning landscape is complex and dynamic, shaped by the varied demands of a wide array of learning situations and by an ever-changing technological landscape. Attempts to understand ‘what to blend?’

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and ‘how best to blend?’ have precipitated a large volume of literature. Insights presented in literature form an important foundation for the design of future implementations of blended learning. This chapter presents some fundamental ideas about blended learning and is aimed at those making their first forages into blended learning in adult education contexts. It is intended that this chapter will serve a launching point for further exploration into other literature.

The chapter firstly provides a context for the concept of blended learning by briefly exploring the ideas of multimedia, e-learning and flexible learning from which blended learning evolved. Blended learning is then defined. This is followed by focus on the design of blended learning environments. An understanding of the design of blended learning environments is developed by discussing three important components: philosophical foundations, appropriate instructional design principles and some frameworks and models to guide implementation. Finally, the key advantages and challenges of blended learning are discussed and some insight given into future trends and research directions.

BACKGROUND

The understanding of blended learning is assisted by a brief discussion of multimedia, e-learning and flexible learning from which blended learning evolved.

In the early 1990’s the emergence of multimedia delivered on CD ROM heralded a new era for technology based learning. ‘Multimedia’ being any technology making possible “the entirely digital delivery of content presented by using an integrated combination of audio, video, images (two-dimensional, three-dimensional) and text along with the capacity to support user interaction (Torrissi-Steele, 2004, p. 24)”. The promise of multimedia was the use of multiple modalities which would be supportive of individual learning

styles, enabling learners to construct individual pathways through content and use of interaction as a way of actively engaging learners (Butcher-Powell, 2005).

Shortly thereafter the emergence of the internet and in particular, the development of the World Wide Web expanded the array of technologies available for teaching and learning endeavours. The graphical user interface (GUI) offered by the World Wide Web rapidly facilitated its use in educational contexts. Terms such as ‘e-learning’, ‘online learning’ (sometimes used interchangeably) became common use. ‘E-learning’ refers to “online access to learning resources, anywhere and anytime” (Holmes & Gardner, 2006, p.14). E-learning primarily viewed as “an alternative way [to face-face teaching] to teach and learn” (Alonso, Lopez, Manrique & Viñes, 2005, p. 218). An important characteristic of e-learning is that it frees the access to information and learning materials from the constraints of specific time and place.

Alongside the development of the internet, the growing availability of networks made way for a range of communications tools for both online synchronous (same time/same place, same time/different place) and asynchronous (different time/different place) communication. These tools enabled the formation of e-learning communities. E-learning communities are a powerful feature of e-learning environments. When learners are able to engage in shared learning activities (Holmes & Gardner, 2006; Alonso et al., 2005) more meaningful learning occurs because learners have the opportunity share and questioning their understandings (Laurillard, 1993).

The flexibility of time, place and collaborative opportunities at a distance, made possible by e-learning precipitated strong focus on the idea of flexible learning. Flexible learning may be defined in terms of approaches to teaching and learning that are learner centred, free up the time, place and methods of learning and teaching and use appropriate technologies in a networked environment

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