

Chapter IV

A Reflection on Teachers' Experience as E-Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the insights gained by a group of teachers from their lived experience as e-learners participating in a blended module on designing e-learning. An understanding of the student perspective on online learning was obtained, but we were also able to reflect on our participation in the module on the basis of our other roles: as teachers and potential e-tutors, and as course designers. As a result, important considerations were identified for the design and facilitation of online courses. These include the support provided to online learners, particularly over the first few weeks; appropriate assessment methods; the facilitation of online collaboration; access to the Internet; time management; and contextualising and scaffolding learning activities. Some issues relating to the implementation of effective e-learning in higher education institutions were also considered. Our lived experience as e-learners was invaluable to our development as e-tutors and module designers, and this approach is strongly recommended to achieve effective learning on how to be an effective online tutor and facilitator and how to design and develop online programmes and activities that make full use of the strengths of online learning.

INTRODUCTION

The authors recently participated in a 10-week blended learning module entitled Designing E-Learning as part of the postgraduate programme in third-level learning and teaching in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Ireland. This module allowed us to experience e-learning from the student perspective in order to help us to develop as e-tutors and course designers. In total, seven academic staff from a range of disciplines and a number of Irish third-level colleges took part. Most had only experienced learning online before to a very limited extent (accessing course material in a virtual learning environment, VLE), and two were implementing the blended delivery of modules within their programmes. The diverse background, experience, knowledge, and confidence among our group of e-learners meant that a wide range of issues and problems that online learners and tutors encounter in practice were brought to our attention.

In this chapter, we examine the insights we gained into blended learning from a student's perspective and review the current literature in this area. We also discuss our experience from the perspective of our other roles: as teachers and potential e-tutors, and as course designers. We consider the support provided to online learners, the appropriateness of assessment methods used, the range of e-learning methods experienced, and the problems encountered, as well as our reflections on the strengths and shortcomings of the e-learning environment. Finally, future trends and research directions are discussed.

BACKGROUND

What is Blended Learning?

Throughout this chapter, the term *blended learning* is used to describe course delivery in which a combination of face-to-face and online teaching

and learning take place. Holmes and Gardner (2006) state that the rationale behind this approach is to improve traditional learning environments by incorporating e-learning where appropriate. Thus, e-learning is employed to complement other methods, not replace them, and should only be used if it enriches and enhances what is already being done (Charlesworth & Vician, 2003). Singh and Reed (2001) maintain that variation in the blend selected allows a programme of study to be tailored to the particular needs of the learner: "Blended learning focuses on optimizing achievement of learning objectives by applying the 'right' learning technologies to match the 'right' personal learning style to transfer the 'right' skills to the 'right' person at the 'right' time" (p. 2).

There are several other interpretations of what blended learning involves, including one that views it as a blend of different types of Web-based tools and media only (Whitelock & Jelfs, 2003); another proposed by Driscoll (2002) describes mixing several pedagogical approaches that may or may not include instructional technology.

In a recent review, Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, and Francis (2006) recognise that blended learning is not easy to define. However, they recommend that the use of the term is continued because this lack of clarity allows teaching staff to develop their own particular meaning appropriate to their context. They also contend that academic staff are reassured by the implication that face-to-face contact with students is preserved in a blended learning approach. M. Oliver and Trigwell (2005) are of the opposite opinion, however. They argue that use of the term should be discontinued because of the problem of clarity and also because none of the interpretations include the perspective of the learner. They suggest that a move toward a student perspective would be facilitated by employing a variation theory research framework. We believe that the expression *blended learning* has now entered into relatively widespread use and that it is not practical at this stage to abandon it. However, the issue raised by M. Oliver and

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