

Chapter I

Introduction to Blended Learning Practices

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning is now part of the learning landscape in higher education, not just for campus-based courses but for courses designed for students studying at a distance as well as for communities of professional learning and practice. The impact of this concept in university teaching and learning can be seen in the appearance of practice focused texts for example, Littlejohn and Pegler (2007) and, more recently, Garrison and Vaughan (2008). Blended learning is now constantly positioned as one of the emerging trends in higher education (e. g. Allen, Seaman and Garrett, 2007; Graham, 2006; Garrison and Kanuka, 2004) and therefore is of particular strategic importance in the future of universities, their students and teachers as well as in the widening community of professional education and training. As an introduction to this book, this chapter will review the growing literature about blended learning and will discuss some of its key issues. The authors begin by introducing the concept of blended learning and its many meanings and attempt to clarify the definitional discussion. Issues in teaching and learning in both campus based and distance settings are then described followed by a discussion of the way blended learning provides a process for establishing communities of learning and practice, particularly for professional learning. Much of the literature about professional learning and learning communities has only just begun to identify aspects of blended learning practices as significant in their field, a gap this book is helping to fill.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS, DEFINITIONS AND FRAMEWORKS

When writers attempt to define blending learning in a substantive way, the literature is marked by enormous variety in approaches. One of the simplest representations is that of the combination of physical and virtual environments, for example, Bleed's (2001) idea of the innovative and interactive combinations of "technology, architecture and people" through the right mix of "clicks and bricks" (2001, p.18). Many definitions refer to combining face-to-face and online learning, for example, Graham (2006) who adds a historical perspective to his working definition when he discusses the convergence of two quite separate learning environments. These are traditional face-to-face environments that are essentially synchronous and based on high fidelity human interaction, and distance environments that are asynchronous and have been traditionally reliant on text driven and independent learning. The advent of information communications technology (ICT) has created the potential for integration of these two systems and hence his preferred and working definition of "combining online and face-to-face instruction" (2006, p.4). This integration enabled blends across four key dimensions that Graham (2006) identifies as space, time, fidelity and humanness.

The training sector has claimed the term blended learning for over a decade (Maisie, 2006) and though Cross (2006), also from the corporate training sector, writes that in this context blended learning is only a transitory term, it is a term which has gained ongoing currency and aroused great interest in the higher education sector and appears to be surviving its "buzz word" status and taking "its rightful place as signifying a particular idea or practice" (Mason & Rennie, 2006, p. xvii). Where blended learning was traditionally defined as consisting of a face-to-face component followed by an online component, this has changed even in the training sector where Cross (2006) describes

a local model and a distance model which blend either more or less online interaction with face-to-face meetings with the term denoting flexibility and a range of technology mixes.

Littlejohn and Pegler (2006) explicitly acknowledge the role of ICT with their concept of 'blended e-Learning' and while they acknowledge historical antecedents similar to those of Graham, they present their concept as one with two different components, being e-Learning and blending. This approach enables them to consider each of these concepts separately, thus avoiding the implicit approaches in much of the literature i.e. the introduction of an e-Learning activity into a face-to-face setting which is considered as a single phenomenon with little effort being made to distinguish between the issue of e-Learning and that of blending. Littlejohn and Pegler's (2006) identification of these two elements adds clarity to the discussion about blended learning and enables better consideration of the complexities of technologies, different settings and learning.

Blended learning can be placed somewhere between fully online and fully face-to-face courses and one of the definitional issues is where this might be on such a continuum. In their report on blended learning in the USA, Allen, Seaman and Garrett (2007) define blended or what is also termed *hybrid* learning as courses where 30 to 79% of the content is delivered online. While a numeric description seems to offer clarity, this is somewhat dependent on the meaning of "content". Vaughan (2007) and others argue that where an online element simply supplements a face-to-face course, then this is not blended learning and there must be a reduction in face-to-face time. Littlejohn and Pegler (2007) talk about 'strong' and 'weak' blends (p. 29) where courses are, respectively, almost exclusively e-Learning or contain very little e-Learning, but they do not attempt to quantify this in any way. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) argue that the real indicator of blended learning is not the amount of face-to-face or online learning but their effective integration within a course.

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