

Chapter 6

Blended Learning: An Opportunity for Integration or Variation?

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning provides an opportunity to rethink the ways in which instructors and learners use face-to-face and online distance learning modalities. Sometimes, this opportunity is missed and the resulting blended course is no more than a mechanical mix that serves pragmatic purposes but fails to reshape learning. This chapter rethinks the structure and dynamics of blended learning experiences and considers what it might mean to use different teaching/learning modalities. It explores the possibilities, challenges, and design of blended learning from a perspective of variation theory. It also reviews strategies to make explicit the differences in structure and dynamics of face-to-face and online distance environments that are encountered by the learner and suggests the benefits and limitations of such strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The blended learning environment, in which elements of face-to-face and distance teaching/learning are thoughtfully combined, is seen as an opportunity to bring together the best of both modalities. Although it is often claimed that fully integrating the different modalities enhances the learning experience, this chapter argues that blended approaches which recognize and retain the qualities of face-to-face and distance learning can actually result in experiences that are *richer and more intense* than those available in

the separate modalities. Thoughtful blending, in other words, can lead to a *synergistic* experience. Before exploring the potential synergism of blended learning, it will be useful to consider the broader context of distance learning and to briefly review the history of the blended option. This will highlight the evolving understanding of blended learning and underscore the challenges and opportunities that have been recognized, pursued, and often neglected.

Blended learning burst onto the educational stage about ten years ago and was enthusiastically welcomed. Judged by subsequent institutional

adoption and learner reaction, this enthusiasm seemed fully warranted. By the academic year 2006 as many as 35 percent of American four-year colleges offered blended courses (Parsad & Lewis, 2008, pp. 6-9). Blended courses have never been as prevalent as online distance learning courses; however, the most recent data set indicates that despite this they represented 5.6 percent of all 2005 course offerings. The institutional adoption rates of the blended course seems to have peaked (it was 6.8 percent in 2003, down to 6.6 percent the following year), but this saturation may reflect administration strategy rather than consumer demand, which “appears to significantly outpace prior consumer experience, and estimates of current market size” (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007, p. 17).

Blended courses mix together elements of traditional campus-based instruction and online distance teaching and learning. Distance learning was originally designed to overcome educational access problems posed by geographic distance and dispersed student populations. Increasingly, however, it is recognized that “for many modern students, the problem or barrier is not geography but time” (Skelton, 2009, p. 1). Distance learning provides exceptional flexibility in how, where, and when students can learn. The need for careful time management, use of technological innovation, and the possibilities for ubiquitous Internet connectivity have all been significant drivers in students opting for more flexible approaches to access “higher education without having to physically attend classes” (Change & Fisher, 2003, p. 3).

Although they may face similar time constraints, distance learners – or as they are increasingly termed “educational consumers” – are not a homogenous group. Like consumers everywhere, potential users of educational services arrive at their choices through prism of different preferences and expectations. Some prefer the flexibility that purely online distance learning offers; others favor a degree of face-to-face contact and see merit in either blended or traditional face-to-face

options. To the degree that course enrollment reflects consumer preference the purely online distance learning course has been most popular. Over the last decade (2002-2012), registrations for purely online courses have averaged an annual growth rate of 17%, compared with the 3% growth rate in all higher education enrollments. In the academic year 2012, 6.7 million learners in American colleges and universities – that is 32% of all enrollees – take at least one online course per semester (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Administratively, it is expedient to balance the format of course offerings – online, blended, and face-to-face – with learner demand, but often institutions give preference to a particular format that may reflect the college’s strengths or philosophy. Institutionally, the blended course is often seen as a “neutral” option that lies somewhere between online and face-to-face options; however, Banerjee (2011) has warned that the aggressive promotion of blended formats – with a concomitant decline in face-to-face offerings – may actually deter potential learners from enrolling in these courses, or even from engaging in higher education altogether. Although not further pursued in this chapter, this prompts broader questions about the strategy of administrations in higher education: the purpose of education, how it is understood by educational providers, the degree to which it has been commoditized, and the market-place options provided, eroded, or eliminated in moves towards an accessible educational system.

Institutionally, blended options have also been particularly popular because they offer ways of managing educational delivery costs, increasing student access, and enhancing student retention rates. Examining twenty critical economic and demographic factors that are transforming American higher education, Betts, Hartman, and Oxham (2009) argued that distance learning and blended programs “expand student markets nationally and internationally, moving beyond traditional local, regional and state markets... provide opportunities for new institutional revenue and the

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