

Chapter 23

Blended Learning Support for Undergraduate Students’ Research and Writing Skills Development

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ABSTRACT

In this exploratory study, a subject librarian and a writing instructor investigated the potential of designing blended learning around research paper assignments in the context of two foundational courses in the Faculty of Human Ecology at the University of Manitoba, Canada. The objective was to explore alternative, more embedded learning support for undergraduate students. The significance of blended learning support was situated in the broader literature of the teaching and learning practices in higher education. In this case study, descriptions of blended learning support for facilitating student learning, and of the main barrier to its implementation are provided. Based on what was learned in the exploratory study, the chapter provides working guidelines for designing and developing blended learning support, mainly drawing from Butler and Cartier’s (2004) research on academic engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The on-going development in Information and Communications Technology provides affordances to explore the designing of more meaningful and student-centered learning environments in higher education. The idea of developing student-centered learning environments can be applied to supporting undergraduate students’ research and writing skills in many undergraduate programs. Blended learning, “the thoughtful integration of

classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences,” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 96)¹ has the potential to be an alternative to the primarily lecture-based traditional writing-intensive courses in many undergraduate programs. The project that will be discussed in this chapter was conceived as a learning project and initiated by a subject librarian and a writing instructor, to explore an alternative more integrated model, by embedding blended learning in a specific course context in collaboration with course instructors.

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The project involved designing blended learning around research paper assignments in the context of two different foundational undergraduate courses in the Faculty of Human Ecology at the University of Manitoba in Canada. This case study explores blended learning—primarily focusing on its pedagogical issues—as the means for offering students alternative learning environments that may be more conducive to supporting and scaffolding development of their research and writing skills. Because this was initiated neither by the course instructors nor by the faculty-level planners, there was a question of the extent to which the course instructors would welcome the collaboration. Furthermore, this study was not intended or meant to redesign the courses that were essentially conceived and designed as traditional, face-to-face classes. The study, however, started with the intention of the librarian and the writing instructor to investigate a better way of supporting the development of students' research and writing skills with an open attitude of “see what's going to happen.” The project thus became an exploratory study because we looked for the opportunity to enhance student learning while we prepared to make necessary adjustments to honor the original course syllabi and the course instructors' teaching. The students who are coming into higher education are increasingly diverse not only in their research and writing skill levels, but also in their prior experiences before their entrance to the undergraduate programs. We were interested in the potential of blended learning support to broaden the learning opportunity for an increasingly diverse undergraduate students body.

The exploratory study was shaped largely in response to two different course circumstances and resulted in two different outcomes: in the first course, the blended learning support aspects of the course integrated well into the rest of the course while the integration did not work well in the second course. The objectives of this chapter are:

1. To situate the original intention of the exploratory study in the broader literature addressing the teaching and learning practices in higher education.
2. To present a case study of blended learning support by comparing and contrasting the two different course circumstances.
3. To describe student learning experiences from the exploratory study using the results of the surveys and semi-structured interviews with student volunteers as well as the observations and insights that emerged from the study.
4. To describe the key potential of blended learning support in facilitating student learning and to offer designing guidelines, drawing mainly from Butler & Cartier's (2004) and Nelson's (1990) research.

BACKGROUND

How the learning opportunities are created or arranged for students in higher education are traditionally dictated by the specific roles or service functions assigned to teaching faculty, librarians or writing instructors, respectively. Also there is some variation in how the learning support functions on campus are organized, whether they are managed under one administrative unit or managed separately under multiple administrative units.² The course instructor has authority over the course content, while librarians and writing instructors are often asked to parachute into the class to address the information literacy skills or writing skills. Alvarez (2007) points out the “institutional disconnect” inherent in the traditional support model in which librarians and writing instructors support research and writing skills of students “in parallel lines” (p. 27) – by separating students supports into the pedagogy of research and the pedagogy of writing. Although it is traditional to teach research and writing skills as two separate sets of skills within higher education, both skills

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