

Chapter 25

Blended Learning Experience of Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning has been in existence for over a decade, and more research needs to be done to determine its efficacy and desirability for colleges and universities. The goal of this chapter is to document the ways in which blended learning has changed the university learning experience for graduate students. End-of-semester student questionnaires were analyzed, and it was found that even in the early years of blended learning, students were generally satisfied and appreciated the convenience of the blended modality. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected through the questionnaires, a student focus group, and faculty interviews. The goal of this chapter is to answer the questions: How do graduate students perceive the BL experience? What are the faculty's perspectives about changes in the delivery of instruction? How has the university learning experience been changed as a consequence of BL? Student priorities were teacher presence, faculty skill at teaching blended classes, and the support that was available to them from the faculty and administration. Faculty voiced concerns with transitioning from teaching face-to-face or online to teaching blended.

INTRODUCTION

To increase access to the growing adult population many colleges and universities offer blended learning programs that include a mix of face-to-face, online and hybrid courses. Teaching in a blended learning program requires that faculty members have instructional skills in multiple teaching and learning environments. This has become more challenging since while some receive training, many learn how to teach adults and multiple course delivery formats through experience. This qualitative study investigates graduate students'

and faculty perceptions of how they teach adults within a blended program influences their teaching practices; how faculty describe the process of teaching in multiple course delivery formats within a blended program and to document the ways in which blended learning has changed the university learning experience for graduate students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, background questionnaires and faculty observations.

Blended learning (BL) has sometimes been called the best of both worlds, combining the advantages of face-to-face instruction with the

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advantages of online learning. It has been in existence for over a decade, and more research needs to be done to determine its efficacy and desirability for colleges and universities (Bleed, 2006). The goal of this chapter is to document the ways in which blended learning has changed the university learning experience for graduate students. End-of-semester questionnaires administered to students were analyzed and it was found that blended learning with graduate students was generally satisfied with the experience and appreciated the convenience of the blended modality. Quantitative and Qualitative data was collected through the questionnaires, a student focus group and faculty interviews.

The goal of this chapter is to answer three questions. Namely, how do graduate students perceive the BL experience? What are the faculty's perspectives about changes in the delivery of instruction? How has the university learning experience been changed as a consequence of BL?

BACKGROUND

Researchers have attributed a number of benefits to BL, from improved learning outcomes, to increased student engagement and lower attrition compared to fully online learning (FOL) alone. Dziuban et al. (2004) studied student success rates (as defined by grades of A, B, or C) at the University of Central Florida for seven semesters beginning in spring, 2001, and concluded that student learning outcomes in BL classes were higher than in FOL classes and comparable or in some cases better than face-to-face (F2F). Even student attrition rates were favorable, with withdrawal rates lower than those of FOL and comparable to F2F. Dziuban et al attributed the success of BL courses to sound instructional design, the most effective courses being wholly redesigned rather than only supplemented with online elements. Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) explain that instructors use BL to attain various goals for their courses:

- **Pedagogical Richness:** Student learning can be improved by using class time for rich, in-depth activities, and online time for dispensing information.
- **Access to Knowledge:** The online portion of a BL course can be used to enhance accessibility to information for students. Web-based resources are vast in comparison to textbook content.
- **Social Interaction:** The social interaction present in blended learning environments (BLEs) may not be as prevalent as in FOL systems. Social contact can take place F2F and continue online.
- **Personal Agency:** The development of self-directedness and control by the learner is an important tenet of instructional design. BLEs offer students the opportunity to make choices in their learning, such as what and how they will study.
- **Ease of Revision:** Most BLEs grow out of F2F rather than FOL models; faculty often modify online components in response to student needs or the speed with which the course progresses. BL “has the potential to create a learning atmosphere that is flexible, responsive, and spontaneous” (p. 232).

Skibba (2006) found that connecting F2F and online activities establishes a *continuous learning loop* that creates an active and meaningful learning experience. When instructors reflect upon their course learning objectives and decide which activities work best F2F and which work better online, they can set up a learning experience that transfers seamlessly from one modality to the other, thus creating a learning loop that takes the student from the beginning of learning to using knowledge in meaningful ways. Skibba noted examples such as sharing students' online postings in class to generate richer F2F discussions, and commencing group work online and carrying over activities to the classroom environment.

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