

PERCEPTION OF BLENDED LEARNING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: This communication presents the results of a study aimed at observing perception of blended learning among students. In order to carry out the study, a questionnaire has been used to find out, the opinion of our students about their digital competence which involves the confident and critical use of information society technology (IST) and thus basic skills in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The aim of the study is to find out the different opinions of university students about the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to give users quick access to ideas, files and experiences.

Key words: Blended learning, e-learning, Higher education.

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's society Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are a mainstay in all areas, both educational and professional. Higher education is a key element of change and transformation as it is in this area where students must develop the necessary skills for their implementation and development both personally and professionally. The use of e-learning platforms has led to the development of blended learning that allows and guarantees the education of those students who, for different personal and professional reasons, cannot attend lessons every day. These e-learning platforms are also used to supplement classroom training, because they enhance and facilitate communication between students and between teachers and students, to give rise to greater flexibility in space-time in the teaching-learning process, and to promote self and lifelong learning.

Living in a knowledge-based society driven by the wide-spread diffusion of ICT does indeed give rise to the need for acquiring new digital competences and ICT skills. It is important to acknowledge and to confirm that it is not only about "ICT literacy", i.e. learning to operate the technology, but also about higher-order skills such as knowing and understanding what it means to live in digitalized and networked society but specially what it means to work in online cooperative teams where information is shared and knowledge collaboratively constructed.

Today's students are increasingly more diverse than ever before. Incoming undergraduates are in many cases more technologically proficient than their faculty with 80% reporting that they have a computer by the time they reach college. With the majority of these students having already "surfed" the Internet for homework purposes and two thirds having used email, they are approaching college courses already experienced in Web technologies. Undergraduates also appear to be more nontraditional than in years past. The majorities of these older undergraduates also report being employed and as a result, are approaching college with responsibilities above and beyond what they encounter in their classrooms.

II. BLENDED LEARNING:

Blended learning (BL) integrates seemingly opposite approaches, such as formal and informal learning, face-to-face and online experiences, directed paths and reliance on self direction, and digital references and collegial connections, in order to achieve individual and organizational goals.

In a more conservative side, **Bonk (2004, p.5)** cited the three most common definitions of blended learning:

1. A combination of instructional modalities (or delivery media)
2. A combination of instructional methods
3. A combination of online and face-to-face instruction

Many faculty and universities are now experimenting with courses that utilize both fully online and face-to-face instruction. Faculty, students, and administrators are realizing a number of advantages in these blended courses and many see them as offering the best of both instructional worlds. Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary defines "blend" as "to mix or mingle together; esp. to mingle, combine, or associate so that the separate things mixed, or the line of demarcation, cannot be distinguished". Within the context of blended courses, this definition can be related to the combination of web and face-to-face that is necessary to produce a course utilizing the best of both instructional worlds.

Blended learning environment integrates the advantages of e-learning method with some advantageous aspects of traditional method, such as face-to-face interaction. Blended learning brings traditional physical classes with elements of virtual education together (Finn & Bucci, 2004).

As Brown (2003) stated that blended learning supports all the benefits of e-learning including cost reductions, time efficiency and location convenience for the learner as well as the essential one-on-one personal understanding and motivation that face to face instructions presents.

Why Blend? – Students' Perception:

There are many reasons why an instructor, trainer, or learner might pick blended learning over other learning options. Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) identified six reasons why one might chose to design or use a blended learning system: (1) pedagogical richness, (2) access to knowledge, (3) social interaction, (4) personal agency, (5) cost effectiveness, and (6) ease of revision.

Many of today's college students are nontraditional, attempting to balance family, jobs, and university life. Coming to campus is often difficult for many of them and through reducing the number of face-to-face hours required, blended learning can help them meet this challenge.

Universities and faculty are looking for ways to reach and retain these students. By putting course materials on the Web, students can access the material at any time of day and review it as needed, which provides them with increased flexibility. Busy students don't have to spend time commuting and parking, so blended courses can add up to significant time savings for those with long commutes.

Students like the ability to access course materials anytime, anyplace, and are positive about the convenience and flexibility this provides them. Because many students are older and working, blended courses help provide them with the flexibility they need to juggle jobs, school, and family. By reducing time and space commitment, access is easier and thus many students have come to prefer these courses over the face-to-face counterparts. Through available Web resources, faculties change the organization of the course and add enhancements to accommodate unique needs or learning styles of some students. Students who need more repetition and exercises can have that opportunity without taking face-to-face class time away from those who might not need the extra reinforcement.

Both students and faculty are positive regarding the flexibility and convenience and the perceived increase in interaction they have with blended courses. Students rate the quality of their blended experience as high as or higher than their face-to-face courses. They also report high satisfaction with instructor interaction.

Course weaknesses often refer to problems with technology, including difficulty with course management systems. Researchers at Ohio State University surveyed 201 students from three universities about their experience in courses spanning the distance education continuum from completely face-to-face to completely online. What students indicated was that the intuitive structure of the course – clearly defined objectives, assignments, deadlines, and encouraging dialogue and interaction—were most important in satisfaction with the course.

Rovai and Jordan compared three education graduate courses—traditional, blended, and fully online—and found that students in the blended course measured highest in a sense of community, similar to those students in the face-to-face section, but higher than those in fully online section. They stated “since students in the blended course exhibited similar sense of community and variability as students in the traditional course, offering the convenience of fully online courses without the complete loss of face-to-face contact may be adequate to nurture a strong sense of community in students who would feel isolated in a fully online course”.

Students in the blended courses touted the benefits of the online portion of the course which allowed them the freedom to perform some of the course instruction at their own flexibility, a feature important for these students, many of whom needed to work. However, many of them also mentioned the value of the face-to-face component which they felt helped them both academically and in building professional relationships and a strong sense of community. In addition, some students in the fully online course misread the instructor's comments as being “sharp and frank” while students in the blended and fully online courses did not convey such impressions, possibly because of the opportunity for face-to-face discussions which allowed everyone to become acquainted.

E - Learning

Proponents of sole e-learning instruction like Lu and Chiou (2010) believe on some benefits of such educational environments like immediate communication, processing learning based on each individual pace, using web technology facilitators (email, chat, video conferencing), etc. Studying through online mode, however, revealed that the feeling of isolation is real and that this negative element is removed through blended learning.

The blended learning environment motivates students to participate in online classes more eagerly as they have the opportunity to meet and discuss virtually with their classmates.

Perera (2010) concluded that compared to the virtual learning environment, blended learning offers a more successful learning experience since it contains some aspects of traditional classes. Moreover, mere virtual learning still consists of many problems in the area of education. Based on Hameed, Badii and Cullen (2008), sole e-learning courses is more demanding for instructors and more time commitment is expected of the teacher. Lack of interaction, according to Tinto will cause frustration and a sense of isolation which leads students to drop out. Tinto (1975, cited in Rovai & Jordan, 2004) also argued that drop outs are due to inadequate interactions of higher education students with peers and instructors. Lim, Morris, and Kupritz (2006) concluded that instructions in a blended learning environment seem to be more transparent than using only online delivery format.

New advances in the internet based technology have brought challenges and opportunities as well to education and training, in particular through online instruction. The learning environments where instructional materials are transferred electronically or through the Internet or through course software with the help of computer technologies in teaching and learning environments and where the teacher and the learner are in different physical environments are known as e-learning. E-learning is also defined both as a kind of learning which occurs through the Internet, a network or only a computer and as audible, visual and interactive synchronous or asynchronous educational activities. The most significant characteristics of e-learning are that the teacher and the learner are in different physical environments and that the communication throughout the teaching/learning process is carried out via e-mail, forums, etc. through the Internet.

Advantages of e-learning are:

- Class work can be scheduled around work and family
- Reduces travel time and travel costs for off-campus students
- Students may have the option to select learning materials that meets their level of knowledge and interest
- Students can study anywhere they have access to a computer and Internet connection
- Self-paced learning modules allow students to work at their own pace
- Flexibility to join discussions in the bulletin board threaded discussion areas at any hour, or visit with classmates and instructors remotely in chat rooms
- Instructors and students both report eLearning fosters more interaction among students and instructors than in large lecture courses
- eLearning can accommodate different learning styles and facilitate learning through a variety of activities
- Develops knowledge of the Internet and computers skills that will help learners throughout their lives and careers
- Successfully completing online or computer-based courses builds self-knowledge and self-confidence and encourages students to take responsibility for their learning
- Learners can test out of or skim over materials already mastered and concentrate efforts in mastering areas containing new information and/or skills

Blended learning in Higher Education

One of the most commonly cited, a reason for blending is more effective pedagogical practices. It is no secret that most current teaching and learning practice in both higher education and corporate training settings is still focused on *transmissive* rather than *interactive* strategies.

In higher education, 83% of instructors use the lecture as the predominant teaching strategy (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Similarly, distance education often suffers from making large amounts of information available for students to absorb independently (Waddoups & Howell, 2002). Some have seen blended learning approaches increase the level of active learning strategies, peer-to-peer learning strategies, and learner centered strategies used (Collis, 2003; Hartman, Dziuban, & Moskal, 1999; Morgan, 2002).

III. CONCLUSION

The power of the Blended Learning model is its flexibility and its pedagogical effectiveness. Because it emphasizes active learning techniques, it increases student interaction with other students and the instructor. One of the most significant accomplishments of the Blended Learning was its impact on the participating instructors. They stated that the blend experience would change their approach to all of their future teaching, whether in a traditional, hybrid or distance education class. Thus it can accomplish general faculty development goals and provide new and exciting teaching experiences for instructors and students. Institutions have the potential to manage instructional and facility resources more efficiently, teaching more students within a semester. This approach is beneficial for students, providing the convenience and flexibility associated with online learning, freeing up time for work, family obligations or extra-curricular activities. Blended learning develops a skill set for students that otherwise would not be possible in exclusive face-to-face instruction. Skills include digital citizenship, information management skills, self-directed learning, and web research and collaboration skills.

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