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Blended learning: what's in the blend?

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Abstract:

Problem statement/rationale, including reference to key literature:

The adoption of the internet into education has led to a proliferation of use of the term “Blended Learning” as indicated by over 185k scholarly articles as reported by Google Scholar.. Not surprisingly, due to the relative novelty of the term there is a misunderstanding between the scholars and practitioners when it comes to blended learning theory and its practice. Pedagogical analyses of the definition of Blended Learning have been attempted but have been inconclusive, which is not only a theoretical problem but a practical one as well (Sharpe, et. al., 2006).The default assumption is still that Blended Learning essentially means the delivery of education by the combination of the internet and face-to-face teaching.

Two key issues arise from this. The first, as eloquently discussed by Oliver and Trigwell (2005), is why a type of learning is defined by a technique of teaching. The use of the word ‘delivery’ implies that Blended Learning is simply the introduction of a new tool into a standard didactic process. When a teacher stands up in a classroom and explains a topic to a group of students followed by some discussion, this is widely recognised as a well established technique of **teaching**. Strangely, if the teacher additionally provides material and facilitates discussion through the internet, the combination is often referred to as blended **learning**.

The second issue, which we explore in field work described in this paper, is that there are more than two elements to the blend. Whether we take the perspective of either the teacher or the learner, independent learning may be far more important than classroom or web based teaching. Typically the ‘delivery’ of teaching, whether online or offline, is a small proportion of the total learning time of a given module. Self study is in fact an essential prerequisite to learning (Heinze and Procter 2010). It follows that any definition of a type of learning must include the role of self study. The absence of this from definitions of Blended Learning can imply a lack of significance being attached to how the learner engages with modern forms of teaching, and potentially set back advances in the application of pedagogy.

The evolution of these issues in the literature will be discussed in this paper.

Research design and methods of data collection and analysis or method inquiry:

There are two separate and distinct parts to the research. The first part summarises an exploration of contemporary literature on Blended Learning. The second part describes field work undertaken with faculty and students on a Blended Learning course, including results taken from an interpretive action research study conducted over two academic years.

Main findings:

The paper discusses the elements involved in Blended Learning including self study, and the significance of educational theory in achieving an effective mixture of these elements. We conclude with the importance of definition in both the application of, and research into, Blended Learning.

Discussion of implications:

It is our objective to help the practitioner release the entropy of new technology to enhance learning, by contributing to the discussion of an accepted definition of Blended Learning.

List of key references/resources:

Fearon, C., Starr, S., & McLaughlin, H. (2012). Blended learning in higher education (HE): Conceptualising key strategic issues within a Business School. *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal*, 26 (12).

Heinze, A., & Procter, C. (2010). The significance of the reflective practitioner in blended learning. *International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning (IJMBL)*, 2(2), 18 - 29.

Sharpe, R., Benfield, G., Roberts, G., & Francis, R. (2006). The undergraduate experience of blended e-learning: a review of UK literature and practice: Higher Education Academy.

Oliver, M., & Trigwell, K. (2005). Can "Blended Learning" Be Redeemed? *E-learning*, 2(1), 17-26.