

Moving Forward with Blended Learning (BL) as a Pedagogical Alternative to Traditional Classroom Learning

Hisham Dzakiria, Che Su Mustafa & Hassan Abu Bakar

Faculty of Communication and Modern Languages

Universiti Utara Malaysia

06010, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

hisham@uum.edu.my

Abstract

Globalisation and technology are altering our views on education and educational offerings. Technology has given birth to many new avenues for learning. To name a few, online learning, teleconferencing, the Internet, computer assisted learning (CAL), web-based distance learning (WBDL) and other technologies currently exist. In turn, they have helped to coin the term “blended learning” (BL), and although the term is still ill-defined, BL has entered into the training and education scene and is gaining popularity. BL is no longer a fad but is now expanding and getting established, although rapidly changing. When an institution makes the critical choice of delivery methods, it needs to consider various factors. One in particular that this article advocates is the need to understand the students as the primary educational client, their perspectives and experiences, and the learning support mechanism for effective learning outcomes. This qualitative study reports in some detail the experiences of a small group of postgraduate learners as they progress through their Masters and Ph.D. courses at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Malaysia. The paper looks at learning as described by the learners – it is *their story, their experiences and their perspective* on graduate learning experiences at the institution. In particular, this paper looks at BL and what that entails to the learners. From these findings, conclusions have been drawn regarding the role of learning support to facilitate BL and the provision of better educational experiences and outcomes at UUM. This article offers several suggestions and a discussion on the broader applications of the BL framework and the readiness of the UUM students for its implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The term “blended learning” (BL) has gained considerable interest in recent years as a description of particular forms of teaching combined with technology. The definition of BL is varied and contrasting. For example, Whitelock & Jefts (2003), Alavi & Gallupe (2003), Arbaugh (2005) and Peterson (2003) referred to BL as the integrated combination of traditional learning with web-based online approaches, the combination of media and tools deployed in an e-learning environment and the combination of a number of pedagogical approaches, irrespective of the learning technology used in each case. The first definition is perhaps the most common interpretation. The second is also widespread, although sometimes advocated in a more general form as concerning “models that combine various delivery modes” (Singh, 2003), rather than privileging e-learning. BL seems to be an approach that combines the use of multiple delivery media that are designed to complement each other and promote learning and the learning application or technology used. In addition, Singh (2003) also provided a more substantial description that elaborates BL as a much richer set of learning strategies or dimensions that can be blended in ways such as: *offline with online; self-paced with live, collaborative; structured with unstructured; custom content with off-the-shelf* and so on.

However, these three contrasting definitions are not the only ones that have been offered. Kerres & De Witt (2003) discussed blended learning as the mix of different didactic methods and delivery formats, arguing that these two are independent. Both of these articles draw on Driscoll’s work (2002). In this, she identified four different “concepts” denoted by this term: combining or mixing web-based technology to accomplish an educational goal; combining pedagogical approaches to produce an optimal learning outcome with or without instructional

technology; combining any form of instructional technology with face-to-face instructor-led training and combining instructional technology with actual job tasks.

It is evident that based on what is offered in the literature, BL means different practices to different people, which illustrates its widely untapped potential. A similar but more precise explanation is offered by Hofmann (2001), who proposed that the idea behind blended learning is that instructional designers review a learning programme, put it into modules and determine the best medium to deliver those modules to the learner.

This array of definitions is not, in itself, helpful. The various interpretations mean that almost anything can be seen as BL, and consequently, its use can be misinterpreted. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this article, BL constitutes multiple teaching and learning activities which include face-to-face (f2f) meetings, e-learning, e-portals, e-mailing, case studies, problem-based learning (PBL), independent work and self-paced learning.

WHY BLENDED LEARNING?

This article focuses on the issue of delivering multi-media assisted BL which is expanding rapidly to serve potential students and the challenges associated with it. Other factors also need to be considered, such as the design of materials, the motives, attitudes and experiences of programme developers and instructors as well as students with regard to web-based tools and support systems. To answer the various relevant questions about administering BL programmes, we will focus here on improving our initial understanding of BL and what that means to the students; we then discuss the critical issue of understanding the issues and challenges involved in administering BL and examine whether UUM can leverage from BL and become internationally known for its programmes and courses.

The use of BL can lead to exciting opportunities where lecturers and students interact and discuss scholarly ideas in an asynchronous or synchronous chat or video-conference. It is now a standard part of the education and training lexicon. Based on the definitions given in the literature, organisations and educational institutions must now account for BL in all its various disguises (Webster & Hackley, 1997). BL is seen in the linkages between instructors, learners and classrooms located at various places. It is important to listen to and understand learners' voices and perspectives on educational experiences in Malaysia because of the complex mix of cultures, languages and urban and rural factors. Additionally, there is a need to reflect on the effectiveness of BL and the teaching and services provided from time to time. In doing so, education providers and institutions like UUM need to get a balanced picture of how the learners perceive and experience BL, and what is "right" and "wrong" in their programmes, courses and administration. Understanding how the experience discourages or frustrates learners pertaining to BL enables UUM to reflect and make constructive changes to create a condition for better BL in the future and making more effective efforts to internationalise UUM's programmes and courses.

Secondly, the current definitions of the term BL are vague, and vary within and across the literature. Therefore, much confusion exists as to what BL really entails. This in turn has created expectations that define what BL is all about from other stakeholders' *point of view*, not that of the learners themselves. Considering the experiences of postgraduate students in formulating definitions can help to clarify the term, perhaps creating new approaches to addressing the needs of this group.

Finally, the implications of this study are pertinent to how UUM administrators, teachers and educators organise courses and programmes, and educational activities to meet the needs of the learners. Ultimately, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how learners perceive and experience BL at UUM. Such understanding will enhance our knowledge of how to go about

designing and implementing effective future BL as a pedagogical approach to teaching in the future.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research on BL are to generate insights and understanding into the questions of whether BL can be a substitute or a possible alternative as a pedagogical approach, and *how* UUM can leverage from this and go further. Specifically, the research objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To characterise the learners' perspectives on the BL approach.
2. To develop an understanding of the barriers and challenges that learners encounter, and the ways they cope with these problems (if any).
3. To demonstrate principles through which BL can be empowered and guided by the micro and macro environment surrounding the learners and their lives.
4. To determine if UUM can leverage and go further (internationally) with BL.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study focused on the experiences of a small number of postgraduate students (n=06) at the Faculty of Communication and Modern Languages at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) as part of a close case study of postgraduate students taking the course *Academic Writing* for graduate studies. Due to the heterogeneous characteristics of the learners, this study deliberately sampled learners with various backgrounds to generate unique insights into the way they viewed BL. Furthermore, as these students had been enrolled between two to three years in various academic programmes at UUM, the study would provide a better understanding of the teaching and learning as experienced and perceived by these learners at the faculty.

An instrumental qualitative case study (Stake 1995) approach was deployed to understand the experience of individual learners as they progressed through their postgraduate studies at UUM. The research used the *interview* as the primary instrument. All the postgraduate students involved in this study were interviewed on a one-to-one basis, this forming the framework of the data reported in the paper. Table 1 shows the guide used to conduct the f2f interviews:

Table 1: The Interview Guide

Thematic Guideline	Consistent Topics	Additional Topic(s)
Experience of learning in the postgraduate programme at Universiti Utara Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactions with course materials • Interactions with teachers & educators • Interactions with other learners • Attitudes towards technology • Attitudes towards learning • Pull & push factors • Learning style & behaviour • Coping mechanism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult life • Family life • Attitude • Future career plan • Learning differences

The interview guide helped to ensure maximum use of the limited time available during the fieldwork. Most of the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, and the English language

was only used when necessary and possible. The interviews were then transcribed and selectively translated and profiled.

LEARNERS' VIEWS ABOUT BLENDED LEARNING

In general, the learners set a high value on formal educational and learning opportunities but expressed a mixed set of emotions when asked to describe their perspectives and experiences of the teaching and learning in the postgraduate programmes at UUM. The following section presented and analysed the students' views on three themes: *learners' perceptions on educational interactions*; *getting involved in new ways of learning* and *perceptions of educational technology*. The section concluded with observations in reference to the literature and discussed some implications of the findings.

Learners' Perceptions on Academic Interactions

Feelings of isolation and alienation were strongly evident in the dialogues. In addition, the fact that instruction was delivered, not just through occasional f2f interactions, but through other media as well, may not have been suitable to some of the learners interviewed, as evident in this study. One example in particular was that some of the learners were concerned at not getting an immediate response to their questions or problems. One learner pointed out:

"...When I contact my lecturer in an e-mail, I do expect to get a speedy reply to solve my learning problem, but... that does not happen too often..." [R 2: Interview]

"...When you only see your lecturer 3 hours a week, you need to be really focused and able to get attention and reply from your lecturer fast..." [R1: Interview]

"...You sometimes tend to ask where the lecturers are when you need one..." [R4: Interview]

Their discomfort in this was apparent, for example, that stressed by R2, *"...is damaging to my learning..."* (Interview 3). Many of the respondents mentioned that it took much more time to get feedback on questions at a distance, and in some circumstances, this interfered with their learning.

Such experience is, of course, not common in the traditional educational experience. It was also noted by a respondent that in the traditional educational experience, he seldom looked for materials outside the course unless the teacher asked him to do so, but in distance learning *"...that is in the package, you are required to be more responsible, the problem is what help do you get to ease your learning process? That, I think, is somewhat lacking..."* [R6: Interview 3]. This respondent further expressed concern about not knowing how to communicate or ask for help on specific problems. This can be an indirect consequence of the lack of intimacy on learning interactions between the learners with their respective lecturers.

Getting Involved in New Ways of Learning

Based on what we have discussed thus far, this study suggests that the extent or the importance of learning support influences the students' overall perceptions of their teaching and learning experience. It should come as no surprise that learners recognise that participating in today's postgraduate programme involves "change" at a different level. Most notable would be the perceptions of learning to work more independently and having to adopt more active ways of learning as a result of learning at a distance. The relative scantiness of empirical research on BL adds to the sense of urgency of considering BL as a learning system. One clear exception here is the study by Brower (2003) which focused on emulating classroom discussions via discussion board technology. This study illustrates with a single class example how to create a "student-centred learning community" in the classroom.

The learners, through their responses, showed a clear sense of having to adapt to a new type of learning environment or learning culture. The discussion of what they had done traditionally and what they “had” to do currently as postgraduate students occupied many of our initial sessions on their graduate learning experiences, especially interactions with the course teacher, with other learners, as well as with technology. For example:

“...In my many years of traditional education, I never had to do what I am doing now in my current POST GRADUATE programme. It is different, so much so if I don't change my attitude, learning to be more proactive and responsible, I will sink in this course...” [R5: Interview 2]

“...Today's learning is about changing one's study habits...” [R3: Interview 1]

“...Having to realise that the instructors are not always there for you, I realise that that I had to put failure or success in learning into my hands. If you think this way, you know that something had to change to accommodate your learning....”

[R7: Interview 2]

It did not take much time for the learners to notice the fundamental differences between traditional learning (in a class), at a distance, online or blended, “...It's like two different world, two different experiences...” said R6. What is necessary, however, is to enable these learners to have the educational “change” for today's types of learning and to facilitate the way for BL lecturers to provide an optimal learning support system.

BL is different from traditional learning experiences. Malaysian learners, in general, have cultural orientations towards learning which make educational experience through BL difficult to grasp. The learners are more reserved, and are often passive participants in classroom discussions. As a result, they sometimes feel at a loss when clear instructions are not given for work, assignments and experiments. When this happens, they are tempted to blame their lecturers for an apparent lack of knowledge or commitment as revealed in some of the students' interviews.

Inherent in the nature of BL is a sense of individual autonomy in the learner, which may be valued but which may also cut across traditional values. The learners are not always given immediate feedback, which may come with f2f interactions in a traditional course. “Feedback” here means more interactions than just comments on learners' written work, and more reassurance from lecturers reiterating a point or responding to a question asked by a distance learner.

Learners are sometimes unsure of what lecturers mean to say when interpreting their lectures and materials without having this level of reassurance. This in turn may cause the learners to experiment with many different possibilities for meaning, thereby constructing their own knowledge and making connections to situations that are more meaningful to them, but at the risk of “being wrong”. The degree of uncertainty in this process can cause learners to lose self-control, courage and the power to make decisions. They make mistakes, and continued errors may demotivate them from learning successfully. This in turn may lead to failure and withdrawal and could be a possible “push factor” towards BL.

Learners' Perceptions on the Use of Educational Technology

Postgraduate students are typically adult learners; they appear to need computer assistance and training. One obvious problem revealed by some of the learners in this study was the feeling of inadequacy regarding their technological skills. The respondents' perspectives on learning and, in particular, the use of technology showed that they needed more support and training opportunities. An understanding of the behaviour of postgraduate students vis-à-vis information and communication technology (ICT) is the posing of questions such as: *Do they use computers on a daily basis? Do they have a computer at home, at their working place? Do they have easy access? What do*

they need? How can learning be improved? How can interactivity in their learning be improved? It is imperative that effective technological resources be available as their presence will promote better learning interactions.

Almost all the research respondents experienced some adjustment to the technology used in their postgraduate programmes. As iterated in some of the dialogues earlier, the change or transition was not easy. Learners demonstrated several ways of dealing with technology problems through electronic means such as the e-mail. Typical e-mail messages were to request assistance regarding assignments or Internet-related issues. Nevertheless, it is evident that quite often, technology interferes with the learners' learning:

"...I have a serious problem, the technology used in this course looks complicated..."

[R2: Interview]

"...It is just unacceptable, when you want to learn and progress in your course but the attachment sent is 'unreadable' or can't be opened...what do you do?..."

[R3: Interview3]

LEARNING SUPPORT TO FACILITATE BLENDED LEARNING

Learning support refers to systems intended to enhance and improve learning. It covers a wider range of skills that ranges from the initial registration, the teaching programme of the course to the end of the course term until results are released. There are many critical issues that call for effective learning support as indicated by Simpson (2002:), among them: *decisions about starting studies; feelings about becoming a student; motivations for learning; finding the time for learning; tackling course materials; planning the learning; tackling the assignments and dealing with failure.*

The list of issues listed above shows the complexity of the nature of the learning support required for BL. There are many "considerations and factors" with which postgraduate students have to cope in learning; and learning the skills needed for BL may not be easy for all learners. Learning support is undoubtedly necessary for success in BL implementation. The principal objective of learning support is to produce postgraduate students who are able to progress through their programmes of learning successfully, able to be independent learners who have good learning skills and strategies, and are able to interact effectively with lecturers, tutors, learning materials and other postgraduate students at any time. Education, after all, is not simply the acquisition of facts or knowledge, but their synthesis and finding creative and unique ways of putting together information about the world. This calls for greater attention to the issue of learning support and its role in distance learning.

DISCUSSION

The fact remains that learning support can predictably affect BL – positively if planned well but negatively if attention has not been paid to the conditions under which learning best occurs. In reality, its importance has been undervalued. Many measures of educational institution effectiveness neglect the context of learning, focusing instead on the selection and performance of staff and learners and on the technology used. Effective learning support should be designed to enable postgraduate students to concentrate on their studies, free from distracting elements. At UUM, learning support should facilitate learning and access to knowledge. It is thus imperative that lecturers have an in-depth understanding of the impact learning support has on the learner and on BL as a whole, and some understanding of the context of the courses being taught.

In order to support the learners in a BL environment, it is imperative that lecturers have not only learning skills to facilitate learning, but also skills and experience to facilitate the learning process through designing and building support that encourages BL. They need to be specialists

in their subjects. In positioning UUM as a quality education provider, there is no place for the amateur lecturer. *Effective communication* is important to the BL mode but it is communication in new forms which must be learnt by both postgraduate students and lecturers. The use of BL elements in open and distance education can promote a stimulating relationship between postgraduate students and lecturers and consequently, enhance the attempts at building a better learning support to facilitate postgraduate learning.

A lecturer-learner mentor programme is an imperative component for learning support to facilitate BL. A number of the respondents viewed knowledge of BL principles as essential to their daily function as postgraduate students. All education processes need to be carefully guided by these principles. With regard to the *use of technology*, there were mixed views. On the one hand, it was strongly supported because of the existence of globalisation and the move into a technological future, while on the other hand, there was a fear of depersonalising the mode of delivery and instilling fear and anxiety amongst learners.

Speed and interactivity capabilities can overcome the major drawbacks to BL. Again, we are reminded of Buckminster Fuller's remarks on communication technology and how anything we can envision or dream of will likely come to be. The critical technology components of multi-media learning environments are depicted as moderating variables. The basic components consist of video, voice, text, interactivity and graphics. To these, we add access to online databases and virtual libraries. These online tools provide remote students with access to materials that previously had been less than readily accessible prior to the advent of BL and other computer/Internet based multi-media systems. We recommend that BL administrators follow a check list of considerations when they design or decide to deploy BL as supplemental and/or substitute for teaching a postgraduate programme or course: *student' issues, organisational issues, technology, delivery and design, teaching and learning support, outcomes assessment, learning and teaching flexibility, supplemental versus substitute*, etc. In addition, the following questions should also be considered:

- Has the interactive nature of multi-media learning within the BL pedagogical approach brought the students closer to the traditional classroom?
- Should we adopt BL as an alternative to traditional classroom teaching?
- Is learning technology already a major supplement to the new traditional classroom?
- Does BL have some advantages over the traditional or other learning systems?
- Does technology give the instructor and/or students a learning advantage?

In conclusion, it is apparent that the postgraduate students interviewed in this study had expressed satisfaction with their learning experiences. However, based on the emerging themes of this study, it can be concluded that lecturers at UUM have not adequately provided the learning support to facilitate BL. Although numerous efforts have been made, the lecturers need to adopt a wide range of initiatives. Lecturers very often become catalysts, and as such, are crucial in enabling learners to liberate their understanding. They have a special role in providing learning support. The journey to effective BL, after all, begins with lecturers at UUM making personal improvements in their understanding and practice. This may require changes that will be difficult to achieve. Often, perspective transformation, paradigm shifts and reassessment of personal philosophy are needed. As Walker (2002) puts it, "...The student does not simply 'learn' but (almost always) learns from someone. This implies for the lecturer that they need to become someone from whom it is possible to learn..." (p.5)

CONCLUSION

Continued research on BL is essential. This study offers research potential regarding the learning support necessary to implement BL successfully. The challenge, however, is to ensure that learning support in BL is sufficiently addressed when a better learning experience for students is targeted. UUM, like any other dual mode institution in Malaysia, aims to be an effective education provider. If UUM wishes to promote BL, issues pertaining to

learning support must be addressed effectively. Attention has to focus on its apparent neglect which clearly links the learning environment to the physical and social aspects of student engagement and learning outcomes and inappropriate ways of measuring postgraduate students' satisfaction in learning. Moreover, lecturers should be seen not simply as knowledge providers but as learning support providers. The task is to design and offer an educational experience that encourages learning. UUM needs to understand that its educational products and services are to assist the learner and provide an encouraging educational experience. We must consciously and actively develop and maintain approaches which enable learners to have their voices heard, and for lecturers and educators and UUM itself to be able to listen and understand the practical implications of what is being said. The learners should never be perceived as the problem, but should be perceived and integrated as part of the solution. Such an approach and attitude will benefit all stakeholders in distance education.

In designing the learning support for BL, this paper wishes to encourage UUM to choose appropriate combinations of methods for particular learning contexts. It is important to note that the recommendations this study proposes for UUM may not be the only solutions to resolve the learning support concerns in BL. Nor may they necessarily provide optimal advice pertaining to components within the learning support. They are, however, made in an earnest effort, firstly to sensitise lecturers to the importance of their role in providing learning support in BL and, more importantly, to stimulate thought, dialogue and future research in providing learning support to BL.

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