Preface

This edited book is about blended learning, which means using a combination of face-to-face and online teaching methods to facilitate learning even though there is no agreed definition. Blended learning offers unlimited ways to offer courses that facilitate creativity, critical thinking, higher order thinking, and meaningful learning. Some use information technology (IT) as an add-on tool; some use the online platforms as resource repertoires, whilst some use electronic resources as electronic books. However, it is well understood that most academics and teachers did not have the experiences of using blended approach to learn when they pursued their own educations and, obviously, there is a lack of best practices to follow suit.

This book offers insightful perspectives related to blended learning, as there are chapters which overview practices, analyse pertinent literature, discuss issues, and compare practices. It is more than showcasing the good practices of pedagogy, research, and practices of using blended learning, as this book contains an added element of comparative studies, which is distinctive from other blended learning books. The comparative discussions facilitate readers to analyze and compare ideas and practices easily and come up with a creative use of the dual delivery modes. Indeed, this edited book is about rethinking and redesigning the learning and teaching activities to maximize learning effectiveness regardless of the learners’ background and experiences.

This book informs academics, administrators, and researchers with the contemporary knowledge and best practices so that they can avoid any unnecessary frustrations and pitfalls and yet to be inspired by quality practices and research in blended learning. It is contributed by 34 authors and co-authors from 8 countries (namely, Australia, Bulgaria, Greece, Hong Kong SAR, Singapore, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America). There are 18 chapters which have been organized into four sections, namely: blended learning environments (4 Chapters); blended learning practices (9 chapters); culture differences studies (3 chapters); and cross disciplinary studies (2 chapters). Each section has its unique theme. Exemplary practices were drawn from primary school children, information technology undergraduate students, student teachers, and practicing teachers from developed and developing countries.

OVERVIEW OF CONTENTS

This book is useful to teachers, academics, administrators, and researchers regardless of their background and blended learning experiences. For example, Chapter 1 is useful to policy-makers and educational practitioners around the globe to ponder, especially to seriously answer the four key questions that are related to blended learning. Chapter 3 gives lots of ideas to academics and teachers who are interested to mix and match different face-to-face and online activities. Chapter 8 is not only appealing to those...
academics who are keen to facilitate discussion via e-mentoring, but also to researchers who would like to analyze online discussion. Chapter 11 and Chapter 12 shed light on how to use blended learning as an alternative mode of motivating problematic learners. Chapter 14 is useful to researchers who are keen to know more about the role of culture plays in blended learning and the content of relevant literature. Chapter 16 suggests there is a cultural difference between users from different countries. Finally, Chapter 18 provides a holistic view of IT and non-IT academics and students on blended learning, which serves as an invaluable source for administrators and researchers. The following paragraphs will highlight the essence of the chapters.

**Section 1: Blended Learning Environments**

Commercial, or tailored made learning management systems (LMS), are commonly adopted to facilitate blended learning. There are different ways to term LMS and the term “learning platform” is more commonly known than LMS. Learning platforms are widely used as a learning portal to allow students to learn at anytime and anyplace as long as they have access to an Internet connection (Boggs & Shore, 2004; Freeman, 1997; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). LMS contain the unique functionalities of the Internet and learning resources, online assessment, and course statistics.

Chapter 1: “Beyond Control: Will Blended Learning Subvert National Curricula?”—Williams discusses blended learning by examining key issues of educational policy and the creation and implementation of policy at national levels. The nature and significance of Web 2.0 applications and open educational resources are also discussed with examples to illustrate the growing gap between traditional educational systems and the current digital cultures. Although blended learning poses cultural threats, it also opens new opportunities. Whether these threats can be turned to advantage depends crucially upon how national policies are formulated and how they are implemented at all levels.

Chapter 2: “Perspectives on Blended Open Distance Education Learning and Teaching in a South African Context”—Singh and Liang present a micro-comparison of two different learning platforms which facilitate open and distance learning at the University of South Africa. The authors had described myUnisa, the self-created learning platform, and Osprey, which is the custom-made Web site at the School of Computing at the University of South Africa. They also discussed the future trends of the use of blended approaches in the context of open distance education and learning, which is informative for those who would like to adopt e-learning in developing countries.

Chapter 3: “Enhancing Student Learning through Blending Varied Learning and Assessment Experiences”—Hodgson gives a very good review and comparison between traditional learning, teaching, and assessment vs. online methods, which gives readers a good understanding of blended learning. Theories and good practices were shown clearly so that readers could select appropriate approaches for their undergraduate students. In particular, e-portfolio systems are neither well adopted nor documented, but the collected students’ competences should be able to portray a comprehensive university experience.

Chapter 4: “Implementing and Promoting Blended Learning in Higher Education Institutions: Comparing Different Approaches”—Wang compares various forms and expressions of blended learning adopted by different parts of the world. The limitations of commercial LMS were discussed and the constraints led to his discussion on subject-specific Web sites to supplement a commercial LMS to facilitate blended learning. How and what to use Wikibook projects to foster academic reading and writing in English for non-English native speakers were described in greater details. Student teachers worked in groups to write an academic textbook collaboratively online and evidences showed that these projects were highly effective and the wiki technology also made peer editing much more efficient and effective.
Section 2: Blended Learning Practices

There are numerous face-to-face learning and teaching methods and technology is only one of the factors that affects blended learning. Benbunan-Fich, Hiltz, and Harasim (2005) designed a research framework, an input-process-output model, which is very wide-ranging and comprehensive in its scope. The input factors in this framework include technology, course, instructor, and student characteristics; the intervening factor is the learning process; and the outcomes include access, faculty satisfaction, student learning, student satisfaction, and cost effectiveness. From the different practices illustrated in this book (Chapter 7 to 13), I argue that pedagogy is the most important variable for conducting blended learning, even though findings from Chapter 6 illustrate that the grades that students scored had no relationship to pedagogy. Perhaps the authors had not fully designed and created appropriate digital materials, nor took full use of different features of and learning platforms. They have not mentioned using the discussion forum, which is rated as the most important element of e-learning (Alexander, 2001; Fredericksen, Pickett, & Shea, 2000; Sims, 2003).

Chapter 5: “Student Profile and Its Effects on Online and Hybrid Courses”—It is imperative to know our students when offering blended courses to meet their needs and expectations. Boghikian-Whitby and Mortagy took the effort to analyze the profile of students who were enrolled in a face-to-face and an online course of management information systems over 15 semesters at an American university. It was found that most online students were adult students who were of African American and Hispanic background. Forty percent of the students enrolled in online delivery modality were of extravert type. It was recommended that short modules and using different exercises would be able to accommodate various learning styles.

Chapter 6: “Using Action Research to Assess Student Performance in Traditional vs. E-Learning Formats”—Action research is commonly used by many academics to reflect and to refine their teaching approaches. Guy and Wishart adopted different teaching approaches to students who took online courses in the United States who were mainly blacks. They changed the teaching strategy for e-learning class from student-centred to instructor-centred to even more instructor-centred for the three years. Students’ grades of face-to-face and online courses were compared but it was found that neither the strategy nor the delivery method had any impact on student performances. The amazing results are rather different from other research findings in this book.

Chapter 7: “Examining Individual Students’ Perceptions of Curiosity Utilizing a Blend of Online and Face-to-Face Discussions: A Qualitative Study”—Little is known about the impact of a blended learning approach on individual student curiosity and whether combinations of online and face-to-face learning activities significantly enhance student exploratory behavior. Shroff created a blended learning platform that allowed students to interact and collaborate in both online and face-to-face settings. Data were obtained through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with information systems undergraduate students. The interviewees appeared to derive pleasure from the online discussions, which also provided them with a level of surprise, conflicting discrepancy, and novelty. Results from the qualitative study showed that individuals’ perceptions of curiosity were strongly supported.

Chapter 8: “Online Discussion and E-Mentoring Strategies in Blended Continuing Education Courses”—Wang and Looi analysed online discussions in a course portal that supplemented class discussion in three continuing master education courses in Singapore. The courses combined face-to-face and online approaches to instruction. The participants were full-time professionals who studied on a part-time basis. Henri’s model was adopted to quantitatively and qualitatively analyse the online discussion. This chapter emphasizes the role of the e-mentors in promoting and mediating the discussions. Factors that contributed to the effective e-mentoring strategies were also discussed in detail. Transcript content
analyses showed that students’ messages were on-task, thoughtful, and indicative of student-initiated learning and a good amount of peer help.

Chapter 9: “Infusing Web 2.0 Tools for Blended Learning: Virtual Presentations as an Alternative Means of Assessment”—Academic’s lead in discussion forum is invaluable to foster learning but it is equally important for student teachers to master different strategies and skills to integrate learning, teaching, and assessment. Lai and Ng describe an innovative practice of infusing Web 2.0 in assessment in Hong Kong. The participants were two groups of student teachers who created virtual presentations, which could either be videos or other digital formats for each group to learn from each other. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected, analyzed, and compared. It was found that most of the participants were positive about this new presentation approach and ready to accept it as a part in assessments but they gave more feedback to their class rather than the other class. Furthermore, their attitudes were influenced by the tutors’ participation and this finding echo the importance of e-mentoring strategies (Chapter 6).

Chapter 10: “Reflective Practice, Professional Learning, and Educational Partnerships: Effecting Change in Classroom Settings”—Discussion forums were not only useful to student teachers, but also useful for professional development for teachers. Brook and Lock presented a model of professional learning that incorporated blended learning, reflective practice, performance management processes, authentic experiences, and tertiary learning to encourage change in classroom settings for practicing teachers. Teachers in this study found that a blended learning setting connect between theory and practice and collaborative learning provided a strong learning experience that translated to change in classroom practice. In particular, the use of video recording of their classroom teaching was seen by the participants as a powerful tool in reflecting on their teaching.

Chapter 11: “Allegheny Women’s Biotechnology Workforce Collaborative: Investing in Disadvantaged Populations with Technology”—This chapter sheds light on how blended learning assists underprivileged learners. Zuckerman-Parker, Compliment, Rosella, Ehrlich, Post, Todd, and Schreiber describe a research-based educational intervention designed to support participants at Pennsylvania with “lifelines” using blended learning so that they further their education and enter the biotechnology workforce. This holistic educational approach focuses on individualized learning using technology to foster personal skill development and mentoring from industry professionals. Quantitative data and qualitative data showed that those participants who had been using the technology to learn and to reflect were better than those who did not use the technology. Technology also provided a safe haven for participants to express themselves, a medium to reduce and mediate the stress. Interesting background of the participants and their text exchanges were also included in this chapter, which warm our hearts.

Chapter 12: “Blending Classroom Activities with Multi-User Virtual Environment for At-Risk Primary School Students in an After-School Program: A Case Study”—Tay and Lim explored an uncommon way to adopt blended learning for primary education. A group of 14 academically low Primary 5 students were engaged in academic related tasks in an after-school program mediated by a game-like 3 dimensional multi user virtual environment. Qualitative findings from the observation notes, interviews with the students, and students’ activities showed that the students were engaged with ‘play and fun’ and ‘recognition and affirmation of performance.’ The game played a significant role in attracting the students to attend the after-school program, as they were allowed to explore, discover, and satisfy their sense of curiosity, but non-ICT activities were also necessary to further enhance their learning.

Chapter 13: “Comparing Face-to-Face with Blended Learning in the Context of Foreign Language Education and Cross Cultural Communication”—Vlachos also investigated about the usefulness of blended learning for primary school children but the study involved three classes from Finland, Spain, and Greece. He collated and explored the blended learning modes related to a number of critical to language learning issues. Asynchronous online collaboration was regularly and systematically integrated
into learning English as a foreign language. Findings showed that the blended learning group scored slightly higher than the face-to-face group, even though the former scored lower than the latter before they conducted the experiment. Furthermore, almost all blended learning students acknowledged the online communication and blended learning enrich their intercultural knowledge and experiences even though the face-to-face appeared enjoying cooperating and working in groups more.

Section 3: Cultural Differences Studies

Different cultures have different beliefs, norms, and practices, which could affect pedagogy, technology adoption, and access. Hofstede (2001) defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (p. 9). This collective programming of the mind consists of a patterned way of people thinking, feeling, and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, which are based on their traditional ideas and values. Many research studies reported the benefits of using the technology to connect learners from diverse background and countries so as to enrich their learning experiences. Chapter 15 and 16 show that there are cultural differences regarding technology access and security awareness.

Chapter 14: “When Cultures Meet in Blended Learning: What Literature Tells Us”—Hu presents a summary of relevant research studies; their underpinning theoretical frameworks, methodologies used, and examples of the projects involving learners and teachers from culturally diverse backgrounds. The chapter specifically addresses the feasibility of cross-cultural blended learning and learner differences. It appears that successful cross-cultural blended learning programs requires more than technology. It was found that the committed teaching teams could make better decisions on curriculum choices, learning tasks and assessments, and types of technology.

Chapter 15: “Online Literacy among Students and Faculty: A Comparative Study between the United States and Eastern European Countries”—Miltenoff, Hoover, and Tzokov conducted a survey to faculty members and students from the Midwest of the U.S. and three Eastern European countries. The results confirm findings from the literature about the existence of a digital divide between developed and emerging nations. The digital divide may be caused by rigid administration in Eastern countries as they had less access to computer labs due to fewer and less flexible hours. However, Eastern European students were satisfied and comfortable with technology. Perhaps, Eastern European students and faculty members tended to compensate the deficiency by using alternative access sites such as Internet Café and home.

Chapter 16: “The Efficacy of Security Awareness Programs from a Cross-Cultural Perspective”—Medlin and Chen argue that different cultures have different technological capabilities and perhaps face different security challenges. They conducted an intercultural study to investigate if users from the U.S. and Taiwan engaged in the same situational awareness learning would have different performance in security awareness outcomes or not. Pre- and post-tests were conducted to assess both cultures’ receptivity to the use of technology-driven security awareness programs. It was found that that security awareness was not universal, that is, high individualists had a higher level of security awareness than low individualists after receiving situational training. Since security awareness is an important issue for all Internet users, it is imperative to have different learning approaches to cater to users around the globe.

Section 4: Cross-Disciplinary Studies

It is logical and natural for IT professionals to take the lead to integrate IT in teaching and learning and majority of the blended or e-learning studies are related students who took information technology or related courses. However, learning is no longer confined to a single discipline to cope with the real world
situation. Bordons, Morillos, and Gomez (2005) found that cross-disciplinary collaboration between authors, coclassification analysis, interdisciplinary nature of publication journals, and cross-disciplinary references are the most useful approaches to enhance learning.

Chapter 17: “Cross Disciplinary Learning in Distance Higher Education: Empowerment for Sustainable Research Prowess among Professionals in the African Sub-Region”—Osiki argues the benefits of interdisciplinarily can enhance learning especially when their emotions are understood. The author investigated the relative and differential effectiveness of three behavioural techniques in relieving learners’ emotional tension when they took research writing module. The distance students took part in a pre-test, post-test, control quasi-experimental research design. It was found that the participants’ research capacity had improved tremendously.

Chapter 18: “Comparing IT and Non-IT Faculty and Students’ Perceptions on Blended Learning”—Many blended research findings were related with IT or related disciplines, but there are not many studies related to non-IT disciplines. Ng conducted interviews and focus group meetings with both IT and non-IT academics in order to find out if there were any differences between their perceptions on e-learning. Their findings were also cross referenced with findings from students who participated in a questionnaire survey. These two groups of students also gave high ratings on most of the questionnaire items even though there were some minor differences between them.

REFERENCES


