Chapter 2
Moving From Passive to Active Blended Learning: An Adopter’s Experience

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter is a reflection on practice that resulted in the incorporation of an active blended learning approach in courses which the author facilitates for transnational students. These courses were popular, received very favorable student evaluations, and seemed successful in delivering their learning goals. However, there was a growing realization that the dynamics of these courses could be enhanced and made more effective in terms of student engagement. There was also a concern that the “blending” in the course designations might be more of an administrative classification than a thoughtful combination of the best features of distance online learning and face-to-face instruction. The chapter details the author’s reflection on practice in course design and facilitation. It reviews the identification of areas of concerns and missed opportunities in these learning environments. Finally, the chapter considers the implementation and result of actions taken to revise and reposition these courses through an active blended learning paradigm.

INTRODUCTION

Being mindful of self, either within or after experience, as if a mirror in which the practitioner can view and focus self within the context of a particular experience, in order to confront, understand, and become empowered to act towards resolving contradiction between one’s vision of desirable practice and one’s actual practice to gain insight within a reflexive spiral towards realising one’s vision of practice as a lived reality and developing professional identity. (Johns, 2017, p. 3)

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7856-8.ch002
The focus of this chapter is primarily on reflective practice. Reflective practice is a critical and essential process for those who design and facilitate distance teaching and learning environments. It involves an ongoing personal assessment of what we teach, of how we express our core philosophies of teaching and learning, and of the extent to which we realize our desired educational objectives.

Sometimes, reflection takes place within the active flow of teaching and learning, when we confront the unanticipated and use our inventory of accumulated knowledge and skills to reframe the problem, reconsider it from differing perspectives, and resolve the issue: reflection-in-practice (Schön, 1983, 1987). Sometimes, reflection takes place at the end of a course, when we think back on what has been and consider the success, limitations, or failings associated with that teaching and learning experience: reflection-on-practice (Schön, 1983, 1987). In either case, we consider moving along a different pathway to better actualize what we believe to be significant and valuable in the teaching and learning encounter.

During such reflection, I encountered active blended learning (ABL) serendipitously on the website of the University of Northampton, where it was promoted as an effective way of creating and sustaining student engagement (Palmer et al., 2017). I understood ABL as a move from passive blended learning in which the various affordances provided by the separate components of the course are actively blended by the facilitator to provide a richer and more engaging learning environment. Through purposeful integration and interconnection, the course facilitator unifies the separate elements of the course in order to provide a learning space that exploits the synergistic potential of these combined elements. The “active” in ABL applies both to the intent of the course designer and the response of the learner, who can be more actively engaged in the new and more expansive learning space. The concept of ABL, and the ways in which it was being used at the University of Northampton, resonated strongly with me and suggested a possible solution for my course concerns.

There was no distinct “problem” associated with these courses: they were well received by students. As a course designer and facilitator, I was familiar with the process and the dynamics of student-centered distance learning. I was also sensitive to communication, participation, and interaction in culturally diverse online learning environments (Starr-Glass, 2014, 2016, 2019). Nevertheless, I wanted to revisit prior experience and established practice to better understand what I had been doing and why I had been doing it to better appreciate not only what had been but what might be.

This chapter is structured as follows. The next section examines the consequences of distancing learners and considers the potentials and possibilities that blended learning provides. The following section examines the context of this present reflection on practice, identifying areas for improving blended learning environments. Solutions to these perceived problems are explored and an explanation given as to why ABL was adopted as a central dynamic in the restructured courses. This section also provides feedback, comments, and shared experiences from learners in the redesigned courses. The penultimate section considers future research that might be of importance and the chapter ends with a holistic review of the project and its outcomes.

**Background**

The traditional model in higher education has been that teaching and learning are conducted in-person and in real time through different modalities (lectures, seminars, tutorials, etc.). This model, derived from the medieval universities of Europe, has many supporters among faculty and students. Changing expectations and altered lifestyles, however, have resulted in a widespread reconsideration and reconceptualization of this traditional model. In particular, most colleges and universities have complemented
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campus-based learning with instructional models that physically distance learners from the institution (Kemp & Grieve, 2014; McLaren & Kenny, 2015; Picciano, Seaman, & Allen, 2010).

Distance learning has sometimes been introduced because the college or university served an expansive geographic area with low student density making a campus-centered model inefficient. Sometimes, it was introduced to expand the university’s catchment area and increase enrolment. Sometimes, distance learning was introduced to provide study options and alternatives for students who were employed, had scheduling constraints, or who valued the convenience and flexibility that distance learning offered. From the institution’s perspective, distance learning allowed for expansion, utilization of economies of scale in teaching, reduced teaching costs, increased scheduling flexibility, increasing the size of the student body, and increased tuition revenues (Bramble & Panda, 2008; Xu & Xu, 2019; Zhang & Worthington, 2017).

At the beginning of the 2016 academic year, 6,359,121 students—representing almost 32% of enrolments in U.S. higher education—were taking at least one distance education course (Seaman, 2018, p. 11).

Distance learning models have a long history and a variety of forms: print, radio, television, video conferencing, etc. (Hanover Research Institute, 2011; Sumner, 2000). Over the last twenty years, technological advances and communication possibilities have increasingly made web-based systems a preferred option for teaching and learning because they provide exceptional flexibility for all of those involved. The transition to mobile and web-based teaching and learning has prompted considerable research and speculation on the impact of distance learning, the altered dynamics of the learning process, and the best suited pedagogical approaches (Anderson & Dron, 2011; Crompton & Burke, 2018; Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2003; Rodrigues et al., 2019; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2017)

The Consequences of Distancing Learners

The “distancing” in distance learning for learners and teachers is geographic, technological, and social. The distancing of learning has little to do with spatial displacement; rather, it has to do with the psychological and social separation of student and instructor and a distributed locus of learning experiences. The consequences of distancing, particularly for learners, include:

- Decreased learner and instructor social presence (Oztok & Brett, 2011; Tu & McIsaac, 2002);
- Reduced psychological, cognitive, and affective immediacy (Baker, 2004; Woods & Baker, 2004);
- Impoverished communication process and reduced nonverbal communication possibilities (Dixson et al., 2017); and
- Increased student isolation, loneliness, disengagement, and potential attrition (Duranton & Mason, 2012; Myles, 2020; Rush, 2015).

Most of these consequences were anticipated and predicted by Moore (1973, 1993, 2018), who popularized the construct of transactional distance. Moore (1993) defined this as “a psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner” (p. 23). He argued that three issues become salient for distanced learners when they encounter and cope with transactional distance.

- **Dialogue:** The interactive communication between instructor and learner. Ideally, dialogue should be continuous, considerate, and responsive. The communication goal is for the instructor to listen actively to the distanced learners, respond perceptively to their issues, and guide them through the
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learning experience. Dialogue is usually initiated and mediated by the instructor. Learners may not be able to articulate the issues confronting them or appreciate the guiding and facilitating role of their instructor. In distance learning situations, successful dialogue depends on “clearly defined educational targets, cooperation and understanding on the part of the teacher… [and] culminates in solving the learners’ problems” (Giossos et al., 2009, p. 2).

- **Structure**: Moore (1993) understood structure as the resulting architecture of the distance learning course. Structure describes the component parts of the course, the ways in which they connect and interlock, and the pathways that learners have to take to achieve their learning goals. The structure of a distance learning course is a manifestation of deeper attributes—the designer’s goals and objectives; the ways in which outcomes have been prescribed, assessed, and communicated; and the pedagogical philosophies that inform its design. Structure can range from flexible and open to rigid and inflexible.

- **Autonomy**: This is the degree to which learners in the distance learning environment feel empowered, capable of making their own learning decisions, and having control over the learning process and outcomes. Autonomy centres on learner self-directedness, ownership of the learning process, and personal responsibility to engage with it. It is still an open question as to whether autonomy is a pre-existing attribute of the learner or whether it arises during the learning experience; however, expressions of autonomy are undoubtedly mediated by the learning environment. Autonomy—or the experienced lack of autonomy—becomes salient within the distance learning experience. Moore (1973) observed that “the autonomous learner is not to be thought of as an intellectual Robinson Crusoe, castaway and shut-off in self-sufficiency” (p. 669).

The experience and extent of learner transactional distance results from the interaction between dialogue, structure, and autonomy. For the learner, the transactional distance is low (positive) when dialogue is high, structure low, and autonomy high. For the instructor, changing the quality of transactional distance poses a trilemma—increasing one of these three elements decreases the other two. For example, if the instructor recognizes that transactional distance is high (negative) it might be because structure is too high, which results in low dialogue and low learner autonomy. The instructor might want to improve transactional distance by lowering course structure, which would be expected to increase both dialogue and learner autonomy.

Continued lowering of structure would further increase dialogue and learner autonomy; however, the minimum level to which course structure can be reduced without destroying the course’s integrity was never provided by Moore (1973). It is likely that very low levels of structure will result in learner confusion, uncertainty, and frustration and lead to the abandonment of dialogue and autonomy (Delgaty, 2018). Ideally—or at least theoretically—finding the optimal level of transactional distance requires active negotiation and experimentation between the instructor and learner.

The transactional distance model has great appeal, but might it promise too much and deliver too little? Some researchers believe this to be the case. Gorsky and Caspi (2005), for example, felt that both theory and model have inherent internal problems, logical inconsistencies, and that the move “from abstract, formal philosophical definitions to concrete, operational ones caused ambiguity, at best, and collapse of the theory, at worst” (p. 10).

However, many academics and distance learning practitioners see value in transactional distance. Jung (2001) argued that the model “provides a useful conceptual framework for defining and understanding distance education in general and as a source of research hypotheses more specifically” (p. 527). Zhang
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(2003) found the model to be exceptionally useful but considered that it needed revision to deal with contemporary online environments and greater user awareness of connectivity. Similarly, Falloon (2011) acknowledged the usefulness of the transactional distance model but suggested revisions to “reflect the move toward using synchronous tools for distance learning, particularly its definition and view of structural elements and how synchronicity affects learner autonomy” (p. 207).

It is important to note that Moore’s (1973) theory and model have been subjected to empirical testing; however, these efforts have neither succeeded in conclusively rejecting the theory nor in validating the predicted inter-relationship between the three variables that define it (Goel et al., 2012; Vasiloudis et al., 2015).

The transactional distance model proved to be a useful way of approaching a redesign of the dynamic possibilities within my distance learning courses. In particular, the introduction of a synchronous element into these courses did much to reconfigure dialogue, structure, and autonomy. Others have also found transactional distance to be a particularly useful framework in blended learning situations whether in changing student perceptions (Elyakim et al., 2019), increasing student retention (Wankel & Blessinger, 2013), improving learner outcomes (Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014), or enhancing student satisfaction (Best & Conceição, 2017).

The Potential of Blended Learning

“Blended learning” may seem innocuous enough, but it has been the source of considerable confusion, misunderstanding, and heated discussion. The central issue is what is being blended. Some scholars and practitioners argue that the blending involves bringing together and mixing different forms of communication media, communication channels, and technologies into the learning experience—blending as structural change. Others acknowledge that blending involves different modalities but argue that the key issue is the mixing of differing teaching and contrasting learning approaches—blending as pedagogical and process change.

Although the lack of operational clarity seems problematic and demonstrates the ill-defined nature of blended learning, Driscoll (2002) argued that this lack of precision infers that “blended learning means different things to different people, which illustrates its widely untapped potential” (p. 1). In a similar vein, Graham and Dziuban (2007) noted that “the simple elegance of the blended learning concept can also be a weakness… if the focus is entirely on the mode of instruction rather than the holistic nature of the learning experience” (p. 270). Hrastinski (2019) suggested that it might be helpful if those discussing blended learning considered “using a more specific, descriptive term as a complement or replacement” (p. 568).

The origins of the term are unclear, but blended learning had emerged as a practice by the late 1990s and was often represented as a convergence—rather than blending or mixing—of traditional in-person teaching and distance online or computer mediated learning (Skrypnyk et al., 2015). These two components are stressed in what are now considered to be classic definitions:

- “The thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 96).
- “Courses that integrate online with traditional face-to-face class activities in a planned, pedagogically valuable manner; and … where a portion (institutionally defined) of face-to-face time is replaced by online activity” (Picciano, 2006, p. 97).
“Blended/ hybrid courses… blend online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and typically has a reduced number of face-to-face meetings” (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p. 5). Subsequently, in the same work, these authors defined a “substantial proportion” of the online delivery as 30-79% of the total course.

These definitions clarify the structural and technological elements which are brought together. They describe what is being combined but shed no light on how these elements are brought together or why they are employed. Defining blended learning in purely instrumental terms is understandable but it is also limiting because it suggests that “the idea behind blended learning is that instructional designers review a learning program, chunk it into modules, and determine the best medium to deliver those modules to the learner” (Hofmann, 2014, para. 2).

Oliver and Trigwell (2005) suggested that a deeper understanding of the how and why implicit in blended learning approaches lies in the multiple learning processes utilized by the learner, the inclusion of variation and variation theory in the learning environment, and the different pedagogical approaches in the instructional process. They maintained that this reinterpretation of blended learning as a process issue, rather than as a structural one, “shifts the emphasis dramatically, from teacher to learner, from content to experience and from naively conceptualised technologies to pedagogy” (p. 24). They also argued that accepting and valuing these shifts of focus “would constitute a worthwhile redemption of current interest and investment in blended learning” (p. 24).

Well designed and facilitated blended learning recognizes these shifted emphases. It attempts to provide a true blending of difference, rather than to cobble together online distance learning courses and in-person teaching for the sake of superficial variety or institutional mandate. Constructing blended learning environments requires an appreciation of the dynamics, processes, and pedagogies of online distance learning and in-person teaching. It requires an ability to integrate these differences into a seamless and synergistic whole. Designing and facilitating blended learning environments also provides an opportunity for experimentation and innovation, with cycles of revisions based on the experiences and feedback of those who have participated in these environments (Boelens et al., 2017; Bower et al. 2015; Kenney & Newcombe, 2011; Kintu et al., 2017).

MOVING FROM PASSIVE TO ACTIVE BLENDED LEARNING

The blended learning courses I teach are delivered to transnational students attending a private university in the Czech Republic. The university has a formal arrangement with the Center for International Education of a New York State College by which the U.S. institution prescribes curricula, supervises instruction, and awards its degree. The language of instruction is English.

Most of the instruction is delivered by traditional in-person teaching by local faculty at the university’s Prague campus. In keeping with the articulation agreement, most senior level and all capstone courses are taught by U.S. faculty—either through online distance learning or blended learning. Several times a year, the U.S. faculty conducts residencies in Prague to advise students, lead seminars and tutorials, and deliver the in-class portion of their blended courses.

The Prague campus is exceptionally diverse with 90 nationalities represented in a student body of approximately 550 students. The minority of students is Czech (about 30%) and the largest demographic groups are from Central and Eastern Europe. Culturally, students hold very traditional and conservative
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notions about higher education. Power distance is high, and students demonstrate considerable respect and deference towards their professors. Within this student population, distance online learning is considered inferior to in-person instruction. Informal discussions with students taking blended courses revealed that they greatly enjoyed the in-person teaching visits of their U.S. teachers—it was considered a time when “real teaching” (as opposed to online instruction) took place.

Students generally believe that the visiting faculty should have a longer residence and increase the in-person component of their blended learning courses. However, the administration recognizes that residencies are expensive. Over time, residencies have been shortened but the quantity of in-person teaching of blended courses has remained the same. As a result, in-person teaching associated with blended courses has become more concentrated and intensive. One of the results is that it tends to be detached from and less integrated with the online component of the course.

Perceived Problems and Missed Opportunities

Two blended courses are considered in this chapter: Cross Culture Management and Free Markets, Entrepreneurship, and Capitalism. Each was offered in alternate semesters and both were targeted towards senior level students in the final year of their baccalaureate degree. Typical enrolments are about 20 in the first course and 15 in the second. The first course is a requirement for the undergraduate Business degree; the second is an elective in the undergraduate Business and the International Relations programs.

Significant learning outcomes were acknowledged by students and their overall evaluations were positive. In particular, students anticipated and valued the in-person component of these blended courses. However, informal discussions with many of my students and considerable self-reflection suggested some underlying problems:

- **Dislike of online distance learning.** Students disliked this teaching-learning modality considering it distinctly inferior to in-person instruction. Students were accustomed to traditional in-person teaching and it was rated highly from a national culture perspective, especially by students from Central and Eastern Europe. It should be noted that these negative perceptions of the educational value of online distance learning are not restricted to Europe (Gaskell & Mills, 2014; Milani, 2008). Personally, I also had concerns as to whether these blended learning courses—which had been designed and facilitated for a transnational student population—were culturally inclusive and responsive (Stewart, 2019).

- **Concerns that online distance learning is too remote, complicated, and impersonal.** Somewhat paradoxically, although many students believed that online distance learning was inferior, they also complained that it was more difficult and time consuming than traditional in-person learning. There were issues of navigating the online distance learning space, knowing what to do, and knowing how to satisfactorily complete the learning tasks. I certainly appreciate that many learners feel intimidated and overwhelmed by the perceived complexity of the learning space rather than by the actual task complexity that it presents. Students, who had prior experience with online courses, indicated that they often felt uncomfortable, awkward, and challenged in these courses.

- **Perceived variation in instructor presence.** High instructor presence was perceived and restrictively located in the in-person teaching component; however, learners neither anticipated nor appreciated it in the online distance learning element. It is generally acknowledged that perceived
instructor presence throughout a distance learning or blended course is a critical element in the successful teaching-learning engagement (Lowenthal, 2016; Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017).

- **Responsibility for a positive and constructive experience.** I teach via a number of different modalities and have no particular preference for any one of them. For the learner, irrespective of the modality that the instructor employs, the learning experience must be optimal and beneficial (Berge, 1995; Northcote & Gosselin, 2017). For the majority of my transnational learners this is their first experience of either online or blended learning. They may initially approach the experience with reserve, concern, or even trepidation. Those who have taken other online courses often tell me that their experiences were not particularly rewarding. My personal goal is to provide a positive and constructive first-time online experience for all learners.

- **Return to the question: What is being blended?** Overall, my sense was that the “blended” courses that I and other faculty members were offering were blended in name only. It was unclear what constituted the “blend” apart from the deliberate co-joining of different instructional modalities. Blended learning provides many teaching opportunities and pedagogical affordances, but it seemed that these were not being fully utilized. At a personal and professional level, I agree that “blending, like its counterpart active learning, is a personal and individual phenomenon experienced by students... it should not be surprising that much of what we have called blended learning is, in reality, blended teaching that reflects pedagogical arrangements” (Dziuban et al., 2018, p.12). As such, it seemed to me that there was a need to revisit my own blends of teaching and my own pedagogical arrangements.

As I was considering how best to re-envisage my blended learning courses, I encountered active blended learning (ABL). This was advanced as a broad pedagogical approach that is applicable to all teaching-learning encounters irrespective of whether they rely on a combination of online distance learning and in-person teaching (Godlewska et al., 2019). It seemed that an ABL approach might prove advantageous in redesigning and reinvigorating my blended courses.

**SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

At the beginning of the spring 2020 semester, I decided to increase the scope and sharpen the impact of the in-person component of the blended course by instituting mandatory video conference sessions to accompany each online course module. This was to be in addition to the in-person teaching that I intended delivering during the Prague residency.

The strategy was to confront transactional distance issues by increasing the dialogue in the course, hoping that this would change the perceived structure of the course (lowering it) and increasing learner autonomy. The idea was that more explicit instructor social presence would stimulate, encourage, and support learner activity and engagement in the courses (increasing learner autonomy). Although I was unable to find any extensive articulation of ABL, I did understand that “the University of Northampton’s approach to learning and teaching, termed active blended learning, is a student-centred approach to support the development of subject knowledge and understanding, independent learning, and digital fluency” (Power & Cole, 2017, p. 668).

I utilized Zoom video conferencing to hold 40-minute weekly meetings with learners. During these meetings, I discussed course content, explaining the selection and intended purpose of material in the
learning environment. In particular, I explained the relationship between the different elements in the course content and identified narrative threads that connected them. The objective was to reconfigure structure by making it more understandable: structure as a designed space within which learning content and activities were embedded. These video conferences augmented the in-person teaching associated with the courses; however, due to COVID-19 concerns, the Prague residency was cancelled.

It seemed that restructuring the course—or rather making the structure more understandable and functional—and directing focus on course content and learning activities would promote a greater level of engagement and active learning. The desire was to restructure the learning environment, making it more flexible and negotiable—a place in which learner-initiated learning could take place rather than a repository of instructor-curated knowledge.

Learning spaces do not dictate behaviour but they do influence it and it was believed that in the restructured space, with richer dialogue and interaction with the instructor, learners would be more inclined and interested in claiming ownership of their active learning experiences within that environment. It was also believed that by using ABL, I would successfully integrate and interconnect the asynchronous and virtual in-person elements of the course in a way that was synergistic, with the resulting whole being greater than the sum of the blended parts.

I monitored student reactions and comments during the video conferences. I asked students to keep a reflective journal in which they could share with me their thoughts and reactions. I always ask students to keep reflective journals in my online distance learning and blended courses and to share these with me at the end of the semester. Reflective journals encourage students to examine their experiences more thoughtfully, to consider what they have learned, and to appreciate how they have created new knowledge (Lindroth, 2015). They are a powerful way of exploring how students approach and respond to learning.

I asked students to comment in their reflective journals on the video conference element and the degree to which they found it helpful in navigating the course, promoting their learning, and sustaining their engagement. Feedback provided from the student journals was not formally analysed. The following unattributed observations and comments were all derived from student reflective journals and transcriptions of our video conferences.

- **Increasing instructor dialogue and interaction.** The main focus of these video conferences was to explain course structure, course content, and anticipated learning outcomes. These conversations were not about selling, telling, or justifying—they centred on explaining why the learning environment was constructed in the way that it was and on sharing the envisaged relationship between course process, dynamics, and outcomes with a community of learners. The object was to provide opportunities for learners to come to terms with the course structure, appreciate its elements, and understand how structure could be navigated and negotiated. Students did not actively participate in these video conferences: they listened. However, later most students reported that the forum provided them with a great deal of clarity and understanding about course content and process.

- **Making sense of course structure.** Almost every student, irrespective of whether they had prior online distant learning experience, said that they understood what was to be done within a particular module but were not initially clear as to why they had to complete the assigned learning tasks. The video conferences focused on sharing why course modules were designed in the way that they were—on why I had selected particular content (readings, videos, etc.) and activities. For example, the *Cross Culture Management* course includes interviews with significant figures in the field in which they discuss their perspectives on what “cross culture management”
means and on how it should be taught in business schools (Szkudlarek et al., 2013). Students reported that initially it was unclear why this reading had been selected. After the video conference, they saw it in a completely different light because I pointed out that the course participants—as learners of the subject and as students in the business school—were at the center of the study. For many, the learning activity then took on a new meaning and personal significance that had not been previously considered.

- **Increasing instructor’s guiding and instructing presence.** The video conferences doubled the amount of in-person contact in these blended courses. However, the nature of the added contact time differed from in-person teaching. Teaching can be differentiated into two rather clichéd but useful ways: “the sage on stage” (traditional lecturing, transmission-centred, formal communication, and limited interaction) and “the guide on the side” (mentoring, coaching, participation-centred, informal communication, directed towards supporting, and open to a higher degree of interactivity). In-person teaching was definitely of the “sage on stage” variety; the video conference accentuated a “guide on the side” perspective. The blended course now contained both of these teaching forms and it was hoped that this would add to the variation in teaching experience in addition to increasing instructor social presence and augmenting communication channel richness.

- **Transferring ownership from course designer to course participant.** One student remarked that, in a previous online distance learning course, he had been confused by course content but eventually “figured out what the professor wanted” and completed the activity. This resonated well with others—they too had taken the path required by the facilitator without any personal appreciation of why that path had been selected. The activity “belonged to the professor” even though students had to complete it. The activity elicited no personal interest, made no connection, and created no sense of involvement. Engagement was required, but no invitation to engage was extended. Video conference discussions allowed me to anticipate such problems by explaining why elements of the learning module had been selected, what alternatives had been considered, and why the final form emerged. It was hoped that these explanations would, in a sense, transfer ownership of subject matter from me to students—content and learning activities would belong to them, they could claim ownership, and engage with what belonged to them.

- **Accentuating critical evaluation and autonomy.** Some students explained that throughout much of their undergraduate education they had been presented with ideas and knowledge as though they were established, certain, and immutable. They understood that it was the student’s responsibility to accept such knowledge. They were therefore surprised as to why I had selected learning activities that presented alternative perspectives or critically challenged received wisdom (McSweeney et al., 2016; Orr & Hauser, 2008).

Students reported having had little exposure to critical perspectives and little encouragement to come to their own conclusions. In our video conferences, we explored the complexity of theories, their validity, generalizability, and limitations. The meetings provided an opportunity, which would not otherwise have existed, to encourage learners to critically evaluate content and form their own considered opinions on many of the key elements and concepts in the course (Romani et al., 2018). This pedagogic strategy was intended to increase the learner’s sense of autonomy in the learning process.

- **Making sense of distance and learning.** A number of students raised questions about how they should act as distance learners—their role, their agenda. Many thought that distant learning forced
students to act independently but were uncertain whether this was positive or negative. Some students who had taken online distance learning courses in the past said that they had experienced isolation, minimal interaction, and a sense of being disconnected from their peers. The video conferences brought the group together with their instructor for only 40 minutes every week, but they provided social contact and reduced a sense of isolation. In discussions, many students said they found these meetings enjoyable and looked forward to them.

A consistent theme of the student reflective journals was that the video conferences established a sense of connectedness and belonging (Peacock et al., 2020). Over the semester, there was a growing sense that we were a group—albeit a group loosely bound together with a narrow purpose. Social connectedness was limited, and we never became a robust community of inquiry. Analysis of online discussions showed most students made the required number of posts and responses. It did not, however, reveal a high level of social interaction or particular interest in collaborative knowledge creation (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Lee, 2018; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2014).

- **Integrating and blending.** The video conference component provided an invaluable opportunity to integrate elements of the online distance learning environment. My initial concern was that the online learning and in-person instruction were not integrated in a meaningful way for students. Due to the unanticipated COVID-19 travel restrictions, the video conferences were the only direct contact that I had with my blended learning students. These conferences provided me with new insights about how learners looked at their online learning environment, their challenges, and the questions that they had about its structure and content. Over the semester, there seemed to be an authentic convergence of the online and in-person dimensions of these courses.

It seemed that a move towards a more student-centred and synergistic learning environment—a learning environment crafted in response to ABL concerns and considerations—resolved many of the concerns that I had previously had about these blended courses. Students reacted positively to this approach, even although most had no prior experience of blended learning or online distance learning. Many said that this had been an educationally worthwhile experience and had given them an interest in registering for future distance learning options.

Parenthetically, it might also be important to note that these courses also provided significant social connection during the COVID-19 lockdown. In the Czech Republic there was an extended lockdown during which educational institutions were closed. Students found that they had to continue with their in-person courses remotely. Many were critical of the transition and cited the difficulties they experienced when traditional lecture-based courses had to be delivered remotely without any course redesign, appreciation of distancing, or change of pedagogies. Many students, fearing that they would be stranded, decided to leave the Czech Republic and return to their home countries. These students reported that they found our weekly video conferences extremely beneficial in terms of educational continuity, commitment to learning, and mental health generally. No students dropped out or failed to meet satisfactory performance criteria.
FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This chapter is a reflection on practice and change implementation. The journey having been taken, it might be useful to examine the process and results from a research-based perspective.

Institutionally, it might be valuable to determine empirically how “blended learning” is understood and differentiated from purely online distance learning. It might be useful to appreciate the advantages and disadvantages that institutions, their faculties, and their students associate with blended learning. Given the lack of clarity in defining blended learning from a process perspective, its multiple variants, increased technological possibilities, and changing student interest, it is critical that institutions of higher education develop a more nuanced definition and a deeper appreciation of blended learning before investing in them. Such research would complement and extend the work that has already been undertaken in this area (Ibrahim & Nat, 2019).

Research is essential to compare different models of blended learning: specifically, those constructed around ABL principles and those that do not accentuate an active learning model. Such comparisons are difficult and present multiple methodological concerns, but it might be possible to determine differences in student learning outcomes, learner engagement, and overall learner satisfaction. Research indicates that learners are more engaged in, and have more positive experiences of, blended learning environments but it would be of interest to see if these are increased when ABL is employed. In particular, research might explore the degree and quality of learner engagement that takes place within the learning environment and the extent to which this leads to long-term outcomes: increased student perseverance, higher levels of learner persistence, and reduced dropout rates especially among more marginalized higher education participants (Diep et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2017; Zacharis, 2015).

During the COVID-19 pandemic many institutions of higher learning have moved to emergency remote teaching and learning. This transition may become the “new normal” in the future and it may prompt higher education to urgently examine the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning. There is widespread acknowledgement that remote teaching and learning—as presently implemented—differs significantly from well-designed online distance learning and well-considered blended learning in terms of learner engagement and learner satisfaction (Hodges et al., 2020; Zimmerman, 2020). Research is needed to investigate the factors that contribute to excellence in blended learning, which would undoubtedly include ABL, and integrate these factors into the pedagogical framework, design, and facilitation of remote teaching and remote learning initiatives.

CONCLUSION

It is easy for those who design and facilitate distance learning environments to believe that they have created learning spaces in which learners can engage and succeed. These beliefs may well be accurate and substantiated, but all too often the process is conducted in isolation and becomes self-validating. The critical issue is to involve learners in the discussion, allowing them the opportunity to talk about their learning experiences and giving them a voice, as users, in their learning space. The central issue is moving learners from passive objects of learning to active constructors of their own learning.

Enhancing my blended learning courses with video conferencing allowed meaningful discussions to take place—discussions that moved from the singular I to the inclusive we, from the designer of the learning space to the user of that space, from the instructor to the active learner. Set against a frame-
work of transactional distance, direct communication between instructor and learner increased the level of dialogue. However, the dominant strategy was to use dialogue to reduce the structure that learners encountered, thereby increasing learner autonomy.

Transactional distance provided an overarching framework for this course redesign. However, within that framework ABL proved to be a valuable approach. ABL focuses on the purposeful blending of the separate elements available into a mix that is more connected, integrated, and which provides for a synergistic reaction between the mixed elements. It suggests taking learners into their learning. It understands involvement as a natural pathway into the learning process. Involvement does not materialize, or even begin to materialize, unless learners sense ownership and become stakeholders in the educational process. Involvement and learning ownership may, in turn, prompt and support a growing engagement in learning at affective, behavioural, and cognitive levels. The blended online course can be seen as alien and distant to the learner. It can be a place where no clear or compelling sense of direction is provided. It can be seen as a place in which outcomes are specified but the pathways towards reaching those destinations are neither apparent nor articulated.

In blended courses, distancing obviously occurs between learner and teacher, but distancing also occurs between the learner and the structure that comes to represent the absent instructor. ABL provides a means by which those distances can be reduced, if not totally eliminated. But, to do so, ABL must move from a pedagogical construct to an actively employed pedagogical strategy. From my own recent experience, the introduction of a direct, persistent, and responsive channel of communication can do much to ameliorate the consequences of distancing and contribute to the engagement of the distanced learner.

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ADDITIONAL READING


KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Affordance: A design feature that is purposefully embedded in an object, or environment, in order to clarify its use, to suggest other possible uses, or to make use easier. The extent to which an affordance is utilized depends on the recognition, ability, and inclination of the user.
**Educational Setting:** The functional and administrative environment that confronts the learner in a learning experience. It includes a set of anticipated academic outcomes and a program of learning tasks, activities, and requirements that need to be fulfilled in order to successfully meet those outcomes.

**Engagement:** Coates (2007, p. 122) understand engagement as “a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience” including: (a) active and collaborative learning; (b) participation in challenging academic activities; (c) formative communication with academic staff; (d) involvement in enriching educational experiences; and (e) feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities.

**Modality:** The set of unique content structures (media and learning objects) and relational dynamics (learner-content, learner-learner, learner-instructor, and learning-interface) that serves to differentiate one learning delivery system from another. For example, face-to-face/in-person teaching and online distance teaching represent two different and distinct modalities.

**Pedagogical Framework:** The integrated set of philosophical considerations, teaching preferences, and learning values that informs and motivates the instructor in designing and facilitating a learning experience. These considerations, preferences, and values—which are usually not articulated directly to the learner—are then translated into specific teaching strategies, tactics, and approaches that allow the instructor’s broad philosophical considerations and specific educational objectives to be realized.

**Teaching Engagement:** Teaching engagement begins with the teacher’s recognition that the learner is an authentic party in the learning process. This leads to a flow of positive interest and active involvement in the learner’s creation of knowledge and intellectual progress. Although teaching engagement originates with the instructor, it cannot be fully developed unless there is a reciprocal relationship, in which both instructor and learner recognize the benefits of cooperation, advantages of sharing, and the potential for synergism in the learning endeavour.

**Teaching/Instructing:** There are two different ways of understanding teaching. The first sees teaching as an instructor-centred activity in which knowledge is transmitted from someone who has acquired that knowledge to novice learners: teaching as *knowledge transmission*. The second sees teaching as a learner-centred activity in which the instructor ensures that learning is made possible for novice learners and supports, guides, and encourages them in their active and independent creation of new knowledge: teaching as *assisted knowledge creation*. The second sense is used throughout this chapter.

**Transnational Education:** An educational experience in which learners in one national location work with an educational provider in a different country. Learning may be provided at a distance (through online distance learning); through traditional in-person instruction provided by either residential or visiting faculty of the non-domestic institution; or through educational alliances with local institutions.

**Variation:** The provision of sufficient difference between two examples to allow learners to compare, contrast, and generalize. Variation provides learners with the opportunity to identify distinctiveness and to retain this in situations of complexity. Variation theory suggests that learning is linked to the ability of progressively accommodating difference through a process of discernment.