

Foreword

Blended learning is a convergence between face-to-face and distance learning largely enabled by technological and telecommunications developments and fuelled by the need for greater flexibility in the learning environment. Many studies show that blended learning is both an effective learning model and a popular choice amongst students. Most learners want some form of face-to-face or at least real time interaction with their teacher, though they also want the flexibility which online access to materials and other students provides. This book gives ample evidence of the appropriateness of blended learning in different countries, institutions and settings.

Despite its popularity, blended learning requires more careful design and support than traditional face-to-face teaching. Many institutions have insisted that all provision is blended and this has led to lecture notes or Powerpoint slides stuck on the Web with discussion boards made available for question and answer. This is NOT what should be called blended learning.

The emphasis in this book on teacher training and staff development is a reflection of the importance of course design. In fact a move to blended learning should mean that all aspects of delivery are rethought. How should the face-to-face element best be used? How is the course content best provided? What other learning resources can be made available? What interactive technologies could be used? However, the fundamental question should be, “what is the underlying pedagogy of this course”? A purely lecture-based course usually implies a teacher-centric model, whereby the teacher is the subject expert who delivers this expertise to the students. A totally online course usually encourages a student-centric pedagogy in which the learner constructs knowledge of the content through interaction with resources, other students and the teacher. Blended learning, or the mix of face-to-face and online technologies, can go in either direction. Many teachers are unwilling to give up the power and control that a teacher-centric model gives them. Others are excited by the possibilities that technology provides to create an environment in which students can really engage with course ideas through discussion and debate, through self exploration of resources and through team work and collaborative projects.

Arguably a student-centric approach helps learners develop appropriate skills for the workplace and sets the stage for a lifetime of learning. In Section II of this book, various chapters on the educational value of online community present research on informal learning environments. A good deal has already been written on this topic – whether these are “real” communities, how to develop and sustain informal communities and what benefits and disbenefits these communities have in the workplace and for society at large. Nevertheless, it is a useful extension of the practice of blended learning to have these four chapters in this volume.

The growth of blended learning as a model of post-secondary learning seems to be assured for the foreseeable future. Hence the value of this book, based on research and representing practice in many countries and fields of learning.

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