Interpreting Experiences of Students Using Educational Online Technologies to Interact with Students in Blended Tertiary Environments: A Phenomenological Study
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ABSTRACT
This paper is part of a phenomenological study that examined teachers’ and students’ experiences using educational online technologies (EOTs) in blended tertiary environments (BTEs). Its aim was to understand how EOT engagement was experienced, to inform insights on EOT interactions, challenges, functionality and benefits. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with 10 teachers and 10 students from New Zealand and Australia, and their EOT experiences explored, under a range of different interactions. This paper reports on students’ EOT interactions with other students, in reference to four types of EOTs: Online conference tools (Adobe Connect), learning management systems (LMS) (Blackboard, Moodle), online social networks (Facebook), and online collaboration tools (Google Docs). This research helps tertiary education institutes (TEIs) understand how, why and where EOT support for stakeholders is necessary. The outcomes assist TEIs to design approaches to tackle EOT challenges, deliver meaningful EOT support, and inform institutional strategies to strengthen the future of BTEs.

KEYWORDS
Blended Learning, Online Technology, Phenomenology, Student Experiences, Tertiary Education

INTRODUCTION
Educational online technologies (EOTs) have revolutionised the delivery of online education, making a significant contribution to the global increase in demand for higher learning. In an era of unparalleled online growth, their rapid emergence, adoption and demand has engendered significant advances across the higher education sector. Traditional learning spaces have evolved into dynamic blended tertiary environments (BTEs), providing tertiary education institutes (TEIs) with a modern means through which to augment course delivery. These digital transformations signal exciting prospects for teachers and students, the key stakeholders in BTEs. Predictions about future online learning, and the extent of recent growth, along with forecasts for EOT use are discussed in the first of these six papers (Tuapawa, in press).

Despite the significant growth and demand for online learning, considerable obstacles impede the use of EOTs. Such challenges include, but are not limited to attitudinal pre-dispositions and
institutional barriers, insubstantial training, and inadequacies in instructional design support (Panda & Mishra, 2007). Other challenges include resistance to change, ineffective EOT usage, lack of motivation, technical constraints, and accessibility (Tuapawa, 2016). These challenges pose a clear risk to the future success of BTEs (Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2013), and create difficulties for stakeholders as they deliver and engage in learning.

Significant efforts have been made to better understand EOT challenges. This has resulted in considerable subject-specific research, with varied and noteworthy contributions to the literature. Some of these studies have focussed on technology integration into blended environments (Moore, 2013), affordances and effectiveness of learning technologies in higher education (Arenas, 2015; El-Khalili & El-Ghalayini, 2015), barriers to adoption of online learning (Bacow, Bowen, Guthrie, Lack, & Long, 2012), and e-learning challenges faced by academics (Islam, Beer, & Slack, 2015).

However, while “our research foundation is rich” (Passey, 2013, p. 209), not all problems have been adequately identified and addressed. The nature and extent of EOT challenges change over time, as technology advances and stakeholder needs evolve. Gaps therefore exist, and unfortunately “significant challenges are preventing widespread effective implementation” (Nagel, 2013, p. 1), which collectively concerns TEIs. Some feel that “it is the university leadership…, it is the leaders at a university who must…see that…it happens…if widespread change is to occur” (Christie & Jurado, 2009, p. 278). Responsively, TEIs, many of whom are “under significant pressure to provide affordable, sustainable approaches” have collaborated to expand their knowledge-base of the value of online technologies (Beckem & Watkins, 2012, p. 61). Educationalists, administrators, and other key stakeholders have also striven to develop and adapt their technological knowledge and skills (Gregory et al., 2010).

However, the persistence of EOT challenges suggests that some stakeholder needs remain unmet, and that further action is required. Stakeholder needs in modern BTEs have shifted and are evolving, and in an environment of rapid change, are not being understood and addressed effectively. Adding to this, Moskal et al., acknowledge the environments under which these problems arise. They observe that TEIs accept the status quo, and that “ultimately, blended learning has become an evolving, responsive and dynamic process” (2013).

While this transience may cast doubt on the on the longevity of new research, it provides strong reasons to obtain up-to-date solutions to real-time problems. The dynamic nature of TEI environments means that their relevance is dependent on their ability to evolve and adapt to the needs of key stakeholders. It is therefore imperative that they have a clear and current understanding of the EOT challenges facing teachers and students in BTEs, to deliver relevant, meaningful support. This support can be reinforced through rigorous replicable research using an approach that is attuned to stakeholder EOT challenges, and geared towards adding immediate value to decisions on EOT use.

An appropriate research method should answer the following questions effectively: 1) What are the current EOT challenges facing key stakeholders? 2) How can these challenges be understood and addressed effectively? A well-established approach to obtaining in-depth stakeholder insights to a particular issue is phenomenological examination. It is a qualitative method that closely analyses the first-hand experiences of individuals to gain a clear and effective understanding of how a phenomenon is being experienced. Compared to other approaches, it enables a set of real-life experiences to inform the reality of a situation, providing a first-hand basis from which insightful and responsive solutions can emerge.

This paper is part of a phenomenological study that examined teachers’ and students’ experiences using EOTs in BTEs. Its aim was to understand how EOT engagement was experienced, to inform insights on EOT interactions, challenges, functionality and benefits. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 teachers and 10 students from New Zealand and Australia, and their EOT
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