Chapter 3
Enhancing Student Learning through Blending Varied Learning and Assessment Experiences
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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this chapter is to compare the learning opportunities that are available in conventional and the current Web-mediated learning environment in Hong Kong in relation to some of the applications that are available in Web 2.0 and practice-based simulation. Some of these applications can provide faster access to subject-related resources, offer greater connectivity and wider interactions with stakeholders, such as students and professionals locally and overseas, and keep track of students’ learning experiences across their years of university study. Furthermore, Web-mediated assessment can provide faster feedback than conventional paper-based methods, which can streamline the process of reporting and the provision of peer feedback. The potential of and future trends in web-mediated assessment are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION
Although e-learning has been advocated in universities in Hong Kong for over a decade, most university students there experience learning through attending mass lectures and participating in face-to-face group tutorials as part of full-time campus-based programs. In the university where I worked, the implementation of e-learning in traditional teaching evolved slowly. The most common e-learning experience described by the majority of students was accessing teaching notes via a university-wide supported learning management system (LMS). However, some may have been asked to do online quizzes, hold discussions in an online forum, submit assignments through the LMS, or search for information from the Web. The LMS can be a platform for students to access information, communicate between educators and fellow students and do assessment tasks. Generally, students welcome online quizzes because they can obtain immediate feedback on their performance. In contrast, there are limited opportunities for stu-
students to be actively engaged in lectures, and the LMS may not allow learners to reflect on their learning experiences across subjects or years of university study. The aim of this chapter is to compare the various learning opportunities with some of the applications available in Web 2.0 and practice-based simulation, and to discuss the potential for enhancing the learning experience from the perspective of learning, assessment and building a portfolio of competence. Examples will be shown to illustrate some innovative practices in the university.

**LEARNING: TRADITION VERSUS INNOVATION**

When educators plan a curriculum, they are required to design what to teach and how to teach it in order to bring about desired changes in knowledge and skills. They can deploy a variety of learning challenges in their teaching in order to help students to develop professional skills and to become all-round graduates. Consequently, they need to (1) identify course aims and objectives; (2) define students’ learning needs, which include their current level of understanding of a subject and where this needs to be; and (3) to design learning activities, learning actions required and feedback provided through technologies (Laurillard, 2002). To align the assessment activities with the intended learning outcome, Biggs (2007) stresses the need to provide purposeful assessment activities when planning the curriculum.

Through face-to-face lectures and tutorials, students can interact with teachers and their peers in an environment where facial expression, tone of voice and gestures all contribute to enriched meaning in the process of communication (Tolmie and Boyle, 2000). To transfer abstract theoretical concepts, however, educators need to encourage students to engage in learning tasks that are both relevant and in context, thus allowing them to experience the dynamics of a rapidly changing modern world (Herrington and Herrington, 2006). In order to transform conceptual knowledge into practice, they are offered learning opportunities through the incorporation of a practical component in the curriculum: practising skills in a laboratory, consolidating concepts through projects, and experiencing the real working environment in local or overseas work placements. These blended learning activities aim to assist students to practise, rehearse and reflect on their actions when interacting with their peers and with professionals in the field so as to develop both professional and generic competence.

‘Blended learning’ was redefined when the World Wide Web (WWW) was found to be useful by educational communities and is now commonly referred to as mixing the face-to-face and the virtual learning environments (Alonso, López, Manrique and Vines, 2005; Garrison and (Kanuka, 2004; Hughes, 2007; Osguthorpe and Graham, 2003). Educators can now incorporate different instructional methods into traditional university programs. They can lecture on key disciplinary knowledge, while students can be involved in discussions or group debates in the web environment after class. Teachers can evaluate students’ prior knowledge of the topic, and students can be asked to do web-based quizzes before attending lectures. However, ‘blended learning’ may also refer to a combination of different modalities or delivery media (Graham, Allen and Ure, 2003; Harden and Hart, 2002). For instance, students can be instructed to conduct audio interviews and prepare a brief written or oral report of their findings in an online forum so that peer groups can share their experiences. Besides, a blended approach can provide options to meet the needs of students with a variety of learning styles, as described by Felder and Silverman (1988), who define the five dimensions of learning style as processing (active/reflective), perception (sensing/intuitive), input (visual/verbal), understanding (sequential/global) and organization (inductive/deductive). However, Oliver and Trigwell (2005)