Chapter 16

Blended Learning in the Campus-Based University: A Case Study Exploring the Student Experience of Technology for Enhancing Learning

Amanda Jefferies
University of Hertfordshire, UK

ABSTRACT

The development of the term ‘blended learning’ in academic circles has been growing since 2004 when it first emerged as a sub-set of e-learning as noted by, among others, Conole who commented on the impact of technology in the student experience when she asserted that: ‘e-learning is now no longer a peripheral activity, the province of the isolated enthusiast, but is pervading Higher Education (HE), not just as an effective infrastructure for distance courses but blended with more traditional approaches on campus.’ (Conole & Fill, 2005). This chapter firstly explores the role and importance of blended learning from the student perspective in Higher Education and secondly, from the case study described below, identifies transcultural factors which contributed to the successful embedding of blended learning in a medium-sized UK institution.

THE DEVELOPING LANDSCAPE OF BLENDED LEARNING THROUGH THE FIRST DECADE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

With the development of e-learning in the last years of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, prospective students now have more choice about where and how they might study. Instead of choosing a place to study based on the two traditional options of either studying online or studying at an institution which offers an ‘on-campus’ experience, students can now choose a blended environment which could offer the best of both an online and on-campus learning experience. Blended learning has been variously described in the literature but the one to which this author ascribes and whose description aligns most
closely with this case-study institution’s view is the description originally proposed by Garrison and Kanuka (2004): “the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (p.2).

In this chapter the author discusses her own research into the student experience of blended learning, carried out at a UK-based case study institution. The study aimed to investigate how students have used personal and institutionally provided technologies to enhance their learning and how they describe their developing confidence and ultimately their clear preference for studying with the opportunities provided by a blended environment.

The United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education (HE) Context of E-Learning and Blended Learning

Every aspect of UK society has been affected through the use of computers and modern means of communicating as indicated by a recent survey into changing societies in July 2010 (BBC, 2010). For UK-based students, this is epitomised in the expectation by their own UK National Union of Students (NUS) that all registered students in the union will have access to a mobile phone and email address and be contactable primarily through these means (NUS, 2010). Consequently it should not come as a surprise when a University Vice Chancellor comments that

Digital technologies are pervasive in contemporary society: Young people coming into universities have grown up with them and have high expectations that their institutions will provide reliable and easy access to online resources. (Beer, 2009, p.2)

Similarly the Funding Council for HE in England has stated that

Our primary focus is on the enhancement of learning and teaching: this drives our approach. Technology supports this enhancement goal, and is therefore a factor in the development of effective learning, teaching and assessment strategies. (HEFCE, 2009, p.9)

As the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has grown to become ubiquitous within our 21st century society, its impact on the student learning experience has also developed to be of considerable interest to pedagogical researchers as well as those who approach the subject from a technical aspect as educational technologists. Current research into how students experience learning with technology has attracted interest from influential groups outside academia including the UK government as identified in the recent House of Commons report (House of Commons, 2009), which followed research conducted internationally in recent years by, among other organisations, Educause (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2007) and ECAR (Caruso & Salway, 2007). These latter organisations have highlighted the research outcomes which indicate that the generation of 18 year olds now entering HE in western society is both more technically knowledgeable and confident than any previous group of students and has very high expectations of what information technologies they might be able to use for their learning. Access of the internet has risen in the U.S to the point where 93% of Americans between the ages of 12 and 17 went online in September 2009, a figure which had remained stable since 2006. In the UK a similar figure of 70% of all adults were accessing the internet regularly, as was noted in August 2010, (UK Statistics Agency, 2010).

Alongside the growth in personal technology use that is evidenced by the use of mobile phones and email, the first decade of the 21st century has been characterised by a sharp growth in the amount and the availability of information technology for
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