Abstract

Diversity, gender, cultural and personality differences among students have made University teaching a more challenging job than in previous years. Learning styles and preferences vary; and considering these differences while planning lessons ensures the effective delivery of learning. Besides, students’ nomophobia has put more pressure on how instructors plan their lessons. For these reasons, instructors in the higher education sector have been thinking of ways to make learning more interactive and motivating. One of the ways, which is on everybody’s lips nowadays, is integrating an online component with traditional face-to-face instruction. It is such integration, which simply explains what to blend learning means. Many instructors are in favour of blended learning while others are not. This poster presentation discusses what blended learning is, its pros and cons, and finally provides some hands on experience and classroom activities to help instructors integrate blended learning in higher education.

Keywords: blended learning; higher education; classroom material; face-to-face; challenges; potentials.

1. Introduction

For centuries, lectures were the most commonly used teaching approach in higher education. But Lectures or traditional teaching are now described as being passive teaching modes because they discourage students from critically filtering the delivered information. Focusing only on face-to-face interaction does not provide space for collaborative learning, nor does it allow instructors to implement higher-level thinking skills. Such a paradigm shift from traditional teaching to an online environment is considered a challenge for many instructors in higher education.

Most university students feel that whatever taught in class is boring and detached from career requirements. They usually do not perceive the classroom climate as motivating or supportive. Consequently, they attend less, cause more behavioural problems, or do not participate. At the same time, the increasing presence of technology has
changed the students’ behaviour and attitudes, and has altered the manner in which they learn and communicate in and out of class. For example, computers, smart phones, tablets, and online games have diminished the students’ attention span and distracted them from retaining information. Hence, instructors are forced to restructure the learning process and adjust their classroom material to accommodate such change, or else lectures will appear tedious to most students.

Besides, having a mixture of students with different learning preferences and styles necessitates using multiple modalities for learning in order to deliver the right content in the right form (Singh, 2003). The widespread use of digital technology has changed the face of education; therefore, it is time that higher education complies with the growing expectations to help students survive effectively in such a technologically based world. Integrating technology with face-to-face instruction can reinforce both an interactive and communicative learning environment and provide meaningful learning outcomes (Rooney, 2003; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Luckily, blended learning is versatile, so it is down to the instructor’s decision when it comes to selecting from a variety of choices, depending on the learning context, and to determining the target skills that students should master by the end of the term.

The purpose of this paper is to explain the potentials associated with using blended learning in higher education, as well as to consider its challenges. The paper starts by giving a brief definition of what blended learning is, then a discussion on why blended learning should be integrated in higher education. Following this is a list of the challenges facing such an implementation. To conclude, the paper offers some practical ideas on how to integrate technology within higher education.

2. What blended learning is

Several researchers defined blended learning. For instance, Driscoll (2002) defines to blend learning as intermixing of any instructional forms to achieve an educational goal, whereas Garrison and Kanuka (2004) explain that to blend simply means integrating classroom teaching with online experiences. Singh (2003) views blended learning as combining different delivery media to promote meaningful and motivating learning. Live chats, self-paced learning, instant messaging, social networking, blog and forums, applications, and webinars are examples of tools instructors can use to incorporate online opportunities in their classes.

3. Why blend

Even though there are challenges in terms of the feasibility and applicability of implementing hybrid learning in higher education context, a body of research supports the idea of combining face-to-face instruction with an online delivery mode. Such a combination provides better learning outcomes (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The trend of merging asynchronous Internet technology with face-to-face interaction is associated with improved pedagogy and easier access to information (Bonk & Graham, 2004). Similarly, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) suggest that blended teaching can facilitate independent and collaborative learning experiences. Blended learning builds both a community of inquiry and a platform for free and interactive dialogue. In addition, Paechter and Maier (2010) refer to how university students speak in favour of blended learning. Students being digitally literate enhance the chances of extending their lessons and conversations beyond the classroom (Kasraie & Alahmed, 2014). Instructors-led live events and webinars provide students with asynchronous content to explore in their own time and at their own pace, to be followed by classroom discussion or debate. It is evident that combining technologically mediated learning with class debates helps students gain more understanding of the subject matter, and develops their cognitive and social skills at the same time.

Diversity is one major characteristic of higher education as classes consist of different genders, cultural background, learning preferences and linguistic proficiencies. Technology supports differentiation, as there is a wide range of features that can serve different types of students. For instance, Learning Management Systems (LMS) are used to manage a learning environment in an online context. Instructors can use LMS Moodle to post readings, videos, wikis, forums and quizzes to enhance self-regulation and to increase student-teacher interaction outside the class setting. Such blended learning tools can pave the way for the negotiation of meaning, scaffolding, and collaboration (Carman, 2002). They also accommodate students with different learning needs and interests (Dias & Diniz, 2014). The features of LMS offer a diversified and integrated approach that can increase the students’
satisfaction. Furthermore, online learning encourages exchange of information, especially for introverted students. To conclude, given the widespread existence of social media, blended learning can have positive results in terms of learning outcomes in academic settings.

4. Why not blend

Reasons for not blending are various. On the top of the list comes electricity cut-outs. In most countries, educational settings do not have generators as backup; thus it might not be feasible to rely on integrating technology with face-to-face classroom instructions. Another drawback is the lack of immediate response as compared to face-to-face classroom interaction. Some students feel that they cannot connect with instructors in a computer-mediated learning setting, which results in the loss of their sense of classroom community (Vonderwell, 2003). Students do not feel they belong or have group identity. Also, some students might face barriers in terms of accessing online classroom material due to different social economic backgrounds or lack of IT knowledge (Holley & Oliver, 2010). Similarly, instructors need to be trained and/or have an expert to offer IT support while troubleshooting problems. They need to be flexible in continuously changing their course content due to the changing nature of technology. Besides, there could be cultural and social influences, and unwillingness to be independent learners, which consequently lower the success rate of blended learning. This drawback could be due to their lack of enthusiasm to learn, or unwillingness to take risks or operate outside their comfort zone. Paechter and Maier (2010) conclude that establishing social interaction and socio-emotional relations with peers, and fostering cooperative learning, would fit more in a real classroom than in a blended one. Diversity plays its role in blended learning. Khechine, Lakhal, Pascot, and Bytha (2014) look into factors such as gender and age, which affect the acceptance of integrating webinars in higher education. It is evident that younger students are more technologically equipped than the older ones.

Thus, it is important to learn about students’ needs and preferences before planning lessons. Instructors need to bear in mind factors such as socio-economic background and IT knowledge levels as well as gender and age, before incorporating technology in their courses.

5. Classroom activities

Using projects in classes equipped with technology tools supports students to be intellectually responsive while providing them with real life experiences and skills. Students can collaborate remotely through emails, cloud applications and blogs. Such digital collaboration paves the way to the workplace. Instructors can integrate online chat rooms to encourage students to have a threaded discussion or debate on a topic covered previously in class. Tools such as Moodle and web courses provide easier access to information and knowledge exchange. Instructors can encourage students to use the live chat feature in Moodle when communicating and working on a group task. There are also sites such as PBworks, Wikispaces, and Edmodo, which give instructors the opportunity to create a student-centred and collaborative learning environment. Attending webinars and live events adds interest and increases students’ motivation. Apple iTunes U is another example of integrating up-to-date material to any course. Students can listen and benefit from lectures given by top professors. There are many other ideas that instructors can use in their course to blend technology with face-to-face teaching. The choice of ideas will vary depending on the students’ needs, and learning objectives.

6. Conclusion

Although there are indicators that show the emerging need for integrating technology into face-to-face language classes, there are still some limitations that can be the subject of new research. The new generation is equipped with a digital background; thus a blended learning approach can be significantly beneficial as it will improve learning quality and increase students’ access to information. Blending technology with face-to-face instruction can stimulate learning and provide more collaborative learning experiences. It is about time that universities start adjusting to such change in order to catch up with the growing demands for both students and the workplace. In addition, since instructors aim to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed for discovery and experimentation, it is
their duty to choose the appropriate tools depending on the learning objectives. Students’ engagement, motivation and interaction are key factors to attain a successful learning process. When students can relate what they are learning to real life and personalize it, they become more intrinsically motivated. Therefore, blended learning can offer relevance to what students study in class. It also offers them an appropriate challenge.

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