

BLENDED LEARNING: MOVING BEYOND THE THREAD

QUALITY OF BLENDED LEARNING AND INSTRUCTOR EXPERIENCES

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In higher education, teaching and learning is undergoing a variety of innovations that involve the use of technology through blended learning. This pedagogical approach has been popular and expanding quickly in institutions internationally with a shift in focus from the technological aspects of learning management systems to theoretical frameworks to enhance practices in a shift from traditional to blended learning. Learners growing up in the technology-infused environment were referred to as “digital natives” by author Marc Prensky in 2001. They are defined as a generation of learners who are well skilled in the use of technology but also live with the expectation that technology is available in all aspects of their lives, at any time and anywhere. This has resulted in an important and fundamental shift in learners’ expectations and teaching in higher education settings. This dissertation study focuses on gaining a deeper understanding of blended learning, by questioning how to achieve the “thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences”

This quantitative research illustrates the complexity of educational change and the need for strategic planning for higher education institutions implementing blended learning teaching and learning. The findings added to the blended learning body of knowledge by investigating the instructors’ beliefs about the benefits and barriers to blended learning. Additional insight was obtained about the professional development practices and needs for blended learning practices and implementation. Blended learning provides flexibility for the institution, instructors, and learners. Integration of the virtual and face-to-face platforms allows both instructors and students to engage in active learning. However, this practice is most effective when there is

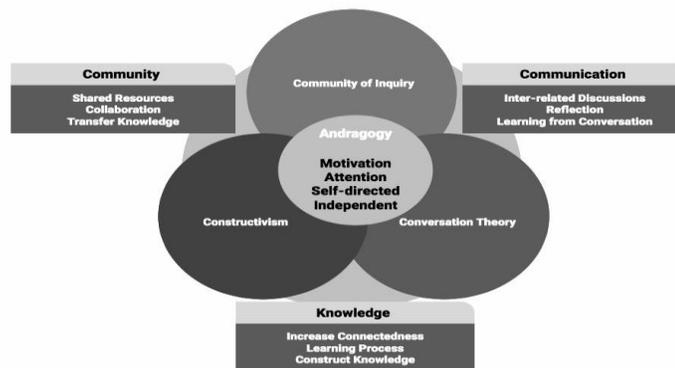
institutional support for professional development and support to redesign the course for a blended format.

The findings of this research are in alignment with existing research literature and lead to several recommendations that can guide higher education institutions in enhancing teaching and learning in blended formats. General themes that surrounded and affected the study's results, moreover the benefits and continued development of blended learning practices were identified. First, implementation of blended learning is a theme identified as a common barrier to blended learning. Additionally, professional development is not consistent in institutions, and most instructors rely on informal training. As instructors are working to enhance their practices, it is evident that there are informal steps being taken through these initiatives. However, there lacks a cohesive plan to transition from traditional teaching to the blended learning format. It is evident that this process requires much more thought and planning than taking an existing syllabus and deciding which portions are online and which will be taught in person. Much of what is blended learning is more of how the class is arranged and scheduled for in person versus online rather than careful planning, analysis, and application of various theories which support blended learning. Finally, it is evident, based on this study, that blended learning is a highly preferred platform and rated as superior and very superior when comparing traditional teaching approaches. Therefore, this modality of teaching is highly preferred approach to teaching and learning and is an area of further research and development to enhance existing practices.

It was hypothesized that technology would be seen as a barrier. However, as technology was identified by less of the respondents, instructors expressed more concern and challenges with the implementation process. Less than 12% of the instructors identified the learning management system as a barrier. Of the three themes identified in this research, implementation continues to be the greatest challenge and barrier. Blended learning has been deployed in higher education for over a decade using learning management systems. With the advanced technology systems available, there can be increased focus on the development and creation of an online environment that is integrated, innovative, and community based. The challenge is reaching the full potential added value of online learning environments in consideration of different learning theories aligned to blended learning.

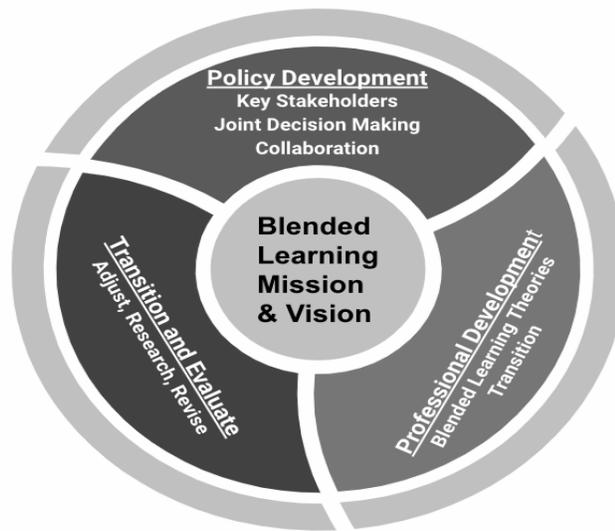
It was evident through this research that the lack of strategic planning and professional development are barriers to the implementation of best practices of blended learning. Further

research is needed to determine how these practices are planned, designed, and implemented. Additional insight is needed to formulate a definition and alignment to a theoretical framework. As instructors design and implement blended learning courses, there is a need to think “beyond the thread” and allow opportunities to increase the level of engagement through the integration of technology. In designing threaded discussions, both the instructor and students benefit from a guide in expectations as well as connection to assignments throughout the course. Additionally, with this transition, instructors need to think beyond what has been done in the traditional classroom and rethink how to blend both of these formats in a meaningful way. With this knowledge, instructors and researchers increase use of technology that correlates with the fundamental shifts in teaching, learning, and student outcomes in blended learning courses. Ultimately, as supported by this research, theoretical concepts and theories about blended learning require further exploration. For this research, the theoretical framework was based on the theories of community of inquiry, constructivism, and conversation theory which centered around the principles of andragogy in order to establish a learning environment rich with inquiry, collaboration, and communication.



As future research focuses on blended learning in higher education, it is necessary to move beyond creating a positive learning environment which is flexible and fiscally beneficial and enhance practices that allow the instructor to facilitate and design an optimal experience. This requires careful and analytical planning to create an optimal learning environment based on a framework of learning theories which encourage interactions, socialization, collaboration, and deeper levels of thinking. The strategic planning cycle will provide higher education institutions a guide and process to review and enhance practices in a systematic way. Beginning with a shared vision and mission statement about blended learning practices will provide these organizations a reference point and guide.

Strategic Planning Cycle



The overall findings of this study indicate clearly that blended learning is rated as an effective practice in higher education. A majority of instructors rated blended learning as superior or somewhat superior to traditional instruction. With this approach to teaching, instructors have identified professional development practices as a barrier to successful implementation and enhancement of this approach to teaching.

Another area of focus from this research is lack of collaboration and shared vision, and the need for strategic planning. Instructors have identified that much learning is self-directed and there is not much sharing and collaboration to enhance these practices. As institutions are implementing these courses, instructors should be included in discussions and planning to create a shared vision. In institutions of higher education, there are different levels of instructors. These shared vision and planning discussions should include all levels. Professional learning in higher education often focuses on the academic rather than pedagogy. This study supports that the greatest changes can result when instructors are given the training to determine how to change *what* is being taught and *how* it is being taught via blended learning courses. Further implications of this research indicate that collaboration should increase, and professional development opportunities should be planned to support this format of teaching.