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ABSTRACT

Evaluating the contexts, activities and relationships of participants in education is a complicated structure that necessitates numerous ideologies and levels of assessment, specifically when it comes to technological developments. Blended learning is a method of instruction that integrates offline and virtual-based education. This article highlights the characteristics of technology and features in blended learning, which enhances the learner engagement in higher education. It showcases some of the digital technologies including video encapsulation and online learning systems that may assist in learning and teaching. This paper delineates the consequences faced by the teachers of higher education while explaining the conceptualization of blended learning. It also suggests the implications that can be practiced for the optimization of blended learning evaluating the learner engagement. It also identifies methods to improve the effectiveness of the teachers in evolving demands in blended learning for higher education.

Keywords: Blended learning, Technology, Higher education, E-learning, online education

INTRODUCTION

A number of innovations are being implemented in the context of learning and teaching. It also incorporates the usage of blended learning. Blended learning (BL) technique has been widely adopted and yet is still in the beginning phases. The implementation of blended learning program takes unique space in the innovations of teaching and learning system. However, the traction of blended learning confronts hurdles for the teachers to adapt the strategies in teaching process. Several instructors may dispute on the factors that constituting 'instructional beneficial' but blended education employs digital resources to modify and strengthen the experimental process not merely reinforce it. Blended learning serves to be the symbol of difference between conventional education and virtual education, while dynamic learning is still seen as a trend. Josh Bersin opines blended learning as,

Blended learning is the combination of different training "media" (technologies, activities, and types of events) to create an optimum training program for a specific audience. The term "blended" means that traditional instructor-led training is being supplemented with other electronic formats. In the context of this book, blended learning programs use many different forms of e-learning, perhaps complemented with instructor-led training and other live formats. (Bersin XV)

There is a global demand for higher education, which expands despite regular criticisms about exorbitant costs, restrictions in accessibility, lower grades and caliber of curriculum. Blended learning is the most recent development in a growing line of technologically sophisticated instruction. The distance between the current lessons and learning methodology to that of the comprehensive transformation is far beyond in the dynamic educational sector. Faculty members of higher education can combine online and face-to-face training in different ways. BL approaches often combine in-person teaching, instructor-based online modules, self-paced learning. Despite the nature of the study, online or offline, students may engage in blended ways of learning such as autonomous study, learning through group discussions, instruction involving whole class. Station rotation, a condition in which individual learners or group, transfer among the different learning combinations on their own or as per the predefined plan. This learning method is frequently used in schools and also in higher education. Analyses of blended educational contexts were made to determine the discrepancy between educational excellence, grade disparities and gender performance variations.

Blended Learning and Enhancement of Learner Engagement

According to several researches, student factors including gender play a major effect on academic accomplishment (Oxford Group). However, studies, which look into the performance of male and female students as a significant component, are few in number. This serves as the reason to encompass more ideas in the success of blended learning. BL emphasizes actual in-person communication in the classroom through the usage of contemporary communication methods such as desktop databases, networking and internal portals. Some fundamental features of data and information are enhanced by digital technologies. Such technologies involve data storage, recovery of records, dissemination, compactness and deformability, flexibility of Education and Information Technologies and configurability.
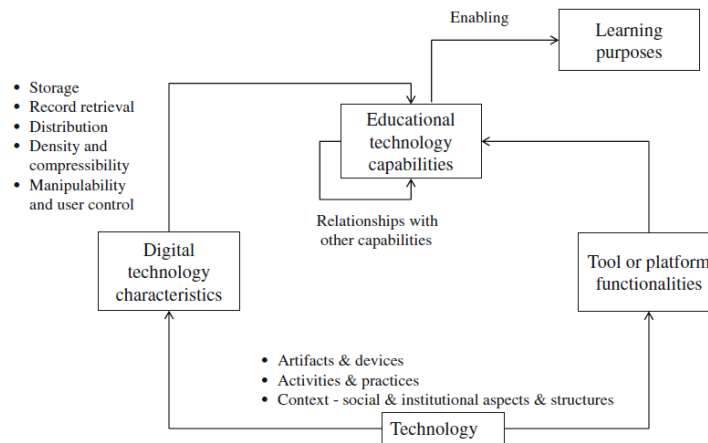

Fig.1: Conceptual Model of Technology Capabilities (Castro 4)

Figure 1 depicts a conceptual model of interaction between digital technology features, tool and platform functionalities and education technology capabilities. Educational technology capabilities (ETC) are described as a collection of common characteristics found in many digital technologies. These capabilities enable a variety of learning objectives. The key idea is that capabilities are created on a unique blend of technological traits. Results from such approach may give birth to different mechanism for assessment. This approach may provide ETCs as a framework to assess and analyze technological deployments and its successive ventures. Thus technology has been playing and continues to work as an important role, which occupies the central position in providing education to the learners of higher education even outside the classroom. All nations thus are ready to implement remote educational technologies by utilizing several online and mobile platforms that is remarkable.

According to Donaldson and Conrad, the authors of *Engaging the Online Learner*, the learner's involvement in the course, whether referred to as communication, interaction, or social integration, is necessary if an online learning system is to be more than a lecture-oriented course in which communication is solely between the learner and the material or the student and the educator. The authors' idea of the engaged learning is explicated as,

Engaged learning stimulates learners to actively participate in the learning situation, and thus gain the most knowledge from being a member of an online learning community. Activities can also serve as memory cues. On several occasions, students have reported remembering the lessons learned from an activity in order to trigger long-term memory relative to the recall of basic concepts. One learner stated that she could not answer a key midterm question until she thought about the associated activity, this caused her to remember the concepts that the activity presented, and the activated memory allowed her to organize and respond to the item in question. (Donaldson and Conrad 7)

It is evident that the students may not always depend on the lecturer or the educator to provide them with knowledge. They do not have to be inactive knowledge seekers to be reliant. They become an active knowledge creators rather than absorbers in an online course. In such a way, they take immense responsibility for their personal experiential learning. The traditional tasks of the educator such as providing additional sources or materials and directing discourse, moves to the learners in the learner-centered atmosphere. The adoption of educational practices that promote the transition in responsibilities and the growth of self-direction is essential to succeed in a virtual learning atmosphere. A virtual learner in higher education immediately becomes acquainted with the technology in BL. The learner also cultivates a greater sense of personality than in traditional classroom. When the degree of familiarity is not attained, the learner will abandon the particular process of learning in exasperation.

Cardinal Tools Assisting Blended Learning

BL involves tools to carry out the curriculum. Although technological tools should not be major emphasis when organizing an activity, employing efficient way of carrying it out will be significant to its sustainability. It is important to discern to be aware of the choice of communication tool. The idea of using synchronous and asynchronous communication tool is critical in both online and offline learning. The participants of any course may have to deal with synchronous or actual interactions. Asynchronous communication takes place at different instances. Students or any learners of higher education have the intimidation to gain real-time responses to our communications in today's highly competitive community. Instructors of higher education opt for synchronous interaction. The reason behind such action deals with the influence of conceptual classroom framework. Many educational institutions have now implemented blended learning. Teachers who are interested in BL programs may find it beneficial to recognize which edtech tools can be chosen for the practice and implementation. According to Katrina Bushko, there are several tools that help teachers of higher education to enforce the teaching strategies especially in BL. Given below are some of the edtech tools that can be used for BL.

- **Popplet** – Popplet is web-based software that allows you to create mid maps, diagrams and charts. It helps the learners of higher education to improve their organizational strategies and skills of the learners.
- **G Suite for Education** – It is formerly called as Google Apps for Education. It can also be classified under SIS tools. The Suite includes all of Google's tools while comprising Google Classroom. It is a learning management system which educators utilize to incorporate their education system or the syllabus of the course.
- **NWEA MAP** – It is a student development and skill excellence assessment system. It is used to measure student performance on a regular basis, which enables them to quickly determine potential pitfalls and customize their admonition to help oneself or group of learners based on particular requirements.
- **i-Ready** – It is a K-12 reading and mathematics tool which employs the student, a responsive evaluation to determine the level of the learners. Teachers of higher education use i-Ready diagnostic tests not only to monitor a learner's progress throughout his learning, but also to exercise instructional strategies.
- **Edmodo** – It is an academic platform that offers a forum for integration, teamwork, mentorship for K-12 schools and teachers. Edmodo is educator centralized software when it comes to architecture and theory.
- **Kahoot!** – Kahoot! is an interactive learning medium which is based on games and is utilized in educational institutions organizations and schools. It may be used in the classroom to review students' knowledge for authentic evaluation, or as a respite from the regular classroom activities.
- **Edgenuity** – It is primarily recognized for its online curriculum, despite the fact that they provide a wide range of services. These classes include everything from access points to electives. It is usually conducted by a virtual educator. Edgenuity is also used by higher education institutions to provide self-paced programs that are tailored to each learner on their effectiveness of performance.
- **Nearpod** – Nearpod is a flexible tool allowing students to engage with the curriculum. It involves reality tours and 3D exploration. It comprises of polls, open-ended quizzes and matching pair activities. It enhances education in both online and offline classes.

Consequences of Blended Learning and Transition of Teacher's Approach

Access to educational technology and innovations remain difficult with innovative digital technologies. One of the claims of virtual learning is that they will enhance access to unconventional and underprivileged students by providing a plethora of educational materials and experiences to people who may have restricted access to on-campus higher education. The teacher's role in BL evolves from knowledge distributor to professional guide and mentor. However, this change does not imply that instructors are less essential or perform a submissive role in their pupils' education and career. Classroom teaching conventionally has been teacher-directed with some variations. The introduction of BL made the classroom teaching student-centric and individualized. BL gives teachers a more detailed and reliable view of how each learner of higher education is performing. Teachers get the chance to build and improve student-teacher relationship as a result of more consistent and personal teacher engagement with individual learners in BL. The trust that comes with intimate connections may provide the instructors with insights to their student's personal issues. Those insights may enable the teachers to reassure and coach the students through obstacles that frequently act as barriers in learning process.

Teachers, while also supervising and interacting with small clusters and whole classrooms, examine, scrutinize and evaluate students' progress and technologies to determine personalized learning strategies for each learner. They discover opportunities for learners and engage them with difficult tasks, which activate them to greater standards. The instructors thus become a genuine educational designer utilizing the potential of the internet technologies to make their content oscillate with the learners of higher education. According to Charles Dzuiban, Charles R.

Graham and Nicole Sicilila, authors of a research article on BL, the evolution of teaching style can provide a huge impact in the learning process, which they opine,

Learning analytics, adaptive learning, calibrated peer review, and automated essay scoring (Balfour 2013) are advanced processes that, provided they are good interfaces, can work well with the teacher— allowing him or her to concentrate on human attributes such as being caring, creative, and engaging in problem-solving. This can, of course, as with all technical advancements, be used to save resources and augment the role of the teacher. For instance, if artificial intelligence can be used to work along with teachers, allowing them more time for personal feedback and mentoring with students, then, we will have made a transformational breakthrough. (Dziuban, Charles, et al. 3)

When technology integration is joined with competent, talented teachers, it results in a classroom where instructors can develop dynamic interactions and target their emphasis where learners require the most. Teachers of higher education may use their time interacting, engaging, guiding, making suggestions and eventually assisting all the learners in their educational experiences. Thus many researches show that the performance accomplishment of each program improves, when the instructors are flexible to implement, accept and appreciate integrated technology in courses along with the curriculum. It also states that having a global understanding for instructional technologies provides teachers with an insight to cohesively converse the usage of technology and the tools that expedite the learners of higher education.

CONCLUSION

This article thus determines the impact of blended learning model on both the educators and the learners of higher education. The emphasis of both online and offline communication provides a greater result in the learners' educational accomplishment. The analysis of Educational Technological Capabilities (ECT) serves as an element in attaining the learner engagement. The learning outcomes of BL thus delineate the role of a teacher that has been transformed from a formal educator to a professional guide and mentor. The Study provides the idea of improvisation in educational institutions with reference to the tools and technological advancements that can be made for the implementation of the blended learning. However, the study limits itself to the information and communication concept of education. It proves that the teachers and educators of the higher education have to build the course's online learning component with the consideration of the students' requirement.

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