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Instructor Approaches to Blended Learning: A Tale of Two Business Schools



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ABSTRACT

The body of academic research on technology-supported learning is growing rapidly, with much of the focus upon student learning effectiveness. This paper addresses the gap in educational technology literature on the examination of instructor characteristics. We shift the focus from student outcomes to instructor input, pedagogy and their strategy of technology selection. In particular, we explore instructors' approaches to blended learning, pedagogical aims and instructional design. Our study of management academics at two UK business schools reveals that blended learning adoption varies greatly. Based on forty semi-structured interviews with management academics, we find that this adoption depends on personal predispositions of academics towards educational technology. Personal understanding and interpretations of the blended learning phenomenon cluster into four distinct groups: traditionalist, pedagogy-centric, techno-centric and cautious, and instructional design and delivery preferences vary widely between groups. The findings of this study demonstrate that there is a wide variation in instructor approaches to blended management learning and that manifests itself markedly in the pedagogical strategies and instructional design and delivery of management education.

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1. Introduction

Research into technology supported learning, both in its eLearning and blended learning forms, in management education has proliferated over recent years. There have been dramatic conceptual, methodological and analytical advances in the field (Arbaugh, Desai, Rau, & Sridhar, 2010; Jones & Kerr, 2012). Much is now known about the strategic imperatives and resource requirements of learning technology and there have been various attempts to define and measure 'success' and 'effectiveness', mostly framed in terms of quantitative metrics of student performance (Jones, Moeeni, & Ruby, 2005; Klein, Noe, & Wang, 2006; Kleinman & Entin, 2002). The research focus has gradually shifted away from pedagogy to strategy and practice.

Technology supported learning takes various forms. Pure online modes (such as pure distance learning programmes), exploit the web for content delivery; there is no expectation of synchronous interaction with faculty; and learners are broadly self-motivated and self-regulating (Jones et al., 2005; Tsai, 2010). Blended learning entails a combination of off- and online methods and is the predominant mode of contemporary technology supported learning (Baugher, Varanelli, & Weisbord, 2003; Bonk & Graham, 2006). Firmly embedded as a cornerstone of teaching and learning strategy, it 'combines

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instructional delivery in a traditional face-to-face context with online learning, either synchronously or asynchronously (Gribbens, Hadidi, Urbaczewski, & Vician, 2007, p. 741). In blended learning, faculty devise teaching and learning strategies that purposively include both traditional face-to-face encounters (in lectures, seminars, tutorials and supervisory sessions) with virtual modes of delivery, the latter including both asynchronous content delivery such as slides, cases, seminar notes; podcasts, blogs, videos, mash-ups, synchronous discussions, and a simultaneous mix of synchronous face-to-face and online instruction (Turner, 2015). In this paper we argue that the literature on blended learning often focuses on fragmented applications of technology in classroom (e.g. (Jones & Kerr, 2012)) and the pedagogical value of blended learning may be lost owing to the enthusiasm about technology, and mistaking the novelty of technology for its pedagogical value. Studies on blended learning provide examples of blended learning evaluations and how it stands up to scrutiny of its efficiency. For example, Bentley, Selassie, and Parkin (2012) present evaluation of a blended learning MBA programme. Their conclusions centre on the importance of the 'instructors' role in the design, delivery, communication and their technological aptitude in blended courses. The roles of students and instructors in various delivery modes have been explored at length (Brady, 2013), the role of the instructor in blended courses and their differences in personal approaches to technology adoption are not understood fully. Following the gaps identified in (Berger & Tapol, 2007; Williams & Williams, 2010), we refocus the research lens by examining the pedagogical benefits of blended learning from the perspective of faculty who use it. We seek to contribute to the literature in two key areas. Firstly, to provide insights into instructors' views of blended learning:

Research Objective 1: Identify faculty approaches to and views of blended learning - there is a gap in the literature concerning the extent to which instructors embrace blended learning.

Secondly, to examine instructors' pedagogical aims in exploiting blended learning as part of their teaching and learning strategy:

Research Objective 2: Explore pedagogical aims and instructional design. Extant research is generally more concerned with blended learning as institutional strategy and, in our view, differentiates inadequately pure online and blended environments. We examine the strategic use of blended learning as a means of achieving pedagogical aims, focusing specifically on teaching approaches and chosen tools; to date research in this area has focused upon student participation behaviours.

We believe that in addressing these specific gaps in the literature this article makes a significant contribution to current understanding of the use of blended learning in management education.

2. Technology and blended learning

Technology has become an accepted component of higher education; few universities today have no online provision. Underpinning the widespread embrace of learning technology is acceptance of a largely instrumental, utilitarian approach to education in which learners take greater responsibility for outcomes and a key measure of effectiveness is the extent to which graduates are prepared for the new information age (Alavi & Gallup, 2003). Stecyk and Chojnowski (2010) report that both learners and instructors rate the efficiency and quality of blended learning twice as high as traditional methods. For Zabriskie and McNabb (2007), a key driver of elearning in universities is the increasing cost of delivering instructional content through traditional means in the face of high student demand, declining resources and shortages of qualified instructional staff. Elearning offers the prospect of lower operating costs and economics of scale through standardised content and delivery methods (Salisbury, Pearson, Miller, & Marett, 2002) and a shift of emphasis from teaching to learning. In Alavi and Gallup (2003) analysis, strategic and financial imperatives are driving the uptake of technology supported learning modalities; consistent with prevalent economic and social discourses in which education must prove its worth by demonstrating economic as well as intrinsic value. As Lehtinen, Hakkarainen, LipponenRahikainen, and Muukkonen, (1999) observe, one of the basic requirements for education is to prepare learners for participation in a networked, information society in which knowledge will be the most critical resource for social and economic development.

For Hwang and Arbaugh (2006), extant studies do little to illuminate the nature and characteristics of effective interaction; it is this general lack of scrutiny of elearning initiatives, universities embrace as a strategic necessity, coupled with inadequate delineation of pure online and blended learning within the learning technology research field that leads us to query the overwhelmingly positive findings of extant research. We propose that the primary concern of this emergent field should not be framed dichotomously in terms of online/offline nor overly focused on quantitative effectiveness metrics, but rather how technology is exploited in blended learning contexts to underpin the pedagogical objectives of management education and how it might be further exploited to reinforce pedagogical outcomes in the future. Serwatka (1999) and Tschirzits (1999) were careful to suggest that the emphasis should be upon the 'transformation' rather than automation of teaching and learning; this transformational approach is supported by Garrison and Kanuka (2004), Graham (2007) and is voiced by Williams and Williams (2010). For Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) the blended environment allows educators to refocus from unilateral delivery to improving student learning, for example, by providing information in advance, hands-on, real-time experiments or posting discussion questions. Many blended learning management programmes are taught primarily through Harvard Business School-style cases studies, and seamlessly yield themselves to online adaptation (for an in-depth review see Rollag (2008)) for which curricula uses 'a mixture of face-to-face and online learning experiences' (Rollag, 2008, p.501). This module design is also advocated by Arbaugh and Benbun-Fitch (2006) who argue that online communication tools, including discussion boards and instant messaging, should occupy a focal point in online instructional design of blended courses instead of being a supplementary or 'bolt-on' activity. The growth of online learning community facilitated by instructors through structured communication is seen by these researchers as the driving force towards improving learning outcomes.

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