



Students' experiences of blended learning across a range of postgraduate programmes

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SUMMARY

The article describes the students' experiences of taking a blended learning postgraduate programme in a school of nursing and midwifery. The indications to date are that blended learning as a pedagogical tool has the potential to contribute and improve nursing and midwifery practice and enhance student learning. Little is reported about the students' experiences to date. Focus groups were conducted with students in the first year of introducing blended learning. The two main themes that were identified from the data were (1) the benefits of blended learning and (2) the challenges to blended learning. The blended learning experience was received positively by the students. A significant finding that was not reported in previous research was that the online component meant little time away from study for the students suggesting that it was more invasive on their everyday life. It is envisaged that the outcomes of the study will assist educators who are considering delivering programmes through blended learning. It should provide guidance for further developments and improvements in using Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and blended learning in nurse education.

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Introduction

Currently the challenge in nurse education is to make programmes convenient, accessible and attractive to a wider cohort of students (Dorrian and Wache, 2009). E-learning and blended learning have the potential to meet this challenge. Little is reported about students' experiences to date. The aim of this paper is to describe postgraduate nursing students' experiences of participating on blended learning programmes in an Irish University.

Background

Although blended learning is widely used in nursing and social sciences (Jonas and Burns, 2010; Marsh et al., 2008; Green et al., 2006), there is no agreed definition. In the context of this study blended learning is defined as a combination of face-to-face and on-line learning. On-line learning involves providing students with access to learning resources, facilitating communication, and collaborative working among and between students and academic staff (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; Volery and Lord, 2000). Effective interactivity facilitates the promotion of active learning environments, the

provision of greater feedback for educators, and enhances student motivation (Markett et al., 2006; Muirhead and Juwah, 2003).

On-line offers a rich virtual workspace in which interactions occur among students either in real time (synchronously) or through discussion boards (asynchronously) (Volery and Lord, 2000). Advantages include increased student satisfaction (So, 2009; Green et al., 2006), increased knowledge (Campbell et al., 2008; Sung et al., 2008) and reduced staff workload (Dorrian and Wache, 2009). Students appreciate the flexibility and convenience of being able to work in their own time and location without the need to travel (Ireland, et al., 2009; Welker and Berardino, 2005; Song et al., 2004; King, 2002).

On-line delivery is not without its problems. These include: the lack of non-verbal cues and cultural markers in on-line student discussions (Twomey, 2004; Hara and Kling, 1999), increased demands on time (McVeigh, 2009; Welker and Berardino, 2005) and technical difficulties. Technical difficulties are one of the most commonly reported frustrations with on-line education (Welker and Berardino, 2005; Song et al., 2004; Hara and Kling, 2000; 1999). Information Technology (IT) ability and access may affect students' ability to engage in the on-line discussion (King, 2002). The ease of access and navigation of any Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is crucial in the effectiveness of online education (Volery and Lord, 2000). Also, traditional teaching roles become less clear; and some educators may focus on the technology and disregard the learning goals (Twomey, 2004).

Students require clear guidelines and preparation prior to starting any on-line programme (Song et al., 2004). Pre-course assessment in IT skills and continuous student support is helpful (McVeigh, 2009).

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Students may become frustrated and anxious by poor communication and delayed feedback from educators (Welker and Berardino, 2005; Aspden and Helm, 2004). The educator has to be approachable and willing to provide prompt feedback to students (Ireland et al., 2009).

Educational context

All postgraduate programmes in the academic year 2009/2010 were delivered through blended learning for the first time in the School of Nursing and Midwifery. Sixty modules for the programmes were blended over a two-year period. The programmes cover a wide range of specialisms including: emergency, palliative care, oncology and mental health nursing. The blended learning approaches that were adopted combined on-line teaching and assessment and face-to-face workshops on the campus. The blend includes:

- A 2-day induction on the campus which introduces programme requirements. Other activities included informal meetings with the module teams, familiarisation with University policies, navigation of the VLE and participation in electronic literature searching tasks.
- Each module is set up individually on the VLE and comprises of:
 - An on-line learning guide that includes resources in meeting programme learning outcomes.
 - An asynchronous BLOG, facilitated by a module team. The BLOG aims to support student learning by seeking their comments, answering questions and reviewing responses to learning activities. The number of students on a BLOG varies depending on if the modules are core or specialist. In the larger core modules, students are subdivided into smaller groups of approximately 20–25 students. This enables contact across a smaller number of students and allows the facilitator to track individual student progress and needs.
 - Specific subject content is delivered in two-day face-to-face workshops for each module.
 - Assessment of the modules varies. These include coursework, practical assessments, and online submission of e-tivities.¹ Feedback on e-tivities is given within a minimum of two weeks following submission.
 - An on-line end of module evaluation.

Redesigning the modules included writing up learning guides, devising meaningful learning activities and selecting key readings. A fundamental challenge was learning how to support student learning in a VLE, and using the technology effectively. Staff were eager to maintain a quality learning experience for students; hence the rationale for the study.

Method

A qualitative interpretive descriptive design was used to gather and analyze data from participants based on Thorne et al. (2004) work. This approach was in keeping with the aim of the study. Focus groups were used to collect the data. The focus groups captured the interaction between participants (Kitzinger, 1994). A semi-structured interview guide developed by the research team was used to guide the discussion (Appendix 1). The guide addressed; experience of programme delivery, programme content, programme delivery and student support. All students (n = 146) registered on the nine postgraduate nursing programmes were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. An information sheet was attached to the email informing them of the purpose, process, potential benefits and harms, data collection procedures, time commitment, voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw, confidentiality, and contact details for additional

information. A total of 51 students returned signed consent forms (RR 35%) and agreed to participate in the focus groups during the lunch hour of one of the face-to-face workshops, six months from the end of their programme. Refreshments were provided. To reduce any potential ethical conflict, seven focus groups were facilitated by four educators, who had minimal involvement with the blended learning programmes under review; and who had extensive experience facilitating focus groups. Prior to conducting the interviews, all participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any time; permission to tape record the interviews and transcribe verbatim was obtained by each participant. The length of the focus group interviews ranged from 36–72 minutes. The study was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee.

A short demographic questionnaire was used to collect supplementary data to describe the sample. The majority of participants were female (n = 48) with between 2–30 years clinical nursing experience. Most participants were in the 23–50 year age category and only nine had previous experience of blended learning.

Data analysis

All data was transcribed verbatim by a qualified transcriber. The resulting transcripts were scrutinized and read thoroughly to check for accuracy of transcription by the four members of the research team who conducted the analysis. Thematic data analysis, described by Burnard (1991) was used to analyse the data. This involved a few stages; 1) individual researchers thematically coded the data. This involved reading and re reading the transcripts and assigning open codes, axial codes and finally generating tentative categories. These tentative categories included 'accessibility', 'flexibility', 'managing the blend', 'autonomy', 'responsibility', 'expectations' 'technology' and 'learning and application'. 2) The four researchers compared their individual codes and categories and a coding framework was established. 3) The transcripts were reread, in light of the agreed coding framework, and coded accordingly.

Rigour was maintained using the principles of credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility and trustworthiness were enhanced by having the researchers initially independently code the data and develop and agree a coding framework. To further enhance credibility, a copy of the findings was presented to participants (n = 4) to provide them with an opportunity to comment on the accounts and the researchers interpretations of same. All agreed and confirmed that the findings accurately captured and reported their experiences. Dependability and confirmability were also ensured by keeping a detailed record of the research strategy, analysis and the resultant findings.

Findings

This section presents two predominant themes, each containing sub-themes concerning the participants participation on the blending learning programmes (Table 1). Selected quotations from the interviews

Table 1
Themes and sub-themes.

	Themes	Sub-themes
1	Benefits of blended learning	Accessibility and flexibility Autonomy and responsibility Application to practice Enhanced learning
2	Challenges of blended learning	Feeling isolated Maintaining a sense of community Invasiveness of blended learning Feeling overwhelmed Technological problems Blogging and e-tivities. Feedback

¹ The term "E-tivity" refers to a conceptual framework for discussing interactive learning activities (Salmon, 2002).

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