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REVIEW ARTICLE

SHIFTING PARADIGMS OF CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING AND E-ENABLED PLATFORMS FOR 21ST CENTURY TEACHING AND LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

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The article addresses the different definitions and view of different schools of thoughts concerning blended learning. It also outlined brief history of blended learning and reasons for blended learning. The procedure for designing course of instruction and the guiding question to the considered while designing blended learning were outlined. Due to the increased access to information through new technologies along with the need to prepare students to compete in an emerging information-based global economy call for the need for a pedagogical approach to professional development of teachers for the paradigm shift. The article further enumerates the elements that need to be considered in the professional development of teachers. The advantages and limitations of the blended instructions were equally listed. It was concluded that despite the need and demand to adopt blended mode of instructions in education, the knowledge base of blended instruction is still in its infancy stage hence there are myriad areas that call for better understanding before setting upon a definite mix of web based instruction and its face-to-face counterpart.

KEYWORDS

Continuous Professional Development, Blended Learning-enabled Platform, Teaching, Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Blended Instruction is defined by a researcher as a computer-mediated instructional strategy that leverages technology and focuses on the student-teacher relationship to enhance independence, engagement, and achievement [1]. This student-centered, teacher-facilitated strategy includes online and experiential components to strengthen classroom learning. In blended instruction, blending not only includes technology but authentic experiences as well. A group of researchers stated that "Blended learning should be viewed as a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment, rather than a ratio of delivery modalities." [2]. Simply put, blended learning approach is an integrated instructional approach that combines face to face interactions within the classroom and online activities. A researcher stated that a practical working definition of blended learning is a kind of instruction that combines instructional modalities, method, face to face and online [3]. Blended learning is a student-centered approach to create a learning experience whereby the learner interacts with other students, with the instructor, and with content through thoughtful integration of online and face-to-face environments. This definition reflects the idea that BL is the combination of instruction from two historically separate models of teaching and learning: traditional F2F learning systems and distributed learning systems [4]. It also emphasizes the central role of computer-based technologies in blended learning. A well-designed blended learning experience thoughtfully

organizes content, support materials, and activities via synchronous and asynchronous learning events, all of which are delivered in a variety of modes ranging from traditional lecture to online tutorials. Communication and collaboration are necessary functions of a blended approach. Because formative assessment is embedded throughout learning events, the learner assumes responsibility for his or her learning.

In contrast to teacher-centered, rote-learning approaches, blended learning environments provide multiple ways to access content and to demonstrate mastery. As a result, they lend themselves more readily to differentiation of content and process. A blended approach also gives the learner the opportunity to be more responsible for his or her learning, which creates a learning situation that may be more meaningful on an individual level [5]. Because the learner comes to construct knowledge through personal effort, she or he is more likely to demonstrate understanding beyond rote memorization, and to transfer what she or he has learned to new settings. Above all it has the capacity for improved pedagogy, increased access to knowledge, fostered social interaction, increased the amount of teacher presence during learning, improved cost effectiveness, and enhanced ease of revision.

2. HISTORY OF BLENDED LEARNING

The concept of blended learning, in which multiple learning environments and activities are combined, has existed for quite some time. Long before the advent of computers and social networks, teachers created blended learning experiences using simple technologies like paper and pencil.

Educators have always crafted learning experiences that incorporate a variety of activities in different environments for the purpose of reinforcing learning material. For example, consider the concept of the apprenticeship. Prior to the hands-on experience, the apprentice studied the work of the master through observation, conversation, and possibly through reading.

Contemporary definitions of blended learning take into account the role that technology can play. Technologies like CD-ROM and later the internet made it possible to create new environments for learning, new opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous collaboration, and new modes of delivery for learning materials, self-directed guides, and tutorials. More recently, blended learning figures prominently in conversations about online learning. In this context, blended learning represents a convergence of online and face-to-face experiences. Interactions across both environments are mitigated by space, time, fidelity, and personal interaction.

2.1 Why Blend?

Incorporating the blended learning approach allows and stimulates students to be active, bringing about a shift from lecture to student-centered learning. It encourages interactions between students, student-teachers, and the various resources used for instructions further added that it facilitate citizenship education that is the ability of individual to interact online, demand citizenship education (all inclusive) education for anywhere, anytime and personalized learning amidst scarce resources [6]. To change rural communities' educational landscape so as to meet special needs of economic, social and political development.

The approach enables teachers to plan a lecture that will be interesting, engaging and fun for the students. Topics are prepared using creative multimedia tools and presented through the online medium and classroom sessions to engage students in interactive activities like discussions, debates, oral presentations and the clarification of queries. Schedules are flexible and convenient as students can access the online content anytime, anywhere.

2.2 Designing a Blended Course

Creating a blended course may require preparation by combining e-Learning tools (everything from video streaming over the Web to e-mail) with traditional classroom training to ensure maximum effectiveness by the teacher [7]. Prior to framing the course, teachers need to bear in mind the content being taught, the needs of the students and the methods of instruction that best suits the content. Through Professional development where the teacher in delivering web-based professional learning content, helps to sustain teachers by using a diversified approach focused on continuous professional development Teach cape® [8].

Teachers should then decide and allot the content that has to be taught in class and through the online medium. For example, components like introduction to a class, presentations, question and answer sessions, etc. are better presented face-to-face whereas components like course information, quizzing, etc. may be presented online. Thus, they need to follow the standards of online courses that includes formulation of course objectives, content outline and inclusion of appropriate instructional techniques. Schedule of classes and content for each class should also be planned in advance It is important to structure and integrate the two modes effectively as students should feel that the course is a unified blend instead of a collection of techniques from both the modes.

The following questions offer additional insight into the creation of a blended experience.

1. What are the learning outcomes of this experience? i.e., What skills, knowledge, and dispositions should students develop as a result of the experience?
2. What topics and subtopics must be addressed by the entire learning experience in order to achieve the learning outcomes?
3. What are the learning events (activities) chosen to address the learning outcomes?

4. What portion of content is accessed during each learning event?
5. What is the most appropriate mode for delivering that content?
6. In what setting does the learning event occur?
7. What supports and teacher input are needed for that learning event?
8. Where should formative assessment appear relative to each learning event?
9. How does the learning event relate to previous learning events and those that follow?
10. How will learners transfer their change in understanding from one learning event to another?

2.3 Pedagogical Approaches to Professional Development

Increased access to information through new technologies, along with the need to prepare children to compete in an emerging information-based global economy, promises to fundamentally reshape school practice as we move into the next century [9]. Despite increased access to computers and related technology for students and teachers, schools are experiencing difficulty in effectively integrating these technologies into existing curricular.

According to the U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment (1995), the lack of teacher training is one of the greatest roadblocks to integrating technology into a school's curriculum. That same report revealed that most school spend less than 15 percent of their technology budgets on teacher training and development.

Thus, a scholar argue that school systems have not taken into account the training and supporting of teachers needed to appropriately and effectively use computer-related technology in the classroom to remains relevant. The following elements are the pedagogical considerations that the professional developers and school administrators should take into account planning professional development initiatives [10].

2.3.1 Time

Teachers must have substantial time if they are going to acquire and, in turn, transfer to the classroom the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively and completely infuse technology into their curricular areas [11]. However, Harvey and Persky (2005) suggest there is an overwhelming sentiment that schools have yet to create the kind of training and practice time teachers need in order to learn how to effectively integrate technology into the curriculum.

2.3.2 Taking into account varying needs

When designing staff development sessions on technology, individual differences must be addressed, and individual strengths supplemented [12].

2.3.3 Sustained staff development

To help teachers properly complete the "learning cycle" of computer-related professional development, training must be ongoing and systematic [13].

2.3.4 Flexibility of professional development opportunities

Staff training programs designed for the technological development of teachers are effective when programming offers flexibility and is not based on a "one size fits all" philosophy. Teacher training programs must not expect that all participants will leave with the knowledge and skills to facilitate the transfer of learning to their individual classrooms. Instead, a group of researchers' states that effective staff development for technology requires flexible content and opportunities [14].

2.3.5 Provisional support

One of the most effective ways to align staff development with

district/school goals is to invest in someone with experience in both technology and curriculum.

2.3.6 Collaborative development

The environment in which the effective technological development of teachers occurs is built around collaborative learning. Because teachers vary in their level of expertise at the time of their training, the context which surrounds their technological professional development must provide a non-threatening environment that is sensitive to the individual teacher's level of expertise and experience. As a result, a previous researcher suggests that collaborative problem solving, and cooperative learning must undergird the approach to technology learning for teachers [15].

2.3.7 Linking technology and educational objectives

The technological training must have an instructional focus that guides teachers to think first about their curriculum which, in turn, helps them address how to integrate technology into the curriculum [16].

2.3.8 Intellectual and professional stimulation

The model of staff development for technology must put the teacher/learner at the center of the learning experience and provide a meaningful context for learning.

Teachers need instruction that engages them and forces them to reflect on the benefits and limitations of teaching with technology. When teachers engage with others in ongoing reflection about what they have learned about the instructional use technology, they are more likely to critically evaluate their own pedagogical practice and redesign their instruction [17].

2.4 Advantages and limitations of Blended learning

Blended learning provides an integrated platform for online and face to face learning, and hence it should have both the merits and demerits of these two approaches [18].

2.5 Advantages of Blended Learning

Apart from offering Social benefits of classroom training focused on learning that gains the most from face to-face interaction. Individualization benefits of self-paced, online learning for content that requires minimum interaction [19]. 1 Cost savings through minimizing time away from the job and travel/classroom/instructor expenses. 2 Improved retention and reinforcement through follow-up mechanisms on the Web. 3 Greater flexibility to meet the different learning styles and levels of your audience it also has the following advantages [20-22].

1. Less expensive to deliver, affordable and saves time.
2. Flexibility in terms of availability – anytime anywhere. In other words, e-learning enables the student to access the materials from anywhere at any time.
3. Self-pacing for slow or quick learners, reduces stress and increases satisfaction and retention.
4. E-learning allows more affective interaction between the learners and their instructors through the use of emails, discussion boards and chat room.
5. Learners have the ability to track their progress.
6. Learners can also learn through a variety of activities that apply to many different learning styles that learners have.
7. It helps the learners develop knowledge of using the latest technologies and the internet.
8. The e-learning could improve the quality of teaching and learning as it supports the face-to-face teaching approaches.

9. It changes educational landscape of the rural communities

10. Providing citizenship education (all-inclusive education) for economic, social and political development.

3. Limitations of Blended Learning

1. Lack of a firm framework to encourage students to learn.
2. A high level of self-discipline or self-direct is required, learners with low motivation or bad study habits may fall behind.
3. Absence of a learning atmosphere in e-learning systems.
4. The distance-learning format minimizes the level of contact, e-learning lacks interpersonal and direct interaction among students and teachers.
5. When compared to the face-to-face learning, the learning process is less efficient.

4. CONCLUSION

Despite its high demand and the rapid adoption of the blended mode of instruction in higher education, the knowledge base of blended instruction is still in its infancy stage. There are myriad areas that call for better understanding before setting upon the definitive mix of the Web-based instruction and its face-to-face counterpart. An instructor of hybrid courses needs to have a deep understanding of how people learn, what students' learning styles are, and what technology can provide for the successful design of technology-integrated learning environments.

Not all blended instruction is effective for all learning environments, the success of blended learning is dependent upon understanding the nature of the instruction, algorithmic preparation of instruction based on the analysis of the course, locating comparable online (technology) components to traditional counterparts of instruction, understanding strengths and weaknesses of different learning modalities, and incorporating pedagogically effective educational theories into the course design. Ideally, this will lead to readers reflecting on their own instruction and considering ways to develop a successful blended course.

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