

## **Do I prefer to see a face?**

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Providing students with a variety of learning approaches may offer a competitive edge to higher education institutions. When instructors provide lecture type or face-to-face experiences, there is risk of students experiencing cognitive overload especially if presented materials are crowded with information that is redundant (Author, Ayres, & Sweller, 2012). Blended learning may offer a positive contribution and may reduce the risk of cognitive overload hence provide an opportunity for students to engage in a variety of delivery modes of instruction where F2F is not the only form of learning. In the context of the UAE, more and more higher education institutions are showing interest in such innovative teaching and learning approaches. But as universities witness the emergence of new technologies that offer unconventional approaches to teaching and learning, there is a need to offer classes that are unconventional in nature as well. No research in the UAE has been conducted to examine how students feel about blended classes they are enrolled in. The research presented aims to present students' experiences of a blended learning course offered at a federal institution in the UAE. Specifically, the research attempts to analyse student's reflective journals of their own blended learning experience using a qualitative approach.

This research is necessary as it allows for more informed decisions related to the adoption of e-learning as an alternative mode of instruction. This study can help in identifying the developing feelings of students enrolled in blended classes that can in turn be an important finding as far as future enrolment in blended classes is concerned.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative method was used employing text analysis of student's online reflective journals in order to investigate student feelings towards a blended learning experience. Journal writing, which involves analyzing, criticizing, evaluating, and identifying challenges, has gained much attention in the literature (Daniel, 1992). Journal writing involves the stimulation of thoughts and allows one to look into oneself, one's feelings, and one's actions (Wood, 2012). It was anticipated that by looking at students reflective journals, students were provided a voice to express themselves and a way of conversing with themselves as they attempted to make sense of their blended learning experience.

## ***Participants***

The study was conducted at a federal university in the UAE with 72 undergraduate female Emirati students who were enrolled in an education course. For the majority of the students, this class was an elective. As such, the participants were from the mixed majors offered at the university. Though the language of instruction was in English, the participant's native language was Arabic, but they all were able to read, write, and speak in English. The participants were familiar with some e-learning tools such as Blackboard, but for all the students this was their first blended learning experience. The mean age for the participants was 20.5 years.

## ***Procedure and data analysis***

All students enrolled in the blended learning class received various supporting and guiding tools at the start of classes which were F2F in order to help support their novel learning experience. For example, a detailed course guide that included screenshots and various images was provided to show how students could navigate and effectively use Blackboard for (a) content related materials, and (b) assessment related materials. Blackboard was used as the basic

platform for the various online and virtual activities such as discussion board. The students were encouraged to write reflective journals and although they were encouraged to contribute to their journal at least once a month, they were allowed to add entries whenever they felt they had something to write or share. Students were reminded that the journal was about them - their feelings, thoughts, views, and reactions towards their blended learning experience.

The data used for this study was drawn from the student's journal entries on Blackboard. The participant's reflective journals were analysed using constant comparative analysis or the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Based on the grounded theory approach, categories are not imposed by the researcher; rather, these categories for theorizing the data emerge from respondent's answers - the written reflective journals in the case of the current study. Categories were generated by frequently comparing new statements with previously reviewed statement.

## **Results**

Three major categories in relation to how students felt towards their blended learning experience emerged. The first theme was *F2F Preference* and this referred to individuals who preferred F2F class sessions throughout the blended learning experience. The second category that emerged was *Blended Preference* which referred to individuals who had positive feelings towards the blended learning experience - preferring a mix of both F2F and online sessions. The last category was *Converted Preference* and this referred to individuals who preferred one specific learning approach (e.g. F2F or online) at the beginning of the semester, and then had a different or converted learning approach preference towards the end of the semester.

On a general note, this study showed that the participants had mixed feelings about their blended learning experience with the majority preferring F2F learning, although they did not

mind some online class sessions because it was a new experience, encouraged independency and allowed for flexibility.

### **Limitations, implications and future research**

The study is not without limitations. It is worth noting that when students enrolled in the class, they were not aware that it would be a blended class. It would be interesting to see if students would have still enrolled in the class as an elective had they known it was not going to be a typical university F2F class prior to enrolment. The study is gender unbalanced with only female participants. The study is also restricted to one institution and one blended class and therefore results cannot be generalized. Similar studies could be carried out with other courses and varying concentrations. One could argue that some courses that are heavy in content may lend themselves better to a blended learning approach. Still it would be interesting to continue investigating students blended learning experiences, so long as there are blended learning opportunities.

## References

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