

238

Blended learning: next steps, new opportunities.

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Research Domains

Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract

Following the global Covid - 19 pandemic, the Higher Education sector had to quickly adapt to hybrid forms of teaching and learning that posed challenges; but may also have created opportunities for new, previously unimagined ways of working and studying. This research initiated as a study of the emergence of the new academic ecology. The focus was on new pedagogy and its implications for staff and students; the use of digital media in supporting blended teaching and learning and ways of working with and relating to each other. Following a mixed approach design and using online questionnaires and interviews, we aimed to capture the experiences of staff and students. Findings indicate the majority of respondents preferred a blended model that relies heavily on a face-to-face pedagogy but incorporates online elements. Our research found this duality allowed for greater inclusivity for both students and staff.

Blended leaning, Higher Education, Pedagogy, New ecology

Full paper

The context of our study

The Covid 19 outbreak in March 2020 was unexpected, unprecedented and had multiple and profound effects upon Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). It created a new ecology that has fundamentally changed our ways of studying, working, and relating to each other (Lashley et. al., 2020). As an evolving system with its own ecology, universities were forced to quickly adapt to social distancing and then lockdown, with an overnight transfer to online classes for teaching and learning (Driessen, et al., 2020). At a technical level, issues with online access and a lack of appropriate software often inhibited student and staff engagement with online activities. We and other universities had to adapt quickly to the covid crisis and initiated working groups, and staff were told to adapt existing platforms like Blackboard to deliver online teaching. Online teaching and learning imply a certain Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) (Rapanta, et. al., 2020), not always comparable to the pedagogical principles of face-to-face teaching and learning. Staff and students needed support to understand and engage with the new ways of teaching, learning and interacting online.

The aims and purpose of the research

The overarching aim of our study was to gain an understanding of some of the profound changes in the academic environment, to study the emergent conditions in the new ecology and explore the impact of these upon the student experience and the academic community. From this, our purpose was to identify a pedagogy out of what started as a chaos of covid and consider the eclectic mix of what worked well and how we could take this forward. Our initial, explorative study considered impacts in three areas:

1. Online teaching and learning: students and staff shared their experiences
2. Relationships, interactions, engagement, identities:
3. Organisational aspects: broader, governance, organisational, managerial aspects

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was taken to give insight into both student and lecturers' experiences and preferences during this period of online teaching and learning. Surveys and interviews were conducted with both students and lecturers within the faculty, as well as lecturers from other universities, to provide a broader comparative perspective of the online experience. 63 staff and 193 students in the faculty, and colleagues from other HEIs responded to the questionnaire. One to one interviews and focus groups included 58 students (including student representatives) and 26 tutors, along with 8 tutors from other institutions.

Outcomes

The detailed findings and outcomes of the research have implications for developing a pedagogy that realises a number of issues that are complex, varied and, on occasions, contrary. As a multi-disciplinary team of researchers, the data collected resonated to produce lively and refreshing debates challenging us to think about what constitutes a new ecology and whether a new pedagogy has emerged.

a) Online teaching and learning

Post pandemic, certain departments within universities suggested that 'lessons were learned' and that we should continue with a hybrid model, whilst others favoured going back to entirely face to face teaching. Reports of the success of the online experience came from students who, prior to the pandemic, found attendance in person difficult due to various factors. The use of technology was seen as both a cause and solution to isolation predicated by learning during covid.

b) Relationships and engagement

Findings indicate an important intersection between staff and students' technological ability and the availability of equipment, along with the importance of maintaining morale. Personal obstacles in the lives of students and staff, such as health concerns, illness and bereavement (Driessen, Beaty et al., 2020) but also economic uncertainties have had an impact on relationships, interactions and the well-being of all members of the academic community (Marinoni & Van't Land, 2020).

c) Organisational aspects

What has emerged can be seen within the context of meeting the needs of managerialism via a discourse of power, whereby the promotion of blended learning aligns with other managerialist agendas. Changes were presented by management as necessary to meet the needs of diverse student cohorts and their expectations of the use of technology.

In summary, the outcomes from the research, which is ongoing, highlights some of the strategies and staff/student experiences that inform a possible vision of online and blended teaching and learning for the future. The research continues to be a partnership and dialogue with both lecturers and students within a changing ecology of learning and teaching.

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