Blended Learning Delivery on a Suite of Masters-Level Research Courses in Education (0327)

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Blending face-to-face and online delivery offers opportunities for tertiary students and academics alike (Stubbs et al. 2006). Previous studies suggest online materials complement traditional forms of instruction and can help achieve more effective student learning (Lei 2010), and that online learning activities can have a positive impact on achievement in the face-to-face classroom (Lopez-Perez et al. 2013, Lim & Morris 2009, O'Toole & Absalom 2003).

Blended learning lets students study material at a place and time of their choosing (O'Connor et al. 2011) and exposes them to a greater variety of learning tools, enhancing their overall experience (Eugenia 2008). Online tasks help teachers clarify information and concepts presented in the classroom (Brothen & Wambach 2004). Blended learning can enhance students' ability to reframe and reinterpret existing knowledge, values and beliefs (Cooner 2010). Students have described it as 'personally meaningful' (Mayes & De Freitas 2006), a characterization likely attributed to its flexibility and individual customization. Many have reported referring back to online lectures to reconsider them on the basis of new experiences. Osguthorpe & Graham (2003) found blended methods to improve pedagogy, increase access to knowledge, foster social interaction, increase the teacher's presence in the learning process, improve cost effectiveness and enhance ease of revision. Chung & Davis (1995) reported that blended instruction provided learners with greater control over the pace of learning, instructional flow, selection of resources and time management.

Student opinions on blended learning are mixed but largely negative. Many view online tasks as additional or extra-curricular work, choosing not to participate (Orton-Johnson 2009). Many who do engage eventually abandon online learning tasks, perceiving traditional texts as more 'authentic' sources of academic knowledge (Forsyth & Archer 1997, Johnson & Kiviniemi 2009). Students who lack home Internet access are also profoundly disadvantaged (Cooner 2010). Students often experience frustration, difficulty and confusion utilising web-based study materials (Hara & Kling 2000, 2002; Parkinson et al. 2003). The literature, however, does not provide a clear picture of specific challenges for specific modes of

technology. Indeed, most research evaluates innovations in course design or teaching methods (Sharpe & Benfield 2005) rather than student experience. Without a clear understanding of how students use and experience online resources, the design of blended learning materials is often based on assumptions. Care needs to be taken to select technological approaches and conventional teaching methods that enhance the targeted learning outcomes. Student access is important in this process as well, and requires various ways of accessing content (Davis & Fill 2007, Topper, 2007).

Since 2010, the Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh has delivered three courses, on understanding, conceptualising and planning research, for MSc students across several taught postgraduate programmes, to predominantly international cohorts of 300 to 500 students each year. To make the most of staff resources, these are delivered using a blended learning model, with videos and other VLE content supported by face-to-face workshops. This study examined the strengths and weaknesses of this delivery model from the student perspective, investigating how students view blended learning in relation to other course formats.

The study drew on a sample of the 2013-14 MSc cohort at Moray House using a combination of surveys, diaries and focus groups throughout the year. A baseline questionnaire collected demographic data and information on prior experience of studying online. The 239 respondents were 90% female and 10% male (reflecting the student body overall) and represented 28 nationalities, including 170 from China. 82% of respondents had not lived in an English-speaking environment previously, and 57% had no previous experience of studying online. 98% said they use the Internet regularly, 77% felt confident about using it, and 53% felt comfortable with learning online.

Focus groups were conducted with 19 students halfway through the academic year and 8 students after they had completed all three courses. A small number also completed reflective diaries aimed at capturing changing perceptions of course challenges over time.

The first groups were asked to rank by usefulness, and then to discuss:

Watching videos
Reading video transcripts
Reading books and articles

Using the VLE discussion board
Having tutor input
Participating in group work and face-to-face discussion

Nine out of nineteen students nominated the videos as most or equal-most useful, noting their repeatability, their value for improving listening ability in English, and their informal and entertaining aspects. The video transcripts were also valued for improving understanding, particularly when lecturers spoke with accents or at a pace that was hard for non-native-English speakers to follow.
Most nominated the discussion board as the least useful resource. Students felt they were not properly initiated into using it, and that it was hardly ever used. Some gave cultural reasons for not using the board, saying that Asian students worried about asking questions that may bother others, and preferred to email tutors instead. Face-to-face discussion was considered a more intense form of discussion.

In the final groups, students were asked whether they had revisited any of the materials from the three courses to help with their assignments, other courses, or dissertation. Little of the uniquely online material was revisited; most nominated the readings.

Some students now saw value in the discussion boards, however, even if they had not used them. The questions and comments posted by others were seen as useful, and questions posted by tutors to spark discussion were particularly important. Regular tutor input was seen as key to improving discussion boards' usefulness. Anonymous posting would also be welcome, encouraging those with lower confidence to ask questions.

In conclusion, we observed some of the problems with blended learning reported in the literature, but there were indications of practical steps that could address them. Participants valued videos for extending the readings and for their repeatability. Transcripts enhanced their value. Discussion boards went largely unused, but stronger tutor input and direction, plus a provision for anonymous posts, could turn this around.

Students will not use an online resource unless they see value in it. Improved direction from and engagement by course developers, organisers and tutors adds value.

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