Serial number 0104

Title   Student responses to blended learning: valuing relationships

Session   What is valued in higher education? Identity, equity and engagement in and around the neoliberal university (Lomer)

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Abstract

A Midlands University is in the process of introducing an institution-wide pedagogical shift towards Active Blended Learning (ABL). ABL involves learner-centred interactive tasks in both online and face-to-face interactions. Initial implementation has led to variable student participation in online tasks. This qualitative research project explored students' perceptions of ABL. It established that key success factors identified in previous literature also applied to this institutional context, which were not being universally applied. In particular, students said that relationships with staff were key to their engagement with online components. Where students felt that staff respected and cared for them and their grades, they were more likely to complete online tasks. This was expressed in setting high expectations, designing bespoke content and providing feedback on online tasks. Given sector-wide moves towards adopting blended learning, it is essential for teaching staff to consider the personal factor in designing and implementing ABL.

Paper

A Midlands University is in the process of introducing an institution-wide pedagogical shift towards Active Blended Learning (ABL). In a year's time, it will be moving new town centre premises designed on a radical plan which prioritises small-group technology-enhanced teaching spaces. The entire university is therefore transitioning to using ABL.

Active learning is founded in constructivist pedagogy (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978; Wegner-Trayner, 2014) which requires students to do meaningful learning tasks and think about what they are doing. Examples include discussion, projects, problem-based, enquiry-based and collaborative learning. Blended learning (also known as hybrid or mixed-mode) combines face-to-face interactions with online activities (Alammary et al, 2014; Buckley, et al, 2010; Wu, et al., 2010;). Different approaches to blended learning include: 'flipped classroom' (Bergman & Sams, 2012), problem-based learning (Greener, 2015), online group learning (Rovai and Jorden, 2004), scenario-based learning (Clark and Mayer, 2012) and structured online tasks/ e-tivities (Salmon, 2013). Online components usually include activities like discussions, wikis, blogs, videos, quizzes, or virtual classrooms, embedded in virtual learning environments. Good blended learning systematically develops learner-centred interactive tasks in both online and face-to-face contexts (Salmon, 2013) which are responsive to students' situational learning needs (George-Walker and Keeffe, 2010). ABL, at its best, scaffolds independent learning and autonomy in a seamless learning cycle within and beyond the classroom, integrating technology to build digital literacies. This approach is deemed critical for progression through higher education and into employment.

The data for this research project was collected after two years of re-designing modules and programmes to encompass ABL principles but prior to the site transition. Whilst significant progress had been made and there was evidence of innovative practice, there remained problems with the management of the change and the implementation of ABL design principles. In particular, student engagement with online components has been highly variable, and this research project aimed to find out why, through qualitative focus groups with students from faculties across the university. It confirmed the findings of previous literature around the importance of clear design (Swan, 2001) that is transparent and well communicated to students (Porter, et al, 2016). Students preferred interactive tasks (Al-Hunedi and Schreurs, 2012; Wu, et al., 2010) with clear relevance for them (Henrie et al, 2015). Curriculum links (Mayes and de Freitas, 2004), particularly to learning outcomes (Salmon, 2013) and assessment were key for students. Furthermore, the clarity of instruction provided (Lim, et al., 2006) and regular discussion and evaluation of online tasks with students (Swan, 2001) was critical to engagement. It appears that students' perspectives on their role in learning are in flux and reflect a limited understanding of the pedagogical model.

In particular, here students felt a strong, positive relationship with staff, they were more likely to participate in online tasks. *"He really wants every student to do really well."* This was often framed in terms of 'care': *They actually care about your grades, to be quite honest with you, rather than treating it as a 9-5 job and 'Let's just bloody get out of here'."* Students are deeply concerned about marks and grades, often to the exclusion of other aspects of learning. When online learning was neither assessed nor apparently visible to the tutor, they viewed it as 'useless'. Thus care for students is evidenced in caring about their grades.

Some students reported feeling isolated when the staff-student relationship felt like it was being distanced or undermined *" I don't think there's a great connection between tutors and students."* Where relationships with the tutors were lacking, students reported that this directly affected their engagement: "*I don't feel like I have a good relationship with my teacher at all .... Therefore I find it harder to do the work."*

The sense of a positive relationship that evidences care in an ABL model was formed, in part, through support of and feedback on online tasks. Where promises of support and feedback were not fulfilled, students felt particularly let down, and students said they would be less likely to engage in future as a result.: *"We were told that they'd read them and feedback to us personally but they haven't…None of it".*

Relationships were also formed through tutors' manner in the classroom:
> *"S1 Real trust.*
> *S2 Yes, we have a good relationship with [staff name redacted] so we're not afraid to ask him questions."*

This sense of positive rapport encouraged engagement : *"I don't do it (online tasks) because I want to do it, I do it because I want to make [staff name redacted] happy! [laughter]".*

Sometimes a positive rapport based on friendliness and easy-going responses led students to feel so 'relaxed' that they were less inclined to complete tasks. In contrast, a 'strict' approach of following up and identifying non-completion was more likely to encourage engagement. It seems that effective rapport is experienced when students feel supported and cared for but when expectations are high and boundaries clear. Students also felt cared for when they perceived tutors to be investing time and effort into developing bespoke materials. Students valued seemingly trivial signs of care, such as responding to email, stopping to chat in the corridor, and following up on online tasks.

Implementing a strategic approach to pedagogical change within an institution of this size is challenging, particularly with respect to communicating effectively. Two years in, there is still progress to be made with ensuring that ABL is successfully implemented. It is increasingly critical that Universities develop a global reputation for pedagogic innovation in light of recent sector changes and global competition. Our research identified areas of excellent practice of ABL, as well as practices which discourage student engagement. The human factor of personal relationships between staff and students needs particular attention because students, and indeed staff, equate technology with a lack of relationship or human contact. In implementing ABL, therefore, staff need to build positive rapport in face-to-face and online environments. This is likely to encourage greater student engagement.

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