

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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The Tangled Web of Active Blended Learning

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Research Domain: The Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract:

The benefits of blended learning are well documented (Fong et al, 2005), however, some concerns remain particularly around engagement, time management, independent learning and motivation (Fong et al, 2005; Vaughan, 2007). The current study interviewed 6 non-engaging students about their experiences of blended learning. The results indicated three main themes that highlighted a complex web of Blended Learning. Students mainly spoke about “The Downward Spiral of Disengagement” which related to the difficulty in returning to study once students had missed one session leading to them falling significantly behind and being unable to catch up. Students also spoke about pedagogic preferences and their misperceptions that blended learning only equated to online sessions with no interaction with academic staff. Results are discussed in line with current literature around digital pedagogy and Blended Learning alongside interventions to improve understanding, perceptions and attitudes as well as engagement and achievement using ABL.

Fong, S.F., Ng, W.K., Ong, S.L., Atan, H., & Idrus, R. (2005). Research in e-learning in a hybrid environment: A case for blended instruction. *Malaysian Online Journal of Instructional Technology*, 2(2), 124-136

Vaughan, N. (2007). Perspectives on blended learning in higher education. *International Journal on E-Learning*, 6(1), 81-94.

Paper: Background

The University of Northampton’s new pedagogic model emphasizes the use of Active Blended Learning defined as learner-centred, interactional and containing a suitable balance of face-to-face

and online activities. The benefits of blended learning are well documented (Fong et al, 2005; Vaughan, 2007), however, some concerns remain. Vaughan (2007) argues that some students may have difficulty in coping with the responsibility of more independent learning as well as taking initiative in active engagement with course materials. These concerns also link with potential difficulties students may face in management of time and self-motivation (Fong et al, 2005). Therefore, these aspects could lead students to become disenchanted and demotivated thus leading to a lack of engagement and achievement. Student engagement in higher education is broadly defined as student's involvement with academically meaningful activities (Kuh, 2001). It is argued that by combining face-to-face and online learning environments universities are providing students with wider opportunities to engage (Boyle, Bradley, Chalk, Jones, & Pickard, 2003; Brennan, 2003; Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003) which theoretically should see an improvement in motivation. However, the subject area of psychology at the University of Northampton has been trialling aspects of ABL for the last 3 academic years with students consistently disengaging from the ABL elements. Delialioglu (2011) found that the style of blended learning was a far greater predictor of student engagement than individual learners therefore this study considers why students are disengaging from ABL and how we can improve the student experience, thus enhancing engagement, motivation, retention and achievement.

Methodology

6 non-engaging level 5 psychology students were invited to take part in a semi structured interview focusing on their experiences with an active blended learning module after its completion. Students were interviewed by a fellow student employed as a research assistant. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis to identify common and linking themes.

Results

The results indicated three main themes that highlighted a complex web of Active Blended Learning. The main discussion points within the interviews related to "The Downward Spiral of Disengagement" where students discussed how missing one session can often lead to complete disengagement from studies due to fear of being unable to catch up. This discussion was linked closely with a second theme of "Pedagogic Preference" where participants discussed independent learning styles and high levels of internal motivation. Within the same theme students talked about a negative mindset in relation to ABL. If students already view ABL negatively it will be harder for academic staff to change their minds and engage them in studies. Very much linked with this is the final theme of "Muddied Vision of ABL = All Online". Students were assuming that the new pedagogy meant less contact time, greater difficulty in meeting tutors and greater online presence (and face-to-face absence). The students also discussed, at length, the volume of work and fear around ABL modules leading to far greater effort to keep up.

Discussion

Greener (2008) suggests, “Blended learning requires confidence in learning, choosing familiar ground, being prepared to be open... and working together in a safe and supported situation with both face-to-face and online support.” It appears that the students who have disengaged from blended learning in the current study are not confident in learning or are prepared to be open. Students instead discuss their preference for face-to-face teaching alongside their lack of self-esteem at becoming and maintaining independent learning. What can also be learnt and applied from the current findings are strategies to halt and potentially reverse the downward spiral of disengagement as well as interventions to increase students’ knowledge base of what is required.

References

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