

Communication streams on the blended learning journey: developing educator capability for blended delivery

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1. Abstract

The TAFE Queensland learner cohort is diverse with forty-one per cent aged over thirty, and seventy-five percent are working or seeking work. These and other factors influence different learning styles requires a flexible delivery of teaching. Blended learning is regarded as a teaching approach that combines the effectiveness and socialisation opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment (Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal 2004: 3). TAFE Queensland is exploring how educators might best develop their capability to use blended learning approaches in the delivery of training. Strategies to overcome educator resistance and develop capability to apply blended delivery approaches for blended learning will be discussed in this paper. This research is delivered from the perspective of a visiting scholar from China, and the study will be replicated in Chinese education institutes. A comparison of findings between Australia and China will be presented in the paper as well.

Key Words: blended delivery, educator capability, communication

2. Introduction

Developments in learning technologies have impacted teaching approaches worldwide. Evidence shows that a blended learning approach can reduce costs, improve learners' academic performance and improve instructor success in achieving learning outcomes (Hollands 2012; Garrison & Kanuka 2004; Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2012). However, there are many challenges when implementing blended learning in real teaching and learning environments. This paper describes the findings of a research project investigating educators' perceptions, attitudes and current application towards blended learning and blended program delivery in TAFE Queensland. It is delivered from the perspective of a visiting scholar from China, and the study has been replicated in Chinese educational institutes.

Comparison of findings between Australia and China are also outlined in this research.

3. Literature review

3.1 What is blended learning?

Blended learning, (or hybrid or mixed mode instruction) is generally seen as delivery of course content using both face-to-face instruction and online media. However, the definition of blended learning is “murky” (Ocak 2011, 690). Ocak (ibid.) collated parameters to define and distinguish blended delivery, including the portion of the content online and the technology used (including computer mediated).

Instead of defining blended learning, Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, and Francis (2006, 18) synthesized eight dimensions of blended learning, including delivery different modes (face-to-face and distance education), technology (mixtures of web-based technologies), chronology (synchronous and asynchronous interventions), locus (practice-based vs. classroom based learning), roles (multi-disciplinary or professional groupings), pedagogy (different pedagogical approaches), focus (acknowledging different aims), direction (instructor-directed vs. autonomous or learner-directed learning).

This project relies mostly upon the work of Mehmet Ocak (2011) and Dziuban, Hartman, and Moskal (2004, 3), who recommend that blended learning “should be viewed as a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technological enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment”. They suggest blended learning should be approached not merely as a temporal construct, but rather as a fundamental redesign of the instructional model with the following characteristics:

- A shift from lecture- to student-centred instruction in which students become active and interactive learners (this shift should apply to the entire course, including the face-to-face contact sessions);
- Increases in interaction between student-instructor, student-student, student-content, and student-outside resources; and
- Integrated formative and summative assessment mechanisms for students and instructor (Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal, 2004, 3).

3.2. Distinguishing blended learning from other instructional approaches

The diverse modes of e-learning in terms of form and application including online, flipped and blended delivery are often confused. Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal, (2004) recognise delivery approaches as a *continuum* ranging from fully face-to-face to fully online. Where each delivery item sits on that continuum depends upon many factors.

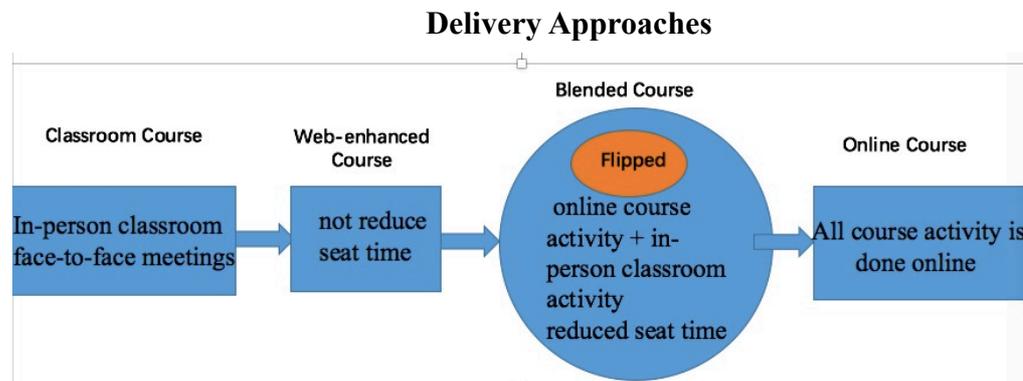


Figure influenced by Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal, (2004) and Sener (2015).

Online delivery describes when course activity including instruction and peer-to-peer activities, assessment and feedback is conducted online using tools including virtual classrooms; learning management systems and digital libraries. Sener (2015, para.13) notes “purely online courses totally eliminate geography as a factor in the relationship between the student and the institution.”

Blended delivery combines face-to-face and online instruction, allowing for individual reflection and face-to-face collaborative team work. The delivery approach may be determined by the optimal learning environment for each activity. It is a type of web-enhanced classroom instruction but also classroom-enhanced online instruction. Both digital and physical are blended to some extent and are mutually enhancing. The Online Report Card (2016, 7) – a benchmark online education survey - defines blended delivery as having “between 30% and 80% of course content delivered online.” However, we believe it’s not the percentage of content online that is significant, it’s more the way the course is designed. The two components (online and face-to-face) of blended learning need to be balanced and facilitate rather than inhibit each other.

Flipped delivery is a form of blended delivery where the educator puts the content and theory online for students to learn and reflect on at home, in their own time. Face to

face class time is then spent on practical activities. The educator's role becomes one of responding to questions and encouraging higher order thinking as students apply the theory they have learned before class.

4. Purpose and Method

There is much literature discussing the advantages and challenges of blended delivery. (e.g. Fitzgibbon & Jones, 2004), however the development of educator capability to practice blended delivery to improve learner experiences is less discussed. This research project "Building Educator Capability for Blended Learning" aims to explore blended learning and blended delivery in TAFE Queensland in order to assess needs for developing educator capability.

To better understand the current situation regarding blended learning at TAFE Queensland, we conducted five in-depth qualitative interviews with education leaders statewide - who represent and spoke on behalf of educators in their regions. In one region we could not access an education leader and so we spoke with an educator who had observed practices there. This took the total number to six. While this number is small, the interviews were in depth and with experienced regional representatives. We asked structured questions about their understanding of blended delivery, attitudes towards it, their perception of educator capabilities and the level of support from TAFE Queensland to innovate in their teaching practice. The aim of this phase of the research project was to inform a pilot that aims to improve educator capability to deliver training using a blended learning approach in TAFE Queensland. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or via videoconference, with follow-up email exchanges.

Because the project is mainly conducted by a visiting scholar from China, the same interview questions were translated into Chinese for a comparative study. For this international comparative study, five interviews were conducted with education leaders and educators from three vocational and training institutes in three different provinces in China. China and Australia have different policy and education frameworks, yet the institutes selected are similar in training offerings. The interview questions are in appendix. Transcripts were de-identified for comparative analysis, and findings are listed below.

5. Findings

5.1 Identified benefits of blended learning

Despite differences across regions and in teaching expertise, we observed a consistency in responses relating to the value of blended delivery across TAFE Queensland. With all interviewees agreeing that blended learning will benefit learners. They suggested the approach gives learners more opportunities, provides flexibility of study, suits different learning styles, offers learners more control and allows them to learn at their own pace and schedule. Blended delivery provides educators with more flexibility, in that they may extend their geographic reach to students if supported by digital resources. Interviewees suggested the teaching approach needs to move from teacher-centred to student-centred.

All interviewees suggested teaching theoretical subjects may suit blended delivery more. Four interviewees mentioned that in highly practical programs and high risk training environments such as electro-technology or carpentry, the potential for blended delivery may be lower. However, with proper design, preparation and organisation, all programs can be delivered in a blended format.

5.2 Challenges

A number of common challenges were identified from all interviews. We observed that a number of factors may challenge the ability of faculty members to incorporate blended delivery into training programs including:

- technological infrastructure requiring potentially new digital skills and digital literacy;
- misconceptions around the concept of blended delivery;
- attitudinal barriers suggesting implementation of blended delivery is complex;
- lack of 'Employer' buy-in;
- allocation of adequate time necessary for planning and organisation. Inadequate time may suggest lack of institutional support; and
- support and training - it involves new 'rules'.

These will now be discussed in more detail below.

Strong technological infrastructure is essential. When talking about blended learning, a

primary consideration may relate to use of digital technology. Across the state, TAFE Queensland's different regions have different technical capacity which produces challenges. Learners offsite may not have appropriate internet bandwidth, download capacity or hardware. Interviewee 5 highlighted the challenges of creating digital content using poor quality hardware –Interviewee 3 emphasised that technical failures may cause students to 'give up', disengage and when it occurs with the educator their confidence and motivation towards blended delivery is damaged and they become critical of it.

Misconceptions exist among educators that online content in blended delivery is simply 'taking what happens in the classroom and resources and placing them online' without any change in teaching approach. However, blended is a more holistic pedagogical approach whereby the educator considers what parts of the program are more suited to face-to-face interaction and practical activities. Educators must think differently and reconsider delivery strategies. Interviewee 4 mentioned educators must understand and be well prepared, or the outcome may be "horrible," citing examples where the technology failed and there was a 'loss of face' for the educator, and where one educator thought blended delivery was simply putting the content online and students were seated in front of computers in a classroom. They were soon bored and disengaged.

Attitudes of educators vary from region to region. We observed that some regions face more resistance and an interviewee suggested this may be due to the age of educators (more senior educators may be change resistant and used to a traditional teaching approach). Some hold misunderstandings of blended delivery or lack confidence or need help with digital literacy. Some educators misperceive that it is driven by "staff cuts" and/or typically challenge leadership directions given without rationale: "say "you have to/must go blended before this date". However, it was also noted that resistance decreases quickly once educators understand blended delivery clearly and time is taken to effectively communicate the new approach to learners. One interviewee noted that upon understanding and seeing blended delivery in action, resistance dissipated quickly and requests for upskilling grew.

For students and learners, we heard that a student's age may influence their acceptance

of blended delivery. It was suggested that school leavers and younger students are more comfortable with digital tools, online networking, and so are more willing to go blended; while older learner cohorts may be unfamiliar with digital learning, however, have typically more self-motivation and self-control towards studying. Blended learning requires better time management and higher self-directed learning, and so this aspect balances out the typology of differences between age groups.

‘Employer’ buy-in’ is one special point pointed out by one interviewee which drew our attention. It was commented that in addition to getting educators and students on board, it was important to secure the employer’s buy-in regarding blended delivery. Employers who send apprentices to TAFE for hands-on practical experience may think blended learning will not achieve the results they expect. Employers may think blended is learning online, not in practice and apprenticeships should be practical. This interviewee suggested any change in delivery should be explained upfront to employers, especially of apprentices, and details provided about how blended learning actually has better outcomes.

‘Time’ is especially mentioned by all interviewees. Additional time is required to transition to blended delivery, in particular preparation, course design and training of the concepts, to address misperceptions, and gain familiarity with tools and processes. When asked about the current usage of blended delivery across the state, the consistent response was that it is not high - in the range of five to ten per cent. Yet there are outstanding examples of blended learning and blended delivery in some programs, for example in nursing and hairdressing.

‘Support and Training’ was noted by all interviewees as urgent and required, notably adequate time for preparation, funding and an appropriate space for practicing. However, there was wide variance in expectations and requirements for training. Because resistance is across different ranks of educators, and because there are different challenges in technical infrastructure, educator capability, digital literacy and more, training must be nuanced throughout the regions.

For example, Interviewee 3 emphasised the regional differences in the student cohort –

geographic dispersion, socioeconomic status and financial challenges. Comments included that there's no 'one size fits all' approach to training, it must fit varied teaching expectations and learning outcomes, it 'must be nuanced to regions, and quality mustn't suffer', and specific courses (like trades) should be treated differently. One interviewee suggested educators should receive one or two weeks "offline" for formal training as part of inductions. An interviewee emphasised training should 'focus first on pedagogy rather than on technology' whereas another believed technical problems need more attention; and we observed disparity in understandings of blended learning.

5.3 Comparison Study with Chinese Findings

There are different policy settings and frameworks between the Chinese and Australian education sectors and institutes. In China, the majority of learner cohorts are directly from high school, for example, of first year students in Wuhan Polytechnic (WTP), 81.2% enter directly after graduating from high school (unpublished data from WTP-Wuhan Polytechnic 2016). Moreover, full-time learners are highly valued in Chinese education, 90% or more learners are enrolled full-time, therefore, program curriculum and 'student management'¹ are very different from Australia.

However, interview findings are surprisingly consistent between countries. All interviewees in China agreed that blended learning and blended delivery programs may provide learners and educators with great benefits for similar reasons to their Australian counterparts. However, because of the uniformity of its learner cohort, Chinese educators focus less on flexible delivery than in Australia because there is less diversity of learners – they are predominantly full-time on-campus. Three out of five Chinese interviewees believe that with good preparation and design, blended delivery can fit all programs, however the nature of the courses affects the extent of its implementation. The current extent of blended delivery is not high, however some good examples were provided, including the WTP General English program which implemented blended models in 2008, and flipped classroom models in 2014. The change in practice to blended delivery received highly positive student feedback, and has achieved great teaching outcomes. While some interviewees from both countries mentioned programs

¹ In China, student management refers to what in Australia is called Student Services.

with high practical content or interpersonal interaction (for example English courses and Trades) may not be suitable for blended delivery, this successful example suggests otherwise. All interviewees consistently support a managed implementation in the transition to blended delivery.

6. Conclusion

The complexity and challenges mentioned above show the transition journey to blended delivery can occur over years. However, digital literacy is not the only challenge in developing educators' blended delivery capability. If an educator faces problems with blended delivery - as a result of the instructional process, community concerns or technical issues - they will need more than improved digital literacy to overcome these challenges. They must understand the concept of blended delivery and how to use it for the outcomes they need to achieve, etc. From the research findings, we noticed that consistently these challenges may be mitigated by clear communication streams between: educators and learners; educators and educators; and administration and educators, as discussed below.

With regards to communication between educators and learners, blended delivery requires greater commitment from students to learn outside of the classroom (often by themselves). It places higher requirements on self-management and time management. Low motivated learners may not succeed from this approach. This has implications for teaching practice. Classroom activities typically become more practical, hands-on, social and active. Students are no longer passive recipients of information in the classroom. To mitigate against the risks of students not preparing before class, educators must communicate their expectations clearly to students prior to class.

With regards to communication between educators and educators, we heard that some educators may lack confidence with new approaches and digital tools. This may be addressed by communication streams between educators. For example, educators with high digital literacy typically succeed in blended delivery – their success stories may be showcased to incentivise other educators. Moreover, misunderstanding can also be clarified by educators with successful blended delivery experience, such as 'they may think the technology is complex, but often it's simple;' and '...show them blended

delivery is a good easy way' (interview in-identified notes, 2017)

With regards to communication between administrators and educators, our findings support Ocak (2010) who suggests that faculties require continuous support from administrators to overcome the challenges of teaching blended courses. Clear policy and strong leadership provided by institutions can promote the implementation of blended delivery and shorten the adaptation time. Communication during the transition to blended delivery is critical. This includes listening to educators and addressing myths and misconceptions of blended delivery upfront to reach a shared and simple understanding of what it is and why it is important. With TAFE Queensland we have heard that the rationale for a transition to blended delivery is to improve the learning experience, it is not driven by 'teaching online'.

Communication may be delivered by training, but interviewees raised concerns about a lack of time and funds. We support the TAFE Queensland Centre for Learning and Teaching recommendation that training programs allow educators sufficient time to:

- fully understand the concept of blended learning;
- develop digital literacy skills;
- identify courses which suit a blended approach and redesign their learning and teaching strategies accordingly; and
- develop the confidence to implement blended delivery within their specific context (and within any identified technology constraints).

The Centre for Learning and Teaching advise that effort is required to communicate the benefits of a blended approach not only to educators but also to students, and also importantly, to employers. Supporting students who would benefit from enhanced digital literacy and self-management skills to be able to thrive in a blended learning environment must also be considered.

In short, increasing the adoption and implementation of blended learning across TAFE Queensland needs a well-considered approach and a significant investment from the organisation if it is to be successful.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How do you believe learners might benefit from blended delivery?
2. Do you think there are benefits to blended delivery as a learning and teaching approach from educators' perspective? If yes, what are some of the main benefits?
3. Do you think certain programs or units are better suited to blended delivery? If yes, what factors should be considered?
4. If you think there are challenges with blended delivery, what are they?
5. Do you think your educators are willing to build their capability around blended delivery?
6. In your opinion, to what extent is blended delivery currently used within your faculty or region?
7. Can you give an example of blended delivery within your faculty or region?
8. What impact do you think the current practice of blended delivery is having on learning and teaching?
9. Do you think more support from TAFE Queensland would be worthwhile? If yes, what form/s of support would you recommend?
10. Do you believe the structure of educator training programs will be important to the uptake and impact of blended delivery? If yes, can you suggest how the training should be designed and implemented?