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ASSESSMENT OF GOOD PRACTICES IN BLENDED LEARNING AS AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH FOR ENHANCING STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER INSTITUTION

Ezekiel Olusegun Babatunde, Ph.D

Abstract

Methods used for teaching and learning have been found to directly affect and substantially enhance students' learning experiences but the extent to how good practices in blended learning has enhanced student learning experiences in higher institutions has not been sufficiently examined. This study assesses good practices in blended learning as an institutional approach for enhancing students learning experiences in higher institution. Mixed method was adopted for the study (qualitative and quantitative approach), qualitative approach made use of structural interview conducted on twenty coordinators and lecturers while the structured questionnaire titled "Good Practices in Blended Learning Questionnaire" constructed by the researcher was pilot tested that yielded Cronbach Alpha reliability of $r=.79$ was used for data collection. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 250 University of Ibadan Distance Learning students. Data collected from interview was analyzed using thematic approach while quantitative data was analyzed using independent t-test. The result shows a significant mean difference between face to face ($M=9.87$, $S.D.=1.96$) and on-line interaction ($M=5.40$, $S.D.=1.91$) in cooperation among student ($t=2.334$, $p<0.05$). Also, a significant mean difference exist between on-line ($M=7.95$, $S.D.=1.96$) and face to face interaction ($M=13.30$, $S.D.=1.66$) in course satisfaction among the students ($t=17.87$, $p<0.05$). Individual differences does not significantly influence student's learning in both on-line ($M=8.50$, $S.D.=.67$) and traditional face to face ($M=8.31$, $S.D.=1.22$) interaction ($t=1.87$, $p<0.05$). Thematic analysis revealed that range of learning resources; lectures, power point presentation among others were provided to support online quizzes, and class exercise. Hence, blended learning environment is judiciously implemented and hold promise for students learning achievement.

Keywords: Blended learning; Good practices, Institutional approach, Distance Learning Centre

Introduction

Blended learning is viewed as a combination of face-to-face and online delivery methods, with the aim of each complementing the other. According to Williams, Bland and Christie (2008) blended learning is a combination of traditional face-to-face learning and distributed learning, the latter, being an instructional model that allows lecturers, students, and content to be in different locations. A main feature of distributive learning is that the learning environment is designed to accommodate the fact that students have different learning needs and preferences. This pedagogical model encourages students to learn in an interactive and collaborative environment, and at their own pace and in their own time (Graham, 2006; Saltzberg and Polyson, 1995). It is believed that such approach should, therefore, influence students' perceptions of the learning environment and, subsequently, their study approach and learning outcomes. It is thus expected that there will be a significant relationship between blended learning, student learning experiences, and ultimate achievement. Thus, Yen and Lee (2011) asserted that, "blended learning, thoughtfully combining the best elements of online and face-to-face education, is likely to emerge as the predominant teaching model of the future" (p.38.)

Blended learning was given different names throughout the years, such as hybrid instruction, mediated learning, technology enhanced instruction, web enhanced instruction, and web assisted instruction. Currently, blended learning seems to be the "de facto" term to refer to these mixed modes of learning environments. On the other hand, the term blended learning is criticized because the blend occurs not in the learning but in the teaching. Oliver and Trigwell (2005) proposed that the term has to be "blended pedagogies", "blended teaching" or "learning with blended pedagogies" (p.21). Blended learning environments are defined as a combination of face to face and online learning environments to utilize strengths of both (Delialioğlu & Yildirim, 2007; Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). Having reviewed voluminous research, Bliuc, Goodyear and Ellis (2007) argued that educationally useful research on blended learning has to investigate the relationship between different modes of learning and how they could be integrated.

There has been much discussion over the term "blended learning" in recent years, yet there continues to be no agreed-upon single definition (Bliuc, Goodyear, and Ellis, 2007; Green, et. al 2006; Jonas and Burns, 2010; Marsh, Pountney, and Prigg, 2008; Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, & Francis, 2006; Stacey & Gerbic, 2008). There is, however, a common theme presented in the literature – the recognition of some combination of virtual and physical environments. This common theme is evident as Graham (2006) describes blended learning as the convergence of face-to-face settings, which are characterized by synchronous and human interaction, with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) based settings, which are asynchronous, text based, and involve humans operating independently. It continues as Mason and Rennie (2006) extend this definition to include other combinations of technologies, locations or pedagogical approaches.

Baldwin-Evans (2006); Harris, Connolly and Feeney. (2009); Mitchell and Honore, (2007); Stacey and Gerbic, (2008) discussed key factors for successful implementation of blended learning while Garrison and Vaughan (2008) described best practices for blended learning implementation in higher education. They underscore the need for a seamless connection between the face-to-face and online components in order to ensure a truly blended learning environment. Moreover, they advocate the superimposition of various other pedagogies, as appropriate—lecture, problem-based learning, just-in-time teaching, cooperative learning and others—on the blended framework.

There is considerable evidence attesting to the fact that blended learning can positively impact student achievement. Research has shown, for example, that blended learning can foster a decrease in student attrition and facilitate an increase in the passing rate for student examinations (López-Pérez, Pérez-López, & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2011). However, other studies point to the need for a more nuanced understanding of how blended delivery affects student learning. Ginns and Ellis (2007) explored the relationships between students' perceptions of the e-learning environment, their approaches to study, and their academic performance. They found that students differed widely in their perceptions, resulting in variations in study approaches and grades – students with positive perceptions of the e-learning environment tended to obtain better grades, and vice versa. O'Toole and Absalom's (2003) study aimed to discover whether providing course materials on a University intranet had a positive effect on students' attainment of the intended outcomes. Their investigation revealed that the provision of the materials in electronic format in and of itself is of limited benefit; in fact, it can have an adverse effect on student performance due to misplaced confidence in the media through which the material is delivered.

Garrison and Kanuka (2004) explored some of the benefits of using blended learning in higher education institutions. They describe how blended learning has transformative potential, offering institutions the opportunity to embrace technology, encourage a community of inquiry, and support active and meaningful learning. Owston et al. (2008) looked at professional development in schools of education and describes how blended learning has the ability to foster a professional learning community and yet still allow for the development of social cohesion due to the inclusion of a face-to-face component.

21st Century Higher Education

Twenty-first century universities are continuing to go through rapid socio-economic and technological changes. These changes have brought about a call for universities to examine carefully their educational practices from a new perspective and to face the challenges that lie ahead in knowledge-based societies (Pittinsky, 2003). These challenges include: a large population of learners from varied backgrounds, needs, motivations, abilities, learning preferences, time availability and course content

requirements; a greater number and variety of higher education places without corresponding increases in funding (Phillips, 2005); a demand for more “client” responsive and flexible courses; and the drive to use information and communication technology (ICT) in teaching and administration (Challis, Holt and Rice, 2005). In facing such challenges, academic leaders in higher education need to rethink organizational structures, operational strategies, and policies appropriate for the ongoing digital age (Duderstadt, Atkins and Houweling, 2002)

Despite the evident growth and potentials of ICT in higher education, many studies such as Green(2004), Gibbons (2005), and Fox and Herrmann (2004) have highlighted the limitations of teacher and student uptake of ICT for educational purposes. Academic e-learning has usually been focused on quantity rather than quality, and on superficial technological adoption rather than conceptual pedagogical change process (Davidovitch, 2007). As a result, many university students and teachers make only limited formal academic use of ICT in teaching and learning (Selwyn, 2007). The apparent self-evidence of educational innovation using ICT has hardly prompted people in most of the higher learning to the areas of innovation and its consequence (Green, 2004), and a “business as usual” approach has been taken without anticipating any real dramatic changes (Collis and Wende, 2002). The diffusion of technological innovation for teaching and learning has not been widespread, nor has ICT become deeply integrated into the curriculum (Mehra and Mital, 2007). Thus, ICT-supported innovation in pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment is rare in higher education (Bullen and Janes, 2007; Cross and Adam, 2007).

Enhancing student learning experiences has become more important in higher education since the mid 1990s due to increased student enrollment and diversification but there has been systematic and extensive research into the quality of students' learning in higher education as far back as 1970s (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Ramsden, 2003, Laurillard, 2002; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999, Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Marton and Säljö, 1976). Outcomes from this research have helped to identify the key concepts related to quality learning in higher education. According to Entwistle, McCune, and Hounsell (2002), and as depicted in Figure 1, factors influencing the quality of learning achieved include course material presentation and both the type of teaching–learning environment provided as well as the students' perceptions of this environment.

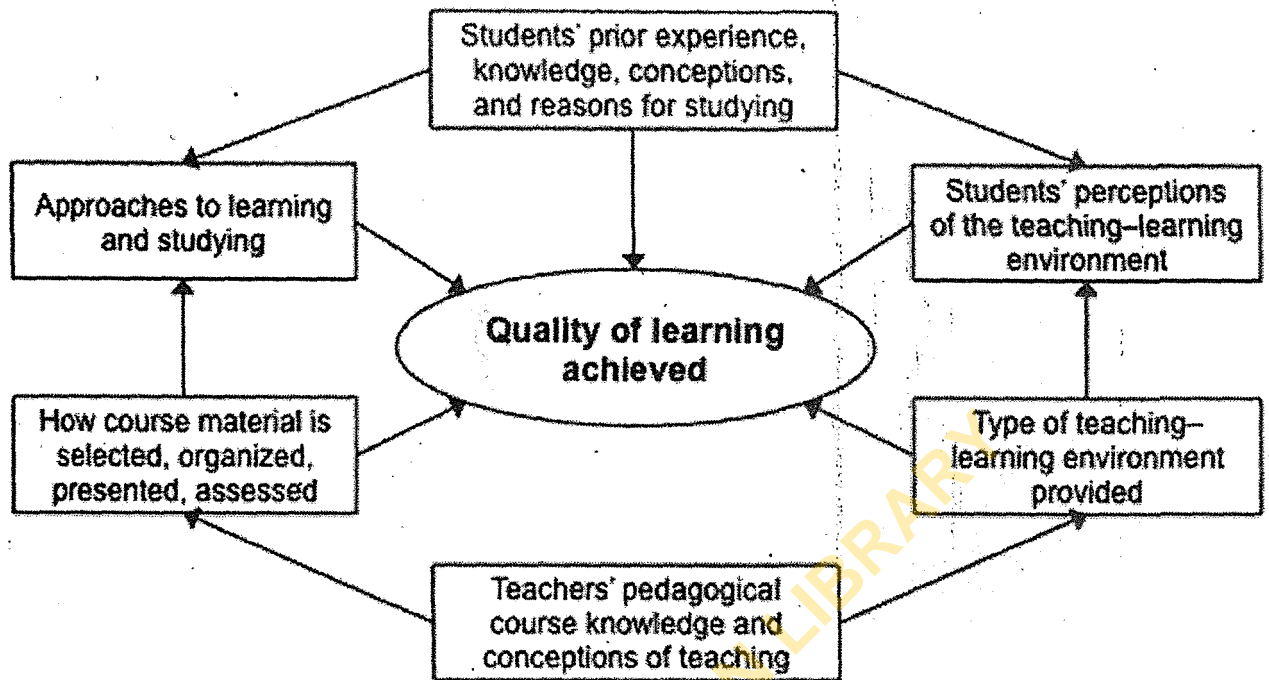


Figure 1. *Concepts related to the quality of learning at University (Adopted from Entwistle, McCune, and Hounsell, 2002).*

A common factor in these elements is university lecturers' pedagogical knowledge, which dictates both the design of the course materials and the learning environment. Lizzio, Wilson, and Simons (2002) share similar findings. They investigated "the relationship between university students' perceptions of their academic environment, their approaches to study, and academic outcomes" and conclude that elements of the learning environment, which can be influenced and controlled by instructors, affect not only how students approach studying, but also the subsequent learning outcomes they attain (Lizzio et al., 2002). Chickering and Gramson (1987) developed seven principles for good practice among which are "contact between students and faculty," "cooperation among students," "active learning," "prompt feedback," "time on task," "high expectations," and "diverse talents and ways of learning." According to Fox and Hermann (2004), teaching practices that encourage active learning strategies, establish collaborative student work, contain challenging tasks, and provide prompt feedback help improve student achievement and learning in schools.

Blended Learning and Practices

Blended learning environments have been utilized in higher education context for more than ten years, but there are few studies that examine student engagement in these environments. The literature has a gap in terms of the effect of different blending

approaches on student engagement (Keppell, 2005; Uden & Beaumont, 2006; Donnelly, 2006; Donnelly, 2010). Therefore, there is a need to extend the line of inquiry of student engagement and approaches for blending technology with different instructional approaches. Mortera-Gutierrez (2006) described faculty best and worst practices using a blended learning approach of e-learning and face-to-face instruction and recommended that further studies be conducted to provide a fuller understanding of blended learning environments, in particular, those related to teaching practices and strategies. Vaughan (2007) explored the benefits and challenges of blended learning in higher education from the perspectives of students, faculty, and administration that had direct experience with blended learning course delivery. Ocak (2010) presented the findings of an exploratory, qualitative case study and examined problems and impediments that faculty members encountered in blended learning environments in the Turkish higher education system. The findings showed that faculty members' problems with blended teaching resulted in the identification of three inductive categories: instructional processes, community concerns and technical issues. Eight themes further emerged from these three categories: complexity of the instruction, lack of planning and organization, lack of effective communication, need for more time, lack of institutional support, changing roles, difficulties in adopting new technologies, and lack of electronic means. However, the study of good practices in blended learning has received little attention. Thus, Sloman (2007) argues that blended learning should not simply be considered in terms of delivery and technology. According to him:

If the term blended learning is to have longevity ... we must extend its use beyond technology. It must be as much about varying learning methodology as it is about training delivery. We must understand more about what motivates learners, what support they need and how these supportive interventions can take place in practice. Only with this understanding we can get the "blend" right (p.318).

Therefore, blended learning is itself a blend. It is a mix of pedagogical approaches that combines the effectiveness and the socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technological enhancements of online learning (Dziuban, Hartman, Juge, Moskal, & Sorg, 2006). Contained within the mix is a paradigm change in which the emphasis shifts from teaching to learning (Nunan, George, & McCausland, 2000). In order to enhance this shift, a blended learning course should also increase the interaction between the instructor and students, and also among students. It should furthermore enhance the mechanism for integrating formative and summative feedback in order to boost students' learning experiences (Yen and Lee, 2011). Therefore, blended learning is a fundamental redesign of the instructional model with a shift from lecture-centered to student-centered instruction where students become active and interactive learners.

Vaughan (2007) cites studies suggesting that students enrolled in blended courses can sometimes have unrealistic expectations. The students in those studies assumed that fewer classes meant less work, had inadequate time management skills, and experienced

problems with accepting responsibility for personal learning. Students in such courses have also reported feeling isolated due to the reduced opportunities for social interaction in a face-to-face classroom environment (Smyth et al. 2012). Having difficulty with more sophisticated technologies is another challenge for implementing blended learning. This was particularly the case where students had to rely on slow (e.g., dialup) Internet connections (Smyth et al. 2012). Poor Internet connectivity has been reported to inhibit students' ability to engage in online discussion (King, 2002) and creates considerable frustration (Hara, 2000; Hara and Kling, 1999; Welker and Berardino, 2005-2006), which can negatively impact learning. Just as time concerns are a challenge for students, the first challenge for implementation of blended learning for universities is time commitment. Johnson (2002) estimates that planning and developing a large-enrollment, blended learning course usually takes two to three times the amount of time required to develop a similar course in a traditional format. The final challenge for universities implementing blended learning is the difficulty in acquiring new learning technology skills, such as how to foster online learning communities, facilitate online discussion forums, and manage students (Dziuban and Moskal, 2013; Voos, 2003). In order to ensure students have successful learning experiences, it is therefore important to evaluate these Seven Principles in conjunction with the elements and design of the learning environment.

Statement of the Problem and Hypotheses

Enhancing students learning experience in higher institution has become very important to individual as well as for national development. Studies carried out in this area have reveal that many approaches have been adopted over the years in order to meet up with the need of students using different concepts which include; perception of learning environment, approaches to study, element of learning environment and blended learning environments among others while only a few studies have examined students' engagement in their environments. Besides, the cooperation and satisfaction derived from course content among students in face-to-face and on-line interaction had not been sufficiently addressed. Thus, there is need to extend the line of inquiry of students involvement and approaches for blending technology with different instructional approaches. This study therefore investigated the extent to which blended learning as an institutional approach enhances students learning experiences in tertiary institution in Southwest Nigeria. Three hypotheses and one research question guided these studies which include:

H_{01} . There is no significant mean difference in cooperation among students taught on-line and face to face interaction

H_{02} . There is no significant difference in the mean course satisfaction between on-line face to face interaction among students

H₀. There is no significant difference in student's individual difference between face to face and on-line interaction among students.

Research Question I: What are your experiences of face to face interaction with students and online interaction?

Methodology

The research adopted a survey type design, the population consists of coordinators, instructors and students of distance learning programme of the University of Ibadan. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 250 students, 5 (five) coordinators and 15 (fifteen lecturers). In all 250 respondents participated in the study. Two instruments were used for data collection. First, Good Practices in Blended Learning Questionnaire with reliability of $r=0.79$ adopted from the student survey questionnaire of Garrison and Vaughan's (2008) book, *Blended Learning in Higher Education: Framework, Principles, and Guidelines* was administered to two hundred and fifty students of the programme for data collection. From the administered questionnaire to students, majority of the respondents (75%) were between 18-25 years old and only few are above 30 years. It was revealed that 150 (60%) of the respondents are in their third year, 10% in the second year while the rest are from fourth and fifth year.

First year students were excluded from the research because they are just coming in contact with such mode of study and therefore may not be able to feel the impact of the good practices embedded in blended learning. Secondly, Structural interview guide was used to get responses from respondents. The interviews lasted appropriately 30 minutes for each person. During the interview, collection of professional background information of respondents was done before proceeding to a series of key questions. The interview schedule was divided into four sections: knowledge and experience of blended learning, design and use of blended learning, resources needed for blended learning, and evaluation of the use of blended learning. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded with similar themes identified. The interviewees are from different departments with average years of teaching experience of 16 years. Their experience using various forms of blended learning including online learning ranged from two to eight years. Data collected was analysed using independent t test at 0.05 level of significance and thematic approach for qualitative analysis.

Result and Discussion

Hypothesis 1:

There is no significant mean difference in cooperation among students taught on-line and face to face interaction

An independent sample test was used to compare the difference in mean cooperation among students in on-line and face to face interaction, a significant mean difference was found ($t = 2.33$, $p < .05$). The result revealed that mean of traditional face to face interaction ($m=5.40$, $S.D. = 1.91$) was significantly higher than that of on-line ($M = 7.95$, $S.D. = 1.59$). Therefore, from the result of the analysis there is no statistical reason why null hypothesis should not be rejected. The null hypothesis was rejected

Table 1

Difference in Cooperation among students base on Mode of Interaction

Variables	n	Mean	Std. deviation	df	t	Sig	p<	Remark
Face to Face	250	9.87	1.96					
On-line	250	5.40	1.91	248	2.33	.015	0.05	significant

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference in the mean course satisfaction between on-line and traditional face to face interaction among students

An independent t-test analysis was done to compare mean difference in course satisfaction among students base on their mode of interaction, the result revealed a significant mean difference ($t = 17.87$, $<.05$) with the mean face to face interaction significantly higher than that of on-line. Thus, null hypothesis was rejected.

Table 2

Difference in Course Satisfaction between On-line and Face to Face Interaction

Variables	n	Mean	Std. deviation	df	t	Sig	p<	Remark
Online	250	7.95	1.59					
Face to face	250	13.30	1.66	248	17.87	.00	.05	significant

Hypothesis 3

There is no significant difference in student's individual differences between face to face and on-line interaction among students.

Table 3 presents the result of independent t-test to compare mean effect of individual difference on the mode of interaction. The result revealed that there is no significant mean difference between the two modes of interaction ($t=1.868, >.05$). Therefore, null hypothesis was not rejected.

Table 3

Effect of Individual Differences Base on Mode of Interaction

Variables	N	Mean	Std. deviation	df	t	Sig	P	Remark
Online	250	8.50	0.67					Not
Face to face	250	8.31	1.22	248	1.87	.46	.05	significant

Research Question I

What are your experiences of face to face interaction with students and online interaction.

Result from the thematic analysis revealed that a range of learning resources, including lectures and PowerPoint presentation was provided to support online tutorials, online quizzes, and class exercises. The lecturers gave average of six two-hour lectures including discussion time. The lecturers provided rich learning materials and vivid examples. Self-directed learning was also significant in this programme as students had to construct their own body of knowledge by choosing and studying the modules freely and were free to take the quizzes and answer the more challenging questions. This result is in agreement with (Sharpe et al., 2006) position that flexibility is a vital element of the programme as they involve several delivery partners based in different places as well as students who primarily study off campus. All the twenty (100%) interviewed instructors of distance learning programme shared common rationales for choosing blended learning as a delivery method, such as flexibility, efficiency, supporting diversity, enhancing the campus experience, and operating in a global context

The result further revealed differences in the mean score in cooperation among students between on-line and traditional face to face interaction. Students reported significantly higher satisfaction with course content in face to face interaction than on-line one. Also,

individual difference does not influence mode of interactions. Blended learning activities required students to actively engage in the learning process. Typical learning activities include but not limited to information seeking, collaboration with other students, and synthesizing the information from various resources. Therefore, similar to the previous research findings in traditional learning environments, blended learning environments methods engaged students with academic activities better than face-to-face methods do. Having found significant difference of good practices in enhancing students learning experiences, the next step of the analysis was to understand what individual factors were important on their learning experiences measured as time on task and high expectation. A model was established to explore the impact of student individual factors on time on task and high expectation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As a more pedagogically oriented innovation with many of the advantages of online learning, blended learning could well become a standard practice favoured by both teachers and students (Albrecht, 2006). However, the implementation of blended learning is a process both innovative and complex, involving multi-facet variations in curriculum content, pedagogy, ways of ICT use, teacher practices, student practices, student learning outcomes, and organizational conditions (Duderstadt, Atkins & Houweling, 2002; Guri-Rosenblit, 2005; Mishra, Koehler & Zhao 2007).

From the foregoing, it is discovered that if blended learning environments good practices is religiously implemented, it hold promise for the student learning and instructor practices as this will lead to more active engagement of students in learning for enhanced achievement . It is therefore recommended that future research needs to examine lecturers practices in blended learning and its impact on student achievement with large scale studies. It may also be interesting to carry out research on how blended learning impact teacher daily tasks and teaching practices.

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