

BLENDED LEARNING APPROACH: VOICE FROM THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

With the speeding up of the use of technology, we have seen an unprecedented emergence of the various approaches to teaching and learning. Nowadays, e-learning has become the counterpart to face-to-face learning which has given rise to a new approach called “blended learning approach”. The present study intends to investigate the extent to which the blended approach can be used in the teaching-learning process to the students from the distance mode. A total number of 38 students who have studied through open and distance learning mode were taken as samples across the disciplines through purposive sampling method from the University of North Bengal, West Bengal. A researcher-made questionnaire was prepared and standardized by the subject experts. A descriptive survey method and interview technique were adopted for the collection of data and qualitative methods were used to analyze data. The objectives of the study were to find the students’ opinion regarding the blended learning; to study the extent to which blended learning is applied across various disciplines and to find the benefits that blended learning may provide to students’ learning experiences. The results suggested that in the University of North Bengal (distance learning mode) blended learning has not been initiated so far. Although the students had a clear understanding of this approach and gave positive feedback yet they were not able to explore their learning because of non-use of blended learning instruction in their program of study.

KEYWORDS: *Blended Learning Approach, Open University, Distance Learning, University of North Bengal*

INTRODUCTION

The current educational system is in a phase of transition where the use of digital technology is as essential as the physical presence of the teacher. Any teaching is successful when there is a tinge of human touch along with the technological use in it. It is understood that a mixture of both helps in meeting the cognitive, affective and psychomotor objectives. In this context, it would not be incorrect to say that Blended learning has emerged as one of the latest and popular pedagogical concepts which have made a profound impact in today’s classrooms. ‘Blended’ as the word suggests is an amalgamation of two or more things. Here, blended learning refers to the approach where the students learn via electronic and online media as well as traditional face to face interaction with the teacher. It is a teaching program which requires the incorporation of technology into the traditional classroom setting. The prime aim of the blended approach is to promote interactive and individualized learning. As Graham points out that blended learning is the combination of instruction from two historically separate models of teaching and learning: traditional face to face learning systems and distributed learning systems. It also emphasizes the central role of computer-based technologies in blended learning.

In Open and distance learning setting, although the face-to-face teaching and interaction has widely been adopted, the teacher hardly gets sufficient time to get through the subjects, the result of which there is a certain dearth of adequate

knowledge among the students. They are not able to develop all the three domains- cognitive, affective and psychomotor. The teaching-learning experience turns out to be monotonous with lack of individualized learning. On the other hand, only learning through online learning may hamper the students' horizon of creative thinking. In this world of technology, it is crucial to blend face-to-face and online instruction simultaneously to attain the best results in teaching and learning. Let us see the definitions of blended learning to gain a comprehensive idea of the approach.

Definitions of Blended Learning

Various researchers have suggested diverse definitions of blended learning. Some are as follows:

- C.R. Graham (2006) says, 'Blended learning systems combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction.'
- Procter (2003) defined blended learning as 'the effective combination of different modes of delivery models of teaching and styles of learning'.
- Garrison and Kanuka (2004) define it as 'the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences.'
- Staker and Horn (2012) produced a refined definition which states that blended learning is 'a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home.'

The above definitions suggest that:

- Blended learning is a mixture of various modes and models of teaching and learning.
- It is a mixture of online instruction and the physical presence of the teacher and the learners.
- It is an approach which allows flexibility by demolishing the restrictions of time, place, path and pace for the students.

Blended Learning: Types

This paper will focus on six critical blended learning types. They are:

- Rotation blended learning
- Flex blended learning
- Remote blended learning
- Flipped classroom blended learning
- Self-directed blended learning
- Face-to-face learning

Rotation Blended Learning: is the one where the students rotate in a fixed schedule between self-paced online learning and face-to-face teaching within a specific course in a traditional classroom.

Flex Blended Learning is a model where online learning remains the backbone for students' learning. Here face-to-face model provides on-site support for pervading flexibility in tutoring sessions.

Remote Blended Learning: In this model, the students' focus is on completing online coursework with minimum interaction with the teacher. They work from remote locations and seldom attend face-to-face classes.

The Flipped Classroom Blended Learning: This is the most convenient teaching-learning model. The students have introduced the content at home and it is only in the classrooms that they are supported by their teachers.

Self-Directed Blended Learning: In this kind of learning the students use a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction to guide their own learning experiences.

Face to Face Learning: Here most of the task is carried out by the teacher although the latter uses online resources to supplement the course material. It is also referred to as teacher-led instruction.

Open University

Open University refers to those institutions which offer education to the students through distance mode. These are the universities which are set up to primarily provide a program of study to the students who are not able to pursue their studies through a regular or a full-time on-campus mode. In such universities, the teachers and students need not necessarily be present in the teaching-learning setting. It is a flexible program of study wherein the students can learn at their own pace in the estimated time frame. These universities are established with the aim of promoting, coordinating and maintaining the educational standards. The University of North Bengal was established in 1962 with its Directorate of Distance Education for providing continuing education to those students who fail to get admitted to a regular course due to less qualifying marks or some other personal reasons.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Hamdi and Qudais (2018) suggested that it is a study program which is more effective and suitable for the students of Arab Open University than the face-to-face and online modes of teaching. Tamim (2017) found a positive outlook of her students regarding blended learning with a deep impact on female empowerment. Nurhikmah & et.al (2018) suggested the need to develop blended based learning media for the biology students so that it becomes feasible for them to learn everywhere and every time. Dangwal and Lalima (2017) argue the need to introduce and adopt blended learning media in the Indian educational system. The use of blended learning stands pragmatic when it comes to teaching a foreign language (Volchenkova & et.al, 2016). Xu and Xiangyang (2015) recommended the integration of micro-lectures into blended learning to provide ultimate satisfaction to the students. The online peer interaction, sharing and discussion brought about by the blended learning approach enriched students' learning; and propositional knowing and experiential knowing, as well as presentational knowing, were enhanced (Anna Wing Bo Tso, 2015). Due to weak internet connections, the adoption of blended learning may be a challenge in the remote areas, however, blending the 'e' with traditional modes of learning is more effective than the individual forms of e-learning or other conventional methods (Abas, Ahmed and Harun, 2019). The study by Chen (2012) indicated that students in blended learning environments performed significantly better on factual knowledge than those in the online learning environment. The related literature indicates the positive side of blended learning approach making it imperative to be adopted in the universities of India, including West Bengal.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This present paper seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To find the students' opinion regarding the use of blended learning in the open distance learning mode at the University of North Bengal
- To study the extent to which blended learning is applied across various disciplines
- To find out the effectiveness of blended learning approach for the students

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

A descriptive survey method was employed for data collection. The study demanded a purposive sampling method as the population was less in number. The total sample comprised of 38 university students studying in the University of North Bengal through open and distance mode. The data was collected with the help of an open-ended questionnaire giving the students the scope to elaborate their opinions along with the tool consisting of Yes, No and Undecided items standardized by the subject experts. The unstructured interview was also applied to gather in-depth information from the learners. The data was analyzed qualitatively with a narrative description.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study intends to answer the following questions:

- How do the students perceive the blended learning approach?
- What is the extent of the use of blended learning approach across various disciplines?
- How much is the blended learning instruction effective for the students?

TOOLS USED

The study demanded in-depth information hence an open-ended questionnaire consisting of the following items were used.

Research Question 1: How do the Students Perceive the Blended Learning Approach?

- Blended learning approach enables the students to enhance their self-learning.
- It allows the students to learn at their own pace.
- Blended learning is a flexible approach.
- Blended learning results in improved learning for the students.
- It is beneficial for both gifted as well as slow learners.
- Blended learning demands enhanced technological use.
- The students love the blended learning approach over other approaches.
- It prevents students from attending regular classes.

Research Question 2: What is the Extent of the use of Blended Learning Approach across Various Disciplines?

- The Blended learning models are used to promote a better understanding of various subjects.
- Teachers exhibit technological expertise in using blended learning models.
- It is the best approach to learning language/ science/ social science subjects.
- Blended learning is frequently used to promote detailed learning of the lessons.

Research Question 3: How much is the Blended Learning Instruction Effective for the Students?

- A blended approach is highly effective over traditional classroom teaching and online instruction.
- It is immensely motivating for the students
- Through blended learning, they can clear their doubts and broaden their critical thinking skills.
- It is economical in terms of money, time and space.
- It advocates individualized instruction and interactive learning.
- It allows the students to catch up on a course if and when they can.
- It demands internet connectivity.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Based on the scores and opinions as reflected by the sample, the findings are as follows:

- The blended learning approach is seldom applied in the open and distance learning mode in the University of North Bengal.
- Although the teachers exhibit technological expertise, they do not show a keen interest in using technology in the classroom.
- The students assert that if used on a regular basis, it is going to be the best approach for learning all subjects.
- It will definitely enhance their self-learning skills.
- It was a common belief among all the students that the blended learning approach is one of the flexible instructions for them to operate their studies from distance mode. However, they expressed regret over the fact of non-use of blended approach in their instructional process.
- Had this approach been used, it would have been easier for the students to improve their learning capacity as it would cater to the needs of both the gifted as well as slow learners.
- It was found that students had got the chance to learn through blended approach in their other regular courses but have never come across it in their learning from the open and distance mode in the University of North Bengal. They acknowledged the fact that blended learning approach is far superior to other approaches however, it demands high internet connectivity which is not feasible for the students residing in the rural and remote areas.

- This approach has helped them to promote interactive learning but they were of the opinion that since it is not applied in this university they were not able to explore some of the major areas from their respective disciplines.
- Blended learning can be immensely encouraging for the students if applied on a thorough basis.
- With the conglomeration of teacher-taught interaction and use of online resources, the students would catch up on a course and clear their doubts instantly.

DISCUSSIONS

The results fall in line with the conclusions provided by Dangwal and Lalima (2017) that there is an urgent need to introduce and adopt blended learning media in the open and distance learning mode in the University of North Bengal. The students exhibited a positive outlook regarding the operation of the blended learning approach as found in the study by Tamim (2017). The result is also in sync with the findings of Abas, Ahmed and Harun, (2019) which suggests that the internet connectivity can be a major obstacle for the students to study through a blended approach. However, it is disheartening to find that the students studying from the open and distance mode from the University of North Bengal are not provided the opportunity to study through a blended approach so far.

CONCLUSIONS

Blended learning is the hybrid instructional program comprising of face-to-face interaction and online learning. It has been proved very beneficial as per the results but it is also a sad fact that in this technological era the students studying from the open and distance mode from the University of North Bengal are exempted from using the blended learning approach. This approach has revolutionized the method of teaching and learning and hence it is crucial for all the colleges and universities to adopt this approach for effective teaching and learning. If this approach gets implemented in a planned and organized way then this can bring a positive change in the full-time as well as open universities.

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