Why Blended Learning?

Salanieta Bakalevu and Neelam Narayan
University of the South Pacific
bakalevu_s@usp.ac.fj and narayan_n@usp.ac.fj

Abstract

Higher education has changed. A shift in the profile of the student body has changed the face of learning and education. Learning is no longer confined within classroom walls nor are the teachers and students required to be in the same location at the same time. At the University of the South Pacific, distance and flexible learning is the pedagogical concept informing teaching and learning. The University's multimodal learning approach has expanded considerably and continues to grow and diversify in order to best meet the needs of the region.

Blended learning was an inevitable transition for learning at the USP and fitted perfectly with the organisation's overall operational strategy. The multiple instructional delivery modalities in blended learning not only accommodate the various learning needs of our students but also give lecturers the freedom and ability to meet other tasks and responsibilities. On-line learning, previously rejected as foreign to our distance communities and people's field-dependent cognitive style is being viewed more favourably as part of a blended learning mode. The presence of a competent on-line tutor is the key. Three mini-case studies in this paper demonstrate this viewpoint.

1. Introduction

Blended learning represents one of the most naturally evolving processes of development at the University of the South Pacific (USP). The strategy fits perfectly with the university's brand as the premier provider of tertiary education in a region that is diverse and complex. The USP is owned by 12 island countries that traverse a large 30 million kilometers of ocean and five time zones. While there are core values underpinning the basic cultural institutions and structures of the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and bind them strongly together, there are important variations that make the region culturally diverse. As such the people and communities of the Pacific Island countries (PICs) cannot be treated as a homogenous group but as individuals with their own preferences and needs. For them,

> … blended learning represents a real opportunity to create learning experiences that can provide the right learning at the right time and in the right place for each and every individual … It can be truly universal, crossing global boundaries and bringing groups of learners together through different cultures and time zones (Thorne, 2003; 18).

From its early years the USP as a learning organisation (Laurillard, 2002) has demonstrated determination to be adaptive to the diverse and changing environment it is in. Distance education began at the University in 1970 only a year after the institution began operations. The establishment of University Campuses in all the USP countries and the strengthening of the private satellite network *USPNet* and other communications are major developments that have created greater access and taken education to the people. The mainstreaming of distance and flexible learning (DFL) has meant that what used to be a separate administration of distance and flexible learning and teaching has now become integrated with the rest of the University. DFL activities are now integrated with the academic activities of the faculties and it is the Deans that now drive the DFL process supported by the Centre for Distance and Flexible Learning (CFDL). DFL is the core pedagogical concept informing teaching and learning at the USP.

> The organization doesn't just service its customers: they become its lifeblood. People do not just make promises, but they deliver, not once but over and over again, consistently developing better and better service. The organization differentiates itself in the marketplace through its people, its products, its processes and its premises (Thorne, 2003; 8)

In the 1970s the University's distance education courses were offered through print mode and supported by audio teleconferencing via an old satellite donated by NASA. From an original 6 courses and 150 students in 1971, the USP's distance and flexible learning (DFL) operations has grown tremendously both in student numbers and DFL courses. In 2004 there were 150 courses offered over three semesters with a total enrolment of over 15,000 students. In 2006, 340 of USP's total 763 courses were available by DFL. The University's total enrolment in 2008 was 19,146 and over sixty percent (60%) of that number were students who enrolled as flexible learners. This proportion is expected to increase further.

2. Learning & Teaching in Higher Education

Higher education has changed. A shift in the profile of the student body has changed the face of learning and education. Learning is no longer confined within classroom walls nor are the teachers and students required to be in the same location at the same time. Instead, today's students are older, with families, and most must work their school schedule around their work schedule and other life responsibilities (Alarcon, 2002). Learners are "social beings who respond to the social, political and organizational context around them" (Laurillard, 2002).

> Approaches to learning are intimately connected to students' perceptions of the context of learning. Perceptions of assessment requirements, of workload, of the effectiveness of teaching and the commitment of teachers, and of the amount of control students might exert over their own learning, influence deployment of different approaches (Ramsden, 1998; 48).

Teaching and learning are inextricably and elaborately linked. "To teach is to make an assumption about what and how the student learns; therefore, to teach well implies learning about students' learning" (Ramsden, 2003). Academics are responsible for their students' learning, which is more than an individual lecturer's duty but the collective responsibility of the organization. The character of the university is defined by its role "to enable a society to make progress through an understanding of itself and its world" (Dearing, 1997; 72). With this changing world and the demand in modern organizations there is increased interest in the definition of the qualities of the effective graduate. Academics are facing an unprecedented challenge to the traditions and values of the profession. Higher education is being forced to change, not only through pressure from within but more now from external sources. According to Laurillard (2002: 3), "the pressures wrought upon it have nothing to do with traditions and values. Instead, the pressure is for reduced costs, for greater scale and scope, and for innovation through technology.

Widely dispersed employees are demanding access to learning anytime and anywhere and on their terms; there is growing recognition that learning is a continuous, life-long process; there is a migration of information to the online environment and more people are coming together in digital classrooms (Rosenberg, 2001; Sanderson, 2002). Educators and leaders of higher education are being compelled to confront existing notions of teaching and learning (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). In particular they are being challenged to position their institutions in line with the various demands like connectivity of prospective students (ibid). As education moves in the 21st century several aspects like technology & learning styles are being revisited.

> We need to preserve the traditional academic values, while seeking change in the means of addressing them. We need to rebuild the infrastructure that will enable a fit between the academic values we wish to preserve and the new conditions of educating large numbers (Laurillard, 2002: 4)

3. Technology and eLearning at USP

Information Technology (IT) has the power to create new types of learning communities in which students can share and learn. At the USP, IT is crucial in educational development and the enhancement of teaching and learning; in fact it has revolutionized the learning systems. IT has become a necessary media because of changing circumstances. While young people are more comfortable interacting with technology than with people, the older generation needs technology to transcend distance and save time and costs. Since 1970 there has been intense development and marshalling of resources at USP to support and accelerate distance education. Today its multi-modal approach uses a range of media including video broadcasting, audio and audio-graphics and video teleconferencing, audio and video tapes, CDROMS and DVDS, and online learning management systems (LMS). In the period 2006-2007 the University's LMS migrated

from WeBCT to Moodle. The opening of the new Japan-Pacific ICT Centre in March 2010 is expected to boost the range and quality of the university's ICT programmes and services further.

New developments are happening all the time. One will happen in the actual programmes of the University from the beginning of 2010 with the introduction of university-wide course that every student will be required to take irrespective of their programme of study. One of these is *UU100 Communications and Information Literacy*. The course will provide students with the necessary knowledge and skills to use computers effectively and communicate through computer-mediated learning contexts. It will meet the needs of mature students who are confronting computers now as returning students. They now realize that technology knowledge skills are important for their own professional competence and also in the new learning modes to support and encourage participation in class activities (Olipiriyakul and Scher, 2006).

4. Why Blend?

Many students complain of loneliness in distance learning and e-learning in particular can be a lonely activity if the environment is not designed and supported well. A feeling of isolation and the absence of a 'human face' to interact with and give direction has contributed to the high attrition rate amongst distance learners. Even the best prepared instructional materials and e-learning environment cannot compare to the visible instructor to answer questions and provide reinforcement. So the demand is for learning programmes where more than one delivery is used with the objective of optimizing the learning outcome and cost of delivery. Enter blended learning, a vibrant mode of learning that brings the best ends of both traditional & virtual worlds together by integrating the best of regular face to face learning with technology-based online learning (Lin, 2008; 56). Blended learning takes account of the impacts of factors such as learner differences, personal characteristics, and learning styles on the learning environment.

Blended learning was an inevitable transition for learning at the USP and fitted perfectly with the organisation's overall operational strategy. It offers a way of thinking about teaching and the use of learning technology effectively in the wider context. The multiple instructional delivery modalities in blended learning not only accommodate the various learning needs of our students but also gives lecturers the freedom and ability to meet other tasks and responsibilities.

There are various definitions of blended learning. Some view blended and hybrid learning differently while others look at them as one. This paper takes the latter view. Blended learning combines various models of traditional and distance education and makes use of all types of technology to offer meaningful learning environments for students (Akkoyunlu and Yilmaz-Soylu, 2008; 27). It is "an effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning" (Procter, 2003; 3). Olapiriyakul & Scher (2006) use blended and hybrid as one to refer to "the mixed mode of instruction which formally combines face to face learning and distance learning by incorporating technology to facilitate the learning process".

This paper defines blended learning as the effective combination of traditional face to face learning and distance learning that incorporates an e-learning component. The online component is of special interest; it was rejected as foreign to our distance communities and people's field-dependent cognitive style (Lieberman, 1994). It marginalized communities and individuals with limited or no access to computer and internet as well as limited knowledge in the use of technology. The absence of a 'human face' to interact with and learn from in online learning also posed a serious handicap for our people who tend to employ field dependence as their cognitive style. Dealing with tangible objects that people can see was easier.

While there are generally accepted reasons for using blended learning, the choices made in each context are based on reasons specific to that learning environment alone. The nature and location of the learners and the resources available are important considerations. The mini-case studies in this paper highlight a new awareness of online learning: the first concerns the author's experience as an online learner with an overseas institution while the other two are about the author's experience in courses at USP that used the blended learning approach. Online learning is being viewed favourably as part of a blended learning mode.

Case Study 1 (CS1)

I was introduced to WEBCT as a distance learner in 2003. We were a small group from the distance and flexible learning centre of the USP that studied with an overseas distance learning institution. I enrolled in a graduate course on instructional design that was totally online. A teacher by profession I was recently recruited as an instructional designer at the university and needed to learn about the new job. However, online learning was a totally new environment and I was not sure what to expect. The class was a mixed group of both young and old, and there were more like me that were new to instructional design. Most of the participants were from that home country and a small minority of international students like me. After planning what to write I made my first posting into the Discussion forum. I remember waiting anxiously for a response and when none came on that day or after that I was disappointed. At 53 years old I was learning to learn online.

I followed the weekly announcements closely. Every week the tutor directed us to content material and links to resources. These were very useful. The tutor linked questions and activities to the discussion forum and invited participation. I made the effort to make one posting every week and tried to link in with other discussions. Students were firing ideas and some ideas were obviously better than others; unfortunately too many good ideas didn't stay on the discussion table long enough. There seemed little coordination of the discussions, which can be done easily in a classroom. At the very least I expected the tutor to do that. On the whole most discussion strands were distorted and incomplete. Some good discussion groups didn't stay connected long enough as new ones were continually being formed. Certain individuals dominated discussions and rambled on; a few times discussions went out of common ground. For most of the semester I learned on my own, following the weekly outline, announcements and links provided by the

lecturer; I left the discussions to the other students. I passed the course but came away with serious reservations about learning online. My biggest disappointment was with the tutor who was "not around" enough to facilitate learning effectively. A lack of response and timely response was cause for frustration. I agree that the facilitation role of the tutor in whatever mode is important in using the tools and available resources carefully to develop and maintain active and collaborative learning; in online learning this is critical during the online component (Heinze and Proctor, 2004). Otherwise the psychological distance (Dickey, 2004) would get the better of students as before.

Case Study 2 (CS2)

My experience with the open-source Moodle was also my first experience with the blended learning approach. In the second semester of 2008 I was among a group of six lecturers co-teaching a Curriculum Studies course for second-year teacher trainees studying on-campus. The course had two major components: a one-hour face to face core lecture for the entire group every Tuesday, followed by a 2-hour Methods workshop in each of seven subjects: language, economics, mathematics, science, accounting, geography, computer studies during the week. This was necessary to prepare teacher trainees to teach two subjects in school. The core lectures defined the theme of the weekly workshops.

Close to 200 students made up the group. About three-quarters were pre-service teachers who were studying full-time while the rest were teachers already in the service and studying part-time. The workshop numbers averaged about 30-40 students each. Because of the large class and diversity in learning needs the decision was made to have a Moodle component. The idea was that the core lecture would set the theme for the subject workshops and the Moodle discussions would be a forum for reflection, hearing student voices, engaging students and developing ideas further. The course coordinator assessed online discussions.

I gave the first in-class core lecture on the title "Why teacher education?" Soon after that the course coordinator posted three questions to generate the discussion for the week. I logged in the day after the lecture and was floored by the big volume of individual responses in the discussion forum, which continued through every day of that week and into next. Most comments were short and they were all over the place. The students were not responding to the questions in any particular order and were referring to my lecture at the same time. Everyone was having a say. I did not make any response on that first day because I did not know where to start. On the second day I took an overview of the discussion and decided to comment on two issues that had sparked the most debate: (i) my view that "teachers are made" and (ii) teacher ethics. The teacher in me decided against a defensive approach so I presented a school scenario for people to reflect on. In the days that followed I noticed a slight change: while a good number of entries continued as before unaware that the discussion had shifted, the responses on the new strand were clearly tempered and thoughtful. Two of my colleagues joined that discussion loop also. Later in the week when I broached the topic in my mathematics workshop, I was surprised at the silence and it took some urging to get some response. It was the same throughout – the online discussion

forum was always alive as students freely posted views and even got into some debates. By the time they came to the workshops the Moodle discussions was a thing of the past and they were ready to move onto another level of activity. Moving in between the lecture, online discussion and Workshop activities worked wonders as was evident in the high quality of students' assignments. The reflective exercises were well written and it was encouraging to detect the effect of online engagement. The students had obviously gained important skills. The online forum encouraged thinking and expression. The teaching presence was still important in managing the learning environment and directing the learning experience. The blended learning context has provided the independence and control required to develop critical thinking.

Case Study 3 (CS3)

I coordinate the postgraduate course in Mathematics Education that targets practicing teachers working towards a postgraduate qualification. It is a second semester on-campus course. Because of low enrolments in my course in the second semester of 2009, the decision was made not to offer it that year. However, the semester was into the second week when the Director of one of the regional campuses informed the School of Education that 15 teachers would like to do my course during the two weeks school holidays that would fall in Weeks 4 and 5 of the university semester. This was the only time the teachers could come together for a lecture. We had almost completed arrangements for that group when we received a similar request from another Campus on the other side of the island to offer the same course to another group of 9 teachers during the same school holidays. I readily accepted both requests. The difficult part was to put together a plan to suit both requests and satisfy course requirements.

A blended learning approach with the following components was adopted:
(i) A Course Book for students;
(ii) Face-to-face session at Campus A on week one;
(iii) Face-to-face session at Campus B on week two
(iv) Moodle portal to be operating from week one
(v) One Saturday face-to-face session for presentations near the end of the semester

Of the five days of each lecture week, three were devoted to course content while the last two were spent in front of the Computer, Internet and Moodle. Work was intense from the first day. The full semester programme was laid out from beginning to end. The mixed delivery mode was explained carefully to students especially their role in making blended learning work for them and the course. We spent time on the assignments especially the major project worth 40%. We only had time to look briefly at the first two topics. The two days in the computer laboratory were also intense. While the majority of students had some knowledge of computers, very few were confident with Internet and the World Wide Web, and no one had online learning experience. With everyone sitting on a computer, we tried various things from logging into Moodle, locating the tools, familiarizing with the Course page, taking part in the Discussion

forum, and linking postings to individual email accounts. The two days of hands-on learning on the computer were obviously more exciting for the participants.

For the rest of the semester I posted the weekly outline every Tuesday together with links to course material online and in the Course Books. I made a few Announcements and posted discussion pointers in the Discussion Forum. The latter did not work as anticipated as only eight students out of the whole group made any postings. However, most students sent me at least one email about the course. It was not possible to run the final face-to-face class and changes had to be made to the course outline and additional materials posted online. Twenty four students completed the course very well, the highest and best results ever for this course. The quality of students' projects deserves mention. In their own ways the students searched, collected and put things together. They communicated with me and amongst themselves. The projects were researched and well written. Students wrote a lot. I came to the conclusion that this class showed greater independence in attending to learning and produced stronger learning outcomes than most face-to-face classes.

5. Conclusion

The learners in CS1 would not have gained qualifications without e-learning but we certainly would have done better with greater presence and attention from the tutor. The large group in CS2 would not have been heard consistently and effectively without the online communication mechanisms. However, the face-to-face sessions both at the beginning and later in the week reinforced thinking and provided motivation. The teachers in CS3 represent the many mature learners in the field who will enroll if there is increased flexibility in and access to learning. This group requested face-to-face instruction but acknowledged the need for modifications. The blended learning models that have face-to-face components together with an online experience in between allow distance learners to enroll in a program that they otherwise may not be able to. They have to balance job and family responsibilities with their studying (Owston, Wideman, Murphy and Lupshenyuk, 2008). One teacher's simple comment in an email said it very well:

"I am teaching in this remote school and I have passed my first postgraduate course. Thank you"

For many years the USP has been the only University in the region. That has changed dramatically in the last few years as other players have made inroads into the Pacific region offering a wider selection of opportunities for learners to choose from. Some offers have come with financial support packages. In addition, online learning has traversed distances and brought overseas programmes and courses to people's homes at much reduced costs. The competition for the best students has already begun and is expected to become intense. As students demand a quality learning experience as well as service and convenience, a blended learning mode that has

the best of both traditions will gain popularity over the traditional on-campus learning mode (Garrison and Kanuka,2004; 107) and online environment. On-campus learning could become the most expensive and least preferred mode of delivery. The group in CS1 completed an overseas course without incurring travel and accommodation costs, and the 24 teachers in CS3 paid only a fraction of the cost they would have paid to study on-campus full time, provided they were given study leave by their employer.

The role of teachers is one of facilitating learning and teaching skills. An important part of that is "to nurture students and to manage information in such a way that each student achieves maximum intellectual, social, physical, emotional and spiritual growth" (Barry & King, 2004; pp 6). Good teachers, according to Dewey (1902), can recognise and create genuine intellectual activity in students. The amount and quality of activity and interaction in class is a measure of this effectiveness. Students in CS1 and CS2 recorded much interaction amongst themselves and with lecturers. They freely posted their views and thoughts and some went further to defend and debate. Students in CS3 were not as interactive. In all cases one cannot forget the 'silent' learners who never got a word in. In online learning, the facilitation role of the online tutor is crucial. The role demands special competence that is different to classroom teaching. The on-line tutor has to be 'ever-present' for every learner as well as the class - to motivate, guide, and direct. The management, relationship and teaching skills have to be melded with the specialist technological skills. Overall there is indeed a new understanding of online learning that has come with wide acceptance of the blended approach. Blended learning has provided for students the independence and control that developed deep thinking and also encouraged an acceptance of responsibility to take charge of their learning.

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