



2019 Extended Abstract

Course on Blended Learning Approach: Finding the Ideal Mix and Balance

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Abstract

This work draws on reflections of facilitating blended-learning courses using Moodle Learning Management System (LMS) smart2 as a platform for teaching and learning. The blended learning concept was administered for the courses of Strategic Management and Business Policy (GT30003). Students basically spent both in the traditional classroom setting and on computer-based activities. They interacted with their facilitators and classmates virtually and face-to-face. Various methods of online platforms were introduced to facilitate learning and to capture the students' engagement. Overall, it was found that the use of several approaches (face-to-face and online) was considered

engaging, thus students' were motivated and more inclined to participate in these online activities.

Key words: blended-learning, reflective practice, engagement, smart2, moodle

Introduction

The core structure of the 21st century education system is now driven by technology-enhanced learning environments (Boholano, 2017). Notwithstanding, the application and implementation of blended learning in many institutions is an on-going debate: what exactly is an ideal practice? This crucial role most certainly requires a *paradigm shift* that spans from teaching to learning (Roger, 2000). The digital technology and the internet are changing how learners would want to learn. To keep abreast with this major paradigm shift, Universiti Malasysia Sabah (UMS) amongst other institution of higher learning, has taken various steps in acknowledging this circumstance which includes the development of smartUMS. SmartUMS is a platform that is expected to open-up opportunities for enhanced learning and support because it enables learners to access, extend, transform and share ideas and information in various communication styles and format.

Content

Background

As facilitators and academicians, we were often intrigued by the need of having to find the ideal *mix and balance* of the course content and delivery methods – of a combined conventional method of teaching (face to face meeting that includes lecture, tutorials, consultations) with interactive e-learning materials that could provide learners with the means to study the subject matter more conveniently on a 24/7 basis, on their own and at their own pace. Is there such and if there is, then what is meaningful and effective method to attain this? The traditional classroom setting is no doubt still significant, however computer-based activities will continue to make a strong impact toward providing learners the benefits of today's online environment (Arkorful,2015).

The Blended-learning Setup

Figure 1,2,3 respectively show the *blended learning setup* introduced for the courses of Strategic Management (Figure 4). Time allocation for each blended learning tasks was at the disposal of the facilitators to successfully implement the blended-learning setup.

Finding the Ideal Mix & Balance

Strategies to gauge students' engagement could vary depending on the structure of the course, point value, emphasis and how course facilitators chose to deliver their material (Sarder,2014). In our context in facilitating this blended-learning course, finding *the ideal mix and balance* activities to set up a successful course required integration of both face-to-face meeting and online learning tools. Ideally, several online learning tools would have already been *tried and tested* for suitability. The online forums were mostly favored by students. "I get to reflect about the topic at my own pace and time", shared one student. Sharing thoughts is an important part of the learning process. Reflection is useful as it maximizes self-awareness and builds self-confidence (Helyer, 2015).

Communicating the methods of delivery emphasizing what were to be delivered/discussed face-to-face and what took place online was equally important. The details on the use of online tools was particularly highlighted to make students feel comfortable and supported so that they could navigate the online learning tools (Figure 1(B) easily and helped them complete the given course activities and assignments to achieve their learning outcomes. In brief, the facilitators regarded that the ingredients which consisted of a combination of [A] Delivery and [B] Learning Tools (Figure 1) are some of the factors that determined users' experience and engagement. The blended-learning approach is a cycle (Figure 2) that span before facilitator-student interaction begins to closing feedback. We observed that the students' expectations increased with the understanding that now learning and materials were accessible 24/7.

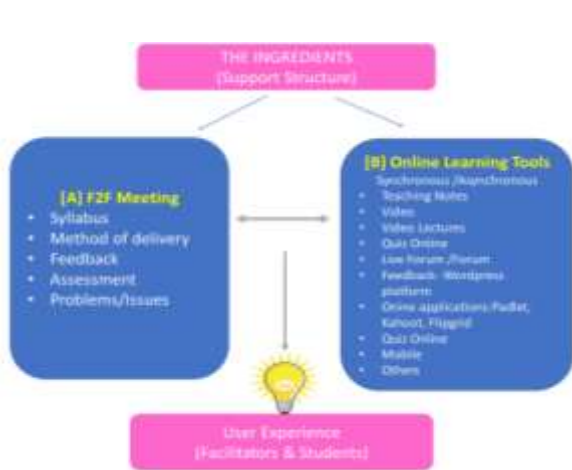


Figure 1: Finding the Ideal Mix & Balance

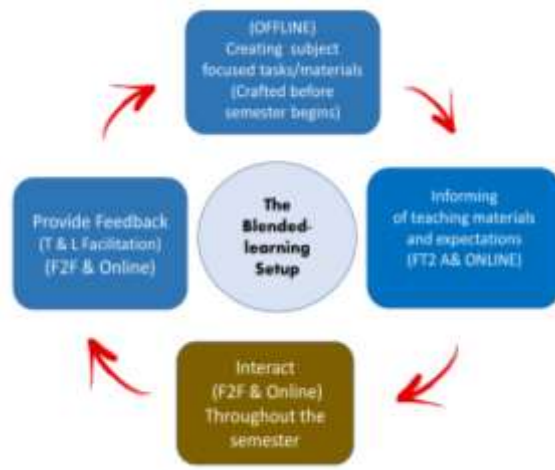


Figure 2: The Cycle

Figure 3 shows the blended-learning activities implemented for GT30003 Strategic Management and Business Policy. To build an interactive blended-learning community requires facilitators' increased online presence and this is challenging (Peery & Veneruso, 2011). Figure 4 shows the implementation of Figure 1,2 & 3 which is housed under COL-UMS Blended Course Development Website page (smart2).

BLENDED LEARNING ACTIVITIES					
1	2	3	4	5	6
GETTING STARTED	COURSE MATERIALS	ONLINE MATERIALS (SMART2)	FACILITATION (ONLINE)	FACILITATION (FACE-TO-FACE)	ASSESSMENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductory Video • Do's & Don'ts • Icebreaking Session • Course Announcements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Textbooks • Open source materials • Other web resources i.e. journal articles, directed websites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Videos <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Self-created ✓ Youtube ✓ others • Power Point Slides • Quiz Online • Additional web resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forums (Chapters) • A 2-hour Live Forum • Course Support Forums (Students helping Students) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group Registration • Lecture • Tutorial • F2F Consultations • Seminar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quiz • Video Presentations • Assignments
To get started, a welcoming video was posted. Introduction was done at the beginning of the semester. First, face-to-face, then students were directed to smart2 for further references.	Students were advised to purchase the main textbook if they wish to. Otherwise, they use an online textbook. They were encouraged to use the internet to look for additional materials.	In addition to power point slides, self-created videos and relevant to chapters youtube videos were uploaded on smart2.	Topic-focused discussions via online forums throughout the semester allows facilitator-students and peer-to-peer interaction. A 2-hour live forums done at least twice.	Traditional F2F lectures and tutorials. Weekly consultations to address general issues and concerns. A sharing session related to current issues (chapter related) by students.	Online quiz focused on the first 4 chapters. Students-created video to present findings as part of the assignment.

Figure 3: Blended Learning Activities (GT30003)

Figure 4: GT30003 (2-2018/2019) <http://smart2.ums.edu.my/course/view.php?id=9798>

Importance to Education

There are countless reasons why the need to have a proper BL setup that is meaningful and useful to facilitators and students. The adoption and successful implementation of a BL courses is dependent on various aspects. However, whether we like it or not, technology is everywhere; it is entwined in almost every part of our culture; deeply embedded in our lives. For learners to survive the current technological environment that goes beyond their schooling, they must ideally, upon leaving the school environment, be well-versed in technology (Bohono, 2017).

Advantages Towards Education and Community

The adoption of a blended-learning approach in teaching and learning can expand the country's tertiary education to a higher level (Azizan,2010).

- The blended-learning setup benefits facilitators and students due its dynamic approach: a mixture of conventional and new. Its flexibility is necessary given the current technological environment.

- Content available at the fingertips as long as internet connection irrespective of students' locality.
- It has the potential to maximize engagement, understanding, and learning retention in a dynamic style in that it enhances soft skills and life-long learning.
- For the community(in general) level, blended-learning courses/setup will expose students (community) to the world of technology-enabled learning.

Commercial Values

Others who are considering bringing their courses to the “blended-learning” level will benefit from the facilitators' sharing of process development and flow. Ideally, they modify the delivery content and learning tools to suit their respective course content and expectations as well as the needs of their environment.

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