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Daniel V. Eastmond

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Reviewer Commentary to "Blended Learning and Sense of Community"

Daniel V. Eastmond
Western Governors University
USA

Let me begin by saying that this article was a pleasure to review. It was well-written, well-researched, and makes an important contribution to our field. I have organized my commentary into three areas: 1) response to the article itself; 2) reflection upon my own relevant experiences; and 3) a perspective from a virtual university that does not offer blended learning.

Response

I agree with the author that the blended learning model provides the best of both worlds: the interpersonal connections and relationship establishing experience through face-to-face encounters, as well as the sustained academic dialog with peers and instructor(s) online throughout the course. Since the research presented here dealt with courses about different subjects, conclusions about actual learning performance and mastery of material will differ based upon the content and methods that these courses employed. Readers must remember that the valid conclusions of this research are limited to students self-report of their sense of community and amount of learning that took place. The correlation between these learning scores and actual student performance would be a good follow up project.

We need further research in our field that investigates the effectiveness of various instructional formats, as presented in this study, including:

- Weekly class sessions versus weekend programs (with or without a distance component)

- These same formats supplemented by online discussion boards

- Several weeks of face-to-face sessions that shift to months of online with a closing in-person closure class

- Putting the face-to-face session in the middle of the course for formative evaluation purposes, rather than at the end

- Combining blended sessions with the beginning, middle, and final face-to-face class in an abbreviated (50 minutes to three hour) length

Such research would reveal whether all of the advantages the author outlines still hold true in various configurations, and which were more effective than others.

My Journey

I began my online distance experience as a doctoral student supporting the launch of blended learning courses in the early 90s at Syracuse University. Most students and professors knew each other already from other courses, but the initial session did welcome a few new-comers and was directed toward the curiosity and anxieties associated with continuing our academic work online. Learning how to use the computer conferencing software in a lab environment was much easier than it would have been at a distance, especially with these technically unsophisticated users. We conducted a mid-course half-day session that allowed people to gather again and evaluate their experiences so that we could make mid-course corrections. The response was positive and by the end of the semester, both faculty and students were pleasantly pleased how effective a blended online course could be. Several years later, I taught blended courses as a faculty member at the University of South Dakota. One course was about distance education; it included purposely designed sessions of teaching from different interactive television (ITV) sites, as well as a six-week long stint of strictly online fare with a closing face-to-face session. This not only brought the class together, but also provided the first-hand exposure to various distance delivery systems that students need to experience. In other courses, I found it convenient to schedule independent study, ITV sessions from other campuses, and online threaded discussion sessions during the semester when I knew that I would be out of town. This enriched the learning experience of students whose only background was face-to-face, opening them to the splendor of distance education. (An important part of course orientation was the provision of essential training on ITV and Web communication tools to these on-campus students so that they could effectively participate in these sorts of sessions).

In contrast, several of my experiences have been with programs that were offered entirely at a distance, including my current position at Western Governors University (WGU). WGU is a competency-based national higher education institution offering distance programs in information technology, business, and teacher education. My first completely online course was from the Open University of the United Kingdom, while at Syracuse University, and it created a totally new paradigm of instructional possibilities as I interacted with over 25 students and four moderators on five continents. SUNY Empire State College's Center for Distance Learning, where I provided academic support, engaged in some of the earliest online distance programs (without blended opportunities), and the tremendous growth and satisfaction of their student population (which includes students nationally and from other colleges through the SUNY Learning Network) is one of the most successful distance enterprises in the United States. Finally, I was sold on the efficacy of strictly online distance courses when I taught four courses for Boise State University's instructional and performance technology program over a several year period. With students located throughout the nation (including Alaska), a graduate assistant in another state, and the rich learning environment created by the extensive experience base of working professionals who applied course concepts immediately to their daily practice, created an exhilarating, quality education experience, unrivaled by most face-to-face classrooms in which I have participated.

Why Strictly Distance Delivery?

So the question remains: Why would an institution run a strictly online distance program if the hybrid format is superior for both community and learning? First and foremost is access – the aim to provide an education to individuals that is independent of time and place, so that working adults can fit this opportunity within the demands of their busy lives. In regard to my particular institution, WGU, blended courses would seem to prohibit students' rapid self-paced movement

through modularized learning resources to refresh and develop just the needed competencies because of the time, place, and content structures the course demands. Another important aspect, diversity, emerges from distance programs that are national, even international in scope. These programs allow people from many professional areas, geographic regions (states, provinces, or nations), urban and rural, cultural and political, age and ethnicity, and even people employed during different work shifts to interact together online. The result is good andragogy: adults bringing their expertise to the collective learning environment to address and apply the content of instruction. These factors of access, diversity, and tailored instruction create a quality distance education experience quite apart from blended instruction.

Another question arises: How do virtual institutions compensate for a weaker course community than would be present in a blended format (as the article argues)? My institution and others are taking programmatic and even institutional initiatives to create and sustain learning communities and student affiliation and loyalty throughout the time a student pursues their degree. This includes at WGU: 1) providing orientation courses that build community, technical, academic, and lifestyle skills to become a successful distance student; 2) fostering cohort groups so that peers work together through a great deal of their degree, supporting and being accountable to each other; 3) mentoring with a dedicated faculty member who works directly with the student throughout their degree; and 4) through a competency-based approach that places performance criteria as the basis of student progress, allows flexible use of learning resources, and acknowledges prior learning.

In conclusion, blended learning courses certainly prove to be effective for both community development and learning. This article corroborates the growing scholarly support of this with some solid evidence. Such in-person sessions are however "costly" in terms of overall access by the length of distance to which such practices restrict courses, programs, and the institution. There are compensating activities that can be intentionally incorporated that can make up for not having face-to-face sessions. At present, it seems that blended courses are most appropriately used within campus-based programs that are venturing into distance education as a means of warming up faculty and students to its possibilities. Such programs may never have the intention of hosting entirely distance offerings, and if so, blended learning courses are important in opening up additional access and providing some of the enhanced learning environments that are available through online communities. I do not predict that face-to-face learning will go away, but its prominence will diminish, as blended courses in all of their varieties become more of the norm. Of course, it will be interesting to see whether the same learning dynamics continue in blended courses as online technology becomes more ubiquitous and class members, students and faculty, become comfortable in community-building and learning strictly at a distance.

Athabasca University