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Blended Learning Tools for Teaching and Training (Book Review)

Reviewer:

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Introduction

Higher education has recently spent much effort in trying to respond to rapid technological innovation in teaching and learning. The emerging technologies in the modern universities are fostering the interest of blended learning. In the past few years, it has been an increasing number of studies dealing with the blended issues such as (1) how to integrate different technology and media into conventional classroom and (2) how pedagogy and face-to-face instructions can be mediated by advance technologies. Stimulated by the emergence of ubiquitous Internet with web 2.0 and mobile technology, the definitions and practices of blended learning are researched by both educational and technological/information professionals. To support the choices of such professionals, the author Barbara Allan addressing the “what, which and how” type of questions in her new book and aims to provide a simple but practical guide for those who are involved in education and training.

Illustrated with a range of diagrams, library-based case studies and examples, *Blended Learning Tools for teaching and training* provides information professionals from an overview for the design and delivery of blended learning, to the management if blended learning projects. The book can be categorized in three parts which (1) commenced with the definitions, tools and technologies used in blended learning experiences; (2) further demonstrations on the learning models, planning, designing initiatives and principles; and (3) concluded with the blended learning projects management.

Chapter Summary and Notable Reviews

Chapter One, *Introduction*, introduces blended learning in the context of information and library services and presents the structure of the book. Build on the works from Sharpe et al. (2006), Littlejohn and Pegler (2007), the author describes an overview of blended learning with two approaches to “wraparound” blended learning and the eight aspects of learning and teaching, which may be blended together.

The author first defines blended learning with two simple sentences and an illustration from personal experiences and discussions with colleagues. Without clothing blended learning with jargons, I assert that this chapter precisely facilitates the novel readers to construct a basic understanding of the subject area. The eight aspects are labelled as “the landscape of blended learning”, which demonstrate the various dimensions of blended learning in a well-defined manner.

Chapter Two, *Tools and technologies*, identifies a range of tools, technologies and their applications in particular relevant to blended learning. Five main areas are categorised: (1) technologies in the classroom such as Power Point and interactive whiteboard; (2) virtual communication tools such as discussion boards, chat room and podcasting; (3) social networking software such as blogs and wikis; (4) e-learning systems such as VLEs and group collaborative software and (5) mobile learning.

This is perhaps one of the most helpful chapters in the way that it fosters variety types of blends by providing many tools and how they may be used. The URL links of the technologies and many real case studies are valuable to the readers who wish to investigate on further information and ideas.

Chapter Three, *Models of teaching and learning*, provides an overview of the modern learning theories underpin blended learning. The author argues that it is a grounding area that enables readers to design, develop and deliver effective blended programmes. The impact of learning context such as physical, virtual and social environments to the learners are first considered. Recognize the Learning style models by Honey and Mumford (1992) and Dunn and Dunn (1999), the author presents few models and preferences of different learning styles. This is followed by the discussions of tutor-centred pedagogies, learner-centred pedagogies and their subcategories, such as action learning, inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning and reflective practice.

Blended Learning involves the combination of two fields of concern: technological and instrumental considerations are, to a greater or lesser extent, combined with pedagogical theory. There is general consensus that pedagogical considerations should be given priority over technical issues. It is impressive that this chapter summarises complex modern learning theories in an unconfused way. The author addresses this provocative issue in a very careful and structured manner. Rather than a conceptual thought of potential rhetoric, these real case-studies are very useful to give the readers a practical picture.

Chapter Four and Five, *Planning and designing blended learning programmes and learning activities* present a step-by-step model and details learning activities available. These stages and details will lead to the delivery and evaluation of a blended learning programme. Simultaneously, the author asserts that successful blended learning programme is depends on researching and responding to the parent organizations and individual learners' needs, as well as establishing realistic aims and learning outcomes.

The stages of the design and development models offer straight forward guidelines to those who intend to design and deliver a blended learning programme. Examples of outlines structure, induction programme and etc are available to support the claim in a more functional mode. The details of learning activities provide tutor a rich idea on a diverse mixture of activities that can be adopted. These are useful chapters that enable readers to explore and embrace new ideas mediated by technologies in an integrated way.

Chapter Six and Seven, *Working with groups and working as a tutor*, deal with two agendas of "how" type of questions: (1) how to facilitate group work and (2) how to be an effective tutor in blended learning programme. Various group activities, characteristic and challenges for effective tutors and their examples are listed.

Practical guidelines for working with groups, role and responsibilities of tutor are discussed thoroughly in these two chapters. I would opine that one of the most interesting parts in the chapter is the strategy for "handling tricky situations during question time." The author suggests a list of strategy for tutor to deal with challenging circumstances such as being asked offensive or bizarre question. This is apparently a valuable hint for inexperienced tutor in blended learning context.

Chapter Eight, *Communities of Practice*, focus on the concept of communities of practice and distinguish them from community of interest. The last chapter, *Managing blended learning projects*, introduce the general project management issues and the principles for managing blended learning project.

The book wisely concluded with the five-phases process involved in establishing and facilitating communities of practice and project management agenda. This wrap up uplifting the reader to a higher and broader view on blended learning agenda holistically, rather than a single blended programme or individual's needs.

Discussions and Constructive Comments

Blended Learning Tools for teaching and training is attractive to all academics who interested at blended learning, although the author claims that it is aimed for library and information professionals. In the beginning of the book, the author, in a wise manner avoids the mess arguments for the definitions of the term "blended learning". The reader is consequently directed to Oliver and Trigwell (2005)'s studies for related controversy.

If there is one point of constructive comment, it is that the ideas of the book (or blended learning) may be too simple and not simple enough at the same time. They are too simple in the sense that many science-like phases and step-by-step guidelines are suggested to model complex social and educational behaviours. Simultaneously, it is too complicated, in that the author asserts that there is no simple solution or prescription for designing effective blended learning programme. The author further suggests that the success depends on researching and responding to the parent organizations and individual learners' needs. Borrow the idea from Turner (2007), knowing and capturing how many people will follow a particular route through the educational system is more useful than be able to predict the behaviour of each individual. Similarly, the author perhaps takes a similar view with Littlejohn and Pegler (2007) that there is no perfect blends for a specific context, just as there is no one perfect blend of coffee for all occasions. However, many structures guidelines and models are suggested in the books. All these may be seen as "3-in-1 coffee mix" or instant coffee for novel readers.

I would argue that there is no standard or constant way for learning and teaching to be conducted, especially in view of the variety and complexity of educational purposes and environments. There are many ways of 'blends' depending on the blender and the context and not necessarily constraint to the learners' learning style. The argument of "too simple and not simple enough" is thus challenging all blended learning researchers as it reminds that our overall epistemology is perhaps vague or controversial.

The author claims that learning is a complex, individual and messy business, it is difficult to summarise learning theories without risking over-simplifying the topic. This is a candid argument that I agree with most of it. I am thus impressed by the summary in chapter three that show the author's attempt to triumph over such challenge. That is however, I would argue that learning is not necessarily a messy business. Obviously the emergence of a digital culture has encouraged some entrepreneurial types to view higher education merely as a potential business or market (Poster, 2005). It may be the reality but less than convincing to educationalists. I would assert that education is much more than merely instrumental business.

Croft (1994) suggests two challenges faced by the people (tutors and learners) when technology-focus is in place in blended learning trend: (1) we should have a distinct idea of the purpose(s) we wish to serve, (2) we must maintain the flexibility and imagination to adapt the tool to new uses as they arise. There are many tools and technologies suggested in the book. Ironically the educational purposes and the flexibility and to adapt new tools are having less rooms in the book.

However, a notable achievement of the book is that it will stimulate blended e-learning practitioners to ponder and to incorporate a variety of ideas in a coherent way. It is not a book for educationalists who need to be motivated to use educational technology. It is intended for the novice who is wishes to find the total solution for improving educational experience mediated by technology.

Blended Learning Tools for teaching and training in overall, is an excellent resource that should help educational professionals to have an insight into the blended learning world. It generally helps the readers to develop educational ideas and start up designing blended learning programmes. It plays a role as a remarkable "start-up kit" and offers practical advice for those who wish to practise blended e-learning.

The emerging of computer and technologies has, unsurprisingly, created a new era for modern education. Some researchers even jump into the pool of technological research which the focus of education has slightly shifted from educational context to instruments. The variety of educational theories, however fundamentally remains unchanged in the process of embedding blended learning. This has apparently fostered debates between researchers on the university's role, educator's role and technology's role in higher education.

Loveless (2000) asserts that technology is not a neutral tool for learning, but a cultural artifact in the experience of learners and educators. As Croft (1994) states that when a person applies a tool to some tasks, the tool becomes identified with the tasks and its value with the desirability of the end. Technology is a tool taking its meaning from the purpose to which educator or learner applies it. Hence, there is a need to explore such debates especially is blended learning the "tools" for teaching and training? This is perhaps one of the few areas about which Barbara Allan is silent.

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