Global Blended Learning Practices For Teaching And Learning, Leadership And Professional Development

Dr. Ann Toler Hilliard, Bowie State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Blended learning is a combination of online and face-to-face activities for classroom instruction or other training modalities to help develop new knowledge and skills that can be transferred to the workplace environment. The use of blended learning is expanding globally (Vaughn, 2007). Blended learning is evident in professional development training and general classroom offerings for a number of educational programs across disciplines in global communities. With the limitation of funding and time constraints, more professional development training organizations, programs in departments and units at universities and colleges are infusing blended learning as another educational tool to use in the delivery of instructional and managerial services. Blended learning is a fast growing trend in traditional institutions in higher education and other organizations. An Online Learning Survey revealed that blended learning was expanding globally to the growth rate 46% or higher per year. Once organizational facilitators and instructional faculty members at the university and college become comfortable with blended learning applications, they are usually highly motivated to explore further new and improved ways of using blended learning for instructional services or managerial training activities (Allen, Seaman & Garrett, 2007). Blended learning practices are used by students, leaders, faculty members and staff in various teaching and learning venues. The leadership development training process continues after face-to-face activity participation with the support of blending learning technology. Many leadership university and college programs using blended learning include at least three dimensions for students such as awareness of concepts, definition and procedures/policy, understanding of measurable skills and knowledge. The role of technology today using blended learning has broad implications for the student or learner. The online tools available in blended courses can also significantly enhance student engagement, ensuring that all students and learners participate in course discussions and benefit from collaborative learning (NGLC, 2012). This study will discuss a guiding definition for blended learning, benefits, team support, policy, management issues, rationale for expansion, professional development, purchasing, funding, evaluation, and lenses of the future and implications.

Keywords: Leadership, Blended Learning, Expanding Globally, Faculty Development, Views of Student Learners, Policy and Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Using the blended learning approach to learning, allows instructional facilitators the opportunity to personalize learning for every participant in any typical leadership training program. However, every participant or student may not learn best by the use of blended learning and that is why the great advantage of the mix of online and face-to-face training could build a more efficient way to offer participants a balanced approach to learning. Determining the best mix of online and face-to-face instruction could be the key to building more successful leadership development training programs in global communities. Plus blended learning is another way of engaging participants in learning and being able to connect to broader communities as they continue their professional development training (Morrison, 1999).

In an educational environment, faculty and staff members globally are seeking ways to utilize software programs to improve professional development, leadership development training and the delivery of instruction and assessment of students' work. Students today are seeking ways to self-check their work before submission to faculty members. Therefore, needed programs and technology tools are a must to have today at the university or for student to access from their own home environment at any place around the world. In order to ensure that the university has the support from key top leaders, the leadership team at various levels at the university should make sure that the infrastructure needs are in place to accommodate or support blended learning programs. It is important to have at the maintenance stage blended learning teaching programs that are relevant and meaningful for the workforce economy. Therefore, curriculum technology programs should be mapped out properly, strategically, updated and improvements should be clear for all ongoing planning and implementation stages and evaluation of all new or improved programs (Welch, 2007). Blended learning programs should be updated within a three year period or less in order to stay current with the needs of industry in the public and private sector. Regardless of the instructional methods used, all college programs should show quality in their content and delivery. Faculty use of time wisely, plus surveying faculty and students to secure feedback of program satisfactory use of software for blended learning should take place by the leadership team at least twice a year (Mandernach, 2005). The leadership team at the university should support quality blended learning programs by providing needed resources to faculty, students and staff. It is essential that students are receiving quality services.

According to a 2003 survey of "Blended Learning Best Practices" by The Learning Guild, over 85% of organizations are using some form of blended learning for the creation and/or delivery of educational content. The experience of respondents participating in the survey was positive, with more than 76% saying blended learning was more effective than traditional classroom training, and 73% suggested that blended learning had a higher learner value/impact than non-blended processes. Over 36% of the respondents used 6 to 10 different components in their blended program. The top five components were classroom instruction, interactive web-based training, email communication, self-paced content, and threaded discussion. Therefore, it appears that there is a high demand for blended learning in many aspects of educational training programs today compared to traditional practices (Boyle, Bradley, Chalk, Jones & Pickard, 2003).

BLENDED LEARNING GLOBALLY AND OVERALL BENEFITS

Many universities and colleges today are using online and/or blended learning in many course offerings. Some of the more traditional universities are moving toward the use of more blending learning to support teaching and learning, but not as fast as practicing blended learning courses being offered at such universities as Long Island University in the U.S. and University of Liverpool, School of Oriental and Africa, Anglia Ruskin University in the UK and many other international universities just to name a few. The European Higher Education Areas (EHEA) is requiring that the university system to incorporate blended learning across the curriculum. For example, WebQuests is used to increase student activities that promote inquiry-oriented assignments that help with higher order thinking skills. The whole idea is important, because the European Higher Education Areas (EHEA) wishes to intentionally push for leading and learning by using technology as a tool for blending learning across curricular activities (Dodge, 2001).

A survey was conducted regarding the top benefits of blended learning by The Center for Digital Education and these were the findings: 1) offer alternate learning opportunities, 92%. 2) offer distance learning to a board-base number of individuals, 85%. 3) promote more student engagement, 70%. 4) help to increase academic achievement, 61%. 5) help to increase classroom capacity, 59%. 6) increase student retention, 56%. 7) decreases cost, 50%. The technology learning model for blended learning has four major benefits, because it makes it easier for instructors or faculty/facilitators to reach students at 92%, helps instructors to measure how students us digital materials at 73%, scales institution or department efforts at 61% and helps to decrease costs overall at 54% (Center for Digital Education, 2012).

LEADERSHIP TEAM SUPPORT

The role of the leadership team at the university is very demanding. In order to have a quality blended learning instructional program there must be effective and competent faculty and faculty needs should be met such

as adequate resources and professional development training for using blended learning tools. The support of the university leadership team and the office of information technology must work together for the benefit of quality resources, instruction and higher student achievement.

The leadership team and faculty must always appreciate the traditional way of learning, but must step forward into the 21st Century to know about and to embrace e-learning as a way of delivering and receiving instructional services in an educational environment that current based on today's standards and expectations. The leadership team in universities must realize that the world has changed and is changing quickly right before our eyes. University faculty must prepare students to effectively use technology tools for an economy-based workforce for today and the future. Therefore, leaders at universities must look at ensuring that the proper online or blended learning tools are functioning and made available to faculty with proper training so that faculty can deliver effective instructional services to all students. Student learning outcomes should link to real-world experiences or application. It is urgent that students receive the kind of education that will place them in positive positions in the broader society academically, socially, culturally and economically as they compete in the market place today and tomorrow for career opportunities (Schutt, 2007). In order to meet the needs of all students, faculty members must be able to see that students are very different today compared to twenty or even ten years ago and it is essential for faculty to help students to be successful as they navigate paths toward careers. Today, learners are seeing and are using digital devices for learning and recreational purposes. Because of the internet, students have the opportunity to see the world globally very quickly. Therefore, universities need the working of e-learning resources in place and programs for faculty to use properly in order to prepare students more than adequately to be successful in the global society (Morrill, 2007).

Working with faculty, the leadership teams at universities need to make an intentional effort to work together to meet the needs of diverse learners. Diverse learners today often seek ways to gain access to some form of e-learning to increase their learning experiences in a convenient manner. Working learners and students with families and other responsibilities often seek various forms of online or blended learning experiences to continue or improve their educational experiences (Bonk, Wisher & Nigrelli, 2004). In order to accommodate the needs of students, faculty members must be competent and comfortable themselves in integrating blended learning and other communication technologies into the design of their coursework.

Students today are seeking convenient ways to attend the university, because of work, family commitments, cost and other reasons. Therefore, modern thinking and savvy university team leaders and faculty members must have infrastructure in place to accommodate today's students in teaching and learning programs. The effective support coming from university leaders can be based on having working software technologies in classrooms and labs so that student learners are able to use chat rooms, forums, video conferencing and a variety of social networks to enhance their learning experiences at and beyond the university today (McKenzie, 2006).

POLICY FOR BLENDED LEARNING

There must be policies in place for the use of blended learning or any e-learning programs at universities so that everyone is on the same page of access and responsibility. Policies must be introduced to all students, faculty and staff and all policies must be in written form in the university's guidelines or handbooks. Based on need and/or observation, policies should be reviewed and/or updated every three years. The e-learning growth is occurring in blended learning environments rapidly. Blended learning can help to personalize learning and facilitate quicker access for its users. Policies must be put into place by policy makers and educational leaders to ensure that everyone is clear about the what, who, where, when, and why about blended learning programs at the university (King, 2002).

Until there is a clearer understanding of use and benefits of blended learning, some universities even ivy-league are using a pilot project to infuse and redesign many of their graduate courses toward blended learning opportunities for students. Some universities are looking at why and how blended learning should be used and at what level decisions regarding blended delivery should be made. For example, should the leadership team and faculty members decide collectively on policy, practices and procedures regarding blended learning use? Decision-making may follow such thoughts as to how blended learning is to be used in individual courses versus entire programs and policy precedents may need to be established. Specific areas of blended learning can be examined by

including courses and program approval, resources, and faculty responsibilities, workload and the redesign or writing of syllabi for courses by professional developers. With the implementation of blended learning, there needs to be a written policy in place linked to the university's core values, ethics, and copyright issues to ensure that the proper use of e-learning resources or other e-learning opportunities are in compliance with established policy at the state and national level (Smith, Lewis & Massey, 2000). The use of blended learning supported by the university must also take into account the need to address continued problem solving issues with software and problems regarding management issues.

MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Great leaders are fully aware of problems about management concerns that will occur when using blended learning or any other online learning applications. The office of information technology should have appropriate knowledge to regularly test the stability of the blended learning platform, check for compatibility of various aspects of the browsers, check existing backup strategies in case there is a problem with the system or software and to use interoperability standards for blended learning. If there are too many problems using prescribed software for faculty members at the university, faculty will not be excited about trying to access its use. Being sensitive to the needs of faculty and the students is essential. It is important too, for management to understand the culture and people at the university or college and to make every attempt to solve technical problems as soon as possible (Busher, 2006).

There can be additional problems with blended learning, if the leadership team does not stay aware of the current needs of faculty, ineffectiveness for the support of the campus network and server support and the lack of appropriate access to the network by faculty and students. It is essential that the leadership team develops a well trained and accessible group of technical support resources to ensure that faculty members are able to gain access to technology that they need in order to provide appropriate tools to support the blended learning curriculum for their own learning and students' learning (Magiuka, 2005).

Again, in order to implement a meaningful and available online teaching program such as blended learning, the network infrastructure and campus servers must be able to provide proper connections to faculty and students. To do online teaching and learning, there is a need to have in place in advance what resources and services that would be needed and how such resources and services can be easily navigated thoroughly by faculty and student learners. Ongoing training activities and professional development for the technological growth and development of faculty, staff and students are also needed in the e-learning environment (Tallen-Runnels, 2006).

RATIONALE FOR BLENDED LEARNING EXPANSION

There are some major reasons for blended learning expansion at universities and colleges globally as follows: 1) Increase access, flexibility and mobility for student learners. 2) Improve pedagogy structure for instruction and professional development. 3) Improve tracking and control of academic activities. 4) Increase more interest in self-study for academic improvement. 5) Increase the opportunity for global connection, collaboration and relationship building. 6) Improve and use cost-effectiveness for materials and resources. 7) Prepare students with needed skills, knowledge and professional disposition in a quick and more effective manner for a competitively-driven marketplace for an economy-based global society (Grahman, 2006).

The global environment for work today is looking for employees to have technology and problem-solving skills. Therefore, universities and colleges must expose their students to this experience in a competent manner. In order for faculty members to be effective and competent in their delivery of instructional services to all students, it is important to embrace the use of blended learning. Faculty members must continue themselves to participate in professional development activities in order to improve their own skills in teaching online abilities (Matheos & Curry, 2004).

The working educational committees for blended or online courses should make sure that all university and college policies, course descriptions, and handbooks are updated to reflect current course offerings and expectations for blended learning applications. There should be clear articulation through professional development of policies pertaining to blended learning practices such as: goals, objectives, course selection advisement, resources, materials,

intellectual property acknowledgement, and responsibilities of faculty, students and the office of information technology. It should be clear how students may access all aspects of needed technology that should be available at the university and the community to support the blended learning platform (McSporran& king, 2005).

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development and the upgrading of skills and knowledge for faculty and students are a must in order to keep up with the latest trends with online learning or blended learning at the university. The leadership team at the university should continue to update faculty and students' skills and knowledge regarding new and improved technologies. Therefore, it is essential to communicate the online policy for new or improved programs, schedule differentiated professional development activities, give faculty incentives to participate in training, encouragement of team participation by departments or areas of interest, continue to seek input from faculty based on their views as to how to best utilize the new or improved technologies at the university (Pospisil & Wilcoxin, 1998). The leadership technology team should also offer mentoring services to faculty in order to show faculty how to use the specific technology management tools based on their particular discipline to enhance instructional delivery services in course work. Some blended learning experiences for students include taking mid-term, final examinations online, and group project development. The technology support team members have the opportunity to show faculty how to use online test security measures and other matters. Based on the opinion of many educators, researchers are finding that blended learning is a popular desire of many faculty members and students because of convenience and quick feedback to the targeted audience (McQuiggan, 2007). In order for faculty and students to be successful in using blended learning resources, again, there is a continued need for the leadership team to support the use of blended learning programs and various software applications.

PURCHASING E-LEARNING SOFTWARE

University leaders may wish do research in order to have more knowledge about e-learning software platforms ***before*** talking with external experts and corporate consultants. University leaders need to solicit information from their own experienced local faculty and staff before engaging in the purchase of e-learning software. Many faculty members have experience with teaching some online courses and facilitating blended learning instruction and could help with purchasing wisely as a consumer. Frequently, local faculty and staff could share with the leadership team at the university or college what works best and what does not work so well. It is important that the leaders of universities and colleges make wise purchases of software access for their faculty, staff and student learners. The leadership team at the university could benefit from observing how other universities within the system are using various types of technology applications and their success rate based on qualitative and quantitative research. In essence, are individuals such as faculty and staff at other universities within the state system satisfied with the software applications that they are using… why or why not (Hammond, 2013). Many factors are important too, before making a purchase by carefully evaluating different types of online programs. Again, check with users and the leadership teams from other universities within the system that may be using online programs could be helpful. It is critically important too, to know what you are actually getting for the quoted price from the vendor. The question could be, can this online system support what the university/college already has on the campus and is there very good support from the corporate office when there are concerns or problems with the software?

The leadership team at the university may have faculty members and other trusted individuals to validate the software program(s) for specific needs of the organization. In the posture of saving money, too many leaders may not always make the wisest decision in purchasing online or e-learning programs (Berking & Gallagher, 2013). The leadership team at the university or college should provide the most appropriate software training program possible for faculty and staff. By providing differentiated technology training, encourages institutional collaboration among different departments, creates a team approach for teaching and learning, and makes sure that courses are designed with the infusion of the appropriate software throughout the curriculum, but most importantly that the buyer be aware of what is being purchased (Wright, 2011). Training of faculty and learners using software programs where appropriate is very important and should be part of the commitment by the university or college. In essence, the leadership team at the university or college must show a strong commitment continuously to provide training for faculty, staff and learners of new and improved software programs. Also, faculty and learners should

know current policy regarding the use of new and/or improved blended learning materials and resources. A lot of useful software could be a free download that could be used in the blended learning environment. However, if software is purchased, all purchases of software should be carefully done as an investment for the university or college (Moore, 2004). It is important too, that the technology tools purchased for blended learning are annually evaluated, because there is a need to see if the tools are reasonable based on their quality for validity and reliability for instructional delivery or management services.

FUNDING SUPPORT AND FACULTY CONCERNS

From the aspect of continued support for online learning and teaching or blended learning, faculty members sometimes may express their concerns regarding the duration of access to online or blended learning because of budgetary constraints at universities today. Especially, if there is a new program related to technology access, faculty members would like to know about funding and policies related to how will a new and improved technology program be administrated, who will be conducting the training, when and how training will be conducted, what software will be used and will this new or improved software be able to connect or communicate with what software the university already has on hand. Faculty will frequently ask how will the curriculum be developed from this new software and suggest use of a set format. Another question could be asked, how faculty members can use their own format and style and finally if this new software is adapted for use with other programs on campus. Faculty members may ask the question how will the technology program be funded since most universities have budgetary concerns and how well is the program progressing based on expectations (Compora, 2003). After the implementation of blended learning programs, there is a need to see how well the programs are working. All educational blended learning programs must continue to be evaluated in order to obtain a view of the quality of the program; therefore, there are some common ways of evaluating blended learning curriculum programs. Using The Sloan Consortium 2011, has been credited for looking at evaluating blending learning programs based on the "Five Pillars of Learning" which includes effective faculty, satisfaction of student, access, and cost effectiveness (Shelton, 2011).

EVALUATION OF BLENDED LEARNING TOOLS

Evaluation of blended learning can be done by internal users and experts externally.

Evaluators can look at the design of the curriculum and see how the curriculum is being implemented. Evaluation could take on a more narrative approach that presents an opportunity to evaluate blended learning in a qualitative manner. Too frequently, blended learning evaluations are done with a lot of formality (Oliver, 2000). Most of the evaluations could be done in a practical manner. For example, an evaluator may ask faculty members and students how they feel about the software used for blended learning. Qualitative data could be collected from an open-ended questionnaire and personal interviews with faculty and students. This type of data collection would reflect the experiences that the participants have had using blended learning methods. By using the qualitative data analysis would also give the evaluator the opportunity to see reoccurrences of program use satisfaction beyond numeric value, because the actual views of the people in their own words would be invaluable (Collings & Ballantyne, 2004).

Faculty members could find that the qualitative approach for using blended learning to be useful, because the approach could offer a view of how to best teach students using blended learning from evaluative feedback from student learners in their own words. Feedback from students regarding the blended learning experience, could give faculty an opportunity in essence to improve their teaching methods through various evaluations and assessment models (Neumeier, 2005).

Using a quantitative approach in evaluation of blended learning or e-learning may include the following: (1) obtain descriptive data on practice structural and functional characteristics, including panel characteristics of student learners participating in the program, (2) estimate reach of the implementation strategies, and (3) assess process and outcome measures to evaluate implementation success (Burton, Civitano & Steiner-Grossman. 2012). The data collector or researcher could obtain practical characteristics data through a survey completed by student learners. Data on implemented strategies could be gathered using a number of methods quantitatively to be returned to the evaluation team or faculty every semester or quarter. The intent is to see numerically how well blended learning is being implemented instructionally and other aspects of the program (Cheers & Towndrow, 2002).

Based on educational standards for teaching and learning, faculty members are very interested in evaluating educational support tools at the work place (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2000). Faculty members could seek the opportunity to evaluate new and improved technology tools to ensure that online programs have the best use of technology tools to enhance the instructional delivery and managerial services while implementing blended learning activities. Faculty members who are part of a shared governance environment believe too, that upgrading technology tools should be done only when there is value added to the teaching and learning environment. Faculty members further believe that all purchases and investments of technology should be reviewed carefully so that dollars are spent wisely for university resources and materials (Ryan, 2005).

Faculty members who evaluate online or blended learning tools need to look more broadly at the usefulness and the quality of training that is offered. Additionally, many faculty members are interested in seeing how students can respond successfully in accessing and using blended learning tools to improve their teaching and learning. Whatever online or blended learning tools that are used by faculty, it is important that faculty members gain competent knowledge and skills that are needed to properly implement online teaching and learning so that students will reap the benefits. Faculty and students need to have easy access to blended learning opportunities as colleges and universities plan strategically toward the future (Picciano, 2006).

LENSES OF THE FUTURE AND IMPLICATIONS

Where it can be afforded, the delivery of instruction to students will be more electronically-driven globally. The entire academic profession will make more and more available to students information and materials online fully or a combination of blended learning venues. For the future, it is perceived that full learning systems for various disciplines at the college and university will be mostly electronically-driven, because making learning materials available to the learner or student would be convenient. Second, teaching, coaching, mentoring and advising learners or students online in some capacity is more cost effective. Third, online administrative services for billing, information and providing technical support make more sense for timing-effectiveness (Weller, 2000).

The future look for blended learning in higher education will grow in the following areas: 1) group problem-solving and collaboration. 2) problem-based learning. 3) discussion groups. 4) case-based strategies 5) simulation or role play 6) student-generated content. 7) coaching, mentoring and advisement. 8) guided and exploratory learning (Brodsky, 2003).

Participants of blended learning programs will have the opportunity to see quickly individual progress, increase learner engagement and motivation, take state certification tests, extend time, greater access to materials and resources, decrease device cost, and adopt different learning apps and more. Further implications are that learners can adapt to more effective ways of using materials for their own learning that will enable them to achieve higher order learning and be able to solve problems strategically. From a humanistic point of view, most learners who participate in blended learning activities will be afforded an opportunity to participate in motivation, personalization, feedback, fluency of listening, see relevancy in their learning, social connection and will become more disciplined from the experience (Pallof, 2005).

CONCLUSION

This researcher intended to share the need for leadership and technical support for online or blended learning at the university or college for improving students' experiences and providing professional faculty development. Today, many faculty members in teaching and learning university programs are recognizing the need to accommodate many diverse learners in the area of course offerings and making course offerings convenient while maintaining quality services for all learners. Therefore, the leadership support team needs to work together in a collaborative manner with the office of informational technology to ensure that there is appropriate infrastructure at the university site for online or blended learning programs. It is essential too, to give timely support to faculty and student learners related to online or blended learning/training, communicating policy use of the technology, solving problems related to management issues. There is a need to offer continuous professional development opportunities, providing the support of ready and experienced technical support personnel from the office of information technology to solve problems and assist faculty and student learners with software concerns. When needed, it is

important that the new and improved technology works properly so that faculty members will be encouraged to use and to evaluate the online tools so that they can better serve learners or students with quality instruction at the highest level possible so that learners are globally prepared academically, socially, and culturally for a workforce economy-based society globally for the 21st Century (Khan, 2005).

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Ann Toler Hilliard is an assistant professor who teaches in the Department of Educational Studies and Leadership at Bowie State University, U.S.A. The author teaches classes related to educational leadership: policy studies for educational leaders, school law, strategic planning and evaluation, management of human resources, dissertation one/two and dissertation advisement. The author's research focus is instructional leadership, learning communities, professional development, teaching and learning, blended learning and international studies. Beyond teaching, the author has experience as a college and school leader in administration. The author currently coordinates activities that provide professional experiences for graduate candidates who are seeking the opportunity to serve as school administrators at the building and district level. Education: Ed.D. degree, George Washington University; M.S. degree, Johns Hopkins University; M.A.T. degree, Trinity University-Washington; B.S. degree, Elizabeth City State University and Certificate for Consulting, Harvard University. Email: draph1@juno.com

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