

A Review on the Significance of Implementing Blended Learning in Tertiary Institutions in Ebonyi State-Nigeria

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Abstract

Blended learning can also be referred as E-learning, visual learning, distance learning, embedded learning or mobile learning. It has been popular since the 1980s, Pegler, C & Littlejohn (2007). E-learning has tremendous potential and promises for education. It allows people to seamlessly share information and learn widely and collaboratively. Blended learning is the integration of traditional face-to-face learning with technology, the internet, and distance learning. This approach is becoming pervasive in the education system in recent years. Blended learning is an effective way of teaching that is flexible and easy to access. Moreover, it can increase students' motivation and their achievement, Kern & Rubin (2012). The usage of technology in teaching and learning is an undeniable need. The effective usage of technology in learning approaches will produce interesting and meaningful learning environments. Studies have revealed that using technology in the process of learning would increase interest, motivation, improve attention span and produce positive mindset towards learning (Bitner & Bitner, 2002; Nguyen, 2015). This research work examines and review the significance of implementing blended learning in teaching and learning in Tertiary institution in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The objective of the article is to highlight the benefits associated with using blended learning as a viable tool of teaching and learning delivery in tertiary institutions of Ebonyi State.

Keywords: Blended learning, online learning, internet, Tertiary institutions, E-learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Blended learning incorporates direct instruction, indirect instruction, collaborative teaching, individualized computer assisted learning, Lalimal(2017). Information and communication technologies, which have been developing rapidly, have become one of the indispensable elements of the 21st century. They have influenced, like all other fields, educational institutions, which are the most important sub-institutions of the social structure. They have offered a favorable environment for the development and use of various methods and tools. A noteworthy progress has been achieved since the first introduction of information and communication technologies into education. The type of education offered through electrical tools such as video, cassettes and television was called "distance education". Distance education covers many different types of teaching and methods. It can be seen as an umbrella concept covering correspondence courses, televised teaching, radio-broadcast teaching, open learning, computer assisted instruction, telematics, individualized learning and self-learning, Sauve(1993:102).

Distance learning is defined by Greenberg (1998) as a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning, Teaster & Blieszner (1999). The term distance learning has been applied to many instructional methods: however, its primary distinction is that the teacher and the learner are separate in space and possibly time". Keegan (1995). Distance education and training result from the technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to "a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained", Keegan (1995). In other words, from these definitions we can see that, distance education is defined as the sort of education in which the distance between learner and educator is emphasized, and technology is used intensively throughout the learning process (Kaya, 2004). Today, with the rapid developments in technology, various tools such as computers, the Internet, cellular phones and satellites have been incorporated into the journey of blended learning, and been taken up in a broader sense. In recent years the spread of computer use, development of Internet technologies and fast Internet connection have paved the way for providing a significant part of blended learning through the Internet. That is why, concepts such as e-learning, online learning or web-based learning, where Internet and network technologies are overwhelmingly used in the presentation and reception of the content, are refer to blended learning.

E-learning is a practical and common method since it presents the learning content in a longer period of time compared with classroom environment and other tools. It ensures the continuation of education twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Nevertheless, e-learning environments pose certain disadvantages since they hinder the socialization process of individuals and weaken the attractiveness of traditional e-learning environments in the eyes of individuals. This is because instructor and learners most times do not know each

other, which results in restrictions in communication.

The above disadvantages triggered search for a new environment, which combines the advantages of e-learning and classical learning environments. This new environment has introduced concepts such as mixed learning, blended learning and hybrid learning. Blended learning can be described as “a learning program where more than one delivery mode is being used with the objective of optimizing the learning outcome and cost of program delivery”, (Singh and Reed, 2001) .

The term blended learning is also used to describe a solution that combines several different delivery methods, such as collaboration software, Web-based courses, and knowledge management practices. Furthermore Blended learning is used to describe learning that mixes various event-based activities, including face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning, and self-paced learning.” (Valiathan, 2002). Another definition of blended learning is the effective integration of various learning techniques, technologies, and delivery modalities to meet specific communication, knowledge sharing, and information needs. (Finn and Bucci, 2004: 2). In brief, blended learning is a type of education which combines various models of traditional and distance education and makes use of all types of technology. In other words, blended learning has come to be understood as a combination of conventional classroom instruction and e- learning. Blended Learning processes are thus articulated by combining online learning and traditional approaches in various degrees. Blended learning environment which is regarded as a different type of distance education amalgamates the advantages of distance education with the effective aspects of traditional education, such as face-to-face interaction (Finn and Bucci, 2004). In contrast to classical learning environment which poses restrictions on place and time, e-learning provides an environment where the learners can study regardless of time and place restrictions according to their learning speed. The factors such as learners’ individual differences, personal characteristics and learning styles have significant impacts on the learning environment. For instance, the learners who have difficulty in establishing communication in the classroom environment find it easier to communicate in the electronic environment. As mentioned before, the disadvantages of e-learning deriving from the interruption of socialization process and the weakening attractiveness of e-learning applications in the eyes of learners are combined with relevant disadvantages of face-to-face education environments. It is obvious that the weaknesses and strengths of online environment and the weaknesses and strengths of face-to-face education integrate in blended learning. The integration of an online learning environment and a classroom environment is likely to combine ideally the advantageous aspects of both types of instruction. Online or web-based learning environment provides the flexibility and the efficiency which cannot be assured in a classroom environment whereas a face-to-face education class ensures the social interaction in which the students will need guidance for learning. McCampbell (2001) emphasizes that blended e-learning will be a suitable approach for incorporating online applications into an existent course program for the first time, and highlights that some parts of the course content should be transferred to the online environment (forum, e-mail, web environment), without offering the whole courses online. However, it is important to establish the equilibrium between face-to-face education and online environments, in view of the advantages of both methods, during the process of organizing blended learning environments. As Ostguthorpe and Graham (2003) states, factors such as instructional objectives, characteristics of students, the condition of online resources and the experience of trainers play an important role in the establishment of this equilibrium. That is why, it is important, in the process of deciding on blended learning environments, to establish the equilibrium between face-to-face and online environments (determining how often teachers and students will encounter, how often they will meet in the discussion environment, etc.) rather than how to present the course.

Basic Requirements of Introducing Blended Learning

Implementing blended teaching is not an easy task. It requires certain fundamental preparations in all the elements of teaching learning process. Such element are teacher, student, content designing, and infrastructure. The following are the basic requirements for implementing a successful blended learning.

1. **Well trained Lecturers:** Learning is student centered but teachers are a very essential factor of blended learning. Lecturers should be well acquainted with the concept of blended learning, fully trained and skilled to blend both tradition and technological teaching approaches. They should be trained to develop content in digital form so that it can be available to students online. They should be well versed with internet terminologies, and as well be conversant with the tools that can be useful for the students while learning online. Lecturers should know how to utilize blogs, you-tube facility, software like Skype, goggle talk, Zoom, google meet and others for video conferencing and social networking sites for educational purposes.
2. **Scientific Attitude:** Only Lecturers with scientific attitude should be involved. It is very important that teachers have scientific attitude. This will result on them having good observation skill, being optimistic and as well, have problem solving skills. Scientific attitude will help the lecturers to deal positively with failures that might arise while working on this innovative concept and will help to analyze the conditions objectively.
3. **Lecturers With Wider Outlook And Positive Approach Towards Change :** As it is must for the success of

any innovative idea or method, blended learning process also need Lecturers that have a wider outlook and should be flexible, All the Lecturers involved should be ready to accept the changes, be very innovative and dynamic.

4. Online Infrastructure/Facilities: Blended learning largely depend on infrastructure/facilities, Universities should not only have good classrooms but should also have a well-furnished compute laboratories with sufficient number of computes, internet connectivity, active subscription of video learning based systems such as zoom etc, good campus Wi-Fi, E-learning system as well as subscription to E-facilities/e-books. These are compulsory factors of introducing/implementing blended learning.

5. Personal Laptop Computers: In addition to the universities having fully ICT friendly campuses, students and lecturers should have basic hardware support to learn and teach online and offline at their residence as well. To further implement this, there should be program to sale Laptop computers at affordable price and payment made installment to both lecturers and the students by the school managements or government and non-governmental agencies.

6. University System/Program Flexibility: University system should also made to be flexible to accommodate blended learning. Flexible time table, school fees payment, course registrations, and examinations system etc are all very crucial for a seamless blended learning implementation.

7. Parent/Guidance Support: The support of parents or guidance is also very pivotal to the successfully implementation or introduction of this innovative approach to and learning.

8. Provision For Online Assessment/Examination: The higher education and university authorities should completely make provision for online continuous assessment and examination for successful execution or implementation of blended learning.

Importance of Blended Learning

1. Virtual classroom: Blende Learning provides students and lecturers an option to teach or learn anywhere, anytime. Students can be a part of a virtual classroom meeting with his co-students and teacher in cyber space irrespective of the geographical boundaries. With world today being a global village, students through this mode will be at par with his counterpart at any other part of the world and will get multicultural experience as well.

2. Student Interaction With Course Content: Traditional mode of teaching and the school campus provides student time to interact directly with their course content through printing material while ICT mediated learning provides them indirect interaction with their course content in a versatile and diverse interesting way. The videos provide required realism to the content and sharing on blogs and visiting e-books provide new and updated perspectives to the content/course materials.

3. Face To Face Teaching: Blended learning provides full scope for traditional classroom teaching where students get ample of time to interact with their teachers and thus get influenced by their personality, behavior and value system. Face to face interaction helps in synchronous communication. Teachers and students both are able to get immediate feedback that in turns is favorable for teaching/ learning process. Face to face interaction is highly motivating for both the teachers and students and it gives a human touch to the process.

4. Peer Group Interaction: Inside the school campus students learns by formal means and they learn informally when they interact with their peer groups. Many needed life skills and social values are practiced in non-formal interaction with their peer groups. School campus provides many opportunities for this during playground activities and social exchange during free time.

5. Accessing E-Library: E-library is a part of ICT supported teaching /learning in blended learning. In traditional mode students, get access to school library that is limited but digital library gives them access to different books related to their topic and on diversified areas. This widens their outlook and enriches their knowledge as well as helps in meeting the cognitive objectives.

6. Online Assessment: Immediate feedback is a key factor in learning as it motivates the learner and is based on principles of readiness. Online assessment helps to make evaluation system more formative, transparent and more fast. It becomes more reliable and objective.

7. e-tuitions: students have different needs. Few of the students do not get benefits from classroom teaching, as they continuously require personal guidance and complete attention. Such students may choose the option of e-tuition that is meeting a private tutor and getting personal guidance in cyber space via video conferencing.

8. Accessing and maintaining educational blogs: Students get less opportunity for nurturing their creativity in traditional classrooms because of rigid timetable and lot of pressure of class work, assignments and coping with examination stress but educational blogs provide students a platform to show their creativity and can get feedback also. In addition to it, educational blogs are a good platform to discuss topics of importance that are not the part of syllabus like those related to social problems, political issues, and other issues relevant to youths like drugs addiction, delinquency, population education etc.

9. Webinars : Webinar is an also a feature of blended learning that is ICT supported format. It means that students participate in seminars in different topics relevant to them via internet connection. All the participants

are connected through different software is available like Skype, Google talk etc. and then present their paper and participate in discussions through video conferencing.

10. Viewing expert lectures in YouTube: Blended learning provides student to gain advantage of the experts of the course content they are studying as they can easily watch the different lectures by renowned experts from different fields available on you tubes. In addition to it, college can also upload video of lecture by its own teachers so that if student is not able to attend the college he can avail this facility and can gain benefit of the teachers teaching.

11. Online learning through videos and audios: Various recordings, animated videos are available that explain various concepts very easily and in interesting way. They are based on the principle of realism and connecting with life. So students can get feel of real life while studying and it makes the difficult concepts and phenomenon concrete for the students.

12. Virtual laboratories: It can be used in professional courses where the laboratory work is very crucial and sometimes the cost of establishing a well-furnished laboratories is not feasible and in few cases the experiments are dangerous and it is not safe for students to handle those equipments then in such cases students.

13. As part of learning is done through ICT, online or offline mode so teachers and students get more time in the classroom for creative and cooperative exercise.

14. Students gain advantage of online learning and CAI without losing social interaction element and human touch of traditional teaching.

15. It provides more scope for communication: Communication cycle is completed in blended learning which is not possible if we follow only traditional approach

16. Students become more techno savvy and they gain enhanced digital fluency

17. Students have more strengthened professionalism as they develop qualities like self-motivation, self-responsibility, discipline

18. It updates course content and so gives new life to established courses.

CHALLENGES OF BLENDED LEARNING

Blended learning in spite of the advantages that it has when adopted in education, also has some disadvantages. Studies support that e-learning or blended learning possesses some disadvantages (Collins et al. 1997; Klein and Ware, 2003; Hameed et al, 2008; Almosa, 2002; Akkoyuklu and Soylu, 2006; Lewis, 2000; Scott et al. 1999; Marc, 2002; Dowling et al, 2003; Mayes, 2002). For example despite the claims that e-Learning can improve the education quality, Dowling et al. (2003) argue that making learning materials available online results in improved learning results only for specific forms of collective assessment. In addition, Mayes (2002) asked a question of whether e Learning is simply a support device for existing methods of learning. The most noticeable condemnation of e-Learning is the complete absence of vital personal interactions, not only between learners and instructors, but also among colleague learners (Young, 1997; Burdman, 1998). According to Almosa (2002), regardless of all the disadvantages of e-learning, there are a lot of benefits which inspire its use and also encourage the search for ways to reduce disadvantages. The challenges or disadvantages of e-learning/blended learning that have been given by studies include the following:

1. E-learning as a method of education makes the learners undergo contemplation, remoteness, as well as lack of interaction or relation. It therefore requires a very strong inspiration as well as skills with to the management of time in order to reduce such effects.
2. With respect to clarifications, offer of explanations, as well as interpretations, the e-learning method might be less effective than the traditional method of learning. The learning process is much easier with the use of the face to face encounter with the instructors or teachers.
3. When it comes to improvement in communication skills of learners, e-learning as a method might have a negative effect. The learners. Though might have an excellent knowledge in academics, they may not possess the needed skills to deliver their acquired knowledge to others.
4. Since tests for assessments in e-learning are possibly done with the use of proxy, it will be difficult, if not impossible to control or regulate bad activities like cheating.
5. E-learning may also probably be misled to piracy and plagiarism, predisposed by inadequate selection skills, as well as the ease of copy and paste.
6. E-learning may also deteriorate institutions' role socialization role and also the role of instructors as the directors of the process of education.
7. Also not all fields or discipline can employ the e-learning technique in education. For instance the purely scientific fields that include practical cannot be properly studied through e-learning. Researches have argued that e-learning is more appropriate in social science and humanities than the fields such as medical science and pharmacy, where there is the need to develop practical skills.
8. E-learning may also lead to congestion or heavy use of some websites. This may bring about unanticipated costs both in time and money disadvantages (Collins et al. 1997; Klein and Ware, 2003;

Hameed et al, 2008; Almosa, 2002; Akkoyuklu & Soyly, 2006; Lewis, 2000; Scott et al. 1999; Marc, 2002)

CONCLUSION

According to Dr. Ranjana Bhatia, advantages of blended learning are : Greater efficiencies with group sizes, Support professional/work-based skills development, Flexible study, with learning on-demand, anytime or anywhere, to meet learners 'needs wherever they want, Wide access to digital resources, shared tools, and information systems. And according to Graham (2006), three main reasons why the blended learning is recommended are: Boosting up the effectiveness of education, Increased access and convenience, Greater cost-effectiveness, Easy to access resources, Live feedback in the classroom, Flexible lessons, No need to large buildings. Altogether, these findings show the significance of blended learning in teaching, for it is the bridge of promoting students' knowledge breadth and depth. In a technologically developed era, using only in person instruction is fruitless for electronicloved students. Alternatively, adopting solo online learning has its demerits such as late feedback, difficulty with the engagement of students, social isolation, and lack of motivation. One last word must be said that, by designing a blended course effectively and integrating positive sides of online and face-toface education, ones can reach mastery of the content. Adopting technology in the education system and blended learning is valuable in the academic world therefore; it can be further studied and made new concepts.

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