OPINIONS OF TRAINERS ON BLENDED LEARNING MODEL

IN HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning model is the combination of face-to-face teaching and technology-based models and it is regarded as the 21st century model by the educational researchers. This study aims to find out the opinions, on blended learning model, of the trainers working at Higher Schools of Vocational Education and Training. This study is based on a qualitative research technique: focus group interview. The findings are grouped under the titles current situation, positive response of the students, flexibility, collaborative learning, financial and pedagogical aspects, and lifelong learning model.

Keywords: Blended learning, vocational education and training, opinions.

INTRODUCTION

There have been two shifts in education. The first is in the filed of material development: the shift from traditional materials to the use of advanced technology. The second is in the approach and methodology: the shift from teacher centered approach to learner centered one. When these two shifts come together, the new models like blended learning to come out. In fact, this is not a reality of the present time. For example, Young (2002) predicted, "Within five years, there will be lots of blended models such as students going to school two days a week and working at home three days a week. Another blended model…is where a student takes five face-to-face courses at school and two virtual courses" (cited in Picciano & Seaman, 2009:5). Also, Buckley et al. (2002) and Tagg (1995) noted a paradigm shift in higher education leading to new models of teaching and learning. Educators have been preoccupied with integrating technology into the classroom for decades (Dziuban, Hartman, Moskal, 2004). In 21st century, technology and students are changing rapidly, which implies that educators should be embracing "the new digital reality of the online, computerized world" (Jukes, 2008:6). Buckley (2002) and Barr and Tagg (1995) placed emphasis on student centered learning paradigms, new technologies like internet and personal computers, and new theories such as brain-based learning, cooperative learning and social constructivism to work together to form the new models. Thus, the term has come into use. Blended learning "combines various pedagogical approaches (e.g., constructivism, behaviorism, cognitivism) to produce an optimal learning outcome with or without instructional technology" (Driscoll, 2002, as cited in Graham et al., 2003). So, it seems possible to call blended learning a method of 21st century as blended learning is a recent online innovation as a result of integrating technology into education. In general terms, it is a "blended" form of traditional and innovative models based on the use of modern technology.

Blended learning model can be regarded as a reaction to some criticism towards traditional teaching and learning models or computer mediated models independently. It is an accepted fact that the model of blended learning is gaining widespread acceptance all over the world but a generally accepted definition has not emerged yet. Some educators stress the benefits of combining the two models and maximize the learning and teaching results. According to Valiathan (2002), the term "blended learning" is used to describe a solution that combines several different delivery methods, such as collaboration software, Web-based courses, EPSS, and knowledge management practices. For Graham et al. (2003), blended learning was developed for its potential

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advantages in offering a more effective education, convenience, and access to teaching-learning environments. In the same way, for Rooney (2003), Blended learning refers to events that combine aspects of online and face-to-face instruction." Graham (2006:5) summarizes three definitions of blended learning as the (a) combination of instructional delivery media, (b) combination of instructional methods, and (c) combination of online and face-to-face instruction. For Bersin et al., (cited in Graham et al., 2003), "Blended learning means the combination of a wide range of learning media (instructor lead, web based courseware, simulations, job aids, webinars, documents) into a total training program." For Kerres & DeWitt (2003), 'blended learning' refers to all combinations of face-to-face learning with technology-based learning: traditional education can be enriched with the use of technology and learning with technology can profit from FTF meetings." Some others define blended learning simply as "maximizing the best of both worlds" so as to simultaneously benefit from the advantages of online environments and face-to-face learning environments (Morgan, 2002). For Thomson (2003), "...blended learning model uses a structured combination of instructional media...can include on-line instruction, mentoring/instructor-led support, and various sources of information and practice from text and electronic media. According to Dziuban et al., "Blended learning should be viewed as a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment" (2004:3). Blended learning is a method to organize the learning environment that is facilitated by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning, and is founded on transparent communication amongst all parties involved in a course (Heinze and Procter, 2006). Garnham and Kaleta (2002) define blended learning as 'courses in which a significant portion of the learning activities have been moved online, and time traditionally spent in the classroom is reduced but not eliminated'. For Osguthorpe and Graham (2003:227), "Blended learning environment is used to try to maximize the benefits of both face-to-face and online methods- using the web for what it does best, and using class time for what it does best".

In the literature, blended learning is usually perceived in three different ways as media-based, method incorporation or a combination of online and traditional education methods (Usta, 2007). Findings of research on blended learning indicate that it is more effective for teaching both declarative and procedural knowledge (Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006); results in better outcomes than online or face-to-face learning alone (Zhao, Lei, Yan, & Tan, 2005); leads to increased access and flexibility, improved pedagogy, and higher cost-effectiveness (Graham, 2006); and may foster more active and deeper learning (Bonk, Kim, & Zeng, 2006; King, 2002). In blended learning, the combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning events and the opportunities for collaborative and problem-based learning are likely to increase the quantity and quality of interactions. Laurillard (1996) reports that a mixed used of teaching and learning methods will always be the most efficient way to support student learning, because only then it is possible to embrace all the activities of discussion, interaction, adaptation, and reflection, which are essential for academic learning. Riley (2000) stressed that teaching and learning that use technology effectively can lead to greater academic achievement and make a real difference in the lives of the students. Chung and Davis (1995) reported that blended instruction provided learners with greater control over the pace of learning, instructional flow, selection of resources, and time management. Hartman, et al., (2005) believe blended learning provides an opportunity to bridge the generations. It provides the face-to-face interactions, convenience, and flexibility desired by Boomers, independence preferred by Gen-X, and interaction and community for Millennials. By combining online and face-to-face formats, educators may achieve the inherent benefits of both types of instruction through a harmonious balance of virtual access to knowledge and physical human interaction; such an approach has been labeled as blended learning (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003).

THE AIM AND IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH

This study aims to find out the opinions of the trainers working at Higher Schools of Vocational Education and Training. The author himself has been working at a Higher School of Vocational Education and Training. Integrating technology in education has been the concern of many educators so far. This integration has been applied in higher education and workplace learning settings throughout the world and may lead to improved pedagogy, increased access and flexibility, and increased cost-effectiveness (Graham, 2006). Blended learning has been popular both in academia and the corporate environment. Each has its own motives (Dewar & Whittington, 2004). Integrating educational technology to vocational education and training in the context of using blended learning model is to be one of the interests of the trainers at university level organizations to contribute to production finally.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study is based on a qualitative research technique: focus group interview. A focus group is, according to Lederman (Thomas et al. 1995), a technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily representative, sampling of a specific population, this group being 'focused' on a given topic. The views of the trainers are determined based on focus group interview technique to evaluate using qualitative research approach. Since the interviewees are themselves trainers, they can be regarded as experts and that's why focus group interview can be an effective technique. Since the aim of the research is to find out the opinions of the trainers working at higher school of vocational education and training, six trainers from at Higher School of Vocational Education and Training, of Selçuk University in Turkey formed the focus group. The group consists of one trainer from the following departments: Mechanical Manufacturing, Footwear Design, Electronics and automation, Construction, Furniture and Decoration and Printing and Publishing. In qualitative research, in particular, focus-group interviews generate large amounts of data. The central aim of data analysis, according to Robson (1993), is to reduce data. Yin (1989) points out that data analysis consists of a number of stages, i.e. examining, categorizing and tabulating or otherwise recombining the evidence, in order to address the initial goal of a study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Current situation: Blending learning is used by the trainers at the activity level and at the course level. Face-to-face traditional learning is combined with computer-based learning for almost all covered subjects within the existent study programs. The national educational system must recognize and support financially blending learning programs to extend the whole coverage up to lifelong learning dimension. Furthermore, the organization using blended model should have enough technical equipment and space to serve and expand the service.

Positive response of the students: The trainers agree that students have positive response to this model. Students are in favor of this model as it is not boring and does not require discipline effort on the student. This aspect also helps students to get more engaged in the lesson content without any pressure by the trainer.

Flexibility: Blended learning can help use training time out of classroom and save time by minimizing the time assigned for classroom. The online part of the blended model can be scheduled at slow times, to minimize absence from work when work activity has priority. The blended learning model should be accessible by students whenever and wherever they wish to.

Collaborative learning: Blended learning model focuses on learning rather than teaching. When students try to learn and learn to learn, they naturally collaborate with the other students. In this case, the trainer acts as a coordinator rather than as a trainer. The level of collaboration is between the students themselves and between the students and the trainer.

Financial and pedagogical aspects: The trainers agree that the formation of an ideal blended learning environment is costly at least at the beginning. In addition, the trainer that is to apply this model should master the pedagogical and technical background.

Lifelong Learning model: The trainers also agree that blended learning model should be adopted as a lifelong learning model by taking the face-to-face side heavier and giving more place to online side.

CONCLUSION

Blended learning model is regarded as the combination of face-to-face teaching and technology-based models. This model is regarded as the 21st century model by the educational researchers. The trainers in the focus group utter nearly the same points about blended learning model. According to trainers, their school is currently using blended learning model but they lack enough technical equipment and space to serve and expand the service. The trainers agree that students have positive response to this model. Trainers do not feel themselves having to limit the lesson within the given classroom and time cycle as blended learning can help use training time out of classroom and save time by minimizing the time assigned for classroom. In blended model, the level of collaboration is between the students themselves and between the students and the trainer. The formation of an ideal blended learning environment is costly at least at the beginning. Blended learning model should be adopted as a lifelong learning model by taking the face-to-face side heavier and giving more place to online side.

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