RELEVANCE OF BLENDED LEARNING IN TERTIARY SCHOOLS: A POST-PANDEMIC VIEW

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript aims to explore and understand the development of blended learning during the pandemic among the tertiary schools in Antipolo City in the Philippines from the lenses of college students. The proliferation of blended learning programs offers new opportunities and challenges for colleges and universities to meet the learning needs of students as we approach the post-pandemic era. Two online focus groups with ten students each session. This provided qualitative views on how students believed blended learning would be helpful for their degrees. Educational institutions are now using a new set of essential skills that students must have. Indeed, this recurring trend in education is called blended learning. Students believed that they were more effective with this new approach, thus being ready for the real world after experiencing emergency remote learning for more than a year.

Keywords: Blended Learning; E-Learning; Post-Pandemic; Qualitative Research.

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions in the Philippines were forced to adapt and embrace digital transformation to remain relevant. Tertiary schools in Antipolo in the province of Rizal (Region IV-A) are finding ways to recruit more students because of the shift in delivering and communicating value to students. The global pandemic has drastically affected existing trends and has introduced new tensions to different businesses, including the academe (Guillen, 2021). Colleges and universities in the Philippines are systematically trailing various forms of online learning to improve their student-centered learning experience (Höfer & Naeve, 2017). With the gradual re-opening of the economy, students must still have the necessary skills to use their knowledge. These skills include critical thinking, applying knowledge to new situations, analyzing information, comprehending new ideas, communicating, collaborating, solving problems, and making decisions (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011). These skills are further developed into three broad categories: information and communication skills, thinking and problem-solving skills, and interpersonal and self-direction skills. With this development in education, it is essential to acquire a new approach in methodology; hence blended learning is a vital consideration. The word "blended learning" is increasingly used in the academe; even so, this term does not give a standard definition that educators could use (Graham, 2004). Therefore, three definitions of blended learning were considered relevant: blended learning is the integrated combination of traditional learning with web-based or online approaches; blended learning combines online and offline tools in an e-learning environment; blended learning compounds several pedagogic approaches (Sigh, 2003). In this paper, the researcher reports some views offered by students about a combination of online learning through e-classrooms, podcasts, discussion boards, and student support from tutors and lecturers in an evolving blended learning approach in the two La Salle schools in Antipolo during the pandemic.

Blended learning definition

The word "blended learning" was often associated with combining traditional classroom training with e-learning activities. However, the term has evolved to signify a much deeper set of learning strategies (Singh, 2003). According to Singh (2003), blended learning has expanded to five dimensions. The first is the most superficial level - a blended learning experience that combines offline and online forms of learning, where online learning usually means "using the internet" and offline learning happens in a face-to-face classroom setting (Singh, 2003). Second is the blending of self-paced and live, collaborative learning. Self-paced learning implies asynchronous learning, on-demand learning at a pace managed by the learner. Collaborative learning requires collaboration or communication with other learners and learning from one another (Singh, 2003). The third is the combination of structured and unstructured learning. A formal learning program is an organized content with specific sequences like textbook or eBook chapters.

Learning in the office is more unstructured, e.g., virtual or face-to-face meetings, town halls, or e-mail communication (Singh, 2003). The fourth dimension is blending customized content with off-the-shelf content or simply content customization (Singh, 2003). Finally, the fifth level is blending learning, practice, and performance support. The most acceptable form of blended learning that was practiced during the pre-pandemic is supplemental learning with just-in-time performance support tools that facilitate the appropriate execution of job tasks.

Blended learning does not have a universally recognized categorization. Previous studies were done to set up certain types of blended learning.

(1) Rotational model (station, lab, modified flipped, individual): Students move from one activity utilizing digital tools and mentoring applications.

(2) Flex: Credit recovery model where students work independently at an individualized pace with some face-to-face support and activities.

(3) A la Carte: Students take a course entirely online to supplement their regular classwork.

(4) Enriched virtual: A specific course or subject in which students have required face-to-face learning sessions with or without their teacher and are free to complete their remaining course work remotely or from home.

The benefit causes the sudden popularity of blended learning it provides to the educational community. AMA Computer University, for example, promoted blended learning, stating that their students come to class three times a week because of it. In addition, many studies were dedicated to exploring blended learning and its relevance to instruction. According to Zackerman (2012), using self-paced videos for practical training helped students understand the subject matter even more. Al Musawi (2011) says blended learning approaches made a significant grade improvement for specific courses over time. Moreover, Osguthorpe & Graham (2003) identified six benefits of blending learning: (1) pedagogical richness, (2) access to knowledge, (3) social interaction, (4) personal agency, (5) cost-effectiveness, and (6) ease of revision.

Evolution of Blended Learning

This concept combines online learning with face-to-face support for a flexible approach to overall learning and skills development (Jara and Mohamad, 2007). The Commission on Higher Education (CHED AR, 2017) views blended learning as a valuable complementary resource that uses technology to facilitate interaction and communication, replacing traditional modes of learning and teaching. Traditional educators argue that physical presence for lectures and seminars is essential for face-to-face interaction. However, the pandemic came into the picture. Advocates of blended learning suggest that there must be a combined approach in conjunction with online technology. In addition, students today are very adept with technology and social media platforms that facilitate learning (Christensen, 2014). Further evidence of more significant study opportunities with blended learning instead of traditional lectures (McKinney et al., 2009). Attention spans in traditional lectures are limited; blended learning and interactive approaches allow students to prioritize work more effectively and thus prepare for seminars and tutorial classes in a more participatory fashion (Sigh 2003). The essence of blended learning came from the fact that traditional and online learning had their limitations. 2003), and we cannot stay online for long periods.

II.   METHODOLOGY

As an overview of this study, the researcher used qualitative investigation on blended learning based on Garrison and Kanuka's (2004) qualitative research within a blended learning environment. In this way, students' views and reflections are represented in a practical contextual setting, and they can make comments on the value of blended learning for their degree and prospective future careers. In addition, two virtual focus groups were conducted, which recorded student experiences and views of blended learning. Two virtual focus groups were conducted in a week at Benilde Antipolo last September 7 and 8, 2021, respectively, which recorded student experiences and views of blended learning with some limited face-to-face activities. The participants involved in this study consisted of 20 first-year students (12 females and 8 males; their ages is from 17 to 18 years old) enrolled in the degree programs such as BS Accountancy, BSBA Marketing Management, BS Tourism Management, BS Hospitality Management, BA Communication Arts, Bachelor of

Secondary Education, and BS Psychology. All participants were of higher income bracket. Participants were recruited purposively online by the researcher and an authorized screener in Benilde Antipolo Campus and La Salle College Antipolo. In addition, participants signed an audio release during the recruiting process.

III.   MODELING AND ANALYSIS

As we enter the post-pandemic phase, a blended learning program may still combine various methods; thus, the researcher chose the most straightforward approach – a blended learning experience that combines offline and online forms of learning where online learning means "via the internet" and offline learning in usual physical classroom setup (Singh, 2003). In this study, online learning activities thru synchronous sessions and self-paced asynchronous formats were observed. The researcher used the modified Disruptive Innovation of Model (Christensen et al. 2014) for its conceptual framework.
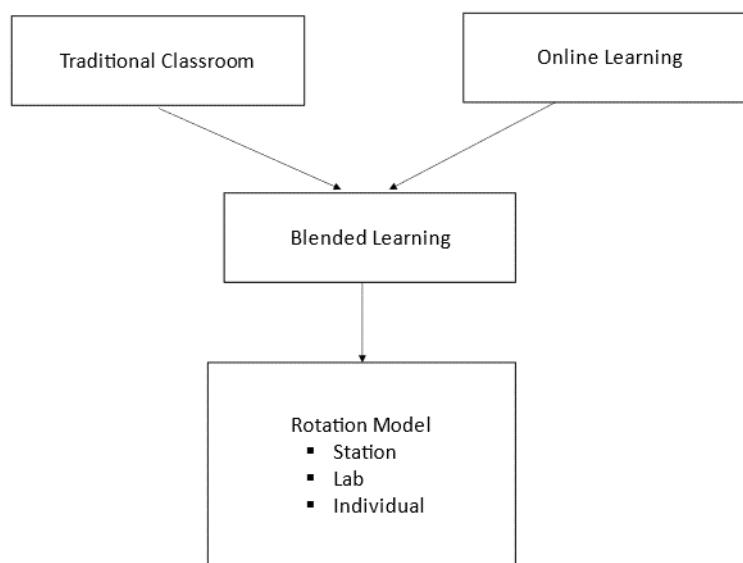

Figure 1: Simplified Disruptive Innovation Model Christensen et al., 2014

Rotation model- a course or subject in which students rotate on a fixed schedule or at the teacher's discretion between learning modalities of online learning. Other modalities may include activities like breakout groups or full-class instruction, team projects, individual mentoring, and assignments. The students may still learn face-to-face, except for any homework assignments (Christensen et al. 2014).

o   Station Rotation- a course or subject in which students experience the Rotation model within a contained classroom or group of classrooms. The Station Rotation model differs from the Individual Rotation model because students rotate through all stations, not only those on their schedules.

o   Lab Rotation - a course or subject in which students rotate to a classroom lab for the online-learning station.

o   Individual Rotation - a course or subject in which each student has an individualized playlist and does not necessarily rotate to each available station or modality. An algorithm or teacher(s) sets individual student schedules.

IV.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some comments regarding the usefulness of blended learning have been documented below. Responses came from each student representative per program for a total of ten. Popular platforms used were BigSky, Canvas, Slack, Trello, Coursera, Canvas, Google Classroom, and Turnitin. In addition, indicative comments were provided in response to the research question: "How useful do you believe blended learning will be for your degree?"

On Station Rotation

Flexibility and support

Nine out of ten students believed that blended learning is highly effective for learning, given that today's generation is visual learners.

Student A: Blended learning allows me to understand lectures and feel like I listen to stories quickly.

Student D: I can take the test via Moodle and have three attempts to check my understanding of management concepts. Our IT is so responsive when we have inquiries.

Motivation and sharing ideas

Student B: Blended learning is adequate for my degree, as it allows me to work when I am at Benilde Antipolo and when I am at home. This should be more motivational, as I know that it would be possible to catch up online if work is missed due to illness. Furthermore, it allows me to share and express my ideas like a blog, given that my course is AB Communication.

Interaction and explanation

Student H: Blended learning is adequate for my learning as it is vital to attend lectures and webinars to interact and learn from other people with their ideas and opinions.

On Lab

Better than eLearning

Student C: Pure eLearning is boring. Combining it with face-to-face learning, especially for Hospitality Management majors, allows social interaction.

On Individual Rotation

Individual communication and teamwork

Student J: Blended learning is effective in this pandemic; it allows easy access to lectures for review, it promotes communication among peers virtually when working on a specific project. I don't feel alone.

From the above commentary, it can be seen that students do have a clear understanding of what blended learning is all about. Moreover, they gave some insightful ideas on how useful it would be in university and the workplace. Enabling and creating awareness of new possibilities and options for learning is essential, not just for further education and training but also for seeking new innovative business opportunities and network collaboration using groupware technologies like Slack, Trello, Monday.com, and a lot more.

A central question remains: how far should blended learning develop within a university context? While eLearning allows technology to replace traditional face-to-face interaction, thus reducing costs for the knowledge provider, the intended user or student may experience technological limitations. For example, in the Philippines, internet speed is on an average of 2 to 4 Mbps (Guillen, 2021). In addressing the above question, the researcher suggests that blended learning should be an integral part of new teaching and learning strategy that enables students and graduates to meet the critical challenges of working in Industry 4.0-ready companies. Graduates, especially in business, should be equipped with collaborative blended learning skills, such as learning rooms, discussion boards, and other mechanisms for generating debate and sharing ideas in this new normal or post-pandemic era. These competencies would be in addition to the information, communications, and technology (ICT) skills related to digital marketing, analytics, and SEO.

It can also be noted that introducing blended learning in colleges and universities will help students continue their education and help ensure willingness to accept blended learning when encountered in their future workplace. Students identified that the blended learning model at the time of the pandemic made their course more achievable and understandable, especially in terms of specific skills (e.g., Marketing and Accountancy). Moreover, several suggested that students welcomed the opportunity to meet fellow students and staff to socialize. Comments include:

Student B: It is great to be able to meet students from other sections and campuses; we can get to know and understand each other.

Student E: These sessions certainly helped me use the system more effectively, especially with the Accounting Information System.

Similarly, the instructors identified that limited face-to-face sessions increased understanding of both practical and theoretical concepts and increased student socialization between peers and staff, enabling the development of a community spirit.

Most importantly, results indicated that a blended learning strategy improved student satisfaction and retention. In addition, the "socialization" of the student is essential. The researcher agrees that re-introducing blended learning in colleges and universities as we enter the post-pandemic phase will help students even after graduation via continuing education, thus ensuring willingness to accept blended learning when encountered in their future workplace. If further research is applicable, a quantitative survey should be explored in the following areas to support this focus group with samples coming from Gen Z ages 16-20 students from various colleges or universities in Antipolo. Questions should include:

o The popularity of platforms commonly used by students for a specific program both paid and freeware
o Delivery of instruction via flipped classrooms
o The length of time spent on accomplishing online activities and quizzes
o Student's performance, e.g., grades under blended learning vs. online learning and traditional learning during and after the pandemic (Comparison of student performance)

V.   CONCLUSION

This paper presents some exciting student views on blended learning now that Antipolo and other areas in the Province of Rizal are under level 1. Meaning, people, including students, can return to work or school subject to a specific guideline. However, this paper is also constrained because of the qualitative nature of exploratory findings. This exploratory study is limited to Benilde Antipolo and La Salle College Antipolo students in the Philippines; thus, they are aware of the value of blended learning and transferable skills in the workplace. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the entire population, yet it still provides valuable information on the benefits and advantages of blended learning from a student's perspective. Nevertheless, similar to some other teaching and learning providers within a university environment, it offers an increasing number of courses that actively incorporate blended learning as a way forward for developing new skill sets for graduates. The researcher envisions increased value-added benefits from combining new technology with innovative forms of participation in learning and teaching. This will typically involve promoting the greater use of technology for all students in Antipolo and with most schools in the country as we enter the post-pandemic phase. Also, this can encourage greater collaboration with industry practitioners for an enhanced, joined-up blended learning approach. The core idea is to enhance and invigorate the traditional lecture or webinar event, promote more stimulating and engaging discussion and create valuable questions and answers through real-time, online collaboration. This study contributes to the literature on how blended learning can be maximized in the post-pandemic phase, thus improving critical thinking skills among tertiary students. Finally, blended learning represents an entirely different and more pragmatic pedagogic view than eLearning or online learning alone. In an era of transformational change with the K12 system, blended learning approaches will be invaluable in enhancing future graduates' skills repertoires amidst the pandemic.

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