

**“Can You Hear Me Now?”
Insights From
Blended Learning Teachers**

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Abstract

Blended learning describes the combination of the traditional modes of learning and teaching with new technologies. While there are many benefits to this contemporary form of teaching and learning, equally there are damaging effects.

Presently, there remains a gap in knowledge into the experiences of higher education teachers who teach in the blended learning mode. This gap is highlighted by Torrisi-Steele and Drew (2013) whose review of over 800 (global) articles found only one article (by Woods, Baker and Hopper, 2004) on blended learning academic practices. This dearth of literature, allied with the trend towards greater numbers of blended learning programmes, provides the rationale for this study. There is simply very little known about such experiences from a teachers' perspective.

This study has conducted three focus groups in Dundalk IT (DkIT) with a sample group of 12 higher education teachers with experiences of blended learning. This group is comprised of higher education teachers from three Schools based in the Institute. The qualitative descriptive study has shed light on the experiences of teaching through blended learning. In order to assess the current and future role of blended learning within the Irish education sector, we need to ascertain the collective experiences of teachers in these environments. This study aims to address this gap in knowledge and subsequently provide insights into the domain, and with that, assist designers develop future blended learning programmes.

Keywords

Blended Learning, Online Learning, Distance Learning, Springboard

1. Introduction and Rationale

The term 'blended learning' is wrought with complexities, owing much to the interchanging of similar, but different terms such as distance learning, hybrid learning, mixed learning, multi-method learning, flexible learning, integrative learning, e-learning, and online learning, and the continual evolution of technology. There is a struggle with accurately conceptualising what is meant by the term. Laster (2004) and Oliver and Trigwell (2005) argue that the term is ill-defined and inconsistently used, and that a lack of clarity and ambiguity creates misconceptions and misunderstandings. Stacey and Gerbic (2007) are also critical of the term's generalisation, while Garrison and Kanuka (2004) attest that the defining complexities relate to its implementation and the endless possibilities and interpretations open to it. While this study doesn't set out to define what blended learning is, what is important is that the contemporary mode is omnipresent in today's educational landscape.

The changing face of the education landscape, manifested in the globalisation and digitalisation of learning (McTaggart *et al.*, 2018), has significantly altered education today. This seismic change has resulted in two primary education-focused outcomes: (i) the use of technology has dramatically increased, and (ii) the time, pace, and place where teaching and learning now occurs has dramatically changed. On blended learning, Graham (2006) reflects on the technological innovations, particularly in the last 50 years, that have profoundly impacted on the possibilities for learning in a distributed environment. For Osguthorpe and Graham (2003), the Internet, and other technologies, has "greatly expanded the educational options available to learners and instructors alike" (p. 227). Meanwhile, Stacey and Gerbic (2007) argue that the "online environment has become accepted as a medium for learning in higher education, initially by those teaching and learning at a distance, but now more pervasively by those teaching and learning in more traditional on campus environments" (p. 225). As such, the Internet, and its technologies, has significantly broadened the opportunities for learning.

Globally there appears to be an effort by universities to transition to this new modality of teaching and learning. This transition has also revealed itself in the

popularity of blended learning programmes in Irish higher education. While there is substantial literature on blended learning from student and course design perspectives, one area that is neglected is the personal experiences of teachers. In a review of over 800 articles, Torrisi-Steele and Drew (2013) found only one article (by Woods, Baker and Hopper, 2004) on blended learning practices from the perspective of the teacher. This dearth of literature, allied with the growing numbers of blended learning programmes in Irish higher education, provides the rationale for this study. There is simply very little known about blended learning from a teachers' perspective.

This study examines the experiences of higher education teachers in Dundalk IT (DkIT) who deliver through a blended mode. Over the past number of academic years, I have taught through traditional and blended learning modes. Initially, I was learning very much 'on the fly' about the dynamics, intricacies, opportunities, and pitfalls of blended learning. While colleagues offered their support, they too were burrowing a lonely furrow, facing the same challenges. These challenges related to microphone and camera issues, sharing screens, lagging or dropped connections, the delivery of course content, and (the lack of) interaction, among many. Given that the trend is towards an increased demand for such programmes, it follows that we need to be better prepared for teaching through the mode. Conducting focus groups with teachers aims to extract insights into their experiences, and thus, better prepare them for teaching through a blended mode, while simultaneously guiding designers in the development of future blended learning programmes.

2. Research Question

The following research question aims to guide the study:

What are the experiences of higher education teachers with blended learning, and how can these experiences inform the design of future blended learning programmes?

3. Literature Review

Graham (2006) offers a summation in defining blended learning as the combination of two archetypal learning environments, one of traditional face-to-face and one of technology. These once independent, learning environments, are prominent features of most definitions of the term. Both Tomlinson and Whittaker (2013) and Epure *et al.* (2015) refer to the concept, as combining the student's traditional, face-to-face learning experience with computer technologies. Kumar (2011) simply details it as combining online with face-to-face learning, while Delaney *et al.* (2010) refer to the integration of traditional classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences. Commonplace within each of these definitions is the combination of two worlds, the traditional and the technological one.

Driscoll (2002) identifies the union of pedagogy and technology as the distinguishing feature of blended learning. Oliver and Trigwell (2005) extend this notion to include the mixture of e-learning with traditional learning, online learning with face-to-face, media, contexts, and different theories of learning, learning objectives, and pedagogic approaches. What is evident from both Driscoll (2002) and Oliver and Trigwell (2005) is the naturalisation of pedagogy with technology, and how both have evolved with a purpose of informing and educating learners. Today, this evolution has shone light on the online environment as a place of learning.

Blended learning gives greater control to students in terms of their “time, place, path and/or pace, and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home” (Christensen Institute, 2019). Garrison and Kanuka (2004) also emphasise the control that students have over their own learning, fostering critical and reflective thinking. Blended learning itself is a hybrid model – reducing time spent in traditional face-to-face settings with increased delivery and coursework online (UCD, 2019). In this context, the control shifts to the learners, placing greater responsibilities onto them in governing and motivating their learning away from traditional learning environs.

The need to connect modalities in the students' learning path must be considered in order to provide an integrated learning experience (Christensen Institute, 2019). Providing the most efficient instructive experience is made

possible by combining the flexible delivery modalities of student-centred traditional classrooms with web-based approaches (Heinze and Procter, 2004; Kumar, 2012; State of Victoria, 2012). However, reaching a balance between the modalities poses a challenge. Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) discuss the need to “to find a harmonious balance between online access to knowledge and face to face human interaction” (p. 228). Attaining the harmonious balance is complex – teachers need to strategise when devising effective blended learning programmes, deliberating where and when to create a more integrated approach, and ensuring that the appropriate technologies are in place. Ascertaining the teachers’ experiences with this balancing act ought to give insights in planning future blended learning programmes.

Bart writing on Faculty Focus (2009) argues that “the biggest benefit to a well-designed blended course could be a much improved teaching and learning experience”. Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) and Graham (2006) refer to the ‘pedagogical richness’ as a redeeming quality of blended learning. Lord and Lomicka (2008) and Kumar (2012) further emphasise this point by highlighting an increased quality of learning. The reasons for this improved pedagogy are varied but the literature points towards greater engagement (Stacey and Geblic, 2008; Faculty Focus, 2009), greater interaction among students and/or with teachers (Osguthorpe and Graham, 2003; Chamberlin and Moon 2005; Stacey and Geblic, 2008), and greater levels of critical thinking (Lord and Lomicka, 2008). Meanwhile, Bates and Sangra (2011) provide evidence that blended learning students actually perform better than traditional students, conditions depending. The literature indicates multiple, wide-ranging pedagogical benefits.

Additionally, blended learning offers increased flexibility with respect to time, space, and pace (Osguthorpe and Graham, 2003; Lock 2006; Chau, 2010; Aslanian and Clinefelter, 2013; Saliba *et al.*, 2013). This greater accessibility and flexibility mean that learners can dictate when and where they learn and at what pace, placing greater ownership onto them.

Other beneficial areas include: the strong sense of community among the learners (Ertmer and Stepich, 2005), and the cost effectiveness of running such

programmes (Osguthorpe and Graham, 2003; Stacey and Gebric, 2008; Allen and Seaman, 2014; Nguyen, 2015).

Conversely, there are negative connotations. In an Australian university study, Tynan *et al.* (2015) found that blended learning increases teacher workload. More specifically, both Larsen (2012) and Dymont *et al.* (2013) found this increased workload related to both the planning and proficiency phases in learning the associated technologies. Similarly, Gulbahar and Kalelioglu (2015) suggest that teachers need to undertake a considerable amount of work in order to prepare online activities. The combination of these various additional elements serves to increase a teachers' already busy workload. Consequently, this has a knock-on effect on other teacher duties.

Time is a common concern for teachers when tasked with implementing blended learning programmes. The time it takes to develop online materials and become familiar and proficient with new online surroundings is a critical factor in turning teachers against the new mode of delivery (Allan, 2007; Mansvelt *et al.*, 2009; Zhu *et al.*, 2010; Jeffrey *et al.*, 2014). The additional workload (previously detailed) impacts negatively on the time required to master the intricacies of blended learning, as well as other teaching duties. For teachers, investing time in developing blended learning programmes needs to result in clearly demarcated benefits for them and their students.

Often teachers are forced into teaching blending learning programmes (McTaggart *et al.*, 2018). Having these programmes imposed upon them creates resentment among the teaching community towards senior administrators (Allen *et al.*, 2012; Tshabalala *et al.*, 2014; Fitzsimmons, 2017) and/or with blended learning itself. Given this imposition, it's not surprising that there is a reluctance to engage with it. A lack of support is prevalent; extending to pedagogy (Skibba, 2011; Larsen, 2012), professional development (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008; Mansvelt *et al.*, 2009), and IT (Mansvelt *et al.*, 2009; Larsen, 2012; Tshabalala *et al.*, 2014). Teachers are often left feeling alone and vulnerable; this lack of support hinders a teacher's ability to become accustomed with their new surroundings and can lead to them questioning the value of integrating technology within the educational setting (Heaton-Shrestha

et al., 2009; Mansvelt *et al.*, 2009; MacCallum, 2011). In order to combat feelings of isolation, teachers must feel support, and receive training where necessary.

Other adversely affected areas include: the undermining or erosion of the teaching profession (Greener, 2009); and the feeling of fear rather than excitement towards technology among teaching staff (Allen *et al.*, 2012).

Like its global counterparts, the Irish educational landscape is also undergoing a seismic change. There was, and currently still is, an acknowledgement that future generations of learners will learn in a variety of ways (including blended), and that the higher education system needs to be flexible in supporting all (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). The report prophesises a significant increase in the numbers of part-time students attending higher education. This increase will be facilitated through “the provision of evening, weekend and summertime campus learning, open distance e-learning and work-based learning” (Department of Education and Skills, 2011: pp. 102-103). Altogether, this shift places a greater onus on institutions to accommodate and serve the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, blended learning is seen as a possible solution.

At the same time as this policy reports release, the Irish government launched ‘Springboard’. The primary objective of Springboard (2016) is to “to help unemployed people to remain as close as possible to the labour market by accessing part-time flexible higher education and training opportunities to up-skill or re-skill in” (p. 3). To achieve this, Springboard (2016) collaborated with higher education providers in the design and delivery of higher education programmes. One of the key findings from Springboard’s evaluation report (2016) highlights the growth in the numbers of learners undertaking online-only programmes – almost doubling from 8% in 2012 to 15% in 2016. Today, 102 out of the 245 programmes listed on the Springboard website have a mixed/distance/blended offering. This indicates a requirement to offer alternative modes of programme delivery to facilitate the growing and diverse needs of the student population.

In line with both the aforementioned reports, DkIT (2013) has developed a policy that proposes to embed technology-enhanced learning in the Institute in a manner that complements and aligns with its teaching and learning strategic goals. Included within are principles and strategies in how to successfully integrate blended learning into greater numbers of programmes in the Institute – indeed, the main goal of the policy is to successfully integrate blended learning into all programmes (2013)¹. To attain this, DkIT recognises that they need to review quality assurance policies; implement learner-centred approaches; nurture staff capabilities; and develop a supportive IT environment. Should this change in DkIT and Irish education policy result in more blended learning programmes, then more needs to be known about the experiences of those teaching presently within the domain to better prepare for future programmes.

4. Methodology

Qualitative descriptive research is very common in many disciplines, including education (Nassaji, 2015). “The goal of qualitative descriptive studies is a comprehensive summarisation...of specific events experienced by individuals or groups of individuals” (Lambert and Lambert, 2012: p. 255). The methodology examines a phenomenon in its natural state (Sandelowski, 2000), and is less theoretical than most other qualitative methodologies (Neergaard *et al.*, 2009). For Sandelowski (2000), qualitative descriptive research does not require the researcher to move as far from or into the data as other descriptive methodologies. It does not require a conceptual or highly abstract rendering of data; the focus is more on the ‘what’ rather than the ‘why’ of the research – that is, the experiences of higher education teachers.

4.1 Design/Data Collection

For Sandelowski (2000), Neergaard *et al.* (2009), and Kim *et al.* (2016), the use of focus groups is a normal method chosen with qualitative descriptive

¹ This policy has since been adopted by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2018).

research. Kim *et al.* (2016) claim that herein the data collection focuses on discovering the nature of the specific events under study. As such, the focus groups will be useful in answering the research question.

4.2 Participants

The participants of the focus groups were those higher education teachers within DkIT with experiences of teaching on blended learning programmes. Focus groups took place in November 2019. The participants' experience with blended learning varies from 2-16 semesters. Three focus groups took place, consisting of 12 teachers in total, all coming from three DkIT schools.

4.3 Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Institute's Ethics Committee. Active and informed consent was provided by all participants. The focus groups, which lasted between 39-58 minutes each, were conducted by the researcher who is not in a power-relationship with the participants – the questions were focused on professional activity, that is, the researcher is not involved in promoting a specific approach. Participation was voluntary – participants could and still can withdraw from the study at any time. All data is being treated as per the Institute's policies.

4.4 Procedure

Thematic analysis is often used as a data analysis technique with qualitative descriptive research (Kim *et al.*, 2016). Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: p. 82). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phases of thematic analysis has guided the analytical process where the findings should provide an accurate description and reflection of the focus groups' discourse. A sample of these findings will be presented at the conference.

4.5 Limitations

Qualitative descriptive research is dependent on the individual skills of the researcher and is open to their bias. Given that a recognised data collection and analysis technique have been identified, this bias ought to be minimal. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process should also bring a degree of rigour. This will be further strengthened by the fact that the findings will be presented back to the focus groups' participants prior to their publication.

Given the small number of participants in the focus groups, and the fact that they are a homogenous group in where they originate from, the researcher does not claim that the findings from the study can be generalised. Further, wider studies need to be conducted in order to make more concrete claims.

5. Conclusion

While the literature review has helped provide clarity on defining what blended learning is, it has also shone a light on a gap in knowledge in what is specifically known about higher education teachers' experiences with blended learning from an Irish context. The qualitative descriptive methodological study detailed within gains insights into the status quo of the community of blended learning teachers in DkIT. It is hoped to extend this study beyond DkIT and into further third-level institutions across the country.

With an evolving technological landscape and an ever-increasing reliance on the transformation of the traditional learning space into a flexible learning environment, the opportunities for blended learning will continue to increase. However, blended learning will not be in a position to fulfil its potential of being a pedagogically-sound, accessible, and flexible learning domain unless more is known about the experiences, opportunities, and challenges that teachers face. This study adds to what little literature currently exists from the perspective of blended learning teachers, and ought to extract findings that can direct the development of future blended learning programmes.

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