

**COMPARING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF BLENDED LEARNING
AND TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM DELIVERIES IN AN ENGLISH
PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE IN A TECHNICAL
UNIVERSITY**

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Comparing Students' Perceptions of Blended Learning and Traditional Classroom Deliveries in an English Professional Communication Course in a Technical University

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Abstract

An interview was conducted to under graduates of Bachelor of Computer Engineering and Electronic who were sat for English Professional Communication course at Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM) in Malaysia. This study compares students' perceptions of the overall satisfaction of the course and the deliveries methods. One group of students were kept in a traditional in-class section, and another group in a blended-learning section in which the primary course delivery method was partly online, whereby students met in class on a limited number of occasions. Overall perceptions of the course, lecturer/instructor and learning outcomes were positive for both groups. Students depicted strong inclination that they would use the material in their careers. The majority of students in the blended learning section indicated that they would take another elective course using blended learning approach if it were offered. However, some interesting differences were noted. Specifically, students in the traditional setting were more satisfied with the clarity of instruction. Blended-learning students also indicated firmly that their analytical skills improved as a result of the course. The results suggest that the two delivery methods were similar in terms of final learning outcomes.

Introduction

As educators or course instructors, we have always taught in a range of environments, using a range of tools and media. We work with our students in classrooms, laboratories, workshops and in the field. Each of these places has its own procedures, practices, strengths and weaknesses. As of today, with Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) becoming nearly universal and ubiquitous over the last several years, university course delivery was almost certain to be affected. This in turn has produced a new and unique teaching landscape and instructional experiences.

Falconer and Little John (2007) pointed out that a hybrid of traditional face-to-face and on-line learning instruction occurs both in the classroom and on-line, and where the on-line component becomes a natural extension of the traditional classroom learning the learning is referred as Blended Learning (BL). BL possibly be any learning experiences that were incorporated with e-

learning range from those that are completely online, with no class meetings, to those that provide for a few meetings in a classroom during the semester. An example of the BL is one in which the Web is the primary instruction mode, but there are a limited number of other face-to-face meetings at various points in the semester. This “blended learning” (henceforth BL) approach may be appealing to many students because it offers the convenience of a primarily-online course, but allows for at least a few meetings with the instructor in person. This approach affords the opportunity to see the instructor face-to-face and avoid a completely impersonal course experience, thereby creating a learning community without an overly-burdensome meeting schedule.

In order to ensure that course objectives are accomplished, it is important to understand how effective the BL delivery methods are when compared to the traditional classroom learning (henceforth TCL) approach. Albrecht (2006) and Chen and Jones (2007) has examined the differences in effectiveness between courses that are completely online and those that use a traditional classroom, with mixed results. However, to date very little research has examined students’ perceptions on BL over TCL deliveries approaches. Therefore, we conducted a survey of students at Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM) in order to engage the perceived effectiveness of the two course delivery methods namely the English Proficiency Communication (EPC) course taught in the university. The current paper is primarily exploratory and comparative in nature and extends the literature by presenting interview results relative to the under graduate EPC course.

Literature Review

Traditional Classroom Learning (TCL)

Traditional instruction, as the name implies, focuses on how the instructor teaches. Traditional instruction is reminiscent of the popular perception of school in almost every parts of the world. Students are instructed by the teacher to study the textbook. The teacher provides information to the students, including concepts, facts, terms, and diagrams. Class periods are lecture based and involve note taking, usually through the use of a chalk board or white board. In this instructional style, it is expected that students will answer questions generated by their teachers (Sungur & Tekkaya, 2006).

Blended Learning (BL)

Blended learning is a mixture of online and face-to-face learning using a variety of learning resources and communications options available to students and lecturers. In other words, blended learning mixes e-learning with other more traditional types of learning.

Related Studies on Blended-learning (BL)

Any instructional method has its own advantages and disadvantages. There are advantages to both face to face and online learning environments. However, by practices, Laurillard (1996) points out, 'A mix of teaching and learning methods will always be the most efficient way to support student learning, because only then is it possible to embrace all the activities of discussion, interaction, adaptation and reflection, which are essential for 'academic learning'. This is particularly so with language and communication skills development. A blended approach allows us to focus all modes of communication onto the completion of a learning task. Another study, conducted by Albrecht (2006) pointed out that BL meet students' preferences and expectations such as convenience, access and control. He continued that devices such as iPods and services such as "third screen" (video, computer and phone) delivery further enable remote access and interaction. Raj and Abdallah (2005) mentioned that BL offers the conveniences of online courses without the loss of face-to-face contact. In so doing a learning environment is created that is richer than either a traditional face-to-face environment or a fully online environment. They continued that lecturers or course instructors use blended learning because they perceive that students may not be able to cope with a fully online course, because they wish to introduce students to technology or because they wish to offer extra support to weaker students. Working in a blended environment enabled instructors and instructional designers to develop skills needed for e-learning in small increments.

A blended approach allows us to focus all modes of communication on to the completion of a learning task. This BL approach may be appealing to many students because it offers the convenience of a primarily-online course, but allows for at least a few meetings with the instructor in person. This approach affords the opportunity to see the instructor face-to-face and avoid a completely impersonal course experience, thereby creating a learning community without an overly-burdensome meeting schedule. At this point in time we are able to say that BL

allows organization to gradually move learners from traditional classroom to e-learning in small steps making change easier to accept.

Although the blended-learning method has become popular in both the corporate and academic world, little research has examined its effectiveness relative to traditional face-to-face instruction. Previous studies conducted by Grandzol (2004) in MBA accounting course; investigated student responses to blended learning and traditional delivery methods, but found inconclusive evidence about learning outcomes as measured by examination scores. Grandzol also found that student' perceptions in terms of enthusiasm, preparation, grading, and clarity of instruction were similar for the two sections.

And finally, Daragmeh (no date) conducted Blended learning approach in teaching English For Special Purpose (ESP) to intermediate students who never had any experience to digital learning suggested that scaffoldings in necessary in enhancing performance improvements. He too suggested that adopting blended-learning setting is strongly recommended in language and communication and not much study has focused on it. Thus on this gap identified the present study formulates its research questions.

Research Questions

To meet the purpose of this study, which aims at assessing student's perceptions of BL and TC delivery method and along with several important parameters relating to the following general research questions; the following research questions are formulated.

Q1: Are there any differences in the overall perceptions of the instructor and the course?

Q2: How does blended-learning compare with traditional classroom delivery in terms of student learning outcomes and skills assessment in of the course?

The following sections discuss our research methods and results. We then summarize our conclusions and the primary implications of the study.

Methodology

Study Participants

Student participants were enrolled in either a traditional classroom section (n = 20) or a blended-learning section (n = 20) of a Degree in Computer Engineering and Electronics course that covered materials in enhancing language proficiency and communication skills. The same instructor taught each class and administered the course in the same way, except for the method of course delivery. Using this approach allowed us to “control” for differences due to instructor, evaluation criteria, and other potential confounds. The traditional and blended-learning sections involved two separate sections over one semester. Within delivery methods, we compared sections and found no significant differences between semesters on the survey item responses.

Instrumentation

We constructed the semi-structured interview questions by adopting and adapting survey items designed by Chen & Jones (2007). The semi-structured interview questions were categorized into three themes namely: the overall perceptions of EPC course, the learning outcomes and skills assessment, and lastly blended learning delivery versus traditional in class delivery.

Course Administration

The BL sections consisted of eight in-class meetings during the semester; all other “meetings” were online for three hours each for seven weeks whilst the TCL section met once each week for three hours for the duration of fourteen weeks during the semester.

The BL and TCL sections were identical in terms of the factors that determined students’ grades and the relative weight of each factor. The instructor conducted classes in the TC L sections using a combination of lecture and class discussions, focusing the lecture on a summary of key issues related to particular topics. Discussion is focused on the topics listed in the course outline that stretched for fourteen weeks. In the BL sections, the instructor conducted the seven in-class meetings in the same way as those for traditional classroom sessions. Online class meetings primarily focused on specific student questions e-mailed to the instructor prior to online

meetings. The instructor required students in the BL section to participate during online class meetings.

The course grade for both traditional and blended-learning sections was based on formative assessment (100%) which includes preparing cover letter and resume, job interview, oral presentation of a product and television advertisements, mock meeting and mock interview. Students completed cover letter and resume individually whilst four other assessments in groups of ten formed during the first class meeting. Each group made a single submission for each case. In the first meeting and in the course syllabus, the instructor told the students that they would assess the relative contribution of each group member by completing peer evaluations during the last class meeting. The instructor then adjusted individuals' grades based on these peer assessments.

The Rationale for choice of methodology

In recent years, qualitative methodology has been recognised as “a set of methods which permits the evaluator to study selected issues in depth and detail” (Patton, 1990, p.3). It also has been accepted as a robust source of knowledge and has been seen as the optimal approach to some of the organisational issues (Yin, 1984), which the present study explores.

Why choose interviewing?

The adequacy of a research method depends on the purpose of the research and the questions asked (Locke, 1989). If the researcher's goal is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry. Qualitative interviewing has been referred to as a non-directive, unstructured, non-standardised, and open-ended interviewing and ‘to be effective the identification of needs should be done through interviews’ (Lewin & Stuart, 1991, p.122). The purpose of interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses. Nor, indeed, is it to ‘evaluate’ (Patton, 1989). At the root of interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 1991). Being interested in others is the key to some of the basic assumptions underlying interviewing technique. At the heart of conducting research by interview is an interest in other individuals' stories or experiences. This explains why people interviewed cannot easily be coded through use

of numbers. Schutz (1967) offers some guidance here in stating that it is never possible to understand another perfectly, because to do so would mean that interviewers had entered into the other's stream of consciousness and experienced the same as the interviewee.

Analysing qualitative interviews

In analysing the interviews, we realised that the process involved close examination of the information collected, in order to find answers to the research questions. This section describes our approach to the interpretative stage. The researchers' procedure for organising the interview data from a taped transcript was as follows. The issues emerged from the data and arose out of familiarity with the data. This referred to reading the taped transcripts a number of times, and 'staying close to the data' at all times. All the taped transcripts were on computer but for the initial stage, the researchers worked from a printout of the interview.

Firstly, the researchers listed the emerging issues when reading the whole text. At this stage, researchers drew out all the issues embedded implicitly in the responses, as well as ones that are explicitly mentioned by the participants. The original questions often helped to give a basic structure of broad issues. The issues in the interviews were oriented: the overall perceptions of EPC course; the learning outcomes and skills assessment and lastly online class delivery versus traditional in class delivery.

The next step was to code the content to issues by going through the text and marking the main quotes. At this stage, the researchers simply marked and coded the text, so that they could be found again. The category was written next to the text and the sub-heading that describes the text put next to it. For example, if the text concerned perceptions of EPC course, then the particular part of the text was underlined, and in the margin 'P/EPC' was written – 'P' is the category, 'EPC' is the subheading. The content of each transcript was coded in this way covering all issues identified.

When the transcripts had been coded, the data chunks were placed under the appropriate topic. In doing so, the researchers could gain a picture of the number of data chunks on each topic. The

researchers used the copy and paste rather than the cut and paste function, so that they could also retain an intact copy of the whole interview in the computer.

Having assembled the quotes, an interpretative statement that supported the quotes was written. These statements summarised the findings within that issue, as the researchers interpreted them. These interpretative statements formed the basis of the research report and the researchers used the material as they continued to work with the data to offer an explanation of the phenomena under study. Having explored all the categories, they concluded the report by seeking out relationships and patterns, and making connections in order to come to a particular view or an abstract conceptualization of the phenomena studied.

Results of the Study

The data obtained from the semi structured interview was obtained from the preliminary study and it was then compared and analysed and the results were categorized under three specific themes:

- a) the overall EPC course satisfaction
- b) the general satisfaction with the learning outcomes and skills assessment
- c) the blended-learning versus traditional in class delivery

The excerpts from the study participants from the blended-learning and tradition classroom sections are indicated by “BL, P(nu)” or “TCL,P(nu)” respectively where BL stands for Blended-learning, TCL stands for traditional in classroom learning, whilst P(nu) denotes specifically to the referred participant.

The overall perception of the EPC course

Blended-learning and traditional in classroom courses were compared for course satisfaction. 19 out of 20 participants in the BL and 18 out of twenty participants in TCL sections respectively had expressed positive perception of the EPC course. Below are some of the participants own words about their overall perception of the EPC course:

“Overall, this was an interesting elective course, no doubt the course outline was something like our Technical Communication II course but this time round, the instructor made the difference...and also the way the assignments preparations...”

(BL, P2)

“I enjoyed the class EPC BLHW 3403 as it was interesting especially when we were doing the assignments”

(BL, P7)

“I learned a great deal from this EPC BLHW 3403 course especially tips for attending interview, then preparing an excellent resume...I learned that resume must tailor to the application intent...”

(TCL, P1)

“hmm... the course content ...although there are many redundancy in the topics [as compared to Technical Communication II] but this time I am satisfied and I learnt more effectively”

(TCL,P 13)

Participants from the two sections hold fairly good perceptions of the EPC course and had indicated a belief that the material they learned will benefit them in their job seeking and careers.

General Satisfaction with the learning outcomes and skills assessment

Out of twenty participants in the BL and TCL sections, 18 out of 20 from BL section and 17 out of twenty participants from TCL sections respectively had arrived to a moderate level of agreement that the class deepened their interest in the subject matter. Below are some of the participants' responses related to the general satisfaction with the learning outcomes and skills assessment of the EPC course.

“I am confident in my ability to understand and apply concepts learned in this course”

(TCL, P 12)

“I was motivated to do well in EPC BLHW 3403”

(TCL, P 16)

“I deepened my interest in the subject matter of this course’

(BL, P 6)

“I enjoyed the class ...the lecturer had created the course to be so enjoyable”

(BL, P 10)

The course instructor appears to have been quite successful in motivating both sections of students to do well.

Apart from the general satisfaction of the course learning outcomes, the study elicited the participants skills acquired from the EPC course. Even though skills acquisitions was not the primary assessment, however it was an emergent issues raised by the participants from both sections that are interesting to be noted. Some excerpts that depicted almost the same meaning about the phenomena are as follows:

"My writing skills have improved as a result of this course"

(TCL, P5 & BL,P7)

"Gosh!, I am indeed happy that I am more analytical and I dare to say that my analytical skills have improved as a result of this course"

(TCL, P 9 & BL,P15)

"...Without realization, I found that my interpersonal skills have improved as a result of this course"

(TCL, P3 & BL,P14)

"it has not gone unnoticed....my computer skills have improved as a result of this course"

(BL, P3; BL, P9 & BL, P16)

"I am confident in determining what is relevant in solving problems"

(BL, P12 & BL, P15)

"I am using more of my personal computer and my computer skills are enhanced.."

(BL, P20)

It is noted that even though the computer skill was not the primary objective of the course, both sections appeared to perceive important improvement/ skill enhancement in this area. Apart from the computer skill, writing skill and interpersonal skill too indicated fairly strongly on the improvements as the result of this course.

Blended-Learning versus Traditional in class delivery

To further assess students' perceived effectiveness of BL compared with TCL delivery, we also asked those enrolled in the blended learning class two other questions designed to examine their general impressions about the quality of the delivery. The participants responded as follows:

"I find online class delivery of EPC materials at least as effective as traditional in-class delivery"

(BL, P14)

"I find online class delivery is more effective than traditional in-class delivery"

(BL,P9)

The students in the blended learning section indicated on average that they do not generally find online course delivery itself to be as effective as the traditional classroom setting. These responses suggest that, in terms of learning and satisfaction with the course are approximately equal to that of traditional classes, and then something outside of the instruction itself contributes to their satisfaction with the course and instructor. 19 out of 20 participants in BL section had demonstrated that if they may opt for other language course using that delivery method, if offered. Perhaps because of the convenience and flexibility of the course, this delivery approach would not deter the majority of students in future courses.

However results pertaining to TCL, was interesting to note too. In terms of course performance and overall course satisfaction, students learning under the two course delivery methods did not appear to differ much in their assessments. Students in both sections indicated a strong amount of utility from the course in terms of usefulness to their careers.

Based on the results of this interview, however, the traditional classroom setting continues to add value in terms on instruction clarity. Students and instructors alike may simply be more comfortable with the classroom environment because it has always existed. This environment allows the instructor to explain more informally how to work on problems and s/he is not encumbered by the need to explain material using a computer keyboard. The instructor can perhaps more easily circle numbers or point to items of emphasis while using a traditional board at the front of a classroom. Some excerpts those explicit participants responses are as follows:

"face to face instruction is so much better...I can ask or seek more info if I have doubts in the instructions"

(TCL, P7)

“Talking to the instruction, prompt and in person guidance is far better to me laaa...”

(TC, P 15)

Conclusion

This study was administered at only one university and involved one English elective course in language learning. Therefore, inferences cannot necessarily be made about other courses, institutions and instructors. Although this approach may be seen as a limitation, it was necessary because an important goal of this study was to be able to make meaningful comparisons between two delivery methods. The traditional and blended-learning sections were taught by the same instructor. This clearly is the limitation of the present study.

Both course delivery approaches examined in this study is timely important in conjunction with today's increasingly-competitive education marketplace, and perhaps both can continue to improve as instructors learn from both delivery methods. In any case, the goal for educators must be to continuously improve in whatever delivery method they are using in order to ensure that their students are gaining the necessary knowledge and skills.

As student ways and means of knowledge acquisition transform, leaning more toward technology for rapid information dissemination and self-paced intrinsic attainment, educational structures and instructors must adapt as well. The challenge of this new educational modality lies in how to effectively teach without compromising content or losing touch with the student.

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