PCF8
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
27-30 November 2016

Sub-theme: Efficiency and Effectiveness

Blended Learning - What Blend? Flexible Learning - How Flexible?

by

Sir John Daniel & Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

Introduction

Good day colleagues: This will be a ten-minute summary of the full paper that Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić and I submitted to the conference with the title *Blended Learning - What Blend? Flexible Learning - How Flexible?* We prepared it jointly but I shall deliver this short version of the paper alone. She will do the same for our joint paper on new approaches to quality assurance.

As back-up to this telegraphic presentation, apart from the full paper in the PCF8 Proceedings, I mention two longer treatments of these questions published in the last year by Contact North and available on their website.

Blended Learning: What Blend?

I shall make five points in answer to the question *Blended Learning: What Blend?*

First, we use the definition of blended learning in the Babson reports. Blended designates courses where between 30% and 80% of course content delivered online. Less than 30% is called face to face; more than 80% is considered online.

Second, although many people use the terms blended learning and hybrid learning interchangeably, we prefer the distinction that Professor Tony Bates makes. He proposes using 'blended learning' for all combinations of online and face-to-face with 30% to 80% delivered online, but restricting the term 'hybrid learning' to courses where, instead of mixing online and other methods in opportunistic and serendipitous ways, the whole teaching-learning system is redesigned to create optimum synergy between the face-to-face sessions and learning online.

Third, this means being clear about how to reach optimum synergy. There is very little research on the strengths and weaknesses of face-to-face teaching to help us make choices.

Fourth, the research shows that face-to-face teaching is not more effective than

asynchronous online learning.

Fifth, this means that we should adopt what Bates calls *The Law of Equal Substitution.* This says that academically, most courses can be taught equally well online or face-to-face.

Therefore other factors, 'such as cost, convenience for teachers, social networking, the skills and knowledge of the instructor, the type of students, or the context of the campus, will be stronger determinants of whether to teach a course online or on campus than the academic demands of the subject matter. Instead of assuming that face-to-face teaching is the default mode we need to identify the exceptions to the law of equal substitution and research the unique pedagogical characteristics of campus-based teaching more carefully. Bates concludes: 'we need to turn the question on its head: what are the academic or pedagogical justifications for the campus, when students can learn most things online?'

Flexible Learning - How Flexible?

I shall also make five points in addressing the question *Flexible Learning: How Flexible?*

First, flexibility sounds like an excellent quality but like all good things it should be taken in moderation. Buildings and earthquakes are a useful analogy. Structures that are too rigid break - but those that are too flexible collapse. We need resilent structures and resilient pedagogy.

Second, take care before giving students too much flexibility in their study timetables. In particular courses without fixed end dates have high attrition. Students need incentives to give priority to their studies.

Third, online learning has also created greater flexibility in the definition of learning outcomes. Where are the limits to that flexibility?

With most MOOCs individual learners simply get statements of participation must judge the value of the learning outcomes for themselves.

Don't get me wrong. I am a big fan of MOOCs. I am now starting my 16th MOOC. But I do this to keep my mind alert, not to get my learning outcomes certified.

However, there is now a range of approaches to certifying learning outcomes for more formal courses leading right up to the examinations and screening used by the most exacting professions. Online technologies have facilitated this diversification, open badges, which seem to be making slow but steady progress, being a good example.

Open badges are based on software that allows any organisation or individual to present a digital badge to a learner who has satisfied the criteria for earning it. Because they are in digital format, badges can include more information about what and how the learners studied, how they were assessed, the time involved, etc. than a normal paper record. Crucially, however, value of the badge to the holder who presents it to a potential

employer as proof of competence will depend on the credibility of the organisation or individual that issued the badge.

Students should be aware that new forms of certification take time to establish their credibility, although in this fast-moving field that time need not be very long. Nevertheless, after learners find a course that matches their needs they should check the credibility, within that particular field, of the body that will certify their achievement.

Fourth, online technology allows us to separate out the various elements in the teaching learning process. They can be split up, potentially separating course design, content development, delivery, support, assessment and credentialing. Then they can, in principle, be done by different organisations. This is called the unbundling of higher education. Previously institutions assembled the complete learning experience and offered it to students as a 'bundle'.

Does unbundling describe a happy world of extraordinary flexibility and rich choice for learners or something closer to anarchy? We suspect that few students will choose the fully unbundled model because most are overwhelmed by too much choice and like the security of dealing with an institution that they trust. That's why most students choose online providers that have a presence in their own country.

Also, academics like to have some consistency and continuity in their student body. They like to get to know their students, both as a group and also as individuals.

Finally, institutions also like to be able to identify 'their' students. In many jurisdictions student numbers determine funding from governments.

For these reasons we expect that HEIs will react to unbundling by organising themselves to re-bundle the total learning experience for students - and that students will accept this gratefully.

Fifth, this will require institutions to expand their capacity to counsel and guide students in an era of greater flexibility, which will benefit both students and institutions.

Conclusion

That is a summary of our paper. You can dig deeper by going to the publications that I mentioned at the beginning.