Emerging trends and definitions of blended learning: Reviewing informal and formal learning environments and course design.

Making technological innovation work

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Blended learning (BL) is generally regarded as a course design process combining in-class, face to face (synchronous) and out-off-class, online and digitally mediated (asynchronous and synchronous) modalities and for more than a decade has influenced the vocational education and industry training (VET) sector. Not surprisingly, given BL is a relative new mode of delivery, research has emphasised learner and faculty satisfaction and flexibility and highlighted the potential of BL as a stepping stone to fully online instruction. However, as the BL area matures, more attention is being placed on issues such as access, impact on practice, alignment with industry goals, and cost effectiveness. As these issues are addressed, traditional conceptions of BL will be examined, challenged and changed.

For example, traditionally the National Diploma in Agribusiness Management (Diploma) was offered across New Zealand in a blended mode to provide participants with the management skills required to run a productive and profitable agriculture business. With the increasing availability of technologies and improved connectedness of rural communities, it was agreed the course needed to be re-designed. During the re-design process it was acknowledged that in this technology driven, information rich world, farmers are constantly mastering new skills, knowledge, and competencies. It was also recognised these were acquired in both formal (such as, structured tertiary provided courses and industry generated training packages) and informal (such as, financial advice from bank managers, attendance at practical field days, and farming specific data-bases, web sites and journals) environments. This fragmentation of learning presented a unique challenge to the design team, how could they blend the learning experiences, knowledge and outcomes of informal settings into a formal credentialed qualification?

This presentation will demonstrate, through an e-pilot for a course in the Diploma of Agriculture, an emerging BL design approach, the blending of formal and informal learning. It will illustrate how learning materials on industry approved external databases and web-sites are integrated with current class materials. It will highlight the alignment of in-class schedules with external industry facilitated workshops, field-days and industry led regional discussion groups. The presentation will then show how detailed assessment rubrics, with identified standards and performance criteria, encourage and empower learners to create personal learning plans. It will then describe how e-portfolios are used to encourage peer interaction and store evidence of competency.

In conclusion it will be argued that in learning environments where there is equivalence between formal and informal learning, practitioners need to evaluate current practice in order to encourage new opportunities for learning.

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