Learning Outcomes and Student Perceptions In Using Of Blended Learning In History

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of blended learning among students in form four (grade 9) in learning of history. A survey of literature on the subject found that although a number of studies were devoted to the use of blended learning (Bonk & Graham, 2006; Duhaney, 2004; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Singh & Reed, 2001), in the teaching of history in school there seemed to be very little evidence of detailed examination to determine learning outcomes and an account or mechanism of how the subject is learnt. In the present study reflective and collaborative learning supported by scaffolding provides an attractive glimpse of blended learning - the employment of face-to-face teaching approach and the use of blogs by groups of students on the Twitter platform, in the teaching-learning interaction throughout the lessons. A mixed-method approach was employed with survey, interview, and text analysis for data gathering. Qualitative text analysis of the interview script analysis clarified the different merits students perceived from each activity. The variations provided by the blended course design served well in meeting challenges set in the learning outcomes and learning standard, and the learning environment was found to be enjoyable for the students. We also discovered that students had positive perceptions of the blended course design.

Keywords: Blended learning; history learning; learning outcomes; Blog; Perceptions of blended learning.

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1. Introduction

The rapid rise of Internet technologies in the past few years led to the opening of alternative and non-traditional learning opportunities across various levels of education and training (Bonk & Graham, 2006; MacDonald & McAteer, 2003). The change involved a wide range of innovations in teaching learning approach, one of which is blended learning whereby a variety of models was employed. Typically all of them basically involved in combining face-to-face and online learning (Bonk & Graham, 2006). Owing to the flexibility as well as the richness in the possibility of remodeling of the approach, interest in blended learning has grown rapidly (Boyle et al., 2003; Duhaney, 2004; Thorne, 2003).

Blended learning has a number of definitions. It may be any learning program where more than one delivery mode is being used with the objective of optimizing the learning outcome and program delivery cost (Singh & Reed, 2001). In short, it describes a variety of teaching which integrates both face to face and online delivery methods (Chew et al., 2010). Blended learning is attractive and realistic because it combines the traditional classroom approach with the online learning model. The mode of delivery modality of blended learning provides an efficient and effective educational experience for learners, with the added value of increased learner accessibility to programs; hence it is also possible to apply the blended model in innovative ways to increase both student learning outcomes and reduce instructional delivery costs (Dziuban et al., 2004). A stern reminder to educationists is that blended learning technology should not be used to replace the teacher or instructor because "students never learn from technology per se; they learn from the strategies teachers use to communicate effectively through the technologies" (Singh & Reed, 2001, p. 5).

2. Literature Review

Blended learning in the current form has come into the scene for over a decade. According to Chew et al. (2010) researchers and practitioners considered that blended learning is currently in embryonic form of its development. Its development to the current stage is much influenced by highly interactive technologies, such as gaming and simulations (Dede, 2005). A good example of the blended learning development came from the University of Central Florida (UCF). Since 1998 it has been using a similar definition for its blended learning courses termed mixed mode courses (Dziuban et al., 2004).

At this juncture an important question raised is whether blended learning is more effective than other learning environments. Many of the studies looking into the three instructional environments -- traditional face to face learning, blended learning and fully online learning -- show mixed results. Dziuban et al. (2004) using course outcomes such as grades show that blended learning students performed better than those in fully online and in some cases those in traditional face to face learning but then there are significant differences among the disciplines. However Reasons et al. (2005) found that students in blended courses performed less effectively than those in fully online courses on grades and tests. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) in their survey on blended learning showed that students believe that they are learning from discussions but their actual performance is only slightly positive and not statistically significant. Further study by Vaughn and Garrison (2005) did not find any evidence that blended learning improved student cognitive performance. A recent experiment of a course taught in all three modalities concluded that fully online was the best of all the approaches, being better than blended and face to face learning environments (Reasons et al., 2005). In short the evidence on the effectiveness of blended learning is inconclusive.

3. Conceptual Framework

In implementing blended learning one requires a well-supported approach that includes a theory-based instructional model (Dziuban et al., 2004). According to Alonzo et al. (2005), ideally blended learning focuses on the individual learner and is based on social constructionist theory where students work cooperatively to readjust
learning as an effective course. The acquisition of new knowledge and experience is reinforced through activities using a scaffold approach to help students practice and acquire new skills. During the activities each student working cooperatively constructs meaning of his or her own. To support the constructivist approach, a learning community belonging to specific grades as groups should be formed. Through a process of collaboration guided by teachers, learning is constructed, not by individuals but by the group (Alonso et al., 2005).

In a traditional face-to-face learning environment, one of the more common methods of constructing group meaning is through discussion. The teacher typically begins the discussion by posing a question. The teacher then invites members of the class to make an impromptu response. Other class members then respond to the first student, and a discussion develops. In this way, students are exposed to several perspectives, and the answer to the original question is constructed for each learner based upon the individual’s assessment of the group’s responses. In a blended learning environment, however, this discussion format can still be adapted and enhanced. The discussion could be held synchronously, in group chat, or could be held asynchronously, in a forum to which learners post responses. In a blended environment, students have the capability of responding to several points at once. Since an asynchronous discussion can continue over a longer period, students can take time to formulate responses, and can respond to a particular part of a comment, even if the discussion has taken another route.

The majority of public education in the United States over the next 10 years will be in the form of blended learning in which fifty percent of high school courses will be face to face and the other fifty percent will be delivered online; in fact six emerging models for blended learning have been identified in K-12 (Picciano & Seaman, 2008). A good model is provided by one of the schools in Denver in which face to face delivery is supplemented by an online environment in which courses are conducted from a DPS server using the Moodle learning management system. The trend in using blended learning will most probably be adopted in many countries throughout the world. The choice of online platform will be quite a challenge as there are even now many in the offing.

Online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Pownce, Jaiku, Edmodo, and Cirip.ro. can be used to publish and edit online brief text, and also images. A micro blogging platform such as Timsoft for example, offers a platform with many educational uses, for information and knowledge management, course enhancement, delivering entire online courses, and collaborative projects in schools and communities. On the contrary, Twitter, a popular social media was designed for general purposes, but could be used in education when users employ it as online learning spaces and tools to work out how to teach in the different contexts. When conducting a literature class using the online learning environment Miles (2011) raised a question with regard to what an online space makes it possible by way of teaching that the normal face to face method cannot do. One effective answer to this is that in the context of his experiment online spaces allow students to role play one of the characters from Charles Dickens’s Bleak House. This study has adopted a blended learning modality in which face to face classroom meetings were supplemented by asynchronous online unstructured learning environment in which students freely and cooperatively interacted in question and answer, discussion and intermittently responded to assignments provided by their teachers. Through this process they would build meanings of the events and episodes related to the subject learned.

4. The problem

Face to face learning environment remains to be the main teaching and learning mode in most of our schools and will remain so in in the future. However, due to the limitation and constraints involved in ensuring effective learning, other modes of learning are introduced and these include the recent development in the use of online learning such as blogs, Wiki and forum (Miyazoe & Anderson 2012), educational computer and video games (Aldrich, 2004; Watson et al., 2010), simulated learning (Dede, 2005; McKenna et al., 2010) and blended learning (Chew et al., 2010). The potentials of these learning environments to improve learning have been
positive as shown by many studies (Bonk & Graham, 2006; Dziuban et al., 2004; Miles, 2011). Since variations in applying these modes are vast (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2012), hence the findings are also varied depending on the subject areas investigated, the modes and also the online platform employed.

One subject that seems to be neglected both in its content organization and teaching mode in schools today is history. It is of no surprise that since the 1980s educators have voiced their opinion that the teaching of this subject in schools failed to meet expectations (Brophy & Good, 1969; Shulman, 1986). Britt and Aglinskas (2002) contended that most history in school provides simple narratives that do not acknowledge the controversies surrounding historical topics. In recent years history teaching began to adopt other learning environments in conjunction with the face to face learning mode and this enables historical controversies be discussed and argued. Watson et al. (2010) employed video games to teach the history of World War II and Lyons (2005) used online learning to teach United States History. They found that students learned better and discovered the subject interesting using these methods. However, there is still doubt with teaching using face to face and online in the form of blended learning (Dede, 2005; Reasons et al., 2005; Vaughn & Garrison, 2005). Since the problem of understanding history as taught in schools at present is a serious one (Brophy & Good, 1969; Shulman, 1986), therefore there is a need to overcome this shortcoming and with the introduction of blended learning students may find history more meaningful. It is therefore important to explore both the process and the meaning students created as they experienced blended learning.

5. Research Questions

Based on the problems posed and the considerations of using blended learning three research questions were raised. These were:

1. Is there a change in the understanding of history in the context of students being able to:
   a. evaluate events and their relationship in order to understand the interplay of change and continuity in history
   b. locate sources and select evidence to support arguments, and develop a critical attitude of abstract generalizations and opinion
   c. offered by historians on the topic and thus making own judgment on the generalizations.
   d. offer alternative answers to the established facts, opinion and judgment about the events.

2. What are students’ views of history after following the blended learning mode?

3. Is collaborative and constructivist approach through blended learning much more satisfying and meaningful than following the lesson in the face to face approach only?

6. Methodology

Two classes of 32 and 38 students from each class in form four (grade 9) were exposed to the same blended learning course in history. There were altogether 12 class meetings, each lasting 45 minutes. The objectives of the course were for the students to improve their understanding of history of the British intervention in the Malay State of Perak. By understanding it means that the students should not only be able to narrate episodes and recall
events leading to the intervention, or accounting for the causes and effects after the intervention but they must also be able to make judgment of the episode and the events vis-a-vis evaluating the events from different sources and different perspectives, reformulating the episode and posing a different interpretation of the events and attempt to arrive at the conclusion as to the validity of the historian’s interpretation of the events, its causes and effects and finally provide suggestion in which the event may be averted.

Each week there were four face-to-face instruction and out-of-class online learning activities which include forum, additional notes and materials, short discussions and short assignments to be completed with group assists and feedback among the students and the teachers. The online activities took place both in the school computer laboratory and also at home if online facilities are available. Despite the availability of many miniblog platforms such as Edmodo, Twitter was used as a platform for the group involving students and two teachers of history. Throughout the course, the teachers as in the face to face learning environment participated in the online activities and at the same time observed what was happening in the system. In terms of procedure, the students were allowed short practice sessions on online tools in class prior to the assignments.

Owing to the nature of the study, data gathering and analyzing were not only carried out at the end of the course but continuous data gathering, sorting out and analyzing were also done during the course. Class face to face observations were also carried out on two occasions. Interesting points raised in the face to face class observations and online day transactions were recorded, analyzed while the study was carried out. Focus group interviews (Patton (2002) were conducted at the end of the study. Students in groups of five to six participated in semi-structured interviews. Areas of questioning include student perception of using miniblog in learning of history, the experiences they went through, the view they have about history and also the teaching and learning of history, the process in which historians should go about in establishing historical abstractions. A qualitative approach was employed to describe and to provide a triangulated interpretation of the learning process, the learning outcomes, and the perception on history and history teaching and learning (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

7. Results

On the first question with regard to whether there is a change in the understanding of history in the context of students being able to evaluate events and their relationship in order to understand the interplay of change and continuity in history, there was some evidence in the later part of the lesson in both face to face class sessions and the transactions in the forms of discussions, note exchanging and questions and answers in the blogs that the students showed some indications of understanding the temporal concept as the underlying structure of history. In both online and face to face class sessions, for example, the students took some time to discuss whether the absolute power of Sultan Abdullah could withstand the power of the British imperialists. They compared the events to those taking place before during the Malacca Sultanate which succumbed to the Portuguese or the Dutch in Java.

In one of the forum series one question was raised by a student; “Can the Malay lords and other dignitaries using daggers and spears stop the British who come with gunships and big guns?” Another student related to the episode of the fall of the Malacca Sultanate in 1511 by noting; “The Malay ruler must remember how the people of Malacca fought the Portuguese and finally the Malays lost, fast and quick!” One student reacted; “How much attempt made to save Perak by the Malay chieftains, unavoidably it will fail because western imperialists determine to conquer us. They will do whatever they can to subdue the local people.” Although signs of understanding history began emerging through the concept of interplay of change and continuity as depicted in historical events and episodes which is the subject building block, the meaning making of history was still unstable and needed to be reinforced.
With regard to understanding history in the context of locating reliable sources and critical selection of evidence to support arguments and assertions the students did show some degree of understanding in that in their discussions and questions and answers both online and during face to face classroom contact were not only voluminous and lively but also indicated efforts to refer to a variety of sources. On what roles played by Raja Ismail and other nobilities such as Maharaja Lela and Dato’ Sagor in Perak during the troubled 1870s for example, some students provided answers like these lords were opportunists waiting if they could get British support. They did provide some credible evidence but other students disputed their assertions, and in turn proposed those nobilities were Malay patriots or strategists or even pacifists. The sources of their evidence varied from different books such as *History of Perak*, online search to stories both fiction and oral.

Regarding development of a critical attitude of abstract generalization and opinion offered by historians on the topic and thus making own judgment on the generalizations, it was found that though there were signs that students were critical with the conclusions or explanations offered by historians, they however were unable to counter the generalizations made or the opinion suggested by historians. In the case of the topic raised, the general agreement among historians was that intervention was inevitable as the tide of imperialism was at its height. Evidence offered by historians was clear. In terms of student learning there was a positive development that students were much more critical of the idea that intervention was inevitable. They felt that if Perak had an able ruler intervention could be avoided. This could be seen in what happened to Malay states such as Terengganu, Kedah and also Siam. They did provide examples and proposed reasons or hypotheses but found difficulty in coming up with reliable sources. This may be due to their lack of exposure to literature on the subject.

For the students to offer alternative answers to the established facts, opinion and judgment about the events they had to master the earlier learning outcome that is develop a critical attitude of abstract generalizations and opinion offered by historians on the topic and thus making own judgment on the generalizations. The students in their deliberations on blogs attempted to provide alternative explanations to the episode studied. However, these explanations were flawed with inconsistencies of accounts and facts. As suggested, the lack of exposure to a wide range of literature might explain why an alternative explanation was not forthcoming.

Data on students’ views of history after following the blended learning mode came from two sources. The first source was from both the amount of information and the nature of information being exchanged through the discussions among themselves and with their teachers both online and during face to face interaction; and the second data source was from the focus group interviews. From the first data source it can be said that the students showed signs of changing their view of history. Before following this lesson through blended learning they thought that history is about facts and fixed episodes, already fixed by a group of experts known as historians. Students should see, understand and believe history as depicted by historians. As they went through blended learning they cooperatively constructed meanings to events and relate in them in the form changes and continuity in relation to time. What has been established and believed as history could still be changed and this made history inconclusive. In the interview many students did say that they had different views of history after having been given the opportunity to say their opinions and to disagree with the assertion and conclusions made earlier. They think the subject was alive as conclusion and assertion could be altered as long as there is credible evidence to support the assertion. One group of students asserted that; “At least now we don’t have to listen to narration of events and accept what and why things happened this or that way. We now can get involved in shaping what and why things happened”.

Another group of students mentioned that: “We enjoyed seeing the subject alive, Now we don’t learn about dead people or events, already past and gone, we think history offers avenue for people to discuss, and to argue without ends…not until they are satisfied with the evidence and the conclusion made”. The idea that history was not fixed but alterable made the student feel that it was different from before in which their involvement was
passive. From the students’ responses it can be perceived that there was a slight shift of belief about history from being simply facts to ideas proposed by people in the area.

The data for the question on whether students felt much more satisfying and meaningful following the lesson in the collaborative and constructivist approach through blended learning than from the face to face approach came from focus group interviews. Most of the groups mentioned that their engagement online in the form of note exchange, raising questions and suggesting answers, explaining and elaborating points of contention, giving support and encouraging fellow students to keep on engaging helped in their face to face class context in that they were much more prepared. By being in constant contact with friends and teachers and having ideas put forward getting support from teachers and friends really they found blended learning helpful and satisfying. One student stated that; “You learn easier because you are not alone. You are always in the company of your friends. They are very helpful”.

8. Discussion

Face to face learning is limited by time. Most school subjects including history require more time for students to engage in the subject together with other students. Since history is based on interpretations of events and episodes it is one subject which needs to constructed with credible and convincing evidence. History as taught in the past due to the constraint of time and the approach adopted did not allow students to deliberate and propose conclusion about events and episodes. Owing to the need to accept facts presented the subject not only caused learning drudgery but also stifled the object of learning history, that is creating the understanding of change and continuity in the context of time-temporal relationship. The introduction of constructivist approach together with the idea of working cooperatively was timely in that history should be a meaningful subject and the students should feel they can contribute in the process of meaning making of events and episodes.

Blended learning offered students more time and in the form of variety of contextual exchange such as forum, discussions, quizzes, short brainstorming and even jokes. Even with this short experiment one can see positive signs emerging that students began to understand that history was about meaning making and they had the roles to play. With their active involvement they would be able to dispute earlier interpretations of a specific historical event and propose a new interpretation. Being able to reinterpret history or even to follow argument why a specific assertion was made was a new experience to the students. Thus history was viewed much more positively as a school subject and its learning was made much more enjoyable.

School learning always puts pressure on students apart from providing very little returns in terms of learning experience to students. Blended learning releases pressure on the students and also on the teaching staff. A variety of learning modes could be explored and this would enable student learning experience to be enriched. As shown in this study the students found the blended learning environment embedded in the constructivist-cooperative framework was helpful and supportive. Much of their potentials were able to be actively demonstrated both through online and face to face interaction.

9. Conclusion

As a case study, this study has limitations in how well its results generalize to other situations. However, these results can still be used as information of how it is possible to pursue teaching particularly history in a much more positive and interesting way. Further research definitely needs to be conducted in a more structured way to ascertain which modality of the blended learning is effective for which subject and which learning situation. As noted in the online transactions there was no guidance provided perhaps with some controls better approach could be gained to guide implementation. With more transactions going online, face to face meeting
becomes more important in terms teachers and students not only to clarify and crystallize evidence, argue for the decision and provide judgment as to the validity of historical interpretation made; but also to seek and pose more problem if any are to be investigated.

References


