

Student Responses to Blended Learning Classes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of Blended Learning classes in which students were exposed to regular and systematic online materials in addition to regular classroom work. The study focuses on student attitudes about doing coursework outside of the classroom (homework, quizzes and listening assignments) as well as student self-assessment of new vocabulary acquisition using surveys (see Appendix) and feedback journals from two classes—American Studies and Jiji Eigo (Current News in English). The results of the study were mixed. While the majority of student responses show positive attitudes about doing online coursework, there are a large number of students who, for various reasons, did not like doing coursework online.

Introduction

Blended Learning, e-Learning, Online Learning, Web 2.0, VLE (Virtual Learning Environment), and ICT (Information and Communications Technology) are just some of the terms being used these days to describe how some recent and not-so-recent applications of current technology are being used in teaching. Describing the similarities and differences of these will be left for another time. Suffice it to say that they all overlap in one way

or another.

The focus of this paper is on Blended Learning. Long before I ever heard of the term Blended Learning I was using computers in some classes and had students working on homepages. I used my own homepage as a point of interaction for students to do homework and view links to websites related to the content of the courses, so I have been moving in this direction for quite some time.

This past year I have been developing online components for most of my face-to-face classes on my Moodle e-Learning site. The term e-Learning refers to computer-enhanced learning where lessons are designed to guide students through information or to help students perform in specific tasks. This could be used for either Blended Learning or strictly Online Learning where there is no face-to-face interaction between instructors and students. Moodle is a course management system (CMS) or virtual learning environment (VLE). It is a free, open source multi-lingual software package designed to help educators create effective online learning communities. You can download and use it on any computer, including web hosts (see <http://moodle.org/>).

My reasons for designing blended courses are to give students an alternative to traditional teacher-centered classes, to have students take more responsibility for their own learning, to get students to study the target language outside of the classroom, and to evaluate the effectiveness of these new technologies.

What is Blended Learning?

The term Blended Learning is not new and originally had nothing to do with online learning. It simply means using two or more methods or approaches to instruction in the classroom. Other terms have been applied

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to this concept, such as 'hybrid learning' and 'combined resource' teaching. The current use of the term Blended Learning refers to integrating face-to-face classroom instruction with online follow-up materials and instruction. Here is a short definition by Heinze and Procter of the University of Salford, Manchester, England.

Blended Learning is learning that is facilitated by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning, and founded on transparent communication amongst all parties involved with a course.

Below is a model of Blended Learning designed by Heinze and Procter. The place where traditional face-to-face instruction (classroom) and pure online instruction (e-learning only) overlap is where Blended Learning occurs. As mentioned previously, Blended Learning can take place in a classroom setting alone without any online component.

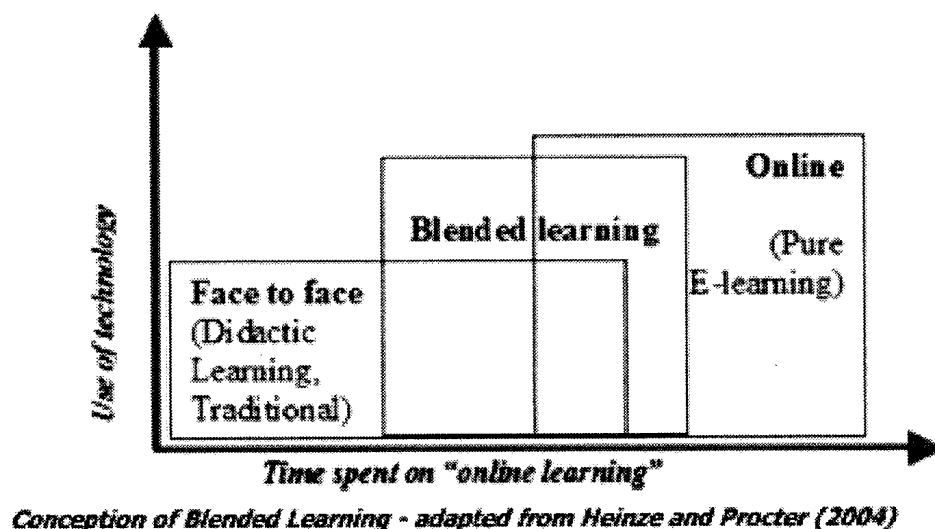


Fig. 1

Procedure

The study consists of survey questions from the two courses, American Studies and Jiji Eigo, and from student feedback journals set up for students to make additional comments. American Studies meets once a week for 90 minutes throughout the year, and Jiji Eigo meets twice a week in the fall semester. Both courses consist of Japanese male and female university students. Sixty 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students responded to two questions in the American Studies survey. In the Jiji Eigo survey, forty-four 3rd and 4th year students responded to question 1, 41 responded to question 2, and 42 responded to question 3. The surveys were conducted online in January, 2008 during the last week of regular classes.

Overview of American Studies

American Studies is a large 90-minute lecture class that meets once a week over the course of one year. I have been developing this course on my Moodle site this past year. The site includes lecture notes, links to websites related to the topics that contain audio and video, imbedded audio and video, maps and other resources, and journals and quizzes.

The quizzes are in a secure window, which means that students have to complete the quiz once it is started. If students open a different window on the computer the quiz will end automatically. The quizzes also have a time limit and begin and end at a predetermined time. The reason for this is to get students to study the material before taking the quizzes. The students can print out the lesson, study it and use it while they take the quizzes. Since the quizzes are timed they need to know where they can find the information they need to answer the questions. They won't have time to complete the quiz if they are using the material for the first time.

Overview of Jiji Eigo

Another course I have been developing is called Jii Eigo. This course meets for 90 minutes twice a week for one semester. In this class we go through two news articles per class (four in one week). The online portion of the course consists of viewing links to online news videos and audio news.

There are two quizzes each week. One quiz includes questions about the four articles covered in class each week and the links to the short online video news clip and the audio file. The other weekly quiz is a vocabulary quiz with words and meanings taken from the articles studied in class. These quizzes have time limits and are taken in a secure window. I usually have all quizzes set to end at a specific time on the day before the next scheduled class. Students are not able to take quizzes after these deadlines.

Results

American Studies

When asked how they feel about doing homework online, 43 of 60 students said that they like doing homework online and 17 said they didn't like doing homework online.

In response to the question "How do you feel about taking quizzes online?" 46 students said they like taking quizzes online, and 16 said they don't like taking quizzes online.

Jiji Eigo

I combined the two questions above in the Jiji Eigo survey. In the first question I asked students how they feel about doing homework *and* quizzes online. Of the 44 students who answered, 28 said they like doing homework

and quizzes online, and 16 said they don't like doing homework and quizzes online.

Students were then asked if they felt their listening ability improved by watching the news videos and listening to the audio portions of the course (41 students answered this question). Thirty-six students felt the news videos helped improve their listening ability and 5 students felt they did not help. For the question about listening to the audio, 38 students said it helped improve their listening ability while 4 students said it did not help.

Among the negative responses there were quite a few in both classes who said in their feedback journals that they had trouble accessing the site with their computer and a few said they didn't have a computer at home, but those students were able to do their homework and quizzes on school computers.

Analysis

The results are different in the two classes when looked at separately. About one-third of the students in American Studies didn't like doing homework (17 out of 60) or quizzes (14 out of 60) online, whereas about one-fourth of students in the Jiji Eigo class didn't like doing homework or quizzes online (16 out of 28).

If the results of these questions are added together it shows that 33 out of 104 students, or slightly more than one-third, don't like doing homework or quizzes online. One thing the survey responses don't show is why these students don't like doing homework or quizzes online. Some of these students wrote in their journals that they experienced technical problems with their computers that were not related to the Moodle site, and a few students said that they do not have a computer at home.

A fundamental question I have to ask myself is, is having one-third of

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a class that doesn't like doing homework or quizzes online acceptable? I would have to say that it is acceptable. Regardless of whether students like or dislike doing outside work on computers, the benefits to having students take responsibility for studying outside of class outweigh any negative feelings students might have about it.

When we look at the results of questions 2 and 3 the Jiji Eigo class that ask about their improvement in listening ability, only 5 out of 41 (question 2) and only 4 out of 42 (question 3) thought their listening ability had not improved. This in itself seems to indicate that there are positive results for students to studying the target language on their own outside of class. That statement may seem self-evident, of course, but from my experience in a traditional classroom I wouldn't be able to get students to do any outside listening even if I assigned it as homework.

Conclusions

The responses to the Jiji Eigo course were positive for the most part and I feel confident in the design and content. One thing I feel I need to do for both courses is to create some interactive exercises, such as crossword puzzles, so that students can go over the content and vocabulary in a non-threatening and less stressful way before going on to take the quizzes. This should boost their confidence, make them feel more positive about online learning, and help produce more long lasting results.

As I reported earlier, a few students did not have computers at home, but that did not present a problem since they could use the computer labs on campus. A few students had problems with their computers that were not related to the Moodle site. I think the only solution to this is that students need to buy their own computers or use the university computer labs. It would be unthinkable that students do have their own PC in any

other developed country in the world. And as for computer problems, students need to be vigilant about protecting their computers from viruses at all times.

It has been my belief that students need to take more responsibility for their own learning and the Blended Learning approach appears to be a good way to get them to do just that. Getting students to study the target language outside of the classroom has always been difficult, but most students are making some effort to study the online homework. Therefore I would have to conclude that the technologies that I have explored so far are useful and effective up to a point, but the true measure of its effectiveness rests with the students themselves.

The most encouraging outcome for me to see was that most students actually felt that there was some improvement in their listening ability over the course of one semester in Jiji Eigo. Progress is often so slow and gradual in an EFL setting and it is difficult for students (and teachers) to see or measure short-term progress. I think that Blended Learning can be a great motivator for student learning if it is designed with students needs in mind.

Appendix

Survey questions and results

American Studies

1. How do you feel about doing homework online?

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| a) I like doing homework online | 43 |
| b) I don't like doing homework online | 17 |

2. How do you feel about taking quizzes online?

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- a) I like doing quizzes and tests online 46
- b) I don't like doing quizzes and tests online 14

Jiji Eigo (Current News in English)

1. How do you feel about doing homework and quizzes online?
 - a) I like doing homework and quizzes online 28
 - b) I don't like doing homework and quizzes online 16

2. Do you think the Video News helped to improve your listening ability?
 - a) Yes, I think it helps improve my listening ability 36
 - b) No, I don't think it helps improve my listening ability 5

3. Do you think the audio news helped improve your listening ability?
 - a) Yes, I think it helps improve my listening ability 38
 - b) No, I don't think it helps improve my listening ability 4

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<http://jite.org/documents/Vol5/v5p235249Heinze156.pdf>

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United States Distance Learning Association

An Instructional Media Selection Guide for Distance Learning, an official publication of the United States Distance Learning Association (<http://www.usdla.org>) that contains a section on blended learning.

Free download available at: http://www.usdla.org/html/resources/2_USDLA_Instructional_Media_Selection_Guide.pdf

Related Links

Moodle:

<http://moodle.org/>

Randall, B., Elangovan, T., and Lim, S.,

<http://www.learnerstogether.net/blended-learning-using-sms/51>

Research on blended learning

Institute for Research on Learning Technologies

“Sloan Consortium”

Wikispaces:

Blended Learning

Wikipedia:

Blended Learning:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blended_learning

e-learning:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E-learning>

ICT:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ICT_%28education%29

Web 2.0:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0:

Virtual Learning Environment:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_learning_environment