Faculty Members' Views towards Blended Learning, the Case of a Najah National University Master Program Teachers in the College of Education and Teacher Preparation

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Abstract

This study investigates faculty members' views towards the blended learning approach they practice in their MA courses. In order to get a clear picture of the issue, 5 experienced faculty members using Moodle in their courses were selected as a sample for the study which used interview as the data collection tool. The researcher composed 5 questions informed by related literature and colleagues' advice to get proper responses from participants in order achieve the study objectives. After analyzing participants' responses, the study found that using blended learning is beneficial and assisted teachers in their performance. Participants' practices were different using this approach, compared to face to face teaching. It also showed that it was worth spending time and effort implementing blended learning as this approach affected learning outcomes positively.

Keywords: Blended learning, Moodle, Technology integration, Teacher preparation

1. Introduction

Nowadays, higher education institutions are striving to find effective teaching/learning approaches and strategies to advance their performance through utilizing new technologies like computers and the internet. Technology integration is a widespread approach among these institutions especially the ones which still consider students' attendance to be compulsory and this integration of technology in their practices is a means for achieving their goals, such as An Najah National University (NNU). The university is doing its best to benefit from the potential of new technologies in all its practices. In the last 5 years, the university has integrated technology through Moodle, the open sources learning management system (LMS). The use of this LMS is spreading among faculty members of all departments to support and enrich their courses by providing students with additional materials, online activities, assignments and other asynchronous communication alongside the face to face sessions. This technology enhances the existing teaching/learning approach through expanding the educational process beyond the traditional one to form, so called, blended learning (BL).

The literature incorporates many definitions of BL. This is due to the different perspectives of writers who tried to define the term. "Finding a single definition, model, or framework for blending learning was impossible." (Picciano, Dziuban and Graham, 2013: p. 4) The following paragraphs provide some views about this learning concept and conclude with the common denominators among these views.

Garrison and Vaughan, (2008) described BL as, "a coherent design approach that openly assesses and integrates the strengths of face to face and online learning to address worthwhile educational goals." (p. x) In their definition of the term, Oliver and Trigwell, (2005) incorporated traditional practices occurring within the traditional classroom and the technological tools offered by the web. "The integrated combination of traditional learning with web based on-line approaches." (p. 17) Driscoll, as cited in Oliver and Tregwell, (2005), identifies four different 'concepts' denoted by the BL term:

1. Combining or mixing web-based technology to accomplish an educational goal;
2. Combining pedagogical approaches (e.g. constructivism, behaviorism, cognitivism) to produce an optimal learning outcome with or without instructional technology;
3. Combining any form of instructional technology with face-to-face instructor-led training; and
4. Combining instructional technology with actual job tasks. (pp. 17-18)

Singh and Reed (2001), defined BL as the learning which "focuses on optimizing achievement of learning objectives by applying the "right" learning technologies to match the "right" personal learning style to transfer the "right" skills to the "right" person at the "right" time." (p.2). They introduced several blending dimensions i.e. blending offline and online learning, blending self-paced and live, collaborative learning, blending structured and unstructured learning, and blending custom content with off-the-shelf content.

In spite of these different views about BL, one can find common denominators among the definitions; a) they combine multiple delivery approaches, b) they rely on the integration of technology as a part of the delivery process, c) the delivery is informed by a sound pedagogy, d) they promote effective learning, and e) the learning approach is led by the teacher. Such denominators facilitate the thoughts brought by constructivism, the learning theory which appreciates learner centered approaches. "Constructivist instruction asks learners to use their knowledge to solve problems that are meaningful and realistically complex... to apply their knowledge and to take ownership of their learning." (Tam, 2000) In addition, this theory calls for working interactively and collaboratively. "The constructivist perspective supports that learners learn through interaction with others. Learners work together as peers, applying their combined knowledge to the solution of the problem." (Tam, 2000) Concurrent with the recognition of the potentials of new technological tools like the internet and the World Wide Web, and utilizing state of the art learning theory principles like constructivism, higher education institutions are striving to provide quality education. Both learner satisfaction and learning outcomes are the dominant concerns for these institutions. BL could be one of the approaches that might overcome such concerns as this, blending with new technology has proved its success in all life sectors. "The interest in BL can also be attributed to the advances and proliferation of communications technology in most segments of society - advances that have not seen the same degree of uptake in the higher education classroom." (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: p. 4)

The potentiality of utilizing a BL approach is worth investigating. This potentiality was introduced by Osguthorpe and Graham (2003), who identified six reasons why one might chose to design or use a BL system: " (1) pedagogical richness, (2) access to knowledge, (3) social interaction, (4) personal agency, (5) cost effectiveness, and (6) ease of revision." (cited in Bonk and Graham, 2012) So, learning displays great differences from the traditional learning approach i.e. face to face, in regards to the students' interests, expectations and needs, and their instructors' performance and expectations. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to investigate BL in the views of the faculty members who are involved in teaching MA students in the College of Education and Teacher Preparation (CETP) at NNU.

2. Rationale and Aim of the Study

In Palestine, quality education in higher education institutions is the primary concern of these institutions' decision makers. The issue of integrating new technologies into instruction practices has grown in importance through official meetings, workshops, conferences and other activities. However, at NNU, this issue did not receive sufficient consideration especially in terms of studies which dealt with this integration.

The aim of this study is to determine the views of faculty members of MA courses in CETP at NNU on their practices of integrating technology through blended learning. It was expected that the study might help to encourage other faculty members to integrate technology in their practices when listening to the voices of their practitioner colleagues talking about the technology potentials in the teaching/learning process.

3. Study Method

In order to determine the views of faculty members of BL, a qualitative method was used. Qualitative study provides the opportunity to explore, not only the participants' actions, but their perceptions of the search process consistent with Dervin's view of information seeking as a process of sense making where a person finds meaning which fits in with his previous knowledge thus forming a personal point of view. (George, et al. 2006) A qualitative research approach is useful when the purpose is to explore an area of interest, and when the aim is to improve the understanding of phenomena. (Svensson, Gorschek and Regnell, 2009) The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of using a BL approach in NNU. For this, an interview method with a selected sample of faculty members (#5) was used as a data collection instrument. Five semi-structured questions informed by related literature were designed. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed thematically.

3.1 Participants

In this study, the researcher intended to obtain a clear picture about utilizing BL in the teaching/learning process at NNU. Faculty members who were active in using Moodle in their teaching practices represented a typical sample, in order to get that picture. For this, a typical case sampling method (Kvale, 1996; Holloway and Wheeler, 1996) was implemented. The method enabled the researcher to choose a sample that would be typical, motivated, cooperative and normal or average for the BL approach. So, the participants were selected for a certain purpose which was investigating this approach through providing coherent accounts and concise and precise answers.

The sample for this study was drawn from the Master Program faculty members at CETP at ANN. The main goal was to select a sample of faculty members that represented the three programs studied at CETP who were experienced in using Moodle. The sample size was 5 faculty members, as informed by the work of Francis, et al. "In studies that use semi-structured interviews that are analyzed using content analysis, sample size is often justified on the basis of interviewing participants until "data saturation" is reached." (2010)

3.2 Data Collection and Procedure

The researcher used a qualitative study approach with semi-structured in-depth interviews. According to Becker, both long-term involvement and intensive interviews enable you to collect "rich" data, which is data that are detailed and varied enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on (cited in Maxwell, 1998). This interview design with a written script of the interviewees' responses enabled the researcher to explore study question topics broadly and reach the intended study goals through comparing responses after analyzing them. For this, five semi-structured interview questions were prepared to obtain the participants' views on the BL approach. The questions were informed by related literature and colleagues' views.

The analysis of participants' responses was informed by grounded theory techniques in which a thematic analysis of the qualitative data was conducted to provide insight into the study's guiding question. So, the researcher categorized these responses into five categories, i.e. difference in teaching approaches, role of Moodle in the teaching/learning process, dealing with learners' differences through technology, worthiness of using Moodle and the role of Moodle in strengthening the party's relationships.

The interview questions are as follows;

1. Do you find any difference between the courses you teach using Moodle and the ones without Moodle?
2. Do you think that using Moodle at NNU advances the teaching/learning process?
3. Do you think that the integration of technology assisted you in dealing with learners' differences better than in the traditional way?
4. Do you think that it is worth spending more time and effort using Moodle facilities?
5. To what extent do you think using Moodle strengthens the relations among you and your students?

4. Data Analysis

The following is the analysis of the participants' answers. In order to achieve the aim of the study which is investigating faculty members' perspectives on BL through using Moodle, the recordings of the respondents were transcribed as precisely as possible. The answers to each question were analyzed to obtain in-depth and precise views. Then these answers were categorized thematically to easily understand the whole picture of these perspectives.

It is worth saying that the interviews were not 'one shot' in nature. The researcher went back and forth in asking his colleagues whenever he found it necessary for the purpose of the study topic, or when an interviewee highlighted an important issue. The availability of these colleagues in the same department made this possible.

Q1: Do you find any difference between the courses you teach using BL through Moodle and the ones without Moodle?

All faculty members stated that there was a difference in their practices when using Moodle. Three of them said that it was difficult for them to track their students learning in the same way as direct observation in the face to face mode. The other two faculty members attributed this difficulty to the large number of students. For instance, a teacher said, '…when in the class you can get sufficient feedback of students' progress through asking students directly or even through eye contact, while in the case of Moodle you have to follow up them individually.'

Another teacher said, '…sometimes the interaction occurs in class is crucial for both the teacher and her students. For instance, Socratic dialogue approach is needed when discussing a certain concept or idea. This of course is hardly occurred through Moodle without planning for it.' In spite of this teacher's view, one of his colleagues mentioned the importance of students' interaction through Moodle because of some social barriers that hinder female/male face to face interaction in the Arab context. When asking other participants about this social issue, the researcher found an agreement with this participant's viewpoint. Faculty members also agreed that in the case of using Moodle, students controlled the discussion which is planned and arranged by the teacher while in the class discussion the teacher controlled it and in most cases it was unstructured and a few students were dominant in the discussion.

For students' learning, there was an agreement among faculty members that it depends heavily on the students themselves in both modes i.e. face to face and using Moodle. This agreement was represented by one of the faculty members who said, '...no matter of the mode itself, if a student was happy with the topic discussed and matched her interest, she became motivated to work on it; read its material, do its tasks and participate in discussions about it.'

Another agreement among participating faculty members was highlighted during the interview, which was the supremacy of using Moodle over face to face teaching. In that good preparation and planning of the materials, tasks, discussion sessions and following up students learning were all possible. 'You feel like you have time to think carefully when designing your course', one of the faculty members said.

Q2: Do you think that using BL through Moodle at NNU advances the teaching/learning process?

All the faculty members agreed that using BL through Moodle enhances the teaching and learning process in many ways, for example; more resources could be added to the course, different activities could be worked on and new types of interaction are possible. The faculty members mentioned the uploading of different types of documents as supplementary resources to the course textbooks like PDF, pptx. and doc. files. Four faculty members mentioned adding YouTube videos to their course content. Three faculty members expressed their satisfaction with such additional materials as they give the students a chance to have a bigger idea of their courses' topics in advance. 'I realized that, in some cases, some topics were used to be discussed thoroughly in the class because some students went through the related online materials,' a teacher said. Another teacher also said that, '...the variety of available online materials enabled students to enhance their understanding of courses' topics through discussions and ideas exchange in the class'.

The benefits of presenting more course materials to students resulted in making students' achievements better. This, according to three faculty members, depended heavily on teachers' direction and facilitation of the students' learning during the course. One of these faculty members said, '...the teacher should clearly direct her students to each topic's related material in advance in order to make it easy for them to deal with the whole uploaded materials. While another teacher mentioned that Moodle enabled him to divide his courses into weeks. And he used to allow his students to deal with these weeks and their materials individually while hiding other course weeks.

In answering this question one teacher mentioned that the time allowed for students to practice some activities in face to face sessions was very limited compared to that when using Moodle. This, according to this teacher, advanced students' achievements to a higher level. Another teacher mentioned an important point regarding using Moodle which was allowing both the teacher and her students' professional development, '... the teacher tried different learning strategies and approaches and became professional in choosing the ones which suits her teaching context, while students could achieve the intended goals through dealing with different learning materials not only the course textbook'. Other participating faculty members agreed with this, as Moodle available tools could assist them in designing different, meaningful engagement tasks and activities.

Q3. Do you think that using BL through Moodle assisted you in dealing with learners' differences better than in the traditional way?

There was an agreement among faculty members that Moodle's activities benefited different types of learners. They agreed that the variety of learning resources uploaded by the teacher made it possible for each student to choose what she wanted in order to fulfill her needs. 'Not all students went through introductory documents or documents dealt with main concepts for instance, only those students who found it necessary for them to revise or recall basic things or introductory material dealt with such documents,' said one respondent.

Learners' differences, according to two faculty members, were easier to deal with in face to face sessions than through Moodle in the case of small classes. While in large classes, Moodle discussion facilities easily enabled the teacher to find out the weaknesses some students have in their participation. One of those two faculty members said that, '...when following up students' discussion on a topic, I used to pick up certain misconceptions or false ideas and the next face to face meeting I used to discuss these ideas or I used to upload some resources asking students to go through.'

According to a teacher who participated in this study, learners' differences could be traced through assignments in which students have to participate. Their participation showed the level of knowledge and skills these students have, 'as each student had to post her participation, their posts are varied in terms of the depth and understanding of the topic.' The teacher then decided what action should be taken accordingly, like adding more activities or providing students with remedial work. This point from this teacher was reiterated by other participants whose comments were almost the same but the problem of large classes was sometimes the barrier.

Again the issue of female/male participation in face to face classes was a concern of the participants. They all agreed that this social issue was not recognized in the case of online sessions.

Q4. Do you think that it is worth spending more time and effort using BL through Moodle facilities?

Although all the participating faculty members agreed that using Moodle required more time and effort from the teacher's side, they admitted that the use was worth it. This is because, according to three faculty members, they were able to produce well arranged, designed and planned resources. Such work, according to one teacher, contributed to the professional development of the teacher. When asking this participant how it contributed, he said; '...when thinking of designing a course using Moodle, you had to mind map every stuff in both face to face and online sessions depending on the course intended outcomes. This allowed you to think and rethink of what was to be done in advance. And even when the course is over you started judging on what worked and on what didn't work.' This view was conveyed to other participants who approximately agreed with their colleague's claim. Another teacher added, '...time and effort spent on using Moodle in my courses were decreased by time. In that the teacher, when teaching the same course in another semester, didn't have to spend the same time and effort.' The things she had to do were to refine, add to, and change the existing resources which didn't take that much time. Another teacher mentioned that his 'self satisfaction' feeling when seeing his students' progress and interaction made him happy to spend this "extra time" using Moodle.

In spite of the above positive answers regarding using Moodle, participants showed that it was not all the time satisfactory for them especially in the case of large classes. So they preferred if the class size didn't exceed forty students in order to better deal with the situation.

Q5. To what extent do you think using BL through Moodle strengthens the relations among you and your students?

In answering this question, the faculty members stated that using BL through Moodle didn't have a clear effect on student-teacher relations, or among students, with different justifications. These justifications could be categorized into the following;

- Students who were self motivated towards using technology were greater contributors to Moodle resources. They didn't only do the assigned works but they might start discussions on new topics or extended the dialogues. They even might raise individual discussions with their faculty members. This in turn could have a positive effect on the relations between a faculty member and her students. While other students' contributions were at minimal levels. So, in this case, the effect is limited comparatively.
- The teacher's role was considerable in strengthening these relations. This meant, according to the participating faculty members, if a faculty member were to force her students to participate in a discussion or in an interactive activity, students would become aware of the importance of contributing. By this, students might extend their contributions to the class were they could ask, listen and exchange their ideas with their classmates and the teacher.
- The nature of topics to be discussed, the type of interactive activities assigned to students, the method and the tool chosen by the teacher to be implemented, all encouraged or discouraged students' contributions.

5. *Discussion and Conclusion*

As shown in the data analysis section above, the participating faculty members agreed that BL was effective and beneficial. The following table summarizes the themes of the study questions and participants' answers;

Theme 1	
Face to face vs. BL	Different practices

	Face to face	BL
	• Tracking students' learning through direct observation • Many ways to get feedback from students • Interaction is possible • Interaction is hindered by social barriers • Discussion is controlled by the teacher • Few students participate in discussion • Good preparation and planning is essential	• Difficult to track students' learning • The only way to get feedback from students is to read their posts • Interaction needs planning • Social barriers could be overcome while interacting • Students run and control the discussion • All students could participate in discussion • Good preparation and planning is a norm

Theme 2	
Role of BL in the teaching/learning process	BL enhances the teaching learning process, unanimous agreement; • Additional resources • Different activities could be designed • More supplementary resources could be added but more arrangement and planning was needed BL could help faculty members in terms of professional development

Theme 3	
Role of BL in dealing with learners' differences	BL benefited different types of learners because of; • The availability of different types and levels of resources • Ease of following up students' weaknesses in large classes • The chance for females to participate but in the case of small classes, dealing with learner differences might be more beneficial

Theme 4	
Time and effort when teaching through BL	BL required more time and effort, but it was worth that as; • BL affected participants' practices positively • BL contributed to participants' professional development • The input of time and effort is only required once or was decreased in repeated courses but again there was the problem of large classes which prevented the feeling of self satisfaction

Theme 5	
The role of BL in terms of teacher-student relations	There were no significant indications of the effect of BL on teacher- student relations or those among students. Factors that might strengthen such relations according to the participants could be; • Self motivation towards using technology • The teacher's role • The nature of topics

As shown in the table above, participating teachers showed there are some advantages of face to face over BL, such as direct observation and the domination of a limited number of students in discussion. For female students, it was the social barrier that hindered them from participating.

This could be overcome through using technology tools, "Internet tools such as e-mail, chat groups and discussion groups in the hands of professionally informed minds have the inherent possibility (among others) to enable learners to work collaboratively across distributed learning modes, especially in the Arab context where it is hard for female learners to participate actively when a male is the teacher." (Shaqour, 2003; p 29)

There was agreement among the participating teachers about the effectiveness of BL in enhancing the teaching and learning process by providing additional resources, more activities and supplementary resources. This effectiveness was confirmed by Singh (2003) who said, "... research from institutions... has given us valuable insight into some of the mechanisms by which blended learning is better than both traditional methods and individual forms of e-learning technology alone. This research gives us confidence that blending not only offers us the ability to be more efficient in delivering learning, but more effective." In spite of this agreement, respondents indicated that this enhancement couldn't be reached without good preparation and planning.

It was clear from participants' views that dealing with learners' differences depended heavily on the number of students enrolled in the course. In the case of BL, it was difficult to deal with these differences in large classes because teachers had to follow up every student's post or answer and this required more time and effort from these teachers. "Instructors were overloaded by the large number of students whose obligatory participation had to be answered in online discussions... teaching blended courses required more time to supervise students' activities and provide feedback." (Alebaikan and Troudi, 2010) Participants also showed that face to face meetings could help in recognizing these differences easily even through facial expressions.

Lastly, the interviews revealed no significant indications of the effect of BL on teacher-student relations or relations among students.   Self motivation towards using technology, the teacher's role and the nature of topics were factors that might strengthen such relations according participants. "This positive attitude is due to the teachers' employment of different methods and materials, and real life situations... the students liked participating in the material relevant to the topics they were dealing with in their textbooks, and also they enjoyed talking about actual settings. These real life situations motivated them to interestedly participate in these activities." (Adas and Abu Shmais, 2011)

6. Future Study and Limitations

The results of this study contribute to our understanding of the teachers' views about BL, which could serve as a basis for developing course of action guidelines for NNU's teachers to cope with BL. This study added several helpful findings to the educational knowledge base regarding how experienced faculty members deal with BL to better address their professional development and learning outcomes.

Furthermore, this study sought to address the issues of BL teachers' practices vs. their practices in face to face mode that leads to effectiveness in today's higher education practices.

Although this study revealed several meaningful findings, these findings are limited to the blended learning approach occurring in CETP settings. To further generalize these findings, future studies involving other teachers in other colleges and programs are strongly recommended.

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