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IDEA SHARING:
IMPLEMENTING BLENDED LEARNING WITH GRADUATE
STUDENTS USING THE MOODLE PLATFORM

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Introduction

A few years ago, I heard about blended learning and Moodle from a colleague. He talked about its benefits and how the online courses have helped him and his students in their teaching and learning. This talk sparked the idea of using Moodle to help my students learn better. However, with my regular hectic schedule, I kept making excuses to postpone doing what I thought could be beneficial for my students.

Early last year, a friend asked me to read his draft of a research paper. Blended learning was the main focus of his study. The successful story of his experimental study reminded and encouraged me of the idea of implementing blended learning in a course I teach at Burapha University. A few days later, I started to gather information by browsing the Internet and visiting libraries.

A few months before the first semester of 2011, I talked to a staff member of the Computer Center at the university and found out that Moodle was installed on the university's web server. I was informed that they would support and help lecturers

of the university with their online courses. It was such good news to me because I neither had to find a reliable Moodle web-hosting service by myself nor conduct an online course totally on my own. Afterward, I sought permission for an augmented online course from the director of the program. During the first semester of 2011, the blended learning Research Designs course for international graduate students in the Faculty of Education at Burapha University was begun.

What is Blended Learning?

Although there is no single agreed-upon definition of blended learning, Graham (2006) has provided one that is comprehensible and often cited. According to him, blended learning refers to learning systems that combine “face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction” (Graham, 2006, p.7). This combined instruction provides greater benefit than instruction that is delivered either entirely face-to-face or entirely online (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

According to Graham (2006), blended learning has four levels: the activity level, course level, program level, and institutional level. At the activity-level blending, face-to-face and online activities are incorporated and delivered synchronously. At the course levels, distinct face-to-face and online activities are delivered either synchronously or asynchronously. At the program-level and institutional-level blending, a mix between face-to-face courses and online courses are chosen by the program or the organization.

Based on the primary purpose of the blends, Graham (2006) groups the blends into three general categories: enabling blends, enhancing blends, and transforming blends. He explains that enabling blends focus on the issues of access and convenience. The blends intend to provide the same learning opportunities and experiences but through a different modality.

The enhancing blends allow incremental changes to the teaching and learning. For instance, in a face-to-face learning environment, additional teaching materials may be included online. Lastly, transforming blends allow a radical transformation of the pedagogy; for example, a model change from where learners just receive information from instructors to where learners actively construct knowledge through dynamic interactions.

What is Moodle?

Moodle is an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment. It is an e-learning software platform that provides a learning management system to help a user manage an online course. Moodle provides open source software with a user-friendly interface and it has numerous useful features. Users can use it as a platform to conduct a fully-online course, or simply to augment a face-to-face course. Users can also select specific activity modules such as Wikis, forums, and databases to build collaborative learning communities. Alternatively, they can use Moodle as a way to deliver course contents to students and to assess their learning using assignments or quizzes (Moodle, 2012). The modules that were used to manage my first online course included student enrollment, content delivery, file downloads, assignment submissions, online quiz and grading, discussion forums, and monitoring students' participation.

The face-to-face class

Research Designs is a course in the Master of Education program in teaching English as a second language in the Faculty of Education, Burapha University. During the first semester of academic year 2011, nineteen students registered for this course. Most of them were language teachers who lived in the eastern

provinces of Thailand. The length of the course was four months and the class met twice a month. The duration for each meeting was six hours -- three hours in the morning and three more hours in the afternoon. There was a gap of two weeks between each class meeting. Effective utilization of those time gaps would be beneficial to the teaching and learning of this course; therefore, a plan to implement an online course to augment the face-to-face class, or blended learning, was conceived.

The online course

The Research Designs course was the first online and blended course of this program. It was designed to be a supporting course for the face-to-face class. The course-level blending with enhancing blends was selected to be this course's blended learning system. In a face-to-face learning environment, additional materials and activities were delivered online. Students chose voluntarily to participate in any of the online activities at a convenient time. The course consisted of five main units. Each main unit had three to five lessons. The first unit was available to students soon after the second face-to-face class and the second online unit was available after the third face-to-face class. The rest continued in a similar way. Each unit consisted of lessons, additional reading materials, and exercises. In addition, the Webboard feature was provided throughout the online course.

The online lessons provided important contents from the face-to-face classes. Some of the graphics, tables, and figures included in the online lessons were similar to those of the face-to-face class. In addition to the read-online materials, download-to-read materials were also provided. These files were research articles in PDF format and some of them were used in addition to the face-to-face class. There were exercises at the end of each unit. Students had to complete the exercises of each unit before

the next unit started and only two attempts were allowed for each exercise. By assigning a timeline for accessing the exercise, I expected that the students would learn and move forward to next unit together at about the same pace.

Results and responses

The online Research Designs course was not compulsory. However, all 19 students of the face-to-face course enrolled in the online course. Statistics showed that there were three students who were more enthusiastic than others; they did the online activities and exercises soon after I had put them online. The total amount of their participation was the highest among the other students. All three of them were frequent Internet users. They also mentioned that their first online course was a favorable experience. All of them performed very well in both the online and face-to-face class.

Statistically, two students did not actively participate. One of them accessed the online course just twice. She explained that her hectic teaching schedule and congenital disease were the obstructions. Her grade for the face-to-face course was average. Another student who accessed the online course only three times mentioned that poor Internet connectivity caused him to give up. However, his grade for face-to-face class was relatively good. The rest were able to complete most of the tasks and activities of the online course and most of them performed at an average level, both in the face-to-face class and online course. The Webboard for the online course was seldom used. Only eight topics were posted and all of them had just one to three replies.

What I have learned and some ideas for getting started

My first experience using Moodle was relatively favorable. I learned that it can be useful in many ways. The following are a few of them. First, it helped the students that were absent from

the face-to-face class to stay on track and to not fall behind. Though attendance of the face-to-face class was obligatory, sickness or other unavoidable situations happened. Those students reviewed the contents and did the exercises for the classes they missed online and posted their questions on the Webboard.

Secondly, it allowed students to choose the time that they wanted to access the online course by themselves. Unlike the traditional face-to-face class, students chose to study online at a convenient and available amount of time at their own pace.

Thirdly, it helped me to better utilize the time of the face-to-face class. Since some of the materials and exercises were delivered online, I had extra time in the face-to-face class to emphasize some other important topics.

Lastly, I enjoyed exploring the variety features of Moodle. Each module provided a range of options. For example, in creating exercises for each lesson, the questions were not limited to just the multiple choice type. I added a variety of different types of questions such as true/false, short answers, and matching. Moodle also helped me to monitor students' revision behavior. The student participation features enabled me to conveniently track the online activities of each student at any stage of the online course.

There were also some drawbacks and limitations in implementing Moodle. First, although Moodle is freeware, it is almost impossible for common users or non-IT persons to download and install the platform, and run a quality Learning Management System on their own. Secondly, Moodle displays inconsistently across different web browsers; namely, Internet Explorer, Firefox, Opera, Google Chrome, and Safari. If you have to access the online course on a different browser, you might need some time to adjust yourself to the different displays. Finally, the online course to a certain extent depends on the

quality of the Internet. Throughout the online research designs course, my students and I occasionally experienced slow Internet connections. There was a time when the web hosting service was down and we were not able to access the course for a few days.

Here are some ideas for those who intend to develop an online course for the first time.

1. Allow sufficient time to learn how to use Moodle. If you are new to Moodle, mastering it to administer an online course can be a challenge. There is nearly an infinite number of ways to use Moodle. You should set aside time to learn the modules you need. Posting course contents, creating quizzes and grading, and creating discussion forums are a few examples of basic features that you might need to learn first.

2. Use online resources. The Internet resources for Moodle are very useful. A huge amount of information about Moodle is available online and Moodle's web page (<http://moodle.org>) is a good place to start.

3. Choose the platform that your organization supports. Although Moodle is widely used, your institution might support a different platform. With the support provided by the IT staff of your organization, your implementation of an online course will certainly be smoother than depending totally on your own.

4. Start with a few essential modules. It is impossible to use all of the Moodle features; there are far too many. You might start with exploring some tentative modules and select a few necessary features for your first online course.

5. Join a user community. The online community of Moodle users is very active and supportive. Joining some of its discussion forums will be very beneficial and helpful, especially when you are new to Moodle.

What's next?

A few changes have been planned for my next online course. Firstly, students will be allowed to access all online content from the beginning of the course. Students who are inevitably not available to participate either in the online course or the face-to-face class in the weeks that follow the beginning of the class, or those that learn at a faster pace, can work ahead. Secondly, animated Web content will be installed. With the help of the e-learning team of the Computer Center at Burapha University, e-learning courseware with animation and sound has been developed for the upcoming online course. The purpose is not only to capture the students' interests but also to make the lessons easier to understand. Thirdly, open-ended-question exercises and reflective journals will be included in the augmented course. Students do not have to print out their written tasks or submit their assignments in the face-to-face class. These can be submitted by using Moodle's drop box. Finally, I will encourage my students to participate more in the Webboard. Many of my students are teachers with long teaching experience, and their ideas, comments, or suggestions can be valuable for the rest of the class. Additionally, some scores will be given as an incentive to students who post interesting questions or comments.

The aforementioned changes are the planned strategies in attempting to encourage my prospective students to be more active in engaging in the online activities of my future blended learning course.

The Author

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