

BENEFITS OF USING BLENDED LEARNING IN “PERFORMER” EDUCATION MASTER PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Problem statement:

In our education master program “Teacher training for early childhood and small age education” from “PERFORMER” Project, we have operated with the blended learning (BL) strategy, aimed to support student-centered learning.

Purpose of study:

The establishment of the qualitative and quantitative benefits of using blended learning strategy in our master study program.

Methods:

Interactive methods and Virtual Learning Environments tools were used in teaching, learning and assessment process. The methods of collecting (observation, survey, training portfolio analysis, and test), organizing, processing and presenting quantitative and qualitative data were used, as well as for the experimental part.

Findings and results:

In the master study program “Teacher training for early childhood and small age education”, BL strategy was explored both in the teaching and learning process, and in ongoing and final evaluation. By using this strategy, the professor caused the student to become responsible and participator in the gathering of data, construction of information's meanings, forming knowledge, problem solving and their reframing, through documentation, exploration and research, and applying what they gained in new different contexts. In this way, professors worked directly and closely with individual students and small groups (face-to-face or e-learning) by harnessing the power of interactive learning and precision of technology, for the highest purpose: student-centered learning. The quantitative results of the assessment showed that 32% of the students have obtained excellent grade, 52% optimum and 16% good, from the experimental group, compared to the results of the students from control group: 9 % excellent, 41% optimum, 28% good and 22% satisfactory.

Conclusion and recommendations:

From the qualitative and quantitative point of view, the impact of BL was shown in the efficiency of learning with this method as well as in the satisfaction of the students and in the certainties of the professors. Hence the recommendation is to persevere in perfecting this interactive learning strategy, which promotes student-centered learning.

KEYWORDS: blended learning, e-learning, face-to-face learning, interactive methods, student-centered learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a result of two years of applying blended learning (BL) strategy in the master study program “Teacher training for early childhood and small age education” under the project „Perspectives of a Higher Quality Level of the Training of Specialists for Early Education and Primary Schooling” (PERFORMER). In fact, this project has proposed a joint-master study program between „Transilvania” University of Braşov as coordinator, and “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia, “Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad as partners, and with an international body’s expertise for curriculum development, of ISPEF (Istituto di Scienze Psicologiche della Educatione e della Formazione) Roma, Italia.

The main goal of this master study program was, is, and will be, to form and develop competences for the teachers who work in the field of early education and primary schooling. But these competences are needed to be formed and developed in a student-centered learning way.

2. MAIN TEXT

In order to meet the requirements of contemporary educational world which promotes student-centered learning, inverting the traditional teacher-centred understanding of the learning process and putting the students at the centre of the learning process, we proceeded to allow the students to actively participate in discovery of the learning processes from an autonomous viewpoint.

Because learning can be seen as a form of personal growth, the students from master study program were encouraged to use self-regulation practices in order to gain learning experiences applied in real life and constructing a new understanding of the content being learned in a proactive way. For that reason, we can state that learning has been conducted in a sense of constructivism theory, that the student have had the full control of his/her learning. [1]

The training and developing of the competencies require a different type of learning, a cognitive-constructivist one. Learning by reception and/or repetitive exercise is not enough. It requires active participation of the student in the construction and use of skills; he selects, combines and applies different knowledge, skills, attitudes, etc. in order to achieve authentic tasks and in different contexts. Clearly, competence is integral to student-centered learning. [2]

Student-centred learning should be integrated into the curriculum because it:

- Strengthens student motivation
- Promotes peer communication

- Reduces disruptive behaviour
- Builds student-professor relationships
- Promotes discovery/active learning
- Responsibility for one's own learning

In our didactical activities we followed those concepts, applying them into specific academic context, for forming and developing students competencies in teaching-learning-evaluation situations and in the idea of student-centered learning samples, for preparing them in another kind of didactical communication which conduces to the professional and social engagement.

On the other hand, in curriculum's implementation we have operated with the interactive training strategies aimed challenge and support active learning in which the student acts on the information for transforming it into a new, personal, and useful gain. Using these strategies, we caused the student to become responsible and participator in the construction of information's meanings, problem solving through exploration and research and applying what they gained in new different contexts.

Blended learning (BL) seems to offer the largest perspective for those requirements and accomplishes what education technology has long promised, but rarely delivered: greater student learning and improved teaching efficiency.

BL works because it combines two things in a way that makes each one better than they are on their own: professors' talent and technology tools. BL allows professors to do what they do best – work directly and closely with individual students and small groups – by harnessing the adaptive power and precision of technology.

The best blended learning approaches use technology to:

- ✓ help each student to master the content and skills they need,
- ✓ allow professors to get the most out of their planning and instructional time, and
- ✓ streamline operations with costs similar to – or less than – traditional schooling.

Nowadays, we, the professors, are provoked and invited to learn more about integrating technology for blended learning courses in higher education, knowing that the students are not so interested in learning but they have a huge attraction for technology, and so we will be better able to motivate them.

The power is in a Blended Learning equation:

$$\textit{Face-to-Face} + \textit{Synchronous Conversations} + \textit{Asynchronous Interactions} = \textit{Strong Online Learning Environment}$$

And if distance learning is to have the level of quality that we dream for, we, as educators, need to proactively be a part of the Blended Learning that is inevitably coming our way. It's not a question of „if”; it's a question of „how”.

For showing *how* Blended Learning is interactive strategy, I can confess [3, 4] that it has been explored in our educational master program “Teacher training for early childhood and small age education”, concrete, in the subjects such as: “Advanced studies of education in community”, „Educational design in relation of the educational institution with the community”, “Docimology - comparative perspectives” and „Quality management and assessment in an educational organization”. In these subjects BL strategy was promoted both, in the teaching and learning process, and ongoing (formative) and final (summative) evaluation.

As the curriculum for the entire master study program was designed by the algorithm:

- 30% courses and seminars, carried out in f2f modality (by interactive methods),
- 30% e-learning (by LMS),
- 20% documentaries from suggested bibliography and webography,
- 20% internship in kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools.

it is obvious that for the 4 subjects mentioned it was identical in structure.

From this description we deduce that face-to-face activities and virtual learning activities (e-learning) covers more or less equally the full curriculum of the whole master degree program.

Into the face-to-face activities we have successfully used interactive methods such as:

- Cooperative learning;
- Collaborative learning;
- Problem solving and reframing;
- Heuristic approach;
- Problematization;
- Algorithmization;
- Modeling;
- Brainstorming;
- Role play;
- Graphic organizer;
- Map-mind, etc.

The e-learning activities have consisted of:

- Virtual activities which took place by Learning Management System of our University (Moodle Platform) and newer, thanks of the platform of the project Performer. These asynchronous and synchronous ways consisted of:
 - Asynchronous – posting the Syllabus, the Student’s Guide, course support, PowerPoint presentations, requirements for the students, answer files of the students and e-portfolio of the students;
 - Synchronous – chat, videoconferencing (on Skype) for enlightening discussions, so that students understand and practice the content in their own manner, personalized, but

guided by the professor; online tests to check the student's understanding of the content.

- Virtual activities involving emails with attachments, or collaborative writing of “the homework” under the Google Docs or Drive.

Both types of learning activities - face-to-face and e-learning - in other words blended learning, have caused training of the students to another standard and provoked them to another attitude towards himself/herself, the others and generally towards learning.

Because we have had enrolled two kinds of students into this master study program, some within the Performer project, and others, ordinary students, we have been able to do a comparative study concerning the impact of using or not using BL strategy.

Thus, the experimental group, on which was applied BL strategy, was composed of the 25 students belonging to the Performer project, and another 25 students who were admitted at the master but not on eligible places in the project, as control group, benefited for interactive learning on face-to-face learning activities

We applied for this research, in establishing the effects of using BL, on one side the interactive methods and Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) [5], for sustaining academic activities, and on the other hand, the methods of collecting (observation, survey, training portfolio analysis, and test), organizing, processing and presenting quantitative and qualitative data for the experimental part.

In terms of qualitative assessment, using as instruments of records the observation sheets and portfolios of student training (e-portfolio for experimental group and printed portfolio for control group) we have found:

- For the experimental group – much more responsibility for the learning requirements, a positive attitude towards work load, more contribution to the discussion, debates or problem solving in "our agora (or e-agora)", a lot of enthusiasm, more willingness to reflect put questions and find constructive solutions, being attracted into the practical application “all the acquisition” made into the learning process, into the school or kindergartner.
- For control group - not so high motivation for the attendance in the learning activities (always saying that they work...), less positive attitude for the work load, more difficult communication, not so pronounced desire to apply what they learned into application's schools or kindergartens

In terms of quantitative assessment using portfolios and final test, for all four subjects: “Advanced studies of education in community”, „Educational design in relation of the educational institution with the community”,

“Docimology - comparative perspectives” and „Quality management and assessment in an educational organization”, the results was:

- For the experimental group - 32% of the students have obtained excellent (10) grade, 52% optimum (8, 9) and 16% good (7).
- For the control group - 9 % excellent (10) grade, 41% optimum (8, 9), 28% good (7) and 22% satisfactory (5, 6).

3. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the students involved in this study, from qualitative and quantitative point of view, lead to the conclusion that the benefits of the BL strategy, used into the curriculum of master study program, are relevant for the efficiency of learning, as well as in the satisfaction of the students and in the certainties of the professors. Blended learning is a reality and we, professors, as experts in education, must embrace it. Hence, the recommendation is to persevere in perfecting this interactive learning strategy, which promotes student-centered learning.

4. AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was possible thanks to participants student, project coordinators (to national and to local) and especially to Fausto Pressuti.

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