

Using blended learning strategies to address teaching development needs: How does Canada compare?

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Abstract

The provision of blended learning strategies designed to assist academics in the higher education sector with the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for effective teaching with technology has been, and continues to be, a challenge for teaching centres in Canada. It is unclear, first, whether this is an ongoing issue unique to Canada; and, second, if it is not unique to Canada, whether we might be able to implement different and/or more effective strategies based on what others outside Canada are doing. Teaching centre leaders in Australia, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Britain, Scotland, and the United States ($n=31$) were interviewed to explore how their units used blended learning strategies. Findings suggest that, as in Canada, there is a “value gap” between academics and leaders of teaching centres regarding teaching development initiatives using blended learning strategies.

Résumé

La disposition de stratégies d'apprentissage mixte conçues pour aider les instructeurs en enseignement supérieur à obtenir les connaissances, les compétences et les aptitudes requises pour enseigner de manière efficace avec les technologies a constitué un défi pour les centres d'enseignement du Canada, et continue de l'être. En outre, on ignore si ce problème récurrent est unique au Canada et, s'il ne l'est pas, s'il serait possible d'établir des stratégies

différentes, ou plus efficaces, en fonction de ce qui se fait à l'extérieur du Canada. Par ailleurs, des dirigeants de centres d'enseignement ($n = 31$) localisés en Australie, en Finlande, en Suède, au Danemark, en Grande-Bretagne, en Écosse et aux États-Unis ont été interrogés pour explorer comment leurs unités ont eu recours aux stratégies d'apprentissage mixte. Les données suggèrent que, tout comme au Canada, il existe un écart de valeurs entre ce que font les instructeurs en ce qui concerne les initiatives de perfectionnement de l'enseignement à l'aide de stratégies d'apprentissage mixte, et ce que font les dirigeants des centres d'enseignement.

The imperative for teaching centres to help academics in institutions of higher education to adopt teaching with technologies is driven from several directions: efforts to enhance the student learning experience, the ongoing appearance of new net-based communication technologies, and the evolution of higher education institutions driven by, and driving, changing expectations. The need for continuing teaching development with technologies is also linked to a desire for innovations in teaching methods. Atop these reasons, institutions of higher education are under pressure to integrate technology and move beyond on-campus classroom approaches, aiming to reach a broader and larger student population - often in a cost recovery format. But leaders of teaching centres in Canada who would also like to implement online and/or blended learning strategies in teaching centres typically bump up against participation problems (Kanuka, Jugdev, & Heller, 2008). Given the current push for blended learning mandates in on-campus institutions of higher education, it has become increasingly necessary for instructors to know how to effectively facilitate blended learning courses and programs. Specifically, literature on blended learning indicates that the effectiveness of blended learning depends on the ability of the instructor to effectively design, develop, and implement it (Dzuiban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004).

As part of a larger research project, this study investigated whether the difficulties, in particular with participation, in blended learning strategies for teaching development are unique to Canada and, if not, whether we might be able to implement different and/or more effective strategies based on what others outside of Canada are doing. Teaching centre leaders in Australia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Britain, Scotland, and the United States ($n=31$) were interviewed to explore how their units used blended learning strategies.

Blended Learning Defined

A substantial body of literature has accumulated over the last decade advocating blended learning as a core activity in teaching development within institutions of higher education (Dziuban, Moskal, & Futch, 2007; Kenney & Newcombe, 2011; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Vaughan, 2010; Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013). Making sense of the literature on blended learning in the aggregate is difficult, as definitions of blended learning vary widely, resulting in a pervasive ambiguity. For example, Heinze and Procter (2004) define blended learning as “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.” In this definition, it is un-

clear what “effective combination” and “transparent communication” mean. Garrison and Vaughan (n.d.) provide the following definition, which is often cited in the literature:

At its core, blended learning is the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences. The basic principle is that face-to-face oral communication and online written communication are optimally integrated such that the strengths of each are blended into a unique learning experience congruent with the context and intended educational purpose.... Blended learning is not an addition that just builds another expensive layer.... Most importantly, blended learning is viewed here as a fundamental redesign that transforms the structure of, and approach to, teaching and learning. The key assumptions of a blended learning design are:

- Thoughtful integration of face-to-face and online learning
- Fundamentally rethinking the course design to optimize student engagement
- Restructuring and replacing traditional class contact hours. (para. 16)

Here too, “thoughtful fusion,” “optimally integrated,” and “thoughtful integration” are undefined. Dziuban, Moskal, and Hartman (2005) have stated that blended learning is “courses that replace a portion of face-to-face instruction with Web components that allow for using Web resources flexibly to reduce on-campus time, yet also to allow face-to-face interaction”. They go on to note that there is no defined standard as to how much or what part of courses goes online widely (see also Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), with many blended learning initiatives replacing 25% to 50% of in-class time with net-based tools (Dziuban et al., 2004). The 25% to 50% allotment by Dziuban et al. is in conflict with the Sloan-C report (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007), which defines blended learning as learning experiences with 30% to 70% of the content online, and as a “course that blends online and face-to-face delivery.... Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and typically has some face-to-face meetings” (p. 5). When conducting research on blended learning, a narrower, or bounded, definition is required.

In its simplest sense, blended learning is the integration of on-campus learning experiences with net-based learning experiences. However, as noted, there can be considerable complexity in its implementation. The complexity revolves around the design or, more specifically, the limitless design possibilities within the seemingly endless unique educational contexts, net-based tools, and content. It is, therefore, necessary to look at the ways net-based tools are used in the learning process. A review of the literature reveals there are three ways net-based tools are typically used in blended learning contexts (Kanuka, 2001, p. 32-33):

1. A tool in the learning process - which is the integration of net-based tools as a “technology” with the aim of constructing learning activities from a technological perspective.
2. A learning environment - which is the integration of net-based tools as a platform for learning and includes, for example, learning management systems (e.g., BlackBoard, Moodle, Desire2Learn).
3. An interactive learning medium - which is the aim of using the net’s unique communication features to facilitate interactive and engaged learning. Intentions to design blended learning as a platform for interacting and inquiry-based learning fall into this category.

Most blended learning initiatives fall within the last point (interactive communication medium) and can be designed in a variety of ways that are in some way net-reliant. *Net-reliant* means that components related to the learning activities rely on net-based tools. Specifically, net-reliance requires learners to access net-based tools at some point to successfully complete the learning transactions. For example, the instructor might place assignments, course information (e.g., textual lectures), and/or required learning activities (i.e., online quizzes or discussion groups) on a website or learning management system.

Net-based tools commonly associated with net-reliant uses (referred to as *blended learning* in this study) include net-based communication tools (e.g., text-based asynchronous discussion forums, text-based synchronous discussion forums, video and audio tools, social media), net-based information dissemination platforms (e.g., related websites, online academic journal articles, course study guides), and net-based tools for learning (e.g., online self-assessment quizzes). The definition of blended learning as net-reliant is used in this study as our working definition of blended learning.

Theories Framing the Study: Experiential Learning and Communities of Practice

Possible advantages of the use of blended learning for teaching development are twofold: providing opportunities for experiential learning and developing a sense of community.

Experiential Learning Theory

The value of the use of experiential learning theory as a teaching development strategy is the ability for instructors to experience online learning from the perspective of their students. Kolb (1984) is most frequently associated with experiential learning theory (ELT) and originally defined it as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 41). Over time and after considerable research, Kolb revised ELT as follows:

A holistic model of the learning process and a multilinear model of adult development, both of which are consistent with what we know about how people learn, grow, and develop. The theory is called “experiential learning” to emphasize the central role that experience plays in the learning process. (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2000, p. 2)

Experiential learning not only provides instructors considering the use of blended learning with the opportunity to learn from students’ perspective, it can also build a greater willingness among instructors to experiment in their teaching with technology. Burton (2003), for example, found that the use of experiential learning strategies involving technology can facilitate a change in teachers’ beliefs with respect to teaching with technology. Related to this finding, prior research (e.g., Richardson, 1996; Whitworth, 1997) has demonstrated that if teachers’ beliefs and instructional reform (such as teaching with technology) are not congruent, the reform will be limited and change will be slow. It has been shown further that providing instructors with opportunities for classroom practice can encourage them to confront these incongruent beliefs, resulting in a broadening of views

of teaching with technology (Levin & Wadmay, 2006). Guskey's (2002) model of teachers' growth also provides support for experientially based learning to facilitate changes in instructional practices. Given the dynamic relationship between instructors' beliefs and practice, whereby beliefs are influenced by practical experience (Thompson, 1992), there is merit to the exploration of the use of experiential learning in the context of blended learning strategies.

Communities of Practice

As important is the possibility that blended learning may be able to provide an additional venue to build an increased sense of belonging, or community (Story & DiElsi, 2003); there is some evidence to support this notion. Rovai and Jordan (2004), for example, found that blended courses measured highest in facilitating a sense of community, with a rating similar to that given by learners in a face-to-face section, but scoring higher than those in a fully online environment. The rationale cited for these findings includes the possibility that blended courses are valued by learners for their flexibility (removing time, place, and situational barriers) as well as for face-to-face aspects, which are perceived as building a strong sense of community. Supporting the latter notion, research by Tinto (1998) has shown that learners' successes involve social integration - which blended learning has been cited as being able to facilitate.

Online communities have been described as gatherings of people online that are self-directed, organic, driven by a shared interest or need, and highly social (e.g., Boyd, 2006). In this context, an online community of practice (CoP) provides appeal because it is tied to the fluidity and pervasiveness of continuing professional development, positioned as an alternative (and/or complement) to formal, event-based learning, bringing people together to share and to support each other. The notion of CoP emerged around the same time as collaborative technologies (Allan & Lewis, 2006); as such, it is not surprising that the notion of community is pervasive in the online literature.

The inclination to believe in the possibilities of online communities has ignited interest. Afonso (2006) notes that the interest in online communities exists because we find "collective goods in the shape of social capital [and] knowledge capital" (p. 156). One driving force behind the interest in community is the call to create more effective online learning experiences (e.g., Garrison, 2006). This move is reinforced by the growing body of research that touts the pedagogical benefits of online learning communities (Afonso, 2006; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2004; Wang, Sierra, & Folger, 2003).

Need for the Study

While the uptake of blended learning has been perceived as slow in Canadian universities, it is, in fact, currently being offered by many Canadian institutions of higher education (COHERE, n.d.); but it is perceived as having uneven success (Kanuka, 2011). Research indicates the reason for the uneven success of blended learning is, at least in part, related to how effectively blended learning is designed and delivered by the instructors. As noted by Dziuban et al. (2004) the benefits of blended learning are offset by these challenges. Kenney and Newcombe (2011) note further that the time and training support required to redevelop and redesign a course and/or program should not be underesti-

mated. Also revealed in the Canadian research literature on blended learning is the ineffective use of in-class time noted by the students - and a preference by students for good classes and lectures (see, for example, Charbonneau, 2012). Research has also revealed that universities are challenged to provide the necessary resources not only to (re)design a blended course, but also to reward faculty for blended learning initiatives (Zawacki-Richter, 2005). Research by Garrison and Vaughan (2013), for example, reveals that effective teaching development leadership is necessary to facilitate transition, adoption, and ongoing support for blended learning. Related to Garrison and Vaughan's results on leadership for blended learning is leadership in teaching centres in general. Considerable research on educational development centres has shown that teaching centres are typically in a state of flux and volatility, with frequent changes in leadership and visions (Raaheim & van de Ven, 2010).

Finally, research into blended learning has revealed another challenge: instructors' perceptions of how well they are teaching in a blended context and students' perceptions are not consistent (Dzuiban et al., 2004). Dzuiban et al.'s survey data showed that instructors perceived themselves in a particular pedagogical style, but their students viewed them differently. Further, instructors were unaware of this inconsistency. These researchers conclude that students' decreased satisfaction rates in blended courses confirm that instructors do not accurately understand how their students perceive them. Perhaps D'Andrea and Gosling's (2001) argument is most accurate: when working with faculty, we must not just do the right thing; rather, we must find a way of doing it right.

Looking to address these challenges within the Canadian context, Hubbal and Poole's (2003, p. 20) research indicates there is a need for two key strategies for effective teaching development: institutional support in the form of time release or teaching scholarships for faculty, and the additional provision of a flexible mixed-mode online program. On the latter strategy, Vaughan and Garrison (2006) examined blended learning in a Canadian faculty development context, concluding that blended learning and a community approach can create "a flexible and accessible environment for faculty to engage in sustained critical reflection and discourse about their teaching practice" (p. 150). These same researchers have argued further that what makes blended learning particularly effective is its ability to facilitate a community of inquiry (Garrison & Vaughan, 2007). The value of facilitating a community of inquiry is that, once it is formed, the learner-to-learner bonding supports open and trusting communication and, with online communication tools, limitless access. Moreover, such environments provide the conditions for free and open dialogue, critical debate, negotiation, and agreement. Garrison and Vaughan (2006) also assert that blended learning has the capabilities to facilitate these conditions and adds an important reflective element with multiple forms of communication to meet specific learning requirements. By way of example: at the start of a course it may be advantageous to have a face-to-face class to meet and build community. In contrast, discussing a complex issue that requires reflection may be better accomplished through a text-based, asynchronous internet discussion forum.

Hence, there is a belief, as well as some evidence, that blended learning can be an effective strategy for teaching development. In particular, experiential learning for teaching development seems to be a promising strategy not only for providing opportunities for instructors to experience blended learning from the perspective of their students, but also to facilitate communities of practice.

Method

Data informing this research were gathered from interviews conducted with academics in teaching development leadership positions at universities who identify themselves as research intensive or focused. It has been suggested that qualitative methods are well suited for exploratory and descriptive research that emphasizes the importance of context and situational factors (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Accordingly, qualitative inquiry methods were used for this interpretist research project.

Participants were selected first by employing purposive sampling (Neuman, 2000) to select individuals who are informed about and experienced in teaching development initiatives. Following purposive sampling, snowball sampling was initiated by asking our core participants to suggest others who are capable of providing significant insights. Semistructured 60-minute interviews were conducted with participants at universities in Australia (n=1), Finland (n=2), Sweden (n=4), Norway (n=4), Britain (n=9), Scotland (n=6), and the United States (n=5). The participants interviewed worked within or were responsible for the centralized university teaching centres or units.

Prior to the interviews, the institution's teaching-related website information was reviewed for the following information: descriptions and objectives of programs and initiatives, mission statements and philosophies, outlines of the work and services provided, strategy documents and plans, annual reports (if available), teaching resources provided for faculty, research and project initiatives undertaken, the calendar of events, and listings of staff and working committees. Gathering this information before the interviews ensured that valuable time was not spent in high-level explanations of each program; it enabled the participants to engage in more in-depth and focused discussion. Interview questions focused on the following topics, as they relate to blended learning initiatives: teaching development activities and initiatives, challenges encountered, and success stories. The interviews were framed around the possibilities of the use of net-based technologies for teaching development with technologies and the possibilities of building an increased sense of community through the use of blended learning strategies. Notes during the interview were typed on MS Word, and member checks were conducted immediately after each interview.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected through semistructured interviews by two research assistants. Using semistructured interviews, we were able to ensure consistency across interviews while providing enough space for the interviewers to allow for probes and follow-up questions unique to each interview.

Merriam (2001) describes data analysis as the process of meaning making: "consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read" (p. 178). The data were analyzed first by identifying the recurring patterns in the data, using Merriam's recommendations for guided analysis. We then used constant comparative techniques, creating categories that reflected the purpose of the research and were comprehensive, unique, and conceptually consistent.

Category construction began with the first set of notes (Merriam, 2001). Notations were made next to data related to blended learning. After we worked through the nota-

tions, analogous comments were grouped together and a list of these groups was created. The next set of data was treated in a similar way, and the list of notes and groupings was compared with those of the first set. The result was a set of topics derived from the data. We conducted a separate thematic analysis, followed by debriefing meetings to avoid researcher privileging, maintain trustworthiness of the data, and detect potential biases or inconsistent conclusions.

Findings

The results reveal that the overarching theme cutting across all interviews is a gap between what leaders in teaching centres are offering and the uptake of these initiatives by their participants. Upon reflection regarding their blended learning initiatives, participants were accepting of the fact that there is little traction for blended learning strategies as teaching development initiatives in their institutions. Participants in this study stated they had tried a variety of ways of offering blended learning, ranging from webinars to learning management systems, with varying degrees of on- and off-campus offerings. The difficulties of initiating blended learning activities expressed by the participants fell into three groups: a lack of resources to sustain blended learning activities, a perception of blended learning as passive, and a lack of sense of community when engaging in blended learning activities. While these topics may seem unconnected, they fall within the overarching theme of a “value gap” between the teaching centre and the institutions’ academics.

Value Gap with Blended Learning Strategies

While a variety of net-based technologies were used by participants, web-based technologies were the most frequently used by all participants. Most participants were using their institutional learning management systems as the main technology for their blended learning strategies, but many also had tried using listservs, webinars, wikis, online cafes, WebQuests, and social networking (e.g., Facebook, blogs, Twitter). As examples were described, it was observed that some participants were more convinced of the value of blended learning approaches and committed to exploration and implementation than others. For example, one participant commented she believed technology could be a “pivotal lever” for teaching development, especially with respect to the anytime-anyplace possibilities.

Underpinning this overarching theme are three consistent topics that explain why the participants perceive a value gap with respect to the use of blended learning.

Sustainability. All participants mentioned that facilitating teaching development activities using blended learning strategies, in one way or another, was a concern with respect to maintaining and sustaining these kinds of initiatives. The reasons are twofold: resources required (technical and human) and lack of faculty participation.

Participants described these issues in a variety of ways:

- “So you run webinars, create an online presence.... It takes leg work to make it work.... It is something you really have to engineer. Right now, we put our effort in other places.”
- “I need to identify individuals who may be leaders, advertise the opportunities the blended initiatives may afford, provide structured activities and provide some of

the supports to ensure they don't just wither away and die. A comprehensive approach is needed and we don't have the staff."

- "We have tried seminars with follow up on email lists... but those quickly died off. What is the impetus for going and checking?"
- "We are moving courses partially and fully online. However, this has resource implications and right now we do not have many staff. It is desirable but not preferred."
- "Most of our faculty are not adopting technology.... Many are just too oppressed and too overworked to try something new. And age is not necessarily the determining factor. How does [the centre/unit] help them make space for this kind of work? Any technology is resource overhead."

In addition, it was explained by participants that it is difficult to justify the time and effort required for blended learning when the uptake by the faculty is minimal. On this note, one participant explained in the following way: "Our technology program is undergoing a review.... [The program] already generated a lot of fellows and mentors but is an intense commitment of resources.... We wrestled with whether it was really best to devote so many resources in these small initiatives."

Others who tried to use blended learning to sustain online communities also found that the time and effort was difficult to justify, as one participant explains: "The online coffee shop was an exploration; wanted to see what kind of response we will get. It had only been going a few months with not too much traction... so we decided to let it idle."

Likewise, another participant shared the following: "We tried to have an occasional meeting online, but for any initiative to be sustainable people like to sit down and talk to each other."

Participants agreed that online communities are a good idea, but a challenge to form and sustain. As one participant explained, "You need champions and a strong commitment to make these things grow and succeed.... I don't know how it could work to scale up virtual communities." Overall, the participants in this study were not motivated to be champions of blended learning initiatives. As explained in more detail below, they put their energies into a fully face-to-face, social format.

Passivity. The issue of blended learning strategies being flat and/or lifeless arose with more than half of the participants. None of the participants stated that blended learning initiatives facilitated critically reflective, trusting, and engaging environments whereby faculty bond with like-minded colleagues in free and open dialogue. We found this surprising because one of the most appealing aspects of communication technologies is that it has been advocated as having the potential to facilitate many of these features between and among participants (e.g., Vaughan & Garrison, 2006).

- "We have a transforming technology program which is billed as a hybrid course. We use online components as a significant part of the course. [We have found] it challenging to maintain momentum.... No activity.... This year we added all components face-to-face and it has been a great success."
- "Our events are largely face-to-face although there are portions for faculty to join in from any campus using video or audio conferencing.... We also use Adobe Connect so people can connect online from their computers - but they have not done a lot of this. [Adobe Connect is] just very passive, not like an in-person conference in terms of involvement."

- “In the past our Institute maintained a ListServ but we have stopped using it as it is hard to get people involved.... People have become accustomed to hitting the delete button.”
- “We have a list but have stopped using it. It consumed a lot of staff time to moderate and maintain - and start and keep momentum.”
- “Blended learning is being done by standard campus-based universities, adding to traditional face-to-face classes, plus a few other things outside the class are available online. Online has two sides: information and presentational, such as tutorials, which is static.”
- “With respect to blended learning. Assumptions and procedures are hard-wired into university processes. For example, learning and teaching is seen as a transmissive process and therefore the design procedures are constructed to produce transmissive materials. While technologies enable contact, why would they bother to talk with others?... So with [teaching development] what is not being addressed is pedagogy.... Moodle might be based on socially constructed principles but it’s the course design that will determine the learning experience - not if we offer in a blended mode.”

It should be noted that none of the participants discussed their program designs as a possible solution to the passivity of blended learning, nor the value of experiential learning as an effective approach to teaching development.

Sense of community. All participants talked to us on the topic of community, or a desire for a sense of connection with colleagues, referring specifically to the need and/or desire for faculty to connect in a face-to-face environment. The reasons why were rather eclectic, ranging from a personal touch to trust building. Whatever the reason, the message was the same: the use of technology in blended learning - or any online format - does not meet the need for faculty to connect with their colleagues.

- “The group has to share certain needs. Just being electronic doesn’t work.”
- “We have a book club for example.... It is the face-to-face contact that really makes it work. We don’t see it moving online. It is the personal touch that makes a difference.”
- “So there are some wonderful online resources [in the context of their blended modules], but it is an effort to make community work online. Community works better in-person.”
- “Faculty get a lot from going to on-campus events. These become a focus for faculty to talk to other faculty about teaching and learning. There is no other place this really seems to happen at the university. Although workshops have their [participation] challenges as well, faculty like the interaction. We have a course on college teaching which is incredibly popular. We tried to offer it in a blended format (face-to-face and LMS) and found that faculty much preferred the face-to-face aspects.”
- “People love and need face-to-face contact and will go out of their way to get it.”
- “Centres that help faculty to enhance their student learning with technology and not using themselves is a bit of a... [*here he is stuck for a word*]. Why is it that a centre promotes technology and then doesn’t use it? It could be perhaps because there are some reasons it won’t work. Faculty have become attached to the existing, face-to-face, programs.”

- “Building trust required for communities is important. In face-to-face communities [*gestures to show a quote with his hands*] ‘I trust you because I know you.’ Whereas, online, there is not the same ability to form trust.”
- “eLearning is helping to bring teaching to the attention of academics but we don’t offer anything online or blended. Our academics want it on-campus, with their colleagues.”

Jurisdiction or Country Variances

Finally, our analysis of the interviews did not find differences in the theme and topics between different countries or jurisdictions. Specifically, the use of blended learning strategies in teaching centres is remarkably similar across all the jurisdictions sampled in this study. Given the uptake of online and blended learning in the United States, we expected there would be differences in the use of online learning, and in particular the use of blended learning, between the United States and other countries. Not only did we expect to find differences, a few of our participants did as well. The following comment by a participant illustrates this point: “The US has a very different approach to faculty development - more of an instructional development model based on computer theory. The EU, AU and UK focus on student learning research. The US is more about people helping with the logistics of the practical and this shows in the popularity of online learning in the US. Canada is a mix of the two [focus on student learning and instructional development]; more like the UK but a bit further behind.”

Based on our initial reviews of the centres’ websites and follow-up in the interviews, we found no noteworthy variances with respect to the use of blended learning strategies, as well as the kinds of events offered in the teaching centres.

Discussion

This study aimed to gain insights with respect to whether the challenges with blended strategies for teaching development are unique to Canada and, if not, whether we can implement effective strategies based on what others outside of Canada are doing. Teaching centre leaders in Australia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Britain, Scotland, and the United States were interviewed to explore how their units use blended learning strategies. Theoretical frameworks underpinning this study were experiential learning theory and communities of practice.

The findings in this study reveal that the participants we interviewed have also encountered challenges implementing blended learning initiatives for teaching development. Based on the findings, the central reason for this appears to be because blended learning initiatives tend not to be perceived as valued by academics. While building a community of practitioners was discussed by all participants, our participants explained that forming and sustaining community is most effectively facilitated in a face-to-face context. The use of experiential learning as a teaching development strategy for the design and delivery of blended learning was not perceived to be an effective approach. The reason is that faculty have a strong preference for teaching development activities in a face-to-face context. Further, the participants in this study perceive blended learning as ineffective at nurturing and sustaining rich dialogues for sharing and interacting among

academics. Quite simply, all participants in this study perceived a preference by the faculty in their institutions for face-to-face sessions hosted by the teaching centres.

And yet, to a greater or lesser extent, all participants expressed a sense that blended learning has potential, with all participants having explored the use of blended learning strategies for teaching development activities. However, there is a gap between their sense of value for blended learning and the value perceived by academics in their institution. Our findings suggest that leaders of teaching centres believe that different types and levels of effort are needed to provide effective and sustainable teaching development activities, with one approach used by all participants in this study: the offering of face-to-face events to bring academics together, providing a place to go to connect face-to-face with like-minded others. Our participants all seemed to be thinking about the possibilities that blended learning strategies can provide, but not experiencing success with this strategy.

Conclusions

The challenges identified in this study contribute to the existing research literature with respect to the impact and uptake of blended learning in Canadian higher education institutions. Perhaps the most noteworthy conclusions of this study are twofold.

The first conclusion relates to the Ithaka organization's report *Barriers to Adoption of Online Learning Systems in U.S. Higher Education* (Bacow, Bowen, Guthrie, Lack, & Long, 2012). The report states that online and blended learning "is alien to most faculty and calls into question the very reason that many pursued an academic career in the first place.... They [faculty] enjoyed being students, and valued the relationships that they enjoyed with their professors" (pp. 19-20). Expanding on this point, Bowen (2013) observes:

There are central aspects of life on our traditional campuses that must be not only retained but strengthened. First is the need to emphasize the great value of "minds rubbing against minds."... But those of us who have benefited from personal interactions with brilliant teachers (some of whom became close friends), as I certainly have, can testify to the inspirational, life-changing aspects of such experiences.... Moreover, a great advantage of residential institutions is that genuine learning occurs more or less continually, and as often, or more often, out of the classroom as in it.

The value of an interpersonal relationship between professors and students has endured from the time of Socrates and has been perceived by many as the spirit and essence of a university education. It has been argued that such relationships are the visible embodiment of the intelligence, skill, passion, and scholarship that constitute the value of a university experience; the essence of an academic is an embodiment of their knowledge and wisdom in every aspect of their lives, turning "those lives outward for students to see - in writing, in conversation, and (best of all) in the dense daily life.... The importance of embodying knowledge in this manner has long been a central theme of the collegiate way" (O'Hara, 2008). It would seem that this visible/physical essence of a university continues to exert a strong hold on faculty, with the enduring value of "minds rubbing against minds" in a face-to-face environment.

The second conclusion arising from the findings of this study pertains to the existing literature on leadership roles in teaching centres. The findings of this study reveal that ad-

ministrators of teaching centres experience leadership issues (e.g., resources and staff) that make the uptake of different initiatives, such as blended learning, difficult to implement. On this topic, substantial research in teaching centres has been conducted in Australia (e.g., Challis, Holt, & Palmer, 2009; Palmer, Holt, & Challis, 2010; Palmer, Holt, & Challis, 2011; Raaheim & van de Ven, 2010), the United Kingdom (e.g., Gosling, 2001; D'Andrea & Gosling, 2001; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004), Canada (Garrison & Vaughan, 2013; Hubbal & Poole, 2003), and the United States (e.g., Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, & Beach, 2006; Sorcinelli, Gray, & Birch, 2011). Findings from these studies have revealed that problems in teaching centres arise, at least in part, from administration and leadership problems. For example, Palmer *et al.* (2010) attribute much of the leadership issues to a constant state of flux within the higher-level (senior) administration, while Gosling's (2001) findings reveal most teaching centre administrators blame the conservative nature of middle and senior administrators in higher education for creating a culture of resistance, and not applying clear and consistent teaching policies. Whatever the reasons, the participants in this study - while acknowledging the necessity to provide support for blended learning initiatives - expressed difficulties in providing sustained and effective leadership for new initiatives, such as blended learning activities. Given the importance of the role teaching centres play in providing direction for new and innovative initiatives, further research in understanding indicators of strategic leadership, as well as characteristics of strategic leaders in teaching centres, is required. Specifically, building on the prior research cited above, further research on the existing problems identified and suggested recommendations on strategic leadership activities would provide a significant, and needed, contribution to leadership problems that continue to plague teaching centres. ✪

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