
Kenney, J., & Newcombe, E. (2011). Adopting a blended learning approach: Challenges encountered and lessons learned in an action research study. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 15(1), 45-57.

Introduction

This article describes the pilot test of incorporating a blended unit into a large undergraduate educational psychology class at a medium-sized university. It was Kenny's (first author, referred to simply as *the author* in this review) first attempt at blended learning, and her insights are instructive. With the goal of increasing student engagement and learning, Kenny's experience provides excellent lessons for those wanting to incorporate some degree of blended learning into a previously traditional course.

The Problem

Large class size and decreasing student involvement led the author to look for a way to increase student participation, preparation, and understanding of the course material. Her students had become quite passive, and she was looking for a way to encourage them to be more active and take more responsibility for their own learning. The framework that grounds the discussion and implementation of this blended learning pilot is based on how people learn. Specifically, the authors focus on a model of how people learn developed by Bransford, Brown, and Cocking and the seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education developed by Chickering and Ehrmann. These are terrific principles that we should all keep in mind as instructional designers. They are: promoting interaction between students and faculty, enhancing reciprocity and cooperation among students, promoting active learning, providing prompt feedback, increasing time on task, setting high expectations, and recognizing diversity in learning. (I'm tempted to make a poster with these seven principles to hang in my office.)

The Potential Solution: Blended Learning

The authors don't really define blended learning themselves, but they do cite several definitions from the existing literature. Most of them involve some combination of face-to-face and computer-mediated or web-based instruction. That is quite similar to our small group's definition, and it is the definition the authors implicitly use in this article.

The author designed a blended unit to pilot with one of her large classes. The article includes a list of eight decision points, most of which are quite useful for

anyone designing a blended unit or blended course. These are taken directly from the article:

1. How much of the course should be blended?
2. Which unit should be used for a pilot test?
3. Which of the three sections of the course would be the experimental group to pilot test the unit? [*This question could be made more general to apply to the decision about who should be in any pilot group.*]
4. How much training and technical and instructional support were needed?
5. How much time was necessary to design the unit?
6. What materials/activities should go online vs. face-to-face?
7. How could a community of learners be created?

It is interesting to read the author's experience with these questions. While her answers are specific to her context and situation, the questions are quite generalizable and applicable to a wide variety of contexts.

Measuring Success

The authors describe the implementation of the blended unit and the measures of success as an "action research study." While in most academic circles this wouldn't actually be called a *research* study (it would be more like a *case study*), the authors did take a very systematic approach to measuring its success. The pilot was conducted with one of three sections of the same course, so the authors were able to compare the performance and attitudes of the pilot group with those of the other groups. They used results from the unit exam, a survey, informal observations, and tracking statistics from the course website.

The pilot students' performance on the exam was only slightly better than that of the other groups (and the difference would be unlikely to be statistically significant). The good news is that the using the blended approach did not diminish performance. Generally, the students' responses were favorable regarding the approach (more engaged, more prepared); but student participation in class (F2F sessions) seemed to be more related to class size than to the blended vs. F2F approach. Students overwhelmingly liked the convenience and independence provided by the blended approach.

Lessons for Blended Learning Design and Instruction

One of the best ways to become better at developing and teaching blended courses is to learn from others' experiences. The authors provide seven excellent lessons they learned from this pilot study: 1) start small, 2) measure the effectiveness of your pilot test, 3) get support and training, 4) collaborate with others who are using blended learning, 5) set up your course management

system carefully so it is easy for students to find materials, 6) provide course orientation as well as learning and technical support to students, and 7) remember that change takes time.

Conclusion

This is an excellent article for instructional designers. The decision points and the lessons learned are quite generalizable to many contexts. I recommend it for instructional designers who are new and to those who are experienced at blended learning. While some of the lessons seem directed at those who are beginners (like the author), the article has great reminders and thought-provoking questions for those who have experience with blended learning. It's also a great article to share with colleagues (and I plan to send it out in an e-mail to my colleagues today).