

Review Paper on Blended Learning, Learning Communities and Blended Learning Communities

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Abstract: *The traditional system of classroom interaction is such that students become passive recipients of the subject matter being taught by the teacher in the class. The teacher is the active giver of information, while the student receives it passively, like a beggar receiving alms. It has been found that this form of classroom interaction makes the student dull and largely unresponsive, resulting in his/her inability to absorb the subject matter being doled out by the teacher. This has created a need for trying to make the classroom more interactive by using alternative means of interaction between the teacher and the taught – means that change the dynamics of the classroom. This paper reviews various research papers dealing with some such techniques of classroom interaction, namely ‘blended learning’, ‘learning community’ and ‘blended learning community.’*

Keywords: *Blended Learning, Learning Community, Blended Learning Community, Classroom Interaction, Traditional Classroom, Student-Teacher Interaction, Teacher as Facilitator, Teacher as Moderator, Active Classroom.*

Introduction

The formal classroom has long been a teaching space with the teacher playing the pivotal role in the interaction. The teacher is considered to be the one who knows everything about what is to be taught. The teacher teaches while the student learns; the teacher is the giver while the student is the receiver; the teacher is the active person here with the students being the passive receivers. In most instances the teacher stands in front of the classroom while the students are seated opposite him/her, whether it is the traditional classroom or the modern new fanged ones where the teacher uses computer technology to teach using PPTs, etc. This, itself, dictates the classroom dynamics – the teacher is the authority while the students are subservient [Alverman & Hayes (1989); Burns & Knox (2011); Bielaczye & Collins (1999)].

It is also assumed that the student learns from whatever is being taught and absorbs most of the instruction being imparted. Though it is assumed that the interaction in the classroom will definitely ensure learning on the part of students, it is not always so. It has been observed that in most cases the learning is prefixed, limited and temporary. Students seem to forget what they have been

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taught in the classroom within days, rather than years [Alverman & Hayes (1989); Burns & Knox (2011)].

This leads to the question whether trying out something different from the traditional system could have a longer and deeper impact. [(Fulton & Britton (2011); Watkins (2005); Bielaczyc & Collins (1999); Carroll, Fulton & Doerr (2010)].

Three such alternative concepts/techniques of learning are 'Learning Communities', 'Blended Learning' and 'Blended Learning Communities'.

Learning Communities

Learning communities exist everywhere, in every area. They are usually used for learning in the informal and non-formal situation.

Learning communities are groups of people with the same learning aim. All those forming a learning community are equal and active participants in the learning process, rather than passive recipients who are forced to listen throughout to one individual. They provide a great deal towards the development of individuals as they are better able to develop existing skills and knowledge, pick up new ones and help each other learn, develop and grow together through such interactions. Learning communities focus on learning and generating collective wisdom rather than developing individual knowledge [Zhao & Kuh (2004); Watkins (2005); Bielaczyc & Collins (1999); Fulton & Britton (2011); Dark (2005); Carroll, Fulton & Doerr (2010); Goddard, Goddard & Moran (2007); Center for Community College Student Engagement (2010); Reilly (2011); Philip (2010); Kabes & Engstrom (2010); Carrino & Gerace (2016); Stoll, et. al. (2006)].

According to Carrino & Gerace (2016), "Learning Community participants earn higher GPA's than non-LC participants, have higher graduation rates, report higher levels of satisfaction with college experience, have higher levels of academic self confidence, and are overall more academically engaged." (pg 02). They also state that learning communities provide a structure for social interactions between and among students, their peers and faculty, staff and other professionals.

Blended Learning

Blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace. . While still attending a "brick-and-mortar" school structure, face-to-face classroom methods are combined with computer-mediated activities. This gives students the double benefit of face-to-face interaction with the teacher, as well as the convenience of anytime, anywhere, accessibility of online courses at a personal pace. Various researches have shown that blended learning increases success rates in colleges as compared with traditional classrooms or entirely online courses, creating opportunities for a high level of collaboration and authentic learning [Graham (2013); Rovai & Jordon (2004); Ernst (2008); Halverson, et.al (2012), Al-

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Qahtami & Higgins (2012); McGee & Reis (2012); Erylmaz (2015); Lalima & Dangwal (2017); Gambhir, et.al. (2017); Yao (2018); Bhowmik, Myer & Phillips (2019); Chan (2019)].

Blended Learning Communities

Blended learning communities merge the concepts of ‘blended learning’ & ‘learning community’, to create a learning community that follows blended learning. Various researches have shown that blended learning creates environments to bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves [Fleck (2012); Rovai & Jordon (2004); Hillard (2015); Yapici (2016); Smith, Hayes & Shea (2017); Shand & Farrelly (2017); Reitsma & van den Berg (2017); Levy (2017)].

This Paper is a review of various research articles written on these three techniques of learning, published mostly during the last twelve years or so, to understand what these terms mean and to identify the elements that they may be constructed with.

Methodology

Relevant research papers were identified by looking at their titles and reading their abstracts. Their content was then analysed to understand what they said about the definitions of the terms ‘learning community’, ‘blended learning’ and ‘blended learning community’ and to identify the various elements that went into their construct. In all 49 papers were referred to. Of these 24 dealt with Learning Communities, 12 with Blended Learning, 12 with Blended Learning Communities and 06 with Regular Classroom Interaction

Findings

Learning Community

Where a “*learning community*” is concerned, the different papers reflect various views on the term. Burgh & Nicholas (2012) refer to it as a “community of inquiry”, while Carroll, Fulton & Doerr (2010) refer to “collaborative communities”.

While some consider the learning community to *exist within the classroom* itself (Burgh & Nicholas, 2012; Greene & Mitcham, 2012; Cooper & Garner, 2012; Centre for Community College Student Engagement, 2010; Academic Senate of California Community Colleges, 2010), some others look at it as *interactions taking place within and beyond the classroom* (Ponder, et.al, 2011; Hancock, et.al, 2010; Redd, et.al., 2012; Mc Gee & Reis, 2012; Carroll, Fulton & Doerr, 2010). For some, ‘beyond the classroom’ reflects *interacting with the community/society and receiving hands-on experience*, while to some this implies *using technological interventions* (McGee & Reis, 2012).

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On the other hand, Janzen, Perry & Edwards (2011) are not looking at the traditional classroom at all. Their ‘classroom’ is a ***single learner seated before a computer system, undertaking an online course***, who may be able to gather the ***feeling of a community from others similarly placed but unseen, even while being seated alone during the learning process***.

Most emphasize that the kind of learning in learning communities is ***“collaborative learning”*** (Greene & Mitcham, 2012; Cooper & Garner, 2012; Centre for Community College Student Engagement, 2010; Academic Senate of California Community Colleges, 2010; Ponder, et.al, 2011; Hancock, et.al, 2010; Redd, et.al., 2012; Centre for Community College Student Engagement, 2010; Carroll, Fulton & Doerr, 2010; Price, 2005; L’Heureux, 2018).

Quite a few of the papers focus on an ***“educational course/course work”*** for the learning (Ponder, et.al, 2011; Armstrong & Newman, 2011; Redd, et.al 2012; McGee & Reis, 2012; Centre for Community College Student Engagement, 2010; Academic Senate of California Community Colleges, 2010; Carroll, Fulton & Doerr, 2010; Carrino & Gerace 2016).

A learning community in the classroom ensures that the ***“teacher’s role is modified in the classroom”*** (Burgh & Nicholas, 2012; Greene & Mitcham, 2012; Cooper & Garner, 2012; Academic Senate of California Community Colleges, 2010; Carroll, Fulton & Doerr, 2010), becoming more of a facilitator of the conversations within the classroom. However, greater student-teacher interaction is seen (Carrino & Gerace, 2016).

At the same time it also ensures the ***“modification of student’s role in the classroom”*** making the student an active participant in the learning process (Ponder, et.al, 2011; Hancock, et.al, 2010; Carroll, Fulton & Doerr, 2010; L’Heureux, 2018).

Classroom learning communities assure that the ***“student learns and develops personally”*** (Burgh & Nicholas, 2012; Greene & Mitcham, 2012; Cooper & Garner, 2012; Ponder, et.al, 2011; Hancock, et.al, 2010; Redd, et.al 2012; Centre for Community College Student Engagement, 2010; Academic Senate of California Community Colleges, 2010; Carroll, Fulton & Doerr, 2010; Carrino & Gerace, 2016).

Redd, et.al (2012) and McGee & Reis (2012) have found that ***“new learning opportunities”*** are created through classroom learning communities. L’Heureux (2018) states, “The integrative nature of the learning community enabled the learners not only to learn science but also to learn about issues by reading, writing, seminar, and discussing issues from multiple literary sources” (p04).

While the Academic Senate of California Community Colleges (2010) focuses on ***“assessing student learning outcomes”***, Carroll, Fulton & Doerr (2010) and L’Heureux (2018) look at ***“improving learning and student achievement through collaborative work”***.

On the other hand, Antinluoma et. al. (2018) state, “The underlying assumption of PLC is that the *core mission of formal education is deep learning*, not teaching” (p77).

Blended Learning

Blended learning allows students *flexibility of time, pace, etc. in learning, according to convenience and preferences* (Graham, 2013; Erylmaz, 2015; Lalima & Dangwal, 2017; Gambhir, et.al., 2017; Chan, 2019; Bhowmik, Myer & Phillips, 2019).

In blended learning there is *greater teacher-student interaction* (Erylmaz, 2015; Lalima & Dangwal, 2017; Chan, 2019).

Blended learning students have a *more positive attitude towards learning*, resulting in *positive impact on their achievement* (Erylmaz, 2015; Gambhir, et.al., 2017; Yao, 2018; Chan, 2019; Bhowmik, Myer & Phillips, 2019).

Graham (2013) advocates, “Blended options can be of particular interest to institutions that *reach out to non-traditional learners in the local communities* where they are already well known and trusted”.

Meanwhile, McGee & Reis (2012) believe that blended learning *should focus* not just on the distribution of learning through technology systems versus the classroom environment, but *on the unique organisation of the content, activities, assignments and meetings (be they online or face-to-face)*. They chalk out various models of blended learning.

Blended Learning Community

Blended learning communities *combine synchronous-asynchronous activities in the internet environment and face-to-face cooperative activities in the classroom* environment (El-Deghaidy & Nouby, 2008; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Yapici, 2016).

They provide a *space for collaborative learning* by practitioners, academics, analysts and observers, *through social construction of understanding*. (Fleck, 2012; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Yapici, 2016; Smith, Hayes & Shea (2017); Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pool, Reitsma & van den Berg, 2017).

Blended learning communities enable a *synthesis of areas of knowledge, thus producing learning* (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Yapici, 2016; Smith, Hayes & Shea, 2017; Shand & Farrelly, 2017).

They create a *learning-centred learning environment* (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Yapici, 2016; Smith, Hayes & Shea, 2017).

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They promote a *strong sense of community* among learners, leading to more *active participation* (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Yapici, 2016; Smith, Hayes & Shea, 2017; Wegner, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Shand & Farrelly, 2017; Pool, Reitsma & van den Berg, 2017).

Blended learning communities lead to an *increase in academic achievement* (Yapici, 2016; Shand & Farrelly, 2017).

Conclusion

A look at the above findings from the literature reviewed seems to indicate that classroom learning communities may indeed be effective in ensuring that students do learn and grow, understanding not just the course material but also developing additional skill sets which they earlier lacked. For example, gaining confidence to speak to a group about the subject matter, which the student may not have been able to do earlier.

Blended learning can be an effective tool for ensuring greater participation and interaction of students, ensuring that there is greater learning.

Creating blended learning communities in the classroom can help in deeper learning and deeper thinking, ensuring that all faculties of students are developed holistically, rather than mere memory power, which is developed through learning by rote and most classroom interaction scenarios.

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