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Effective strategies to support HE students adopt blended learning

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Blended learning is becoming a popular approach to deliver teaching and learning for many reasons such as catering to students' needs across different age groups, improving digital literacy and making optimal use of interactive pedagogy. The concept of blended learning has many definitions ranging from: combining traditional face-to-face learning with online delivery, mixing different types of technology and using different pedagogical approaches (Mabed & Koehler, 2012).

For the purpose of this article we focus on one of the interpretations of blended learning that combines elements of face-to-face and online delivery. This mode offers flexibility which is important for students who need to fit studies around work and/or family commitments. As this approach involves both classroom and an online environment, it has not only impacted the role of a tutor but also that of students (Bilgiç, Doğan, & Seferoglu, 2016).

Student engagement is important to ensure successful implementation and consistent adoption of blended learning. For this purpose, having robust support strategies in place for different phases of the student journey is crucial. This article presents the challenges HE students face whilst adopting blended learning and strategies which could be used to provide effective support.

This article is based on the research conducted at Sunderland College in the UK and a review of existing literature. It will explore strategies to support HE students across different age ranges so that they can benefit from the blended learning experience and successfully complete their studies, as well as improve employability skills.

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Motivation

There are a variety of contributing factors towards a student settling, engaging and learning from blended learning. Alongside motivation and background a student's attitudes towards blended learning could be affected by previous learning experiences and thus create resistance to active learning. This would follow the idea that we are creatures of habit and changing what we do does not come easily especially when there is a lack of self-belief.

Self-efficacy is defined as "your belief in your own abilities to deal with various situations, can play a role in not only how you feel about yourself, but whether or not you successfully achieve your goals in life" (Cherry, 2019).

Self-efficacy amongst students is important for blended learning as it has shown to produce positive results in terms of online student engagement and motivation. Helping students to be digitally literate will help them to be confident and responsible for their own learning (Tang & Chaw, 2016). This would

also set them on the path to lifelong learning and pursue their career goals.

Learning new things can be perceived as a burden and as such expectations need to be managed (Quinn, et al., 2012). An effective way to do this would involve introducing blended learning and the various activities gradually, allowing the students time to get used to how the format, technology and activities works as indicated by research (Kemp, 2013; Suartama & Setyosari, 2019). Using a staggered approach will be beneficial to motivate students and help them make steady progress as they become familiar with blended learning.

A QUOTE FROM ONE OF THE STUDENTS ABOUT WHAT MOTIVATED THEM TO STUDY: 'HAPPINESS I WOULD GET FROM PASSING AND NOT FAILING'.

Research findings

72% students studying business and engineering courses part-time mentioned that the mode of study fitted in with their lifestyle.

81% students studying business and engineering courses part time mentioned that they liked the flexibility of course delivery.

70% of apprentices studying electrical engineering (part time) and business students studying part time said they were doing the course to get the qualification or to help with future employment.

15% of business students studying full time said they were doing the course to run their own business.

Support strategies

Introduce different activities in a timely manner so students don't experience cognitive overload and feel demotivated.

Make online instructions clear, covering the purpose and guidance on how to carry it out.

Explain how blended learning could help students to become more independent and manage their studies in a manner which suits them. This could also be a great way to enhance their employability as students could use this example as evidence to demonstrate discipline and self-motivation in job interviews.

Incentivise students to adopt blended learning using approaches such as badging or using assessment methods such as discussion forums which consider online engagement and contribution.

BEGIN.

Online socialisation and communication

Students across different age ranges are often part of the same cohort studying HE courses in an FE environment and this can be challenging for tutors, especially when it comes to varying levels of proficiency in terms of using technology. Students born before 1980s are often characterised as digital immigrants whilst those born after 1980s are considered digital natives (Prensky, 2001; Čut, 2017).

Students who are digital natives due to their experience of using technology, especially social media platforms, can

find it hard to engage with online learning. This is because they are not able to see similar opportunities to interact with peers in online learning as they do when they use platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram.

Social media platforms allow for instant responses which could be posted in the form of emojis, likes, retweets and comments. Students are concerned about not having enough social contact via online learning with other students and teachers, which could impact their academic relationships and reduce the excitement/fun factor that they experience via social media (Bilgiç, Doğan, & Seferoglu, 2016).

Digital immigrants, on the other hand, tend to have different preferences when it comes to communication and learning. For instance, they prefer one on one communication in real time and prefer reading books or texts. They could find it difficult to communicate with their peers and tutors using technology as they are not as familiar with it as the digital natives (Anekwe & Mezieobi, 2017).

Nevertheless, there could be exceptions to these general assumptions and in certain cases digital immigrants may well be quite familiar with technology and feel comfortable using it.

ONE OF THE TUTORS
WHO PARTICIPATED IN
THE RESEARCH SAID THAT
TEAMS IS LIKE 'ACADEMIC
FACEBOOK'

Research findings

76% students studying computing and access to health science and social work course believed it was easier to ask questions (peers and teachers) online via Teams than it was in class.

65% of those studying computing and access to health science and social work course found using activity level blended learning easier than traditional face-to-face.

100% of those studying on a blended learning course (electrical engineering and part time business students), believed it was very easy or easy to contact teachers using the online tools provided.

Support Strategies

Create small online groups so that students can get to know each other and start by interacting with a few before being able to engage with larger groups.

Maintain an online presence as students will be motivated to participate if they see tutors are willing to engage and participate.

Use an online environment regularly to make weekly announcements, post on discussion forums, conduct online Q&A session and polls.

Get students involved and give them opportunities to moderate discussion forums, suggest activities and use their feedback to improve the online learning experience.



Digital literacy

Digital literacy is one of the key factors which impacts the success of blended learning as students who are not as accomplished in the required digital skills may not be able to engage effectively.

Before implementing blended learning, assessing students' digital literacy levels is crucial so that they can be introduced to the relevant tools and technologies with required support (Tang & Chaw, 2016). This is especially relevant when dealing with students from different age groups and different cultures as some may be completely new to online study (Adekola et al., 2017).

Digital literacy has been explained in various ways using definitions, frameworks and dimensions. For instance, the European Framework for Digital literacy has provided a comprehensive definition as follows:

“Digital literacy is the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse

and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process.” (Martin, 2006,p.155)

Jisc (2014) on the other hand has created digital literacy models based on 7 elements and (Ng,2012) has identified 3 dimensions to digital literacy. These 3 dimensions are most relevant in this context, which is about supporting HE students studying in a FE environment.

- Technical: using IT skills
- Cognitive: locate/search, assess, incorporate digital information considering moral, ethical and legal issues
- Social emotional: online engagement with other in an acceptable fashion.

These dimensions could be used as a starting point to establish a clear set of expectations to ensure a common understanding between students and tutors. A digital skills induction program could also be based on these 3 dimensions.

VLE DISPLAYS THE COLLEGE CULTURE AND MICROSOFT TEAMS CAN BE USED AS PART OF THE SUB-CULTURE CREATED AMONGST A COHORT OF STUDENTS

Research findings

59% computing and access students said that different activities were introduced gradually on Microsoft Teams.

96% computing and access students mentioned that they received enough guidance and support to get started with Microsoft Teams.

63% full time and part time business students found the online learning activities on the VLE useful to complete their assignments.

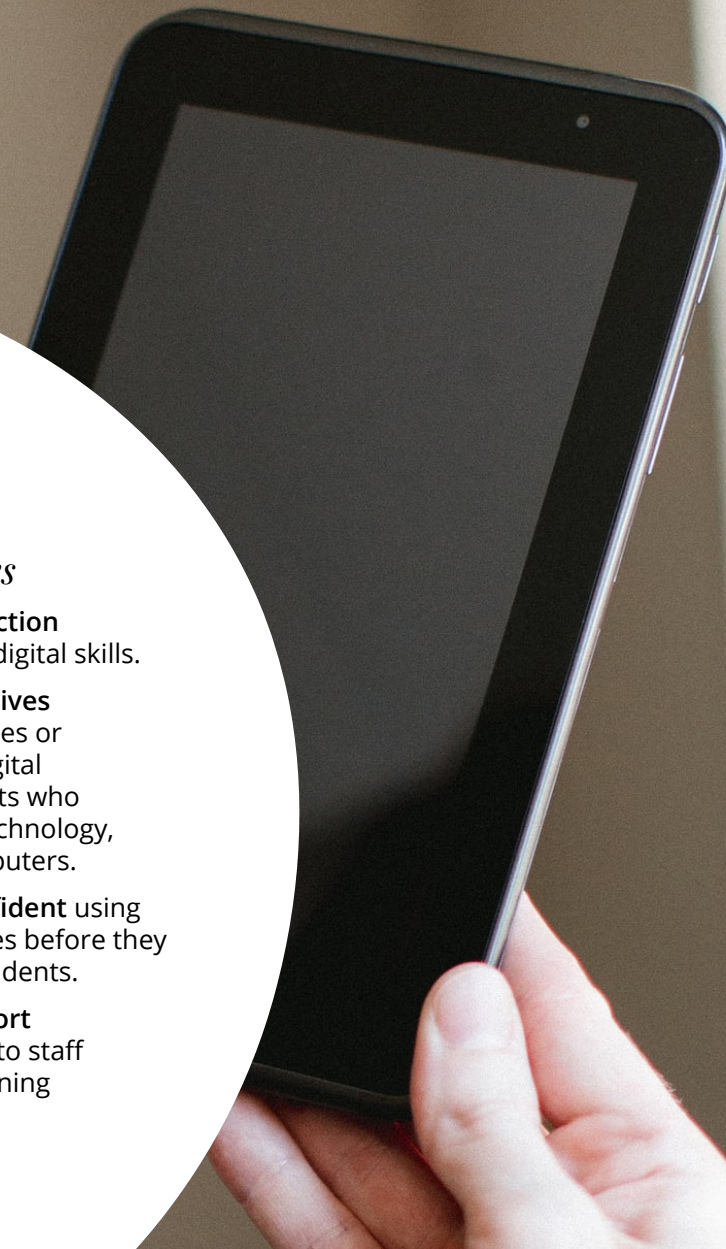
Support strategies

Design a robust induction program focused on digital skills.

Encourage digital natives to volunteer as buddies or champions to help digital immigrants or students who are unfamiliar with technology, software and/or computers.

Ensure staff feel confident using platforms/technologies before they introduce these to students.

Make technical support and advice available to staff and students e.g. learning technologists.



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Appendix

Sunderland College is a large general further education college, which has been operating for over 150 years with provision across several campuses. Over 13,500 students study a range of A-level, professional, technical and Higher Education courses at the college.

Research was conducted at Sunderland College with a pragmatic viewpoint, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, taking a two-stage approach. The first stage involved interviewing seven members of the teaching staff who were asked how they implemented blending learning in their delivery. The second stage was focused on gathering student feedback in the form of surveys and interviews. As the students were using blended learning in different forms the surveys were tailored towards what the discussion with the teaching staff had revealed.

About HN Online

HN Online is a digital solution built around a diverse range of tools, including video case studies, interactive exercises and self-assessment questions.

Created specifically for flexible delivery of BTEC Higher National qualifications, HN Online enables a combination of online and in-college learning, giving students more flexibility to study around other commitments and helping colleges to recruit students who might struggle to attend a fully face-to-face programme.

HN Online provides a self-paced online course which students progress through at their own pace to understand core content

Staff feedback indicates that both Microsoft Teams and VLE were being used to deliver blended learning. Some courses use a combination of VLE to share online resources whilst they use teams for collaboration and communication.

Interview sample included 53 students studying Higher Nationals in Business, Computing and Electrical Engineering. Students taking the access to health science and social work course were also included in the sample as getting a range of responses was essential in establishing if any pattern was emerging across different levels of study that would support existing findings or open new avenues of research. The student sample represents a mix of full time, part time students as well as apprentices across the age range of 19-37.

before they come to class. When online, students have access to all critical course content within a self-paced digital space. This enables you to focus on delivering high value face-to-face teaching and assessment support for the times students are in the classroom.

All digital content is aligned to the learning outcomes of the BTEC Higher National qualification, and you can be confident that rigorous learning design principles have been applied throughout.

Find out more at [qualifications.pearson.com/hn-online](https://www.pearson.com/hn-online) or contact us at highernationals@pearson.com to arrange a demo.

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