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Article Review: 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.

As colleges and universities are more regularly faced with shrinking budgets that force difficult choices, class size has been just one area of change that poses a threat to active student engagement and advancement in higher academia. In order to combat the drop in student success in large (30+) student sized classes, instructors are turning to blended learning as a means to ensure student-centered learning occurs within their courses. This research article examines the success found with the pilot integration of a single blended-learning unit within a traditionally instructed course. The study focused on a single unit instructed within a sixty-student class and the results were positive enough to encourage the professor to blend all of the units in the course regardless of student count.

The theoretical framework for the project was an action research study using a mixed methodological approach. This framework has been rising in popularity in the educational sphere. This approach mirrors the act of instruction in that an agent (teacher) has an impact on subjects (students) within a closed environment. The author of the study is usually the agent, and the results of the study focus on the success of the alterations made by the agent while leaving room for known and unknown variables that could affect the project. I find this to be a good approach for instructionally based research, but it has many potential areas of weakness.

The project proceeded with a literature review and a basic overview of the definition of blended learning that related to the project. An amalgam of ideas from several theorists was congealed to form the basis of their research.

“Graham [16] defined blended learning systems as a combination of face-to-face with computer-mediated instruction. Ross and Gage [17] differentiated between web and technology-enhanced courses that incorporate online supplementary components within traditional courses without reducing face-to-face time and hybrid courses where in-class time is replaced by online course work. Picciano [18] described blended learning as a method of instruction that combines online with face-to-face learning activities that are integrated in a “planned, pedagogically valuable” way and where some of the face-to-face time is replaced by online activities. According to Allen, Seaman, and Garrett [19] a blended course has anywhere between 30 to 79% of online content deliver” (3).

The term blended learning in this project would mean utilization of online assignments. Students would complete these assignments instead of attending regularly scheduled class periods. Classes occurred twice a week, but when in the blended learning unit of the course, students would attend only one day that week. This blended learning unit was planned and pedagogically valuable, and 50% of the unit would be delivered online. The term differs from the one presented in our conversations in that it is more concrete about precise uses of technology and a percentage

of class time that would be spent online. I appreciate it is an attempt to quantify the definition of blended learning and find it accurate but restrictive.

Tackling the issue of large class sizes causing a lack of student engagement drove Professor Kenney to test the hypothesis that introducing blended learning into the curricula would boost student engagement levels and increase unit test scores. With class size in two sections breaching sixty students, the Professor determined that an experiment with blended learning was in order. She decided to add online activities to her human development unit which was more difficult conceptually than the other units. The exact activities were as follows:

“Three online assignments were developed to teach the content on cognitive, personal, and adolescent development. In these assignments, students were given questions to answer requiring information from the textbook and from PowerPoint presentations, video clips, articles, and websites that were posted on Blackboard, the university’s course management system. In addition to the online content assignments, students submitted a case study analysis requiring an application of the developmental concepts learned online. They also participated in an online discussion about the case study” (6).

The instructional goals had several main foci: improving student learning, increasing students’ active involvement in the course and engagement in the material, increasing students’ sense of preparation for in-class activities, increasing student participation during direct learning. These foci were evaluated based on several criteria. The same unit test was given to all students. Students were given surveys and informal observations were made of student activity in class. Finally, tracking statistics from the management system were reviewed.

The Professor attempted to meet each instructional goal through the use of an online learning activities and assignments. The results were in favor of blended instruction being included in the course. All criteria showed positive remarks from students and the results on the standardized unit exam was consistent with those with a smaller sized class with half the number of students. The informal observations showed an increase in student participation in class.

The overall design and use of action research in this manner would be a good basis to use for similarly designed projects using any type of new instructional strategy. This particular piece of research would have benefitted from a more explicit discussion of the informal observation techniques used, raw data from the unit test and survey results, some basis for student ability levels in each class prior to starting the blended learning unit, and copies of the survey questions. I am not completely sold on the methods of assessing the effectiveness of this project. One simple manner of determining effectiveness of the project would have had longitudinal exam results for the entirety of the courses from all three classes involved to determine if test score gains were isolated to this unit or whether the students in one class were stronger academically overall than the others.

This article was not very effective in relating useful information to those working as instructional designers in a post-secondary institution beyond ego boosting. The details of the online activities were slim, the changes made for in-class instruction were not clearly spelled out, and even things as mundane as which learning management system in use at the college were left out. An

Instructional Designer new to blended learning should seek out professional organizations such as the ASTD or take a course in Instructional Design program at UMass...