

Blended Learning Viability in Engaging Post-Graduate Students into Research Methodology Courses

جدوى التعلم المدمج في إشراك طلاب الدراسات العليا في مقياس منهجية البحث العلمي

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Abstract:

During the outbreak of the 21st century, the integration of blended learning has become an issue of great controversy. This latter is seemingly creating new ventures and modes in teaching, especially after the newly devised educational reforms. To assess the viability of blended learning on post-graduate learners, this small scale study has been carried out applying qualitative data collection procedures, namely interviews. The aim of this research project is to demonstrate a new research perspective for the investigation of hybrid learning. This paper addresses the following research query: "what are post-graduate students' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of Internet to study research methodology?" The results obtained through this study confirm the usefulness of blended learning though this latter could be somehow distractive, and, therefore, might affect negatively learners' academic achievement.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Teaching Modes, Educational Reforms.

ملخص البحث

في مطلع القرن الحادي والعشرين، أصبح إدراج التعلم المدمج موضوع جدل كبير. فقد بات - على ما يبدو - يعتمد على خلق مشاريع وأساليب جديدة في التدريس، وبخاصة بعد الإصلاحات التعليمية التي أعتمدت حديثا. لدراسة مدى فعالية التعلم المدمج وجدواه في أوساط طلابنا من فئة ما بعد التدرج و المسجلين في الدراسات العليا، فقد تم القيام بهذه الدراسة المعتمدة على تطبيق إجراءات جمع البيانات النوعية، وهي المقابلات. الهدف من هذا المشروع البحثي هو إظهار منظور بحثي جديد للتحقيق في التعلم المدمج. تتناول هذه الورقة التساؤل البحثي التالي: "ما هي آراء طلاب الجامعات حول استخدام الإنترنت في دراسة منهجية البحث؟". تؤكد النتائج التي تم الحصول

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عليها من خلال هذه الدراسة على فائدة التعلم المدمج. ومع ذلك، يمكن لهذا الأخير أن يكون له آثار جانبية بطريقة أو بأخرى، كأن يكون مشتتًا بطريقة ما، وبالتالي، قد يؤثر سلبًا على التحصيل الدراسي للطلاب.



I. Introduction:

The 21st century has witnessed tremendous changes in the instructional modes devised by the expanded use of digital means and online teaching. Indeed, the integration of information technologies within the teaching-learning process has challenged face-to-face traditional methodologies. Its implementation required a re-consideration of the different teaching approaches and learning strategies. It has been documented that “blended learning”, or used interchangeably as “hybrid learning” were introduced as new modes of instruction during the late 1990s. Little John and Pegler (2006) contended that “New types of learning activities challenge our thinking as to how learning might be facilitated, creating new etiquettes of learning and teaching, and shifting the concern of control from the teacher to the learner” (p.4). The perspective held within this study is that blended learning is an approach which will, in most cases, promote and expand the learning opportunities for 21st Century learners. This paper aims to shed light on the utility of combining online teaching with face-to-face instruction. Its core purpose is to account for students’ attitudes towards the feasibility of blended learning in enhancing academic engagement. Also, it, accounts for the methodological process of generating the research question and hypothesis and arguing for the choice of the method used.

The current paper is structured around the following points. First, there is an attempt to contextualize the problem within its theoretical scope with an effort to address the main research queries. Second, an account of the most prominent definitions of the concept of blended learning has been provided. Finally, the remaining sections reflect upon the research method applied and the data analysis procedure in order to highlight the assumptions understood and grasped about this data elicitation tool.

II. Statement of the Problem:

Blended learning in the higher education sector has become an imposed reality especially during the pandemic crisis. Higher education reforms worked hard to integrate innovative modes at university level to enhance the quality of both teaching and learning. However, what has been observed in the current context, namely Batna 2 University, seems somehow perplexing wherein a scant number of teachers attempted to integrate the use of modern technologies as supportive pedagogic means. Despite the fact that many students are digital literates; some educational settings are still unable to cope with the challenging demands of teaching-learning fostered by modern technologies. Henceforth, the current study endeavors to address the issue of integrating blended learning within the higher education sector, considering students' perceptions, needs, and attitudes.

III. Research Questions:

This study falls within the realm of education where the world of teaching and learning is under scrutiny with an aim to understand, inform and improve practice. The goal is to “explain a phenomenon, describe a culture, disclose life, predict outcomes or assess variables and impacts.” (Mears, 2012, p.170). Data collection methods are determined by clarifying both the research questions and the research purpose, which the aim is, as suggested by Mears (2012), “to reveal broad patterns or trends across populations.” (p. 170). Thus, the current piece of research could be interested in the qualitative paradigm where deep insights and interpretations of variables and perceptions are taken into account.

To investigate the viability of blended learning on academic engagement, it is fundamental to formulate a well stated research question aiming at eliciting valid data. In fact, the purpose is to end up with an empirical piece of research project to “demonstrate both conceptual clarity and a good fit between the different component parts of the research, especially between its questions and its methods.” (Punch, 2009, p.57). Miles and Heberman (1994) point out that “developing research questions is a valuable defense against the confusion and overload that is possible in the early stages of research.” (p.57). Punch added that “the research can make considerable progress towards identifying specific research questions, particularly when professional knowledge about the topic is brought to the research” (p.57).

To investigate the viability of blended learning, a research question has been formulated aiming at generating data. Starting from one general question to

first discern the topic, it has been agreed upon: **“Can Internet be a useful tool to enhance learners’ academic performance?”** With respect to the type of participants required and the quality of data, this question has been refined into: **“What are post-graduate students’ perceptions and attitudes about the use of internet to study research methodology?”**

In the process of devising the research question, there has been a move from the general to the specific focus of the research. Punch asserts that “general research questions are [...] not [...] directly answerable because they are too general”. (p.60). Consequently, specific research questions should be specific and precise.

With reverence to this, Shavelson and Towne (2002) contend that “Many scientists owe their renown less to their ability to solve problems than to their capacity to select insightful questions for investigation.” (p. 72). This process attempts to reveal our ability as researchers in undertaking a given investigation because a research question is meant, according to Dörnyei (2011), “to provide orientation to the research methodology that can best achieve the research purpose.” (p.73).

More importantly, when deciding for research questions one should consider whether these latter are worth asking and worth answering. Based on this premise, the research question formulated considers the research participants and looks at the data needed. Actually, the question is whether this research generates or measures data. This would likely help to contextualize the issue.

In addition, to decide for a good enquiry, the suggested question has been shed upon Thomas’s (2013, pp. 6-11) four dichotomies in designing a research question, such as: What’s the situation? What’s going on here? What happens when? What is related to what? These questions might stand as acceptable as starting points for the current project, knowing that each of them infers “different kinds of complexity” and each of them would lead to different kinds of inquiry. Henceforth, the following questions were asked:

1. Am I going to describe a given situation?
2. Am I going to interpret a given situation to illuminate what is going on?
3. Does X cause Y?

4. What is the relationship between X and Y?

Thomas (2013) asserts that “all of these four types of questions lead to their own routes of inquiry and will cause the researcher to lean lightly or heavily toward a particular kind of approach and design.” (p. 14). Based on the type of the research questions addressed, interviewing is commonly believed to equate with matters of how or what related to lived experience; for example:

- What are the long-term consequences of...?
- What is the experience of...?
- What characteristics emerge when...?
- How does participation in...?
- How do changes influence...?
- How do students perceive...?

Accordingly, in the pursuit of in-depth inquiry and understanding of blended learning in the current academic settings and to first discern the topic, there was an agreement upon a “Prima Facie” research question which is: **“Can Internet be a useful tool to enhance learners’ academic performance?”**. At first glance, this question looked too broad. It has, then, been revised into a more precise research question: **“what are post-graduate students’ perceptions and attitudes about the use of Internet to study Research Methodology?”** Through this question, the aim is to explore students’ perceptions and attitudes about the use of Internet and, in particular, its influence on how they would use it to engage their studying of Research Methodology. More specifically, the core issue was to know “to what extent can Internet facilitate students’ engagement in learning?”

To probe the current research question, qualitative face-to-face interviews have been deployed, as a data collecting tool to have access to information needed.

IV. Understanding Blended Learning:

Although, the literature has not documented a decisive origin of the term “blended learning”, many scholars like Driscoll (2003, cited in Friesen (2012, p.2) defined blended learning as follows:

1. “To combine or mix modes of web-based technology (e.g., live virtual classroom, self-spaced instruction, collaborative learning, streaming video, audio, and text) to accomplish an educational goal.
2. To combine various pedagogical approaches (e.g., constructivism, behaviorism, cognitivism) to produce an optimal learning outcome with or without instructional technology;
3. To combine any form of instructional technology (e.g., videotape, CD-ROM, web-based training, film) with face-to-face instructor-led training.
4. To mix or combine instructional technology with actual job tasks in order to create a harmonious effect of learning and working”.

Additionally, Friesen (2012) coined the term blended learning to refer to “almost any combination of technologies, pedagogies, and even job tasks” (p. 2). Within the same respect, Procter (2003) considers blended learning as “the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching, and styles of learning” (p.4). However, some revolutionary definitions to the newly set concept of blended learning have been proposed to refer to the combinations of face-to-face teaching modes with computer-mediated instruction (Graham, 2006). In concordance with this, for Friesen (2012), blended learning refers to the combination of “Internet and digital media with established classroom forms that require the physical co-presence of teacher and students” (p.1). From the former definitions, it could be contended that blended learning is conceptualized as a teaching mode that equates technology-mediated tools with face-to-face instruction in real-time contexts.

V. Research Methodology Design

To explore the addressed research question, a qualitative approach has been deployed wherein interviews have been used as data collection tools. An in-depth account of qualitative interviews as a research method is given. Consequently, an exploratory semi-structured interview schedule has been designed to generate data and gather descriptions from the interviewees with respect to blended learning and academic learning. Kvale (1996) posits that “the qualitative research interview seeks to describe and understand the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main task in

interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say.” (p.1).

To fulfill the objectives of the current research and the quality of data needed, qualitative interviews are believed to allow for more probing than questionnaires. It can provide in-depth information and allow good interpretive validity (Opdenakker, 2006).

The interview was recorded with the permission of the participants. The next step in this research project was data transcription and analysis. What is worth mentioning at this level is that in this phase, the steps of coding, categorizing and attributing specific themes for the data set by the NVIVO Software have been considered. In what follows a detailed description of this data eliciting technique with its strengths and weaknesses.

VI. Interviews as a Data Gathering Tool:

Dörnyei (2011) posits that “interviewing is a frequent part of the social life surrounding most of us: we can hear interviews on the radio, watch people being interviewed on television, and we ourselves often participate in interviews of various types either as interviewers or interviewees.” (p. 134). As Miller and Crabtree (1999) point out, “the interview genre with its turn-taking conventions and expectations for participant roles, etiquettes, and even linguistic phrases is usually shared cultural knowledge. It is exactly because interviewing is a known communication routine that the method works so well as a versatile research instrument. In fact, although there is a range of qualitative research techniques available for researchers, the interview is the most often used method in qualitative inquiries. It is regularly applied for diverse purposes.” (p.134).

According to Kvale (1996), a qualitative research interview seeks to cover both a factual and a meaning level, though it is usually more difficult to interview on a meaning level. Mc Namara (1999) claims that “interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant’s experiences where the interviewer can pursue in-depth information around the topic. They may be useful as follow up to certain respondents to questionnaires; for example, to further investigate their responses.” (p. 1). For Frey and Oishi (1995), Interviews are “purposeful conversations in which one person asks prepared questions (interviewer) and another answers them (respondent).” (p.1). This is done to gain information on a particular topic or a particular area

to be researched. Interviews are useful tools which can lead to further research using other methodologies such as observation and experiments (Jensen and Jankowski, 1991, cited in Oatey, 2014, p. 1). Gill et al., (2008) confirm that “the purpose of the research interview is to explore the views, experience, beliefs and/or motivations of individuals on specific matters. Qualitative methods, such as interviews, are believed to provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena that would be obtained from purely quantitative methods such as questionnaires. Interviews are, therefore, most appropriate where little is already known about the studied phenomenon or where detailed insights are required from individual participants. They are also particularly appropriate for exploring sensitive topics where participants may not want to talk about such issues in a group environment.” (p.2). Thomas (2013) claims that “an interview is a discussion with someone in which you try to get information from them. The information may be facts or opinions or attitudes, or any combination of these.” (p.194). For Boyce and Neale (2006) “In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or a situation. For example, we might ask participants, staff, and others associated with a program about their experiences and expectations related to the program, the thoughts they have concerning program operations processes, and outcomes, and about any changes they perceive in themselves as a result of their involvement in the program.” (p.3). Boyce and Neale added that “interviews are useful when you want detailed information about a person’s thoughts and behaviors or want to explore new issues. In-depth interviews are often used to provide context to other data such as outcome data offering a more complete picture of what happened in the program and why. For example, you may have measured an increase in youth visits to a clinic, and through in-depth interviews you find out that a youth noted that she went to the clinic because she saw a new sign outside of the clinic advertising youth hours. You might also interview a clinic staff member to find out their perspective on the clinic’s ‘youth friendliness.’” (p.3). In fact, interviews are “purposeful interactions in which an investigator attempts to learn what another person knows about a topic, to discover and record what that person has experienced, what he or she thinks and feels about it, and what significance or meaning it might have. This process appears to be innately simple and intuitive.” (Mears, 2012, p.170).

Qualitative interviews are divided into three basic types: **structured**, **unstructured** and **semi-structured**. For Thomas (2013) “each involves the interviewer in face to face contact or telephone contact with another person, namely the interviewee.” (p. 194). De Valenzuela and Shrivastava (2014) provided another typology for qualitative interviews:

1. **“Informal, conversational Interview** where no pre-determined questions are asked, in order to remain as open and adaptable as possible to the interviewee’s nature and priorities. During the interview, the interviewer “goes with the flow.” (p.8).
2. **General Interview guide approach:** This is intended to ensure that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee. This provides more focus than the conversational approach, but still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting the information from the interviewee.
3. **Standardized, open-ended interview** in which the same open-ended questions are asked to all interviewees. This approach facilitates faster interviews that can be more easily analyzed and compared.
4. **Closed, fixed-response Interview** where all interviewees are asked the same questions and asked to choose answers from among the same set of alternatives. This format is useful for those not practiced in interviewing.” (p.8).

With respect to Thomas’s (2013) categorization, the structured interview is “a meeting with another person in which you ask a pre-determined set of questions. Beyond this set of questions there is very little scope for further follow-up - little scope for pursuing an interesting comment from the interviewee. The idea behind this structure is that there is a degree of uniformity provided across the different interviewees you meet. The interviewee's responses will be recorded on a form that will probably mix different kinds of response, both open-ended and closed.” (p. 196). Structured Interviews are, essentially, verbally administered questionnaires, in which a list of pre-determined questions are asked with little or no variation and with no scope for follow up questions to responses that warrant further elaboration. Consequently, they are relatively quick and easy to administer and may be of particular use if clarification of certain questions are required or if there are likely to be literacy or numeracy problems with the respondents.

Conversely, unstructured interviews do not reflect any preconceived theories or ideas and one performed with little or no organization (Chadwick, 2008, cited in Gill et al., 2008, p.2). It is “like a conversation. There is no predetermined format to the interview beyond your general interest in the topic you do not meet your interviewee with a pre-specified list of questions. The idea behind the unstructured interview is that interviewees should be allowed to set the agenda. They should be the ones who are determining the important issues to be covered. This is of course what is wanted in interpretive research: in this kind of research you are looking for your respondents to set the scene and let them tell you what the issues are. As researchers, we are supposed to go in with an open mind and it is important that the ‘frame’ set for the research allows the interviewee scope to do this.” (Thomas, 2013, p. 197). Such an interview may simply start with an opening question such as: “can you tell me about your experience of visiting the dentist?” and will then progress based, primarily, upon the initial response. Unstructured interviews are usually very time consuming (often lasting several hours) and can be difficult to manage, and participate in, as the lack of predetermined interview questions provides little guidance on what to talk about (which many participants find confusing and unhelpful). Their use is, therefore, generally only considered where significant “depth” is required, or where virtually nothing is known about the subject area (or a different perspective of a known subject area is required.” (Gill et al., 2008, p. 2).

Nonetheless, the semi-structured interviews provide the best of both worlds as far as interviewing is concerned, combining the structure of a list of issues to be gathered together with the freedom to follow up points as necessary. Semi-structured interviews as stated by Stewart (2008) consist of “several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, but also allows the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail. The interview format [...] provides participants with some guidance on what to talk about, which many find helpful. The flexibility of this approach, particularly compared to structured interviews, also allows for the discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants.” (p. 2).

Based on the previous perspectives and to investigate the research question, an exploratory semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix1) has been developed which could generate data as well as weigh the different perceptions of post-graduates with respect to the viability of blended learning

on academic engagement. The interview schedule is built upon Seidman's (2006), cited in Arthur et al., (2012, p. 171) categorization.

VII. Data Collection:

In the data collection process, the interview was recorded using a personal phone with the consent of the participants. Besides, some notes have been taken during the interview to capture other additional information. In fact, the process of data collection relied heavily on the recording as this latter allowed for capturing the essence of what has been sought for. During the data collection process, body language has been avoided to the maximum in order not to influence the respondents' answers and to keep the validity of the process. Mutual trust and personal rapport has been established during the first contact with the interviewees. There was a huge attempt to keep the respondents in a non-threatening environment, and the researcher managed to make the informants feel comfortable with the questions.

VIII. Data Analysis:

Having collected the data is half the process, and now the other half must be addressed. As this study is qualitative in nature, and because this study accounts for a naturally occurring data, it is necessary to denote the different processes undertaken in a qualitative analysis. Indeed, qualitative analysis is used in this project to delineate the different analytical strategies starting from "the deductive categorization to inductive pattern finding." (Dörnyei, 2011, p. 242).

First, data has been transcribed (Appendix 2) and stored automatically in the researcher's personal computer for further consultation. In fact, this is a time consuming process especially if the quality of the recoding was not good. The only factor worth mentioning about data transcription is that it helps us to scrutinize data thoroughly. Concerning this small scale project, the same steps of the NVIVO Software, in terms of coding and attributing themes to the data set, have been followed. Looking at the data, the following categorization has been reached:

1. Times spent on the net
2. The usefulness of the net.
3. Internet and Learning engagement.

4. Pros and Cons of the net.

In this paper, only one participant's views and perceptions have been reported due to managerial constraints. In what follows, some of the attributed themes that have been recorded, for instance, "A couple of times a week" represents the learner's time spent on the net. "I can get a lot of ready-made information" has been attributed "the usefulness of the net" theme. In fact, the answer to this question has raised the idea to how specific the research question was. With regard to the third theme, the participant found the net more helpful in areas where she could exchange information with other persons. What is worth mentioning in this phase is that the need for a follow-up question to extend how and why that might be significant for learning engagement stand mandatory. As far as the last theme is concerned, the respondent affirmed that we should not deny the usefulness of the net in our academic endeavor though this latter could be somehow distractive, and therefore affects negatively academic achievement.

IX. Discussion:

The first reflections on this process were that it was really an interesting experience. The whole process was really enlightening as it causes us to consider a number of important issues in writing research questions and associated interview schedules. In the activity leading up to formulating the questions, the researcher had to consider what type of questions should be asked, should he prompt, generate or probe?

In the execution of the interview, it has been recognized that some other important questions popped up during the interview. The researcher, then, started from the premise to give the total freedom to the participant to answer genuinely the questions with one purpose in mind to get the most from the participant. The researcher also avoided using any facial or body language that would distort the process of the interview. In fact, data collection through interviewing can be an intense experience and a sensitive process especially in the social sciences as we have this close contact with individuals' lives and experiences. It sometimes can be too personal and, here, questions asked are given due value. As Swift et al., (2007) claimed "researchers are often well versed in outlining the importance of protecting participants, the ways they intend to do this and the possible consequences of the research process upon the lives of those being studied." (p.328). To solve this, open mindedness and

flexibility are key. Finally, insights regarding the schedule of an appropriate interview have been well grasped at the end of this project.

X. Conclusion:

One can conclude with Dörnyei's (2011) claim stating that "the interview is a natural and socially acceptable way of collecting information that most people feel comfortable with and which can be used in a variety of situations and focusing on diverse topics to yield in-depth data. The Interviewer's presence allows for flexible approaches, probing into any emerging new issue, while the interview guide helps to maintain a systematic coverage of the domain. The main weakness of the interview is that it is time consuming to set up and conduct, and that it requires good communication skills on the part of the interviewer, which not all of us have naturally." (p.143).

In fact, what has been grasped is that interviewing could generate interesting data due to its versatile quality. However, one needs to acquire the necessary skills to ensure both the validity and reliability of the findings. This method helped in answering the main query raised stating that blended learning could be a double edged tool that might have a dual effect, and that should be approached wisely. For the analytical part, it has been learnt that one might harness the research project for further debate and maybe use other data collection methods and procedures. From above, if one has to draw a lesson from this experience, one should say: "open mindedness is a requirement for good interviews that lead to good quality data and high response rates".

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XII. Appendices:

IX.1. Appendix1: Interview Schedule:

1. How often do you use Internet for your learning?
2. In what ways you think Internet can be useful for your learning?
3. Can you tell me how far does internet build students' engagement in learning?
4. Tell me more about how internet has enhanced your engagement in learning with others?
5. What do you think of Internet as a learning tool?
6. According to you what are the pros and cons of using internet in our learning?

IX.2. Appendix2: Interview Transcript:

Interviewer: Good Morning. How often do you use Internet for your learning?

Interviewee: Uh....A couple of times a week.

Interviewer: Thank you. Three times?

Interviewee: A couple of times. Yeah! A couple of times.

Interviewer: So, in what ways you think internet can be useful for your learning?

Interviewee: In many ways. I think there is uhhh just there is a lot of information out there. A lot of information ready available for you so you can use it. That is really useful. It is really useful.

Interviewer: So, Can you tell me how can internet build students' engagement in learning?

Interviewee: Sorry! Would you repeat please!

Interviewer: Can you tell me how far Internet builds students' engagement in learning?

Interviewee: umm, umm I don't know! Oh! I suppose you have got uhh if you have got already access to that wide range of information that can uhh you can exchange that information so you don't have to struggle a lot if somebody would have it you can easily get if you are working between groups you can get easily engaged. But I am an old fashioned person I don't like to get in touch with people through the net I prefer face to face contact.

Interviewer: So, can you tell me more about how internet has enhanced your engagement in learning with others?

Interviewee: umm from a professional prospect I think I have been able to access information easily it is very quick it does not cost me anything I haven't to go anywhere to get what I need. Teachers could send stuff when I need it where I need it. I can send that information out to people easily. They could send it to me when they find it I find that quite useful.

Interviewer: What do you think of Internet as a learning tool?

Interviewee: umm I think it has its advantages but it can also becoming quite distractive as it does not enhance people's learning.

Interviewer: These are the questions. Thank you very much!

Interviewee: Thank you for you.

Interviewer: So according to you we cannot rely on the internet as an immediate tool for learning?

Interviewee: I think it makes you quite lazy. You can go to Wikipedia and get the information you print it and that's it, but if you read a book you have to go physically and seek for the information if you rely on the internet you can get very lazy as you rely on what you find on the internet and you don't want to search for but if you go to Wikipedia anybody can put stuff on it you don't know whether that information is reliable or not. So you get lazy at the end.

Group: Thank you very much Thanks a lot Thank you so much for your collaboration.

Interviewer: Another question after deep reflection with the group members. We felt the need for a follow up question.

Interviewer: According to you what are the pros and cons of using internet in our learning?

Interviewee: umm pros I think the information is readily available It does not cost you anything. You can learn in your particular way. As a con I think it makes you lazy and you don't know whether the information is accurate because it is online and this is my personal opinion alright

Group Members: Thank you very much Thank you!

Interviewee: Thank you. Thanks!