

Supporting Blended Learning Teachers

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I began using blended learning four years ago as a secondary school teacher in Ontario. I started small, using one feature at a time, but quickly became hooked. The more I learned how to do, the more I wanted to explore and try new things. This learning and growth gave my teaching a renewed energy because I was excited about new things that I was now able to do, and for the first time in my adult life, I was excited about my own learning. My love of blended learning and new-found interest in technology soon led to seeking other ways to integrate technology into my classroom. At this point, there was no turning back.

Last year I moved out of the classroom and into a different position, as an Instructional Coach. My job is to support teachers at my high school in adopting new practices and trying new approaches, so much of what I do is related to technology. Both as a classroom teacher and in my new role I've seen colleagues begin a semester by setting up a course in our Learning Management System (LMS), but for a variety of reasons, some of them don't end up using blended learning as the semester progresses. Why does this initial interest not always mean that blended learning is adopted?

By examining current research I hope to find ways that I can support these teachers and find answers to the following three questions. What conditions have to exist in order for teachers to adopt and continue to use blended learning? What's different for those who get hooked and begin a journey into independent learning? What can I do to support teachers who want to try blended learning?

Review of the Literature

There is a great deal of research regarding the experiences of blended learning teachers. The challenges that they face, as described in recent literature, can be grouped into themes in an attempt to understand why blended learning may not be adopted, or may be quickly abandoned by teachers. *Infrastructure, teacher workload, pedagogical support, and teacher motivation and beliefs* are important factors that are discussed in a variety of studies. In addition, two theories related to technology adoption and innovation provide a framework for understanding how a teacher decides to use or discontinue the use of blended learning.

Some teachers do not adopt, or quickly abandon blended learning because of systemic problems. When teachers do not feel supported by administration, face policies that do not favour online learning, or have students who don't have regular access to computers, they are not likely to adopt blended learning (Tshabalala, Ndeya-Ndereya, & van der Merwe., 2014). School culture plays an important role in supporting blended learning, as "school culture is correlated with the use of innovative teaching practices" (Cincinnati, Zhu & De Wever, 2015, p. 791). In addition, Zhu, Valcke, and Schellens (2010) discovered that lack of time, resources, experience, training and technical expertise were some of the main reasons for non-adoption of blended learning. Barriers such as these are very difficult for an individual teacher to overcome in certain contexts. In such cases, senior level administration will need to address some of these concerns before encouraging teachers to adopt blended learning.

Accompanying these issues of infrastructure and policy is the question of teacher workload. Tynan, Ryan, and Lamont-Mills (2015) interviewed university professors in Australia who are currently using blended learning to deliver their courses and found that the overwhelming perception is that it increases teacher workload. Although the context of the secondary school system in Ontario is slightly different, the concerns expressed by participants in this Australian study apply to blended learning teachers elsewhere. The professors in this study recognize the benefits of blended learning, and are continuing to use it, but have concerns about providing appropriate feedback to students, inadequate infrastructure for both staff and students, professional development and access to support staff such as IT personnel. All of these concerns take time to address; time that could be spent doing other things when teaching face to face courses. Larsen (2012) also described teachers who report that blended learning “gave them more work in the beginning with planning and learning the technology” (p. 189).

Gulbahar and Kalelioglu (2015) support this idea of additional workload. They suggest that blended learning won't be successful if a teacher simply transfers existing activities from a face to face course to an online environment. The course needs to be significantly changed, and this is a time consuming process. “To transform a course from a face to face format to a hybrid format, an instructor must re-examine course goals, develop new online and face to face learning activities, utilize new types of assessment, integrate face to face and online learning activities, and interact with students in new ways” (Kaleta, Skibba & Joosten, 2007, p. 114). This is, indeed, a lot of work. If a teacher doesn't see a need to adopt blended learning, why would they subject themselves to this additional workload? In order for this transition to take place, teachers must have support in the form of appropriate training, collaboration with colleagues and examples of best practices in blended learning (Gulbahar & Kalelioglu, 2015; Larsen, 2012).

Although professional development for the technical aspects of blended learning is important, several researchers have shown that pedagogical support is also needed if blended learning is to be successful. Skibba (2011) states that teachers need to “learn anew and rethink pedagogical strategies” (p. iii), while Kaleta et al. (2007) identify several new roles that blended learning teachers must learn, including pedagogical, social, managerial and technological roles. This transformation of practice should not be expected of teachers without appropriate support. Larsen (2012) identified pedagogical support, technical training and collaboration with colleagues as crucial aspects of professional development for blended learning teachers. He goes on to explain that the support must be ongoing during the semester and that those responsible for the training should “encourage the creation of a community of practice among the faculty” (p. 53). Participants in Larsen's study found that “blended learning pedagogical training was a good motivator because they felt they needed to understand why they were supposed to use blended learning” (p. 137).

Teacher motivation to use blended learning depends on many factors. Scott (2013) found that “gender, age and prior experience may affect teachers taking up e-learning” (p. 571), and Hadjiathanasiou (2009) concluded that “effective implementation of e-learning in schools relies on teachers' abilities, beliefs and motivations” (p. 1). The research of Al-Buaidi and Al-Shihi (2012) focused on teacher satisfaction of a LMS and identified a teacher's computer anxiety and personal innovativeness as a few of the key factors. Moreover, they found that “instructors' satisfaction is a significant determinant of their continuous intention to use LMS in blended learning” (p. 18). Positive views on collaboration and the teacher acting as a facilitator are linked to the adoption of online learning (Zhu et al., 2010), as are teacher willingness and ability to change (Kaleta et al., 2007).

In order to better understand teacher attitudes about technology, Davis (1993) suggests that we examine the cognitive response to the design features of the technology in question. According to the Technology Acceptance Model proposed by Davis perceived usefulness and ease of use have a direct effect on a person's attitude toward using technology, which in turn affects their actual usage. Davis concluded that "perceived usefulness is 50% more influential than ease of use" (p. 475). This would suggest that training for teachers needs to focus on what blended learning will allow them to do and how it will enhance their practice, before tackling the technical aspects of using the given LMS.

While Davis' theory gives us a framework for understanding why a person might choose to use a new technology, the Innovation-Decision Process described by Rogers (1983) provides a more detailed description of the stages of technology adoption and/or rejection. Rogers explains that when an individual encounters a new form of technology they go through the phases of knowledge of the innovation, persuasion by the perceived characteristics of the innovation, decision to use or reject the technology, implementation, and finally, confirmation. Rogers' model is particularly useful in understanding the adoption of blended learning, as it provides an overview of the entire process, including the abandonment that happens in some instances. Rogers refers to this as a discontinuance. He goes on to explain that "there are two types of discontinuance: (1) replacement discontinuance, in which an idea is rejected in order to adopt a better idea which supersedes it, and (2) disenchantment discontinuance, in which an idea is rejected as a result of dissatisfaction with its performance" (p. 209). I have observed both types of discontinuance of blended learning at my school. I have seen colleagues abandon the LMS in favour of using other forms of technology, and I have seen colleagues stop using the LMS because of frustration and disinterest and revert back to previous methods of instruction.

Changing Perspective

After reviewing the literature, my perspective on teachers who do not continue with blended learning has changed significantly. Before researching this issue, I assumed that teachers abandoned blended learning because they lacked the technical skills, or the confidence, or possibly because they didn't really understand that it could be more than just a place to store digital copies of their class handouts. I now realize that this issue is much more complex.

Zhu et al. (2010) found that one of the main reasons for non-adoption of online learning was the lack of a need for innovation. They observed that "teachers who do not experience a concrete necessity to look for an innovation, hold to old teaching habits" (p. 162). I needed blended learning in my courses, so I assumed that other teachers must also have the same need. I now understand that teachers are unlikely to commit to the extra work required in order to begin using blended learning when they don't have a need for it. When they reach a point where their current methods are no longer meeting their needs, then they may look to technology to find a solution. Scott (2013) explains that "critical unmet expectations can usefully stimulate reflection, dialogue and collaboration, leading to redevelopment" (p. 579), and this is when blended learning or another approach may be explored.

Before beginning my research I believed that teachers need support in order to be successful. I still believe this is true, but I think that it has to be the right kind of support. I had a difficult time understanding teachers abandoning blended learning because there are so many people in our school and school board who are available to provide technical assistance with our LMS. What I have learned is that technical support is not the only kind of support that is necessary. I now believe that pedagogical support is even more important than technical support. A change in teaching practice can create the conditions where teachers are in need of innovation. Furthermore, making an explicit connection

between pedagogy and technology will increase the perceived usefulness of blended learning, which Davis showed to be a predictor of continued use.

Rogers' (1983) explanation of the two types of discontinuance also changed my thinking about this topic. Previously, I thought that every case of discontinuance of blended learning that I saw was an example of disenchantment discontinuance and that all of these teachers were reverting back to previous methods. I understand now that some of the teachers who don't continue to use blended learning are examples of replacement discontinuance. They have found something that is more effective in their classroom, and are replacing blended learning with a superior approach. They are not giving up, they are continuing to evolve as professionals. Just because blended learning was effective for me, doesn't mean that it's the best or the only solution for other teachers.

Implementing Change

This change in perspective necessitates implementing change in my current role. My new perspective will influence how I support teachers on an individual basis, and will also influence my planning for professional development.

Much of my support for teachers happens in a one-on-one situation, and often involves answering questions about technical problems. This support is valuable (Larsen, 2012), but I need to start working in pedagogical support alongside the technical support. By asking questions to push their thinking, sharing resources and promoting the best practices of other teachers I would like to become better at assisting teachers in their transition from delivering face-to-face to blended learning courses.

It is recommended that blended learning teachers take a course that is offered in a blended format (Andersen, 2010; Kaleta et al., 2007), so I would like to offer professional development for new blended learning teachers in the form of a blended learning course. This would allow for the ongoing support that was discussed in the literature. It would also facilitate the process of establishing communities of practice which are an important support for blended learning teachers (Larsen, 2012; Yadon, 2014). In addition, the differentiation that blended learning enables would allow for teachers to have control over "the pace and focus of their adoption of technological tools" (p. 184). Ideally this course would begin well in advance of the actual implementation of blended learning by the teachers, so that they could have the recommended time for training and planning in advance (Kaleta et al., 2007; Larsen, 2012).

More than anything, this change in perspective means that I will be more open to other possibilities and ready to honour the personalities and preferences of the teachers that I support.

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