

Editorial on Blended Learning

Prof. Vivienne Bozalek

The new Strategic Plan on Teaching and Learning at the University of the Western Cape, ratified by the Senate and Council in November 2009 places emphasis both on the infusion of technology into teaching and learning and the promotion of flexible learning. The Strategic plan expresses the intention to use technology to promote student-centered and flexible learning, optimising engagement in order to meet the learning needs of students in the twenty first century in a globalizing world. Blended learning which involves a fusion between face-to-face and online learning provides such an opportunity for flexible learning.

Blended learning transcends the dualisms of using either face-to-face or online learning. Projects at UWC such as the International Association of Digital Publications (IADP) piloted in the Social Work Department and the RipMixLearn/ers initiative funded by the Shuttleworth foundation are examples of innovative blended learning endeavours in the institution. The IADP project gave fourth year Social Work students access to both laptops and e-books in the classroom and in their fieldwork placements, making it possible to mix face-to-face teaching and learning with the use of e-books. Students also used mp3 players to record and upload podcasts for formative assessment of their developing skills in simulated exercises and in the field. They were also able to use this electronic evidence to show their competence against assessment criteria and exit level outcomes, thus providing authentic evidence for assessment purposes.. The Ripmixlearn/ers project involved both students and lecturers in innovative projects using a blend of various electronic tools and face-to-face teaching and learning. Tools such as the freely available open-source calibrated peer assessment was successfully piloted in a large class with Economic and Management Sciences students. Ripmixlearn/er projects also used wikis, podcasts and digital storytelling to augment teaching and learning. Students assisted each other's learning by uploading podcasts and other useful material onto a wiki space available to their classmates. These Ripmixlearn/er initiatives have provided possibilities for students and lecturers to collaboratively explore issues of mutual interest both formally inside the classroom and informally in communities of inquiry. Another project which has been initiated and piloted in the extended curriculum programme is the use of clickers and interactive white boards to augment face-to-face large class teaching. Mobile technology and the use of Mixit to respond to students' queries is another innovation in the EMS extended curriculum programme.

Why engage in blended learning one may ask? The benefits of using blended learning are multiple. Blended learning has the potential to make learning more personalised and engaged. It provides just-in-time learning and provides students, particularly second language speakers, the opportunity to gain repeated access to learning resources, which have been shown to be beneficial for their learning. It is a holistic approach to teaching and learning which includes both intellectual and emotional elements.

In the complexity required for twenty first century education, we as higher educators need to think of ways to capture the imagination of students. We also need to consider shifting the focus of controlling resources and knowledge from teacher to learner in an inquiry focused mode of learning. Blended learning offers the potential to encourage creativity, thus motivating students to learn. It is one means of improving learning in higher education.