

The Importance of Blended and Online Learning during the Endemic of COVID-19: A Review

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Abstract

After more than two years, we have had an epidemic called COVID-19, which is now endemic and people are slowly adjusting their lives to it. The word of working from home, online meeting, online learning is not an alien thing to most of us during the outbreak of COVID-19 and it has become the new norm. Particularly in higher institutions, faculty members are actively finding ways and solutions in ensuring the teaching and learning process is always on the right track. Now, most people have realized that face-to-face and online learning could be the best combination of teaching and learning method during this time. The readiness of the users, the sufficient resources of online learning since then, make people adapt themselves to blended and online learning better. Therefore, blended and online learning classes are an option for educators and students. The purpose of this paper is to review and synthesize the literatures on the importance of blended learning and online learning during the endemic of COVID-19.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Online Learning, COVID-19, Endemic, Higher Institution

Introduction

WHO Director, General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stated more than 118,000 cases of COVID-19 have been identified in 114 countries. At least 4,291 people have been killed by the virus since it emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (WHO, 2020). In order to combat the disease, which was spreading at an alarming rate, countries were taking extraordinary measures. Countries took a variety of actions, including implementing Movement Constraint Orders (MCO), closing down companies, schools and higher institutions and many more. Malaysia was not exempt from this global issue, so the government made the decision to close down businesses and educational institutions as well as public and private companies, with the exception of those providing essential services, in an effort to prevent the disease from worsening the nation's conditions (Sipalan, 2020). Now that the pandemic has turned endemic, many things have altered, including the reopening of educational facilities. An endemic, meaning that COVID-19 will not be entirely eliminated, but its ability to overturn societies and livelihoods will be dramatically reduced (Hadfield, 2022). Since COVID-19 took place, the majority of educators and students have used the new online learning technique of teaching and learning. In practice, switching

from face-to-face learning to online learning is not simple but still not impossible to be applied. Not everyone finds it easy to quickly adapt to this method of teaching and learning. Both educators and students must put in a lot of work and be prepared.

The technological constraints, digital divide, insufficient data pack to access the material to attend the class, poor connectivity, lack of device, poor learning environment, technophobia, delayed response, and inability of the teacher to handle the material and communication machineries efficiently, online classes may be more challenging than traditional classrooms (Rouf et al., 2022). Therefore, this review paper's main objective is to identify the importance of blended and online learning in higher institutions.

Methodology

This paper used a review method in literature searching and reviewing, to identify, select, appraise, analyses and synthesize research studies on this topic. The objective of this review paper was:

- to identify the importance of blended and online learning during the endemic of COVID-19.

In order to accomplish the objective of this paper, the authors reviewed the empirical research papers which are ranged between the years of 1999 to 2022. The articles were comprehensively searched through several databases, such Emerald Insight and Google Scholar. The results of the review are written in subsequent sections of the blended and online classes during the endemic of COVID-19.

Literature Review

Blended Learning

Educators as well as students, are accustomed to blended learning in the modern world. Blended learning can be defined as a pedagogical solution that combines both traditional face-to-face teaching and e-learning (Jones, et al., 2007). The authors stated that blended learning is the way to capture the advantages of face-to-face teaching and e-learning pedagogy. According to the study's findings, the university's traditional teaching learning methods can be supported by the blended learning approach (Szadziwska & Kujawski, 2017). Blended learning is the effective blending of various delivery methods, models of teaching and styles of learning that take place in a socially engaging learning environment (Kaur, 2013). In order to enhance student learning outcomes and address significant higher institutional concerns, blended learning courses integrate online and classroom learning activities. Beyond the classroom, blended learning has other options. They are both formal and casual, based on technology and people, autonomous and sociable, and directed and discovery oriented (Rossett, et al., 2003). The authors discovered the possibilities of what can constitute a blended learning approach in Table 1.

Table 1

Strategies for Building Blended Learning

Live face-to-face (formal) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructor-led classroom • Workshops • Coaching/mentoring • On-the-job (OTJ) training 	Live face-to-face (informal) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collegial connection • Work teams • Role modelling
Virtual collaboration/synchronous <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live e-learning classes • E-mentoring 	Virtual collaboration/asynchronous <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-mail • Online bulletin boards • Listservs • Online communities
Self-paced learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web learning modules • Online resource links • Simulations • Scenarios • Video and audio CDs/DVDs • Online self-assessment • Workbooks 	Performance support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help systems • Print job aids • Knowledge databases • Documentation • Performance/decision support tools

Source: Rossett, Douglass and Frazee, 2003

Advantages of Blended Learning

There are many advantages of blended learning. Blended learning, it has been noticed, may transform passive learners into active ones, adds a human touch to the teaching, and offer both students and educators greater flexibility and accessibility without compromising in face-to-face classes (Kaur, 2013; Szadziowska & Kujawski, 2017). Furthermore, an excellent blended learning programmes support students' learning, effectively communicate ideas, demonstrate an interest in learning, plan properly, respect students and fairly evaluate progress (Bonk, et al., 2002).

Disadvantages of Blended Learning

Although blended learning has significant and well-known advantages, there are also some very substantial disadvantages. Szadziowska & Kujawski (2017), through their survey, found that the students (42.9% of those surveyed) significantly disapprove of the lack of educator solutions to the tasks and tests offered via the blended learning platform. The authors also identified the following issues with blended learning as disadvantages; insufficient content availability (34%); user-unfriendly interface (24.9%); lack of direct communication with other participants (19.7%); difficulties logging in (17%); and download issues (14.3%). Other than that, the length of the asynchronous and synchronous course components also has negative feedback from students (Bonk et al., 2002)

Online Learning

New teaching and learning methods have emerged as a result of the development of information technology. Digital learning, often known as E-learning or online learning, is a

modern form of education. Any form of learning that uses an electronic medium is referred to as “E-learning” (electronic learning). E-learning, where the Internet serves as the main tool for implementing learning, is also referred to as virtual education, online training, open training and web-based learning (Baker & Unni, 2018). Online learning, though, is not a completely new approach to learning (Alshauibi, 2021). Table 2 provides a brief historical context of online development as well as the changing focus of educational technology over the past 30 years (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010).

Table 2

The Emergence of Online Learning

Era	Focus	Educational Characteristics
1975 - 1985	Programming; Drill and practice; Computer-assisted learning CAL	Behaviorist approaches to learning and instruction; programming to build tools and solve problems; Local user-computer interaction.
1983 - 1990	Computer-based Training Multimedia	Use of older CAL models with interactive multimedia courseware; Passive learner models dominant; Constructivist influences begin to appear in educational software design and use.
1990 - 1995	Web Based Education and Training	Internet-based content delivery; Active learner models developed; Constructivist perspectives common; Limited end-user interactions.
1995 - 2005	eLearning	Internet-based flexible courseware deliver; increased interactivity; online multimedia courseware; Distributed constructivist and cognitivist models common; Remote user-user interactions.
2005 - present	Mobile Learning and Social Networking	Interactive distance courseware distributed online through learning management systems with social networking components; learning that is facilitated via a wireless device such as aPDA, a smart phone or a laptop; learning with portable technologies where the focus is on themobility of the learner.

Source: Keengwe & Kidd (2010)

The researchers discovered that learning with mobile technology enables people to learn from remote places and that this trend is still going now. It is proven that the growth of online and distance learning has already begun since 2005, and without a doubt, the endemic has even motivated individuals all over the world to start this online learning phase. In general, online learning is usually defined as opposed to face-to-face (F2F) learning (Ryan et al., 2016). Its most prominent feature is the lack of a physical classroom, instead, web-based tools are used to enable studying outside of class regardless of time, location, or

speed. Online learning environments are frequently launched using Learning Management Systems (LMS) or Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) such as Moodle and Blackboard (Pellas and Kazanidis, 2015).

The idea of distance learning is not new to Malaysians. According to Ali (2004), students enrolled in open and distance learning (ODL) programmes in Malaysia are introduced to e-learning. In the 1960s or earlier, many people, especially those who are still employed and wish to enhance their professions, enrolled in external degrees offered by respectable colleges.

Online Webinar

As online learning has been more incorporated into higher institutions, the way it is created and offered is changing according to the needs, limits and resources of the university. Student feedback on the online programme was mostly positive. The webinar was intended to supplement other online learning choices and encouraged involvement in various areas of the online workshop. The webinar received appreciation in especially for giving the course a “face”, encouraging interaction between educators and students, and fostering a sense of belonging among the students. Additionally, students noted that the webinar offered a chance for social interaction (Warren *et al.*, 2015).

Institutions' Effort

In order to ensure that educators and students are receiving effective teaching and learning process, the faculty must support faculty members. Without proper support from the faculty, the educators alone can jeopardize their teaching methods. They require resources, such as access to the Internet and technological assistance, in order to conduct remote learning (Fajardo, 2014; Alshauibi, 2021).

In addition, faculty members and students need to be familiar and comfortable with the pedagogical and technological aspects of online education. The faculty's proficiency in online assessment and student's difficulties adapting to online learning are the main hurdles to a successful online learning transition (Lassoued *et al.*, 2020).

Engagement between Educators and Students

As blended and online learning continues to be included into the foundations of higher institutions, the availability of qualified educators who are dedicated to student support must be a priority in the pedagogy of online teaching and learning (Levy, 2017). The web course, web centered course, and web enhanced course are three alternatives in the construction of an internet-based learning system, as indicated by the growth of e-learning (Sudarsana *et al.*, 2019). Learning, including online learning, has a number of benefits and drawbacks. Behind it all, however, is the fact that online learning is a very helpful component of the present educational process. The effectiveness of the teaching and learning process is also influenced by interaction. Lack of communication between educators and students might affect their motivation, engagement and understanding. Mehall (2020) asserts that poor interpersonal communication can be detrimental. Students will consequently feel dissatisfied or incapable of understanding, which demotivates them. Maintaining student participation in online classes at the same time as the educators remain a challenge.

Technology and Resources

Unsurprisingly, the fact that students and educators were not there at the same time in the same physical location was the root of many of the problems with blended and online learning. An excellent strategy is to divide the assignment into smaller, intermediate deliverables when the projects for these classes call for complex, multi-step abilities. This gives the instructor multiple chances to assess the student's progress and offer appropriate feedback (Bonk et al., 2002). However, problems in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) among educators and students can be avoided through course structure, regular feedback, discourse technique and facilitation factors (York & Richardson, 2012). Synchronous learning is another important way in engaging good interaction with students in distance learning. McBrien et. al (2009) found that participation in synchronous online classes in a virtual classroom has an impact on transactional distance theory's components. When and where appropriate, synchronous technology must be used by educators. Real-time communication between parties is made possible by synchronized technologies like the telephone, text chat and web conferencing (Kearns, 2012). Adding to that, a study by Baber (2020) found that one of the elements impacting student satisfaction with online learning is the engagement in the classroom. Bonk, et al (2002), claimed that the students thought the technology was good and that the distance learning course was enjoyable. It is impossible to deny the requirement for dependable technology to support online learning. For educators to establish a successful online learning environment, the right technology is required. A study conducted by Rahayu and Wirza (2020) among teachers in Indonesia also proved that the importance of technology in their classrooms was recognized by the educators.

When it comes to online learning, learning resources, in addition to technology, become a problem. Numerous resources are needed in order to create and operate an extensive online and hybrid learning environment. Learning resources include unique activities, smart classrooms or spaces, and equipment that promotes participatory learning. Administrators, personnel, and technical support who are easily accessible and knowledgeable are critical in assisting learners and educators in acclimating to online settings (Dringus, 1999).

Discussion and Directions for Future Research

In ensuring engagement between students and educators, both parties should play an active role during online and blended classes not only them, faculty also should give proper guidance and technological support to both students and educators. Workshop and training should be given to the educators in ensuring that they are able to deliver their courses well. This review paper opens up the opportunities for future research, in which researchers could do qualitative research in searching broader views and opinions from the respondents about the hybrid learning. In that way, we might find another issue on blended and online learning and can solve the problem in the future. More studies on issues at higher institutions should be done to enhance the shaping of our future. The result of this review could be used by higher institutions to strategize to overcome the issues, and to put concern on the well-being of the educators, students and the productivity of its institutions.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that educators had faced many challenges and issues regarding blended and online classes after the outbreak of COVID-19. Nonetheless, people around the world

are adapting their best to suit this endemic as well as the educators, students and the higher institutions. Now, faculties are providing more solutions on the issues faced by the faculty members, such as providing adequate resources and technological support to their faculty members. Both students and educators can study in a flexible way with blended learning. Both of them can become learners through the integration of the physical and virtual worlds, but this is the most successful when there is institutional support through the provision of professional learning and the chance to create courses for the best combination.

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