

Blended Learning and New Education Logistics in Northern Sweden

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WHEN CAMPUS-BASED EDUCATION and various forms of “distance” education converge in a more “blended” format, the phenomenon can increase educational opportunities in sparsely populated areas, creating a cloud-like combination of on-campus and distance students.

Description

In March 2010, program coordinators at Umeå University in Sweden responded to an informal survey asking for an indication of how flexible and accessible their on-campus education programs had become. The question emanated from a university-level work group addressing future strategies concerning increased educational availability in northern Sweden. The study group asked if students with time and place constraints had access to educational opportunities comparable with campus-based student opportunities. Certain programs at Umeå University had experimented with various strategies for integrating students at a distance into courses on campus, with varying results. Campus culture also recognized that more-experienced students were able to complete classes using technology-based (IT) learning strategies instead of attending lectures regularly. The work group had two overriding questions:

1. Had the increased use of IT learning tools and communication devices in campus courses created an enriched and more accessible learning environment?
2. Would the use of IT tools and devices make traditional on-campus education more accessible for “distance” students?

Many more program coordinators than expected reported that satellite regional groups existed and that individual students who had little opportunity to attend classes on campus participated in those courses using some form of technology. In some cases, "online education" had become the norm on campus, with students improvising their own learning environments; in other cases, traditional courses, enriched by instructors' use of technology, had increased access.

The majority of coordinators expressed a positive attitude toward integrating technology to increase student outreach, with many commenting that these efforts were beneficial. Only in rare instances did respondents indicate that they preferred to separate on-campus and distance students. Surprisingly, some lab-intensive education program officers believed that these innovations could increase access while maintaining or improving quality.

Looking forward, this could develop into a scenario whereby younger students would attend their courses on campus, while others work in smaller groups around learning centers, and a third group studies from home or from individual workplaces in a wider region but in the same course group.

Need/Rationale for Approach

With the emergence of IT and communication tools, "distance education" has burgeoned in Sweden as elsewhere and is frequently used to attract new groups of nontraditional students in the sparsely populated regions of the north. Umeå University (36,700 students) and Luleå University of Technology (16,000 students) have their main campuses in medium-sized cities on the coast of the Baltic Sea. Over a third of their students do not have a main campus presence, and this percentage is growing.

Asynchronous web-based distance education has shown itself to be a viable instructional format for both institutions, but it demands motivated and self-confident learners. Unfortunately, a large number of nontraditional students do not complete courses and programs in this format. Synchronous video conferencing broadcast to community learning centers has produced better results, although such arrangements are not as flexible and require minimum student cohort groups in one or two places. People in sparsely populated areas, therefore, have fewer learning opportunities, even though they have as many differentiated study preferences as other students. Further, many off-campus educational solutions have suffered from being considered lower-status and project-based, intended for disadvantaged students who cannot attend classes on campus.

During the period from 2008 to 2011, university enrollment has, in general, increased substantially in Sweden. One contributing factor for this growth has been the economic downturn and difficult workplace opportunities; another is the large numbers of college-age students. In part, this trend is being driven by younger-age cohorts entering universities directly after high school, rather than waiting a couple of years, which was previously common. Other students are remaining in universities rather than risking becoming openly unemployed. Demographic projections for the period 2012–2018, however, suggest that youth-group cohorts entering higher education will decrease by up to 40 percent. It should come as no surprise, then, that Swedish universities will try to reach more nontraditional students, especially because educational attainment is considerably diminished in parts of northern Sweden. Educational delivery options that can integrate on-campus and distance students in the same course will then be even more valuable.

Discussion

Where there is no technology at all, a teacher has to be in the same room with his or her students to build a learning environment. While those limitations no longer exist technologically, they still exist culturally. IT integration into campus courses seems to be changing that, however, and perhaps the value proposition for education at a distance, as well. Flexibility has become an added benefit, along with better access to resources and improved quality and enhanced effectiveness of learning.

This integrative strategy (on-campus and distance students together in a blended setting) enables universities to more fully subscribe their courses (if not always their classrooms) in demographic downturns. Nontraditional students in the sparsely populated inland regions get a wider variety of educational alternatives from which to choose even if they cannot come to campus on a regular basis. Even in the blended format, they can experience synchronous social interaction as a part of their studies via video or desktop conferencing.

With a diminishing number of younger-age students entering higher education, universities can reasonably expect logistical challenges when offering different distribution formats (on-campus, video conferencing, and asynchronous web-based), especially if they are kept separate with the need to enroll student-cohort groups. A consolidation of distribution formats into two forms—blended and asynchronous—can represent a viable solution to this problem. The educational environment is much more interactive and engaging if students can learn together in a blended class (at least in many courses and

programs). In this arrangement, all other specialized and international educational offerings might be accomplished in an asynchronous format as an alternative to the normal/blended learning delivery format.

However, if an instructor encounters a situation where he or she is leading a learning process with students, both in the classroom and in other locations and time modes simultaneously, teaching demands increase exponentially. If the classroom is dominant as the learning metaphor, the task appears impossible. However, the process is easier to imagine if “time” and “process” replace the “place” and “transfer” perspective of higher education, with classrooms and learning centers being used as tools among others in the process. Then, blended learning becomes a conscious combination of asynchronous web-based and synchronous traditional and technology-enabled activities, rather than simply a combination of classroom activities and technology-enabled resources.

Hopefully, this game change will be a natural and generic process. When teachers and students are more accustomed to IT tools, a course becomes seamless irrespective of format. IT skills appear to develop naturally when one is teaching and studying—whether the course is at a “distance” or not. IT tools are no longer specialized distance resources for universities. They become work tools integrated into daily life. These resources enhance flexibility, options, and ease of communication.

This model demonstrates how blended learning may be viewed as the *normal* format, as well as how it offers great potential for increasing access to education. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to dramatically increase regional accessibility and turn higher education into a ubiquitous opportunity in a region, instead of being a scarce resource in designated traditional places.

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