The Journal of Asia TEFL

Blended and Experiential Learning for Emiratis in Tertiary Education

Lana Hiasat

Higher Colleges of Technology, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Introduction

Leaders in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have set a strategic plan for the year 2021 to guide the country from its reliance on oil to a sustainable environment (UAE Government, 2012). The vision includes changing educational values that are based on traditional methods of teaching; for example, through rote learning, memorization, and teacher-centered approaches (Hatherley-Greene, 2014). In addition to the importance of including the local culture as part of the 2021 vision, UAE leaders are investing in educational technology to become a knowledge hub in the region (UAE Government, 2012).

Researchers have shown that western frameworks for online learning are not successfully engaging Arab learners (Adham & Lundgvist, 2015; Issa & Siddiek, 2012). Higher education in the Arab world is challenged by a scarcity of high-quality research that would improve the quality of higher learning in the region (Issa & Siddiek, 2012). For example, educational leaders at the Beirut Institute Summit discussed the challenges of understanding how to engage Arab students and reported that problems of engagement remain the biggest challenge for higher education in the Arab world because of the cultural differences of learners in this region (Pennington, 2015). Blended learning approaches in tertiary education offer an opportunity to engage learners using Web 2.0 technology tools and resources that are readily available to both faculty and students.

Cultural Complexities in Blended Learning

Researchers have established the importance of investigating the local cultural context as it is related to education for specific types of learners. To investigate the cultural factors, researchers have applied numerous theoretical frameworks. Several researchers have applied Hofstede's (2011) six dimensions, in addition to models used in teaching intercultural intelligence in Emirati higher education, such as the Knowledge Workx 12 Dimensions Framework and World View Theory (e.g., Hatherely-Greene, 2014; James & Shammas, 2013). The Knowledge Workx framework consists of 12 dimensions, including growth, relationship, outlook, destiny, context, connecting, expression, decision-making, planning, communication, accountability, and status (James & Shammas, 2013). World View Theory consists of three perspectives: honor or shame, guilt or innocence, and power or fear (James & Shammas, 2013). Hofstede's model includes six dimensions that the investigator looks at to include power versus distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty and avoidance, long- versus

short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint (Hatherley-Greene, 2014). The different models offer a focus on a variety of factors that could indicate the cultural orientation of a specific group of individuals or a personal cultural orientation.

Problem of Online Learning in Tertiary Education

Researchers have documented the challenges of learning via educational technology and applying the blended-learning models of teaching for tertiary education (Muniasamy, Ejalani, & Anandhavalli, 2014). For example, scholars have indicated that personalized learning and competing models of education are global challenges that face higher education (NMC Horizon Report, 2015). Researchers in the field of educational technology have examined whether spending on specific educational tools was worth the institution's investment in online learning and blended approaches to education (Cassidy et al., 2014). Despite the documented challenges, other researchers have found that educational technology tools provide several benefits in developing countries, such as in India, where underprivileged learners are offered equal learning opportunities and a cost-effective solution (Gandhi, 2013; Muniasamy, Ejalani, & Anandhavalli, 2014).

Given this background, the two research questions for the present study are:

RQ 1: How do faculty from the general education program at one male-only campus within an institution of higher education in the United Arab Emirates create blended learning environments?

RQ 2: How do students from the general education program at one male-only campus within an institution of higher education in the United Arab Emirates experience blended learning environments?

Methodology

This study is a descriptive embedded single case study that investigates the social process of teaching and learning in a blended-learning environment in one program at one institution. Yin (2014) explained that case studies are either single or multiple case study designs. The multiple cases are beneficial when a researcher is analyzing a phenomenon from multiple contexts. This investigation was of one context, which is a general education program, and an examination of the blended-learning process from various faculty and students' perspectives. While this approach did not allow for comparisons across other departments, or across multiple campuses, the research design allowed for an in-depth investigation about how faculty from this single general education program create blended-learning environments and how their students experience blended learning.

The population in this case study were faculty members, and embedded within the chosen population were their Emirati students in the general education program at one male-only campus of a federal tertiary institution in the UAE. The sampling strategies utilized were non-probability, purposeful techniques. A purposeful sample and criterion-based strategies are often used in qualitative research because study participants are selected so they can inform the phenomenon under study (Le Compte & Gpetzwok, 1982). The purposeful selection of the faculty member included one who had the responsibility and role of the course team leader. The course selection was based on discussions with the department Chair at the research site who anticipated that of the 19 planned classes for the fall in 2016, 11 courses were expected to have some element of blended instruction. From these courses, a random sample of student participants were invited to participate in four focus group discussions with a total of 36 student participants.

Ethical Considerations: The Researcher as Instrument

Several factors were important when considering the ethical practices in this case study, where the researcher's role included acting as the interviewer and as an instrument of the study. The first ethical consideration in this case study included a reflection on the researcher's relationship to the research site. The institutional permissions were the second ethical consideration that the researcher needed to acquire before conducting any research. The third ethical consideration was developing the informed consent for faculty and study participants in this case study. The fourth ethical consideration related to withdrawal procedures from the case study. Finally, the researcher's role included setting up a welcoming and supportive environment during interviews, where the relationship with participants influenced the depth and degree of data collection.

Data Collection

Data were gathered from three sources: 11 faculty, 4 student focus groups, and 4 relevant sources of documentation that included faculty reflective logs, course syllabi, official institutional assessment strategies, and the Handbook for Higher Education Teaching. A panel of nine experts validated the interview questions.

TABLE 1
Sources for Data Collection

Faculty Interviews	Student Focus Group Interviews	Relevant Documents
One-on-one interviews with 11 faculty members	Four focus group interviews with students. Student participants were 9 in each focus group. A total of 36 students participated.	Faculty reflective logs: 9 Official institutional assessment strategies: 11 Course syllabi: 11 The Handbook for Higher Education Teaching

Data Analysis

Data analyses in this qualitative case study were inductive, ongoing, and descriptive. Data analysis happened concurrently with data collection. The coding process started with a search for initial categories. Thematic analysis began with the recognition of the patterns in the data. Saldana (2011) explained that coding functions as a way of creating patterns and classifying data by assigning an attribute to a word or phrase. Coding approaches could vary from process coding, NVivo coding, descriptive, value coding, dramaturgical coding, and versus coding strategies (Saldana, 2011). The following is a summary of the steps in the coding process across all data in the current study:

1. Pre-coding
2. First Cycle: Structural, Descriptive, and Attribute coding
3. Second Cycle: Pattern coding
4. Post coding and writing

The NVivo 11 software was used to augment data analysis by creating a design framework so that connections can be made and presented visually using the NVivo tools.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Yin (2014) described four design tests to ensure trustworthiness in case studies. First to establish construct validity, Yin recommended using multiple sources of evidence and asking study participants to review the case study report. Multiple sources of data collection were included in this qualitative case.

Second, to address internal validity, Yin (2014) explained that case study tactics for data analysis should be followed. I applied pattern matching and descriptive coding approaches as I conducted thematic analysis. Third, external validity can be established through the research design. I used the descriptive and embedded single case design as explained earlier. External validity is concerned with generalizing the study findings. The case study findings were expected to inform other researchers to study the phenomenon of blended learning in the UAE region.

Results

Analysis across all data sources in this study revealed two major thematic groups: (a) culture in blended learning and (b) technology-based experiential learning. The following is a discussion of the two major thematic groups and two subthemes as based on Figure 1:
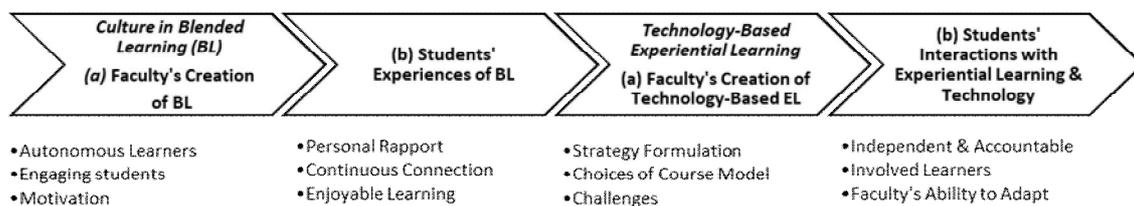

Figure 1. Results and thematic groups.

Culture in Blended Learning

The context is based in the UAE where educational leaders are using western models for Arab learners. When creating blended-learning environments in this context, faculty considered first the cultural values of their learners and their local context, which included students' beliefs of what the teacher's role should be, how students viewed education, and the levels of motivation students had because of their unique cultural situation. Document analysis revealed that student engagement and motivation in this case study was closely related to the learner's cultural expectations and educational experiences. In addition, the faculty created blended learning to develop autonomous learning tasks, to engage students by paying attention to students' personal lives, and to extrinsically motivate learners. Students responded to personal rapport, continuous connection, and enjoyable learning. The faculty's personalities and abilities to establish good relationships with learners in this qualitative case study emerged as a critical theme as to how students experienced the blended-learning environment. Since a key cultural value for students in this case study was group cohesion and orientation, establishing personal rapport was important. Students did not view education as an isolated event from their personal lives.

Technology-Based Experiential Learning

After the faculty had understood the cultural values that guided their decisions for managing cultural differences in this qualitative case study, faculty members made specific choices of how they managed the experiential learning environment using technology. Three categories appeared: strategy formulation, choices for the course model, and challenges.

The best strategy to implement in this case study was active experimentation. However, the faculty appeared to have two challenges to tackle in this regard. First, they needed to ensure that experiential learning met the learners' needs and that the faculty scaffolded content to their students' learning levels. Second, technology added layers of complexity. Some faculty indicated that, despite all the available

technology, faculty members should not assume that students know how to use technology for learning. Because the local culture is based on the "Majlis" concept, which is a place where locals would meet and discuss daily issues, faculty used technology to create a majlis sense of community.

The strategies used included creating in-house instructional videos, developing group work tasks, and role modeling. However, cultural norms posed issues in developing videos that are culturally appropriate. The faculty reflected on low attention spans, the level of language used, and the cultural examples used. A lack of pre-requisite knowledge created a challenge for faculty in the conceptualization phase of the experiential learning cycle. The collaborative tools used were Google+, Trello, Padlet, Socrative, Flip Grid, Wiki Spaces, and Kahoot. Faculty interviews revealed only two models that faculty decided on to structure their blended learning. The two models were flex and rotation. The flex model is when the course is primarily online and teachers are available for support in face-to-face settings. Teachers could plan a blend based on a rotation between face-to-face instruction and online teaching.

Discussion

The following conclusions address the major findings in this case study: (a) valuing independence not collectivism, (b) flexible learning environments promoting values of honor, (c) that experiential learning is suitable for visual and second language learners, (d) the blended-learning course structure, (e) the importance of reflective practices, and (f) the importance of establishing trust.

Valuing Independence Not Collectivism

The first significant finding of this case study was that students preferred independent work and appreciated being accountable for their work rather than working in groups. Students expressed that they preferred to work individually. Students liked group work only when the task had multiple elements, and when collaborative work would get the task done faster than individually.

Flexible Learning Environments Promote Values of Honor

The second significant finding was that determining relevant ways to engage learners was a critical element in managing cultural differences. Students did not experience education in isolation from other events happening in their personal lives. Honor and universal communication are two important implications for the local context in this study. According to the cultural theories that James (2014) used to analyze the students in a similar context, learners value what brings honor to their families and tribal names. Also, students in the present study were universal in their communication styles based on the dimensions found in the Knowledge Workx theory (Knowledge Workx, 2011).

Experiential Learning is Suitable for Visual and Second Language Learners

The majority of the faculty and students found that active experimentation was a relevant element of experiential learning that students responded to positively. There are four stages in the experiential learning cycle, which include concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Learners preferred working on applied projects. However, learners lacked the conceptualization skills to be able to construct knowledge successfully. Technology helped faculty to fill the gap in conceptualization by using instructional videos and Web 2.0 tools. Faculty relied on group work and prepared their learners for the learning environment.

The faculty made decisions based on what they knew about their students' profiles. The faculty members were able to build learner profiles based on their vast experiences in the context of this study. Despite the indication of some researchers that Arab culture is oral (see James, 2014; Rapanta, 2014),

findings in this case study indicated that learners were visually-oriented. The faculty expressed the importance of creating models or prototypes of completed projects, so students can visually see what is required from them. The faculty showed that such a strategy helped with bridging the language gap and the fact that students did not like to read long texts.

Blended Learning Course Structure

The flex blended course structure was best suited for this case's context. The faculty planned the flex class structure for students who took morning classes, while the rotation model was planned for students studying in the evening and who also had work responsibilities. This planning was done in isolation from other faculty and departmental planning, and so inconsistencies in the scheduling arose, causing problems for students taking the rotation model. The students did not self-select into each learning model. The rotation course model was problematic, while the flex model appeared to be convenient and made students' lives easier. Many students equated technology with entertainment and convenience. Technology was expected to fit in the students' personal lives. The rotation course model failed to meet the students' expectations. Prior researchers have also discussed the lack of educational policies and clear institutional approaches within the higher institutions in the Gulf region (e.g., Swan, 2012).

Importance of Reflective Practices

The majority of the faculty revealed that they considered the lack of opportunities to reflect about their work as an institutional concern. Reflection is an essential element within the experiential learning environment. In Kolb's (2015) learning cycle, reflection comes after concrete experience, which could be articulated through written or oral journals. Reflections are considered pivotal parts of professional development because as Kolb (2015) discussed, reflections help learners answer questions about the what, so what, and now what. The purpose of reflection within experiential learning is to convert the experience into transferable learning (Kolb, 2015).

Importance of Establishing Trust

The students valued the time that faculty took to establish rapport and trust with their students. The students appreciated the informal interactions with their faculty and wanted to know about the faculty's personal lives. Even though some researchers indicated that the context of this case study is high context—such as Rapanta (2014), who claimed students tend to jump to conclusions—the study's findings showed different results.

Students appeared to appreciate informality in this educational context because they seemed to feel safe to disclose their true selves, unlike in other contexts of their life. Students identified the faculty's personality and level of interaction with students as key elements of the blended-learning environment. This meant that the faculty were both passionate about their subject and knowledgeable. Technology helped the faculty to establish personal rapport through connectivity and availability outside physical office hours.

The faculty felt that students faced unique challenges related to understanding the content and their reading abilities. Establishing trust further related to the fact that all the students in this case study were not native speakers of English, and their educational system differed from the required course materials which were based on western criteria. The western approach to education was evident in the content students were required learn. They had to demonstrate high levels of critical thinking and reflection, which were not part of the learners' past educational experiences. Students expressed that they did not like reading textbooks for two reasons: (a) the textbooks were not in their native language and (b) they only read what they trusted, which was the Holy Quran. In this regard, it can be concluded that videos and introductions from faculty to the e-textbooks helped students establish a sense of trust that the learning

material was reliable. The researcher did not discuss the importance of trust based on cultural and religious beliefs.

Limitations

The limitations of this qualitative study included the following. First, the current qualitative case study was of one program in higher education, so the study's findings are not generalizable. Although the study was done to inform leaders at this one institution, the results may help guide other researchers to conduct investigations in other campuses. The second limitation of this study was that some of the faculty were initially willing to participate in the study, but as the semester moved on and they got busy with their duties of teaching, not all faculty responded to the reflective logs, so the data from that portion is weaker than the rest.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, analysis, and conclusions, the researcher offers the following recommendations. For faculty and instructional designers, it is recommended that they:

1. Plan blended learning based on collaborative tasks. To avoid tribal issues among students, faculty may need to be careful in assigning groups that would not be able to work together due to the hierarchal differences. Students are recommended to have the flexibility and choice to decide who they would work with if group work is assigned.
2. Empathize with students' personal lives and create learning environments that fit learners' personal lives.
3. Focus on creating local materials that show examples from the local culture.
4. Invest time and effort to understand what students consider joyful learning and how to establish trust with learners.

For institutional leaders, it is recommended that they take the following considerations:

1. Training faculty in developing their competencies of creating instructional videos and instructional design.
2. Training faculty in experiential learning approaches.
3. Video technology tools and game-based learning.
4. Cultural intelligence training.

Lastly, recommendations will be given for further research. One suggestion is for a further in-depth investigation of how faculty develop the instructional design of the courses that they create using blended learning as they implement experiential learning theory. Second, a quantitative investigation looking at course design and institutional learning management reports may reveal more statistically significant results regarding the blending-learning tools and techniques that faculty use to design instructional courses in this context.

The Author

Lana Hiasat is a full-time faculty member and program coordinator at the General Studies Department in the Dubai Men's College, the United Arab Emirates. Drawing on her background of cultural diversity,

training in emotional intelligence, creativity, and intercultural understanding, Dr. Hiasat offers unique insights into educational leadership, cultural inclusion, and the integration of technology. Dr. Hiasat's Ed.D. research was focused on blended-learning approaches fir integrating technology into higher education programs.

References

Adham, R., & Lundqvist, K. (2015). MOOCs as a method of distance education in the Arab world: A review paper. *European Journal of Open, Distance & E-Learning*, *18*(1), 1-16. doi:10.1515/eurodl-2015-0009

Cassidy, E. D., Colmenares, A., Jones, G., Manolovitz, T., Shen, L., & Vieira, S. (2014). Higher education and emerging technologies: Shifting trends in student usage. *Journal of Academic Librarianship, 40*(2), 124-133. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2014.02.003

Gandhi, M. M. (2013). Emerging trends in ICT in higher education in India: Opportunities and strategies. *International Journal of Educational Administration, 5*(2), 107-124. Retrieved from http://www.ripublication.com/Volume/ijeav5n2.htm

Hatherley-Greene, P. J. (2014). The cultural border crossing index: Implications for higher education teachers in the UAE. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, *11*(2). Retrieved from http://lthe.zu.ac.ae

Hofstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, 2*(1). https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014

Issa, A., & Siddiek, A. (2012). Higher education in the Arab world & challenges of labor market. *International Journal of Business and Social Science, 3*(9). Retrieved from http://www.ijbssnet.com

James, A. (2014). Implementing a 'pedagogy of interruption': Worth the risk. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, *11*(2). Retrieved from http://lthe.zu.ac.ae

James, A., & M. Shammas, N. (2013). Developing intercultural intelligence: Dubai style. *Journal of International Education in Business, 6*(2), 148-164. doi:10.1108/jieb-05-2013-0021

Knowledge Workx. (2011). *Cultural mapping and navigation manual*. Sharjah, UAE: Knowledge Workx.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (Vol. 1). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Kolb, D. A. (2015). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Muniasamy, V., Ejalani, I. M., & Anandhavalli. (2014). Moving towards virtual learning clouds from traditional learning: Higher educational systems in India. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning, 9*, 70-76. doi:10.3991/ijet.v9i9.4183

NMC Horizon Report. (2015). *Horizon Report: 2015 higher education edition*. Retrieved from: http://cdn.nmc.org/media/2015-nmc-horizon-report-HE-EN.pdf

Pennington, R. (2015, October). Challenges of the Arab world addressed at the Beirut Institute summit. *The National*. Retrieved from http://www.thenational.ae

Rapanta, C. (2014). "Insha´Allah I´ll do my homework": Adapting to Arab undergraduates at an English-medium university in Dubai. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, *11*(2). Retrieved from http://lthe.zu.ac.ae

Saldana, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Swan, M. (2012, September 27). Education ministry warns UAE students of unaccredited online degrees. *The National*. Retrieved from http://thenational.ae

UAE Government. (2012). *Vison 2021* (1st ed.). Abu Dhabi, UAE: UAE Government.

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.