Building Courses for Nontraditional Students with Blended Learning

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Abstract: The market for higher education is continuing to change, with an increasing number of students falling into the non-traditional category of 25 years old or older. The unique needs of these students are demanding that universities change their delivery methods. This change often takes the form of blended learning delivery. This paper will provide an overview of how blended learning best serves nontraditional students and how organizations can be successful in building blended learning experiences.

Introduction

Nontraditional undergraduate students have been an increasing percentage of total undergraduate enrollment in the United States for several years and projections indicate that they will remain so, and possibly increase in percentage, in coming years (Ross-Gordon, 2011). This shift in the demographics of the student body comes with both opportunities for higher education institutions to grow as well as challenges for how these institutions best serve a large group of students with different needs and different experiences. The needs of these nontraditional students and the methods used to serve them, specifically the integration of blended learning environments into the curriculum, will be the focus of this paper.

Defining who nontraditional students are, and the challenges they face in pursuing higher education, is the first step in exploring how to best serve them. Having defined nontraditional students the next step is to examine how blended learning works to serve both the student and the university. With these parameters in place it will be possible to explore an approach for designing blended learning environments.

Defining Nontraditional Students

The most common, and the easiest, method for defining a nontraditional student is to group undergraduate students by age. Picciano (2009) uses a commonly accepted threshold of 25 years of age to delineate traditional from nontraditional students, a definition also used by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). In many

ways, however, this definition is too simple and fails to recognize the diverse challenges that truly define a nontraditional student.

Beyond the age range, NCES has a list of seven characteristics that define the nontraditional student:

1. Entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school
2. Having dependents
3. Being a single parent
4. Being employed full time
5. Being financially independent
6. Attending part time
7. Not having a high school diploma

These characteristics better identify the life circumstances that create nontraditional student challenges. An 18 year old student who just graduated from high school and goes directly to college is the generally accepted picture of a traditional undergraduate. If, however, this same student is working full-time to pay for their education without support from family members then they face the time and priority challenges of a nontraditional student. Concurrently, a student who begins their undergraduate education at 28 years old after time in the military who is unmarried, without children, and can pay all of their expenses with GI Bill or other scholarship funds so is not working full-time lacks most of the challenges identified with nontraditional students.

The purpose of these examples is to illustrate the lack of clarity as to who a nontraditional student really is. More than just age, nontraditional student status is really a question of the outside challenges that a student faces in completing their education. The core issue is a nontraditional student's ability to balance the commitments they have to work and sometimes family with the necessary commitment to be successful in an academic program (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). This need for balance, and the limitations it places on physical and temporal location for the nontraditional student, drives the need for blended learning delivery.

Defining Blended Learning

Definitions of blended learning vary but most recognize that it includes a combination of face to face and online activities for the students. Lim and Morris (2009) use a definition of blended learning as, "…the appropriate mix and use of face-to-face instructional methods and various learning technologies to support planned learning and foster subsequent learning outcomes" (p 283). This paper will utilize this definition for several reasons. Most importantly, the definition focuses on planned learning and learning outcomes. As assessment outcomes and student success become more important in higher education as an industry this deliberate planning to achieve set outcomes is a critical component of strategy. Also important in this definition is that it integrates various learning technologies. This gives an instructor or institution the freedom to look beyond just an LMS or just a website and consider the full range of educational

technologies that provide learning opportunities beyond the face to face classroom environment. With this definition in mind, the question becomes how to best utilize blended learning for nontraditional students.

Blended Learning and the Nontraditional Student

There are strong links between the challenges faced by nontraditional students and the benefits offered by blended learning environments. Lloyd-Smith (2010) states that, "One advantage to a course utilizing blended instruction is the ability for the adult learner with multiple responsibilities to more easily accommodate not only their school responsibilities but also family and work life" (p 3). Wall (2012), identifies pressure from nontraditional students as one of the forces pushing higher education to utilize more blended learning environments. Poon (2013) explains that blended learning environments are of particular value to part-time students because they provide valuable flexibility. A study by McCarthy and Murphy (2010) reveals that even when students have not experienced blended learning they are open to it as an opportunity.

The flexibility and accessibility provided to nontraditional students through blended learning environments is a deliberate outcome of the design of the system. This design process involves a focus on building an engaging, flexible learning environment that extends the learning opportunities of a course to reach students at different times and different places. Properly implemented, learning outcomes, access flexibility, community, resource use, and student satisfaction are all improved in the blended learning environment (Poon, 2013).

The Design of Blended Learning

A well designed blended learning environment achieves a goal of shifting the learning environment as a whole to a continuous learning process (Lloyd-Smith, 2010). Wall (2012) offers four questions to consider in the design of a blended learning environment:

1. How does one build a blend?
2. How can a blended approach be delivered?
3. How are the roles of educators and participants changed in a blended environment?
4. How to evaluate the blend?

These four questions help to frame the design process as a whole. Considering how to approach the project, how to deliver it, who will be involved, and how it will be evaluated can all be seen as elements of the traditional instructional design process. Thus, designing blended learning is very similar to designing any instruction, with a slightly different focus regarding the delivery mechanisms.

As early as 2002 Troha developed an instructional design model of twelve discrete steps focused specifically on building blended learning environments. Carman (2005) identified five key ingredients to blended learning design as: live events, online content,

collaboration, assessment, and reference materials. Again, these are familiar elements to a teacher or instructional designer and focus on the delivery of educational experiences with the intended purpose of achieving a set goal, that goal to be measured through appropriate assessment methods.

Sound instructional design, using the traditional design approach, is what is necessary to build a blended learning environment. Shibley et al (2011) applied the Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation and Evaluation (ADDIE) model to blended course design. As has always been the case in education the tools and technologies may be different, but the task of designing an instructional experience for students is the same series of activities. By focusing on what will best serve the needs of students and designing the course accordingly a blended learning environment can capitalize on all the advantages available in the environment.

The Design of Blended Learning for the Nontraditional Student

For nontraditional students working in an accelerated format the primary goal of blended learning design is to expand the learning environment to both bridge the time between physical meetings and also reinforce what is done so quickly in the physical meetings at a slower pace that allows for reflection and understanding. What this means in the practical design of learning environments is that nontraditional students need a variety of media that provide them with opportunities to review information and interact with a system independently. The author has found success in this by integrating video tutorials and practice exercises with automated feedback into the LMS for courses.

By offering a bridge between one physical class meeting and the next instructors give students additional opportunities to learn as well as multiple modalities with which to learn. In addition to bridging instruction from one class meeting to the next these same technologies, properly placed in the course, can be very effective as preparatory exercises. By working through a tutorial in advance of a physical class meeting students have an opportunity to come into the classroom ready to engage with the material and more confident in their ability to succeed because they have already explored the topic at their own pace. This kind of preparation can optimize the effectiveness of the limited time available in face to face sessions.

These technologies are not unique to blended learning for nontraditional students but their role in supporting accelerated learning environments is. The goal is not just to give students ancillary materials but to build active, engaging instructional environments that serve the purpose of supporting five or six long face to face meetings to achieve equivalent learning outcomes to a traditional course that runs fifteen or sixteen weeks. Blended learning design for nontraditional students stretches the calendar; it creates educational opportunity by making more happen in less elapsed time through giving the students freedom to learn independently while also engaging with a physical classroom.

Conclusion

Blended learning environments are a valuable tool to help support nontraditional students in higher education. The flexibility and accessibility offered by these environments gives students opportunities to engage course content around their other commitments to work and family and remain successful in their pursuit of a degree. Because these nontraditional students are such a large and growing percentage of students institutions need to deliver learning experiences that give nontraditional students the best opportunity for success. In designing these environments very little changes in comparison to traditional or online instructional design. The same processes, adapted to incorporate different technologies, work to yield successful courses that lead to accomplishing set goals.

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