

Role of a Teacher in A Blended Learning MHPE Program: A Qualitative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Background: During the last two years, the pandemic has taken a toll on education. However, E learning tools and other innovative computer software technologies are being widely adopted to deliver educational elements of different courses to students who are placed in far off areas from the university campus. However, Teaching is demanding and complex task and the key limitations in total e-learning format included limited interactions with peer and teachers, communication problems, and insufficient sense of bonding between the teacher and student. To address these issues concept of “blended learning” was adopted. Blended learning escalates the chances of student engagement, enhance critical-thinking development and improve learning processes in the presence of a valued teacher. However, whenever innovative techniques are introduced, it becomes essential to ensure that there is no impact on instructional integrity. Thus, the response of students who are amongst the main stakeholders is absolutely vital to confirm an effective implementation of any teaching and learning approach. **Objective:** Study provides help to the faculty who newly incorporate BLA (blended learning approach), also it provides guidance for educators and curriculum planners to effectively plan their modules while incorporating a BL approach in medical education. **Study Design:** Qualitative study (Phenomenology). **Settings:** Three universities, Riphah International University Islamabad, University of Lahore, Lahore and Khyber Medical University, Peshawar in Pakistan. **Duration:** Six months from February to August 2017. **Methods:** Sampling was done by purposive (homogenous) sampling. Study population included MHPE students from three different universities of Pakistan. Population size was 10 MHPE students who completed their course work, and data was collected through one on one semi structured interviews. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed manually as well as by importing in NVivo software version 11. **Results:** By a thematic analysis a total of six major areas were identified that influences the student learning in blended programs. Out of these the major influencing factor came out to be the role of teachers' both in online and face to face sessions. This blended course design helped them to become more self-regulated, self-directed, lifelong and active learners, and they were also able to transfer these learning skills to their students as well. **Conclusion:** Students hold a positive perception of the BLA being offered in this MHPE program. Research findings suggests that a BL course design can be successfully used in postgraduate education as well as undergraduate studies it helped to impart new learning approaches in them. The main factors which were appreciated in these courses were flexible or hybrid course design, role of a teacher as facilitators who reinforced learning strategies towards learners' professional needs.

Keywords: Blended learning, Hybrid learning, Student learning, Student motivation, Blended learning environment, Virtual learning.

INTRODUCTION

During the last two years, the pandemic has taken a toll on education. However, e-learning has become popular due to the augmented usage of the internet.¹ E-learning has become a vital part of a medical professional's portfolio.² Blended learning is an amalgamation of face-to-face traditional learning and e-learning.³ It is a prized tool to add to the health professional's toolkit, but it needs to be used fittingly.⁴ For post-graduation, this teaching design has shown a rapid growth and is now widely used. Competence, communication, and compassion are the skills that are needed for being a good teacher.⁵ Teaching is a demanding and complex task. The role of a teacher as identified by Harden can be grouped into six areas in the model presented:

- The information provider in the lecture, and clinical context
- The role model on-the-job, and in more formal teaching settings
- The facilitator as a mentor and learning facilitator
- The student assessor and curriculum evaluator
- The curriculum and course planner, and
- The resource material creator, and study guide producer⁶

In a setting where advanced teaching strategies are required, the focus is on a student-centered approach.⁷ Self-regulation is a key process that includes specific strategies to attain goals, and the adaptation & modification of behaviors or optimize learning and performance.⁸ The students who activate or direct their efforts to acquire knowledge as well as skills by applying tactics rather than just listening to the instructors' directions.⁹ Blended learning escalates the chances of student engagement, enhances critical-thinking development, and improves learning products.¹⁰ It improves students' perception of a subject/topic in the presence of a valued teacher.¹¹ This can be helpful to compensate for the reduction of educational hours due to the pandemic.¹² Blended learning helps bridge the breach between theory and practice and motivates the learner to solve problems and exchange experiences among peers.¹³ There is a dire need that adult teaching should be the main focus instead of just the technology. This study gives an idea of the extent to which teachers are playing a role in the development of a good professional, how their learning journey in this blended environment was, and how they acquired self-directed, and lifelong learning skills. Artificial intelligence allows the teachers to have time for feedback and mentor the students. This

method helps to make a transformational advancement.⁴ Instructors' innovative imagination in presenting learning strategies make a good foundation for the growth and kindle student acumen.¹⁴ The teachers are encouraged to think out of the box about courses and diverse learning experiences than only those offered either online or classroom.¹⁵ Nonetheless, teachers require familiarity with numerous pedagogical approaches. They need professional development training that will lead to the motivation of students.¹⁶

METHODS

This is a qualitative (phenomenology) study was conducted in three universities in Pakistan from March to August, namely

- Riphah International University Islamabad.
- University of Lahore, Lahore.
- Khyber Medical University, Peshawar.

Study comprises 10 Masters' students from the health professions education program who were selected after purposive homogenous sampling.

Participants underwent face-to-face interviews for which a semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire was used, which was formulated after going through a literature search. This questionnaire was sent to 5 different subject specialists in medical education for validation to improve its validity and credibility. A pilot interview was conducted with one of the students, using a validated questionnaire comprising 9 open-ended questions, before actual interviews to improve the quality and sequence of questions. This interview lasted for about 20-25 minutes. The research question and the tool were aligned.

Data was transcribed and deductive coding was done followed by thematic analysis of the data and common categories were identified. They were grouped into six major areas based on similarities which highlighted the factors that influenced students learning and motivation in a blended learning approach Master's program, to help answer our research question.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were informed about the voluntary nature of participation. The participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and security of information. No reward or payment was assured to any of the participants.

RESULTS

Participants were students of BLA Masters (postgraduate) Programs running in three different

universities in the country. Using the purposive (homogenous) sampling technique students who have completed one year of course work in these blended programs were selected demographic details and academic backgrounds of the respondents are as follows:

Table 1: Demographic attributes and academic background of study respondents

Respondents ID	Gender	Age	Academic Backgrounds	Past Experience With e-learning
Lr1	F	37	Fcps Obs/Gyn	Nil
Lr 2	M	41	Assistant Professor Surgery	Nil
Lr 3	F	29	Mbbs Demonstrator Anatomy	Nil
Rr1	F	41	Assistant Professor Dermatology	Nil
Rr 2	F	46	Mphil Biochem	Nil
Rr3	M	37	Associate Professor Surgery	Nil
Rr 4	M	52	Professor Medical Oncology	Yes
Pr 1	M	45	Assistant Professor Psychiatry	Nil
Pr 2	F	32	Assistant Professor Anatomy	Yes
Pr 3	M	47	Assistant Professor Ent	Nil

Themes or the factors identified were grouped under 6 major areas or categories which answered our research questions. Each area comprises the factors that influenced student learning in masters/ postgraduate programs amongst which the role of the teacher was the major factor that influences students learning and motivation in the blended learning format used in masters course.

Figure 1: Role of a teacher in student learning



As it is evident from the word cloud (Figure 1) most of the participants reported that teachers were not teachers during the blended learning format; they were facilitators and they had a most positive role. The verbatim of the participants was put in the word cloud and it appears that the students consider their teachers to be role models, course directors, mentors, specialists, etc. The relationship between them and students was friendly and there was a cordial environment of mutual respect and care between students and teachers. They provided continuous guidance and scaffolding but never spoon-fed them to develop the traits of an independent and lifelong learner. It was a student-centered program where students actively participated and their learning was improved.

Some of them reported teachers as mentors, guides, role models, and instructors too

The most common responses were as:

“Role of teachers is like a role model, they were more of facilitators, I think they have fulfilled all of the roles of the teachers described by Harden and we had a very cordial relationship with our teachers”

“Teachers played a very positive role throughout the course and it is the teachers especially the course director who kept us motivated and focused throughout. They acted like teachers at times and then facilitators and mentors, scaffolding is always there and they were a wonderful a relationship between teacher and students they give us the liberty to express but at the same time they had very good control over us”

“The role of teachers is more of a facilitator and mentors I don't think they are teachers they are facilitators are they are there to guide us on stuff and we need to explore ways how to do it. They guide us whenever we need them they won't spoon-feed us it is an adult learning environment and we have to move on with our journey”

“Role of teachers is like a facilitator, we had a very cordial relationship with our teachers, scaffolding is always there They guide us whenever we need them, it is an adult learning environment and we have to move on with our journey as a lifelong learner”

DISCUSSION

This study examines students' perceptions of a teacher in blended learning. It proves that a teacher plays a significant role as an influencer in the Blended Learning approach. Concerning the perception of the BL process, the participants of this study perceived that teachers make blended learning to be less taxing and more effective than in traditional classrooms. It helped them to develop critical thinking, metacognition, strategic learning, and problem-solving. Our results are in

agreement with the literature reporting that the students show greater satisfaction and improved learning in blended courses than in traditional lectures due to the effective working of the instructor. Collaboration with teachers proved to be fruitful. Teachers have a diverse role and help identify & focus on different learning approaches to reach different students. A good teacher creates such interesting teaching environment that focuses directly on student needs and aptitudes.¹⁷ Due to fact that the course was part of the postgraduate training program in HPE the number of participants was low. But there is a diversity of participants as all of them were from different areas of the country, different specialties, and age groups. However, our results suggest that blended learning course design can be successfully used in a Master's program.¹⁸ The concept of blended learning allowed faculty members and students to form a balance between professional & personal life.¹⁹ As the participants in our study were from various specialties it provided them enough opportunities to work at their own pace, this give them more liberty to function and the vitality of a teacher during hours of need.²⁰ The participants defined teachers as realistic and practically approached the topics and made sure to make the topic easier by inculcating the concepts by recalling them again and again. Teachers were also adamant to engage the students during online teaching.²¹ The instructors play an essential role in converting a novice into Masters of the subject in the most impressive ways.²² The results showed that the learning environment increased students' motivation, helped them learn more systematically. So, the students could reach the sources at their will. There was more student autonomy in this blended environment and they had a command to formulate their learning objectives. The last part of this study's results emphasized the pros and cons of a blended learning course,²³ which indicates that F2F interactions with both the instructors and peers were highly rated in this course by students. Most students found these interactions a moderate to a great amount of help. However, due to the pandemic, the paradigm shifted to online teaching.²⁴ Although students consistently appreciated the flexibility of the time and pace of learning online, students' feedback in the blended learning MHPE program suggested that the student understood the course concepts better in the face-to-face sessions than in a virtual or e-learning environment because they learn by experience. This study suggests that students prefer face-to-face interactions over online communication mechanisms with each other and the instructor. This radical change in the world has led to the acceptance of this mode of provision of education. Even the facilitators have developed an understanding and have, somewhat, gained control over online teaching.²⁵

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to put forward the perceptions of the students about the blended learning approach, and what factors did influence students' learning and motivation in these programs. The results of the study showed that the blended learning environment was useful, convenient, and provided a novel learning approach. Students also indicated that the environment met their expectations. A total of 6 different aspects were highlighted but the role of the teacher attained the most important position. It was mentioned by the students that a teacher is a key driving force be it online, blended or conventional type of teaching. It was important to have access to learning resources, teachers, and instructional materials; so, their motivation was increased and it helped them learn more systematically. Participants expressed the opinion that e-learning combined with task-based group activities in F2F sessions helped change the role of a teacher from being a classroom instructor to a supportive facilitator. The formative feedback provided by them both in the classroom and during off-campus sessions were a driving force for their learning and training.

Students showed both evidence of learning and enthusiasm for the blended programs as they could learn in a cooperative way with their peers and by interacting with their teachers both in the face to face and online sessions which helped them in learning new skills in this program like problem-solving strategies, metacognition, critical thinking, reflection, creative thinking, and deep learning, which improved their learning and helped them as an active learner.

LIMITATIONS

Not any.

SUGGESTIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings suggest that a blended learning format can be successfully integrated into postgraduate learning programs in Pakistan as well as in undergraduate school study programs, as it provides a favorable transition to enhanced flexibility, location convenience, and time efficiency.

The opinions and satisfaction levels of the instructors using the blended learning environment could be also examined, to more fully optimize the potential benefits of new education technology.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST / DISCLOSURE

None.

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