Research Article

Students' Self-Reports on the Blended Learning Implementation at a Private University in Can Tho, Vietnam

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Abstract

This qualitative study was conducted to examine students' self-reports about Blended Learning implementation at FPT University in Can Tho, Vietnam. It also conveyed learners' attitudes toward the massive application of Blended Learning in other academic subjects. Relying on phenomenography theory, 324 students, who experienced Blended learning in the form of learning on Coursera, combining with lecturers' offline mentoring, took part in the research by answering open-ended questions in an online survey. Data collection was analyzed based on Nguyen (2018). The results show that FPT University students have positive attitudes about their current Blended Learning courses, with most compliments for Blended Learing and its prominent features, including satisfying students' curiosity about online learning, bringing students' flexibility, and safety, especially in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Other negative responses related to online learning barriers, and students' inclinations for traditional education.

Keywords: Blended learning, Students' self-reports, Coursera, Online learning, Classroom learning

Introduction

Since its first outbreak in late December 2019, Covid-19 has dramatically influenced every aspect of human life. To control the spread of the virus, the World Health Organization (WHO) has proposed guidelines for the practices of physical distancing in countries (WHO, 2020). This situation challenges the sustainability of education, which can be proven by the educational disruptions of 220 million tertiary students in the world because of university closures (UNESCO, 2021). In response to the challenges, a plethora of institutions must look for appropriate solutions, in which Blended Learning (BL), becomes familiar with students elsewhere as the combination of online and offline learning.

According to Wakefield et al. (2008), BL makes use of the strengths and overcomes the limitations of online and face-to-face learning and teaching. To be more precise, BL provides the flexibility in using resources for the students and offers more time for faculty members to spend on small groups, or even in an individual learner (Oh & Park, 2009). Moreover, BL enables the transformation of the education approach, creating knowledge in collaboration with colleagues, and understanding how to use information in a particular context (Rodrigo & Lepe, 2014).

In the context of FPT University (FPTU), BL has been applying in the form of online learning on Coursera combining with offline mentoring from lecturers. It is, however, merely applied to a few subjects, with specific groups of students. Researching students' responses towards BL implementation (BLI) serves as one of the vital steps for educators to evaluate the current practice and decide its massive application. This particular study focuses on exploring students' responses to BLI by examining their self-report about BL experiences.

Literature Review
1. What is Blended Learning?

Blended Learning (BL) is an ongoing debate about its definition. There is still no single universally accepted definition ascribed to this term (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). Hrastinski (2019) considered its concepts as two sides of the same coin, where the most frequently cited definitions emerge from Bonk and Graham (2012), Garrison and Kanuka (2004), and Allen and Seaman (2010). Noticeably, they all agree that the core factors contributing to BL are the appearance of both face-to-face and online learning elements. Particularly, Allen and Seaman (2010) highlighted the reduction in the number of face-to-face meetings and the increase of online discussion and transferred online learning content. Additionally, Bonk and Graham (2012) clarify the proportion of content delivered online should fluctuate from 30% to 79%. Figure 1 provides an illustration about the common feature that construct the Blended Learning model
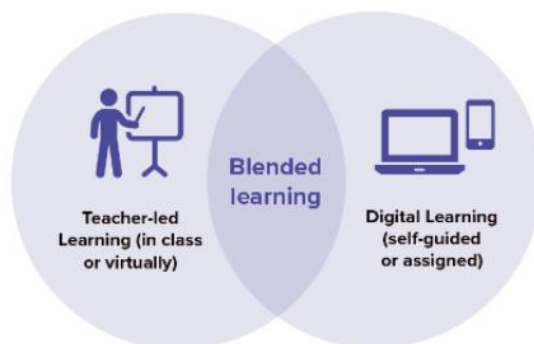

Figure 1 An illustration of Blended Learning
source: https://www.reallyenglish.com/blended-learning-solutions

2. Merits versus demerits of BLI

Concerning the benefits of BLI on school managers' perspectives, Graham (2006) concluded that BL helps improve pedagogy, increase access or flexibility, and minimize cost-related issues. Similarly, Poon (2013) claimed that BL can strengthen flexibility, high autonomy, and develop skills required for research while reducing the costs relating to learning materials. It also provides effective pedagogical practices (Caner, 2012), flexibility in time and space of learning (Harvey, 2003), and easy access to learning resources (Ellaway

& Masters, 2008). Notably, in higher education, BL allows the education approach transformation, knowledge creation in collaboration with colleagues, and understanding of how to use information (Lepe & Jiménez-Rodrigo, 2014).

With regard to BLI and students' achievement, BL can transform students' experiences and outcomes (Davis & Fill, 2007); enhance learners' confidence, competence, and provide a quality learning experience (Azizan, 2010); and increase motivation while decreasing dropout rates among students (Kaur, 2013).

Conversely, it is noticing that BL still has its adverse aspects (Caner, 2012). Bonk and Graham (2012) pointed out the six issues associating with designing BL systems: (1) the role of live interaction, (2) the role of learner choice and self-regulation, (3) models for support and training, (4) finding the balance between innovation and production, (5) cultural adaptation, and (6) dealing with the digital divide.

In higher education settings, Vaughan (2007) emphasized the tremendous challenge related to students' misconception of BL, where they believed fewer face-to-face meetings mean less work and less responsibility for learning. In addition, there is still a growing concern for students, lecturers, and institutions when applying BL models. Specifically, some students blamed for their lack literacy skills and motivation (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), or they have to struggle to adapt virtual classrooms from the traditional ones (Sanchez-Gordon & Luján-Mora, 2018).

In addition, the integration of online and conventional learning modes might not fulfill students' desires and could result in unforeseen failure (Kilmurray, 2003). Regarding BLI, according to (Harris et al., 2009), it is essential to pay attention to the perspectives of various stakeholders such as teachers, institutions, and students, who play the most crucial role. Therefore, students' opinions must be a vital factor for institutions to consider when implementing BL models, especially in the current context of learner-centered education.

3. Student's Self-reports

According to Pekrun (2020), self-report plays an indispensable role in capturing the psychological processes driving human learning. It utilizes participants' verbal responses assessing their cognition, emotion, motivation, behavior, or physical state. As a result, analyzing students' self-report enables the possibility to identify and evaluate their attitudes towards the effectiveness of BL models. Employing students' responses to the field of BL research, researchers have conducted a wide range of study to analyze the quality of BLI (Dewantara et al., 2020), to examine students' performance (Han et al., 2020), or to explore the effectiveness of the usage of technology in teaching and learning (Aspden & Helm, 2004). In the current study, the use of students' self-reports is hoped to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' attitudes toward BLI.

4. Related studies

Much research has been done to explore students' voices about the implementation of BL. Waha and Davis (2014) studied learners' perspectives about BLI by examining twenty-three Master students' responses to close and open-ended questions. The findings revealed that students prefer BL because of its high flexibility in terms of time and space.

Ja'ashan (2015) investigated students' perception and attitude toward BL courses in English at Bisha University. One hundred thirty students in the English Department were asked to partake in a survey. The results showed students' positive signs towards BL with its prominent features including the diversity in learning content, convenience, and communication opportunities through web-based platforms. Also, the research study pointed out issues causing students' negative attitudes towards BLI regarding time-consuming, slow Internet connection, and a sense of social isolation within the virtual learning environment.

5. Phenomenography – the theoretical framework

Phenomenography is underlying research that aims to explore the perceptions, ideas, or experiences people have towards a given phenomenon (Bodner & Orgill, 2007; Marton, 1981). In this kind of framework, the researchers concentrate on how people experience, understand or perceive a phenomenon, rather than the phenomenon studied (Bodner & Orgill, 2007; Dewantara et al., 2020). Accordingly, individuals experience differently based on their interaction with the world (Bodner & Orgill, 2007; Marton, 1981). The present study is theoretically framed as phenomenography to focus on students' self-reports about BL courses, who have

experienced at least one BL course until the time of research. The collective sum of different students' opinions is hoped to gain insight into the promotive and hindrance factors of BLI in FPTU.

Method
1. Research design
      A qualitative method would be employed to investigate students' voice about their BL experiences. According to Choy (2014), the qualitative approach enables researchers to examine the perspectives of homogenous and diverse groups of people assisting in unpacking these differing views within a community. Also, collecting data from a group of people to respond to specific questions may provide more nuanced information than data derived from surveys (Dudwick et al., 2006). In a qualitative research design, it is more important that the inquiry is broad and open-ended which allows participants to confess the issues that matter most to them (Choy, 2014).

      Also in this study, Brislin's model of translation was applied to assure the validity and reliability of replies from open-ended questions (Brislin, 1986). This method is widely acknowledged and used to translate quantitative instruments, but it is time-consuming (Lopez et al., 2008). As a result, one researcher was assigned the task of translating the responses from Vietnamese to English. The results would then be back-translated from English to Vietnamese by the second researcher. The third researcher compared the two versions to ensure that they were accurate and consistent. Before determining the final answers, any differences would be resolved.

2. Research questions
      In search of finding out students' responses about BLI in the university, together with discovering their attitudes toward the massive applications of BL in other academic subjects, the following research question is formed:

      What are BL experienced-students' responses about the Blended Learning at the university?

3. Research participants and the sampling technique
      A purposeful sampling technique is used to select participants satisfying the demand of the phenomenography framework. They have exceptional knowledge or experiences of a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2018). In this study, informants must be the ones who had experiences in BL courses. At first, 326 students experiencing BL courses at the university in the form of learning on Coursera with lecturers' offline mentoring took part in the present study. After the data-checking period, two missing responses were removed. The final of 324 informants' reports including 160 males' (49.4%) and 164 females' (50.6%) were valid to be analyzed based on Nguyễn (2018). Table 1 illustrates some samples of coded extracts.

Table 1 The Samples of Coded Extracts

Code	Sample	Original Sources
NLD46	There are many inconveniences when joining online learning, such as a weak network and a laptop without a webcam. I have to wear headphones and have to choose a quiet place with good light. I can't concentrate, and it's difficult to interact with teachers, and it is a waste of time.	N = Negative LD = Learning Difficulties 46 = This is the ID of the informant
PE147	...it helps my study be more effective	P = Positive E = Learning Effectiveness 48 = This is the ID of the informant
NOL263	Most of the online learning time, students will easily get bored by outside factors, find it difficult to concentrate and can't interact with classmates to complete the lesson well.	N = Negative OL = Online Learning 263 = This is the ID of the informant
PC147	Blended learning is a new form of learning, following international education, worth trying.	P = Positive C = Learners' Curiosity 147 = This is the ID of the informant

4. Research instrument

A web-based survey was compiled on Google Form in Vietnamese with two main sections. The first section calls for participants' general information, and the second section scrutinizes students' answers on the following questions:

1. What do you think about your experiences in Blended Learning courses at FPT University?
2. Are you willing to take other Blended Learning courses in the future? Why? Why not?

Results

Data of participants' willingness to continue taking future BL courses at FPT University show that 238 students (73.5%) said "…Yes, they are willing to." The other 86 students (26.6%) refused to keep studying BL due to a number of reasons. The following parts respectively present the connection between BL and students' positive and negative responses.

1. BL and students' positive responses

1.1 BL satisfies learners' curiosity

Among 239 students who show a positive attitude towards BLI, 31 of them (13%) explained that the main reason they decided to keep studying BL is to satisfy their curiosity. Most of these students shared a common opinion that BL is a new and learning experience and they found it kind of interesting to try BL in other subjects. PC147 and PC176 agreed that BL is a new and exciting learning experience.

"I want to experience new things more". PC249
"Blended learning is a new form of learning, following international education, worth trying". PC147.
"Blended learning helps me master the knowledge better. I can develop my self-study ability, in addition to learning from my teacher the more difficult issues. I find myself more mature and I can learn more things than before." PC387
"I think blended learning is a very interesting learning model; and I want to try to know whether it is suitable with me or not." PC405

1.2 BL attracts students' concerns in online learning

The online learning element inspires learners to enjoy BL courses and influences their decision on taking future BL courses. 14/238 students (5.9%) claimed that they would keep learning BL due to the advantages of online learning besides physical classroom learning. 30/238 (12.6%) students stated that online learning allows them to study anywhere and save time. shared:

"If a subject is both online and offline, it will make the program lighter. I recommend this way of learning; I prefer to study online because it saves me more time than offline". POL136
"When I am busy and not able to go to classes, I can study online." POL115
"I can study online at anytime and anywhere; I would have more time." POL55

In addition, some students responded that online learning within BL courses gives them chances to learn and improve their technology skills. They reported:

"Studying BL helps us boost our proficiency in using technology". POL119.
"BL helps us be familiar with technology, and it is convenient for my study." POL247.

1.3 BL brings students benefits

Among 238 students who gave positive attitudes towards future BLI, 82 of them (34.4%) agreed that time efficiency and study location convenience were benefits to make the prospect of BL more possible because they could be more active on their time and engaged in learning anytime or anywhere. PLF185 expressed: "...it will save much time going to school, the study will also become more accessible, I can study where you want, so it will be easier to absorb knowledge". Moreover, students could access learning materials on the Internet as and when needed (PLF204, PLF251, and PLF264), and "...it will be able to access and learn much necessary knowledge for the lesson, so I can find and do more exercises" PLF264.

Moreover, 13/238 (5%) students thought they had stronger learning motivation and better time management when studying BL (PSM35, PSM45, PSM61, and PSM145). Some believed that BL could

provide autonomy for them to be more responsible in their learning (PSM40, and PSM170). PSM48 shared: "I feel that motivates me to push to meet deadlines."

In addition to time efficiency and beneficial learning location, 81/238 (34%) students considered BL is a good approach to result in higher learning effectiveness: "…it helps my study be more effective", PE147 expressed.

Regarding other benefits related to the Covid-19 pandemic, many students highly appreciate the following contributions, including learning safety, convenience, and flexibility, especially when social distancing or lockdown may come unpredictably. PSA281 shared:

"The Covid-19 pandemic is spreading rapidly, and likely, we will not get it under control. We should learn together to limit travel, limit contact to minimize the infection possibility of the Covid-19 viruses."

"Studying online can be helpful in case of bad weather and especially safe in this current pandemic situation." PSA186 reported.

"Study online when it is not really necessary to go to the classes and due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. In the future I will get used to this learning mode." PSA200

2. BL and students' negative responses

2.1 Students' inclinations for classroom learning

30/86 (34.8%) students who experienced BL courses determined not to take BLI in the future because of their preferable attitudes for classroom learning to online learning.

Relating to learning in the classroom, 18/30 (60%) students agreed that studying face-to-face with instructors and peers helps absorb the lessons effectively, which facilitates deep understanding of new learning concepts upon their existing knowledge. NCL248 said that learning in class helps to pay more attention to and quickly grasps the lectures than online learning. Moreover, in the classroom, students immediately interact with lecturers or classmates when needed (NCL52, NCL76, NCL122, and NCL142). "I like to join a traditional class because I can connect to my teachers and also friends ", wrote NCL246.

Being in the same vein, 12/30 (40%) students said that online learning is ineffective and difficult to absorb.

"I feel like online learning is an inadequate mode to meet the need of students, and it makes students get stuck on absorbing knowledge." NOL106

"It is hard for me to learn and understand when learning in online classes." NOL229

Some of these students also explained they were distracted and got bored while learning online.

"Most of the time online learning time, students will easily get bored by outside factors, find it difficult to concentrate and can't interact with classmates to complete the lesson well." NOL263.

"I am distracted and finding it hard to focus while learning online." NOL283

2.2 Students oppose BL due to difficulties in online learning

When experiencing BL courses, 48/86 (55.8%) students encountered obstacles and inconveniences related to online education, which lead to ineffective learning, difficulty absorbing lessons, and poor learning quality. "It was inconvenient in the process of communicating and understanding the lesson," said NLD105. The following sections will discuss students' responses to factors hindering their online learning, including unstable Internet connection, limited teacher-student interaction, and students' doubts of online teaching quality.

2.3 Unstable Internet connection

9/86 (10.5%) students shared some problems about lag Wi-Fi that disrupted their learning process and brought them inconveniences.

"There are many inconveniences when joining online learning, such as a weak network and a laptop without a webcam. I have to wear headphones and have to choose a quiet place with good light. I can't concentrate, and it's difficult to interact with teachers, and it is a waste of time." NLD46

"My learning process is easily affected by the disrupted network connection." NLD287

2.4 Limited teacher-student interactions

6/86 (7%) students confessed that the lack of interaction with teachers and learners reduced their excitement in learning. It was impossible to have direct interaction (NLD41, NLD96, NLD139, NLD 162,

NLD182, and NLD171). NLD272 and NLD287 all believed that it was hard to connect with teachers and not much interaction among class members in virtual learning. Consequently, some students lose their attention and find it hard to re-focus on the lesson. (NLD82, NLD86, NLD228, NLD96, NLD101, NLD162, NLD206).

> *"… because I cannot pay enough attention to the lessons when I am at home."* NLD43 shared.
> *"It is easy to lose your attention."* NLD86 wrote.
> *"I cannot work in a team with my classrooms like we are in an offline class"* NLD 258
> *"Blending two learning modes reduces my attention when I am learning"* NLD305

2.5 Students' doubts of BLI efficiency

15/86 responses (17.4%) revealed that there was uncertainty in teaching and learning quality when taking BL. As a result, 6/86 (7%) students did not like or felt unsuitable with this learning model, and they refused to continue to experience BL. "Blended learning is not suitable for me," NLE90 stressed. 10/86 students (11.6%) also reported that they found it annoying, tedious, and time-consuming when taking BL.

> *"I feel that this learning mode is boring, costly, and even making me tired."* NLE84
> *"This mode of learning is too time-consuming!"* NLE103

Conclusion and Discussion

The results of the present study revealed an excellent prospect of BLI at FPTU thanks to students' positive self-reports on the current blended courses. This study also figured out reasons for the majority of students' supports for BL massive implementation, including the role of BL in satisfying learners' curiosity, the benefits of online learning sector, and the efficiency of BL modes. In contrast, the number of students refusing taking BL exposed their difficulties in learning online, including the unstable Wi-Fi connection, lack of interaction, and even students' skepticism about BL efficiency. Owing to that occasion, they expressed their favor in traditional education by highlighting their inclinations in classroom learning, and worriment about barriers of virtual learning environment.

Regarding BL environment, students' attitude towards two main constructing learning models, online or offline, can help to predict the prospect of BLI. Collected data show that students who have good evaluations on the online learning aspect are more likely to welcome BL. The opposite can be seen when positive attitudes towards virtual learning reason students' refusal to continue with BL. These findings are consistent with the results from a quantitative study of Tang and Chaw (2013) specifically, the more positive students' attitudes toward classroom learning, the higher possibility they refuse BLI.

With regard to students' positive responses toward BLI, the current study also agreed with the conclusion of (Waha & Davis, 2014) that flexibility is one of the top reasons students decide to study BL. This once confirmed vast advantages of the combination of online and offline learning: to provide students easy access to materials and flexibility in terms of time and space (Ellaway & Masters, 2008; Harvey, 2003). Concerning students' negative responses, the findings pointed out a number of online learning barriers that students encountered, including problems about interaction, and access to the Internet. Those hindrance factors were compatible with the mainstream of Muilenburg and Berge (2005), which were re-confirmed by Van and Thi (2021) when specializing the research in Vietnamese context. Interestingly, students also confessed more suspicions about online teaching and learning quality, which drove their decision to not take future BL courses. Furthermore, technology-related problems such as lack of computer competency or slow Internet connections found from students' responses also emphasize the challenges of BLI, especially in developing countries (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

A distinguishing finding from the current study is students' adaptability. Evaluations on specific situations influence students' decisions in taking future BL courses. Especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, regardless of the learning difficulties of BL models, some still decided to support BLI for safer learning and living conditions.

The findings of this study provide a novel viewpoint on BL and BLI in teaching-learning practices that might be utilized as a guide for institutions considering BL in the future. Investigations into students' attitudes can be used to assess the likelihood of BLI's future success. The qualitative results suggested that students' discomfort with novel learning environments and unwillingness to study in them limits their capacity

to adjust to the BL environment. Active preparation and suitable learning practices, on the other hand, can help individuals be more ready and willing to adapt to new learning styles.

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