

OLTD 502 Week #1 Discussion Post

By Fenella Olynick

Does learning take place differently in online and blended learning environments?

My perhaps naïve response based on personal experience is ... you bet it does! I know we have debated whether “learning is learning,” and I believe that cognitively, socially, and contextually it is. However, I believe that learning only occurs once a comfortable learning environment and skill set is in place.

In my limited experience, I think a few areas/skills impact learning online more significantly than learning in a blended learning environment. In my opinion, these include:

1. **The student’s comfort and skill level with the use of technology:** As Tony Bates discusses in [*Nine steps to quality online learning: introduction*](#), online courses require regular student activities (and support from the teacher), particularly at the beginning of courses. This helps to build confidence with learning online and gets students engaged – this does not appear to be as critical if there is a face-to-face component and the opportunity for spontaneous questions and discussions.
2. **The interactive technologies chosen to use in online courses, and the resultant transactional distance, can affect student success.** As a DL teacher, I have noticed that transactional distance is affected by both the technology choice and ability of the instructor and/or learner to use the interactive technologies. Dron & Anderson in [*Teaching crowds: Learning and social media*](#) note, “Moore (1993) postulated that there are three dimensions of transactional distance – structure, dialogue, and autonomy.” I feel that in an online environment, this distance can be amplified very quickly and can easily go unnoticed. In blended learning models, transactional distance may be reduced due to f2f contact and the increased opportunity for communication (although, I feel, this should not be assumed).
3. **Thoughtful, deliberate, regular feedback** is even more important online. Blended learning models, with their f2f component, perhaps have fewer barriers in this regard. However, I feel a well-designed online course can certainly challenge any f2f and blended learning model, with respect to feedback.

4. From my experience, **the independence and self-directedness of the learner** is especially important when learning online. I feel it is necessary to assess this early with new students, especially if working with the premise that learning can take place ‘any time, any place, and at any pace’.
5. **Teacher ‘competence’** (which ties in with all of the above skills/areas) can be an issue in online teaching and learning, as discussed in the [*iNACOL Blended Learning Teacher Competency Framework*](#). This appears to be supported by Tony Bates in [*Nine steps to quality online learning: introduction*](#).

I’m sure in time I will think of more areas and skills that help or hinder learning online; however, I feel the above noted areas illustrate that learning (and its foundation) occurs differently online. Yet, once the foundational skills and environment have been set for learning to occur, learning can become learning ... I believe. After all, if learning in an online environment does not take place differently, would there be a need for Terry Anderson to publish [*The Theory and Practice of Online Learning*](#)? What do you think?