PROPOSING AN EFFECTIVE TEACHING PEDAGOGICAL MODE FOR ONLINE MBA EDUCATION: AN EXPLORATORY EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

While a teaching pedagogy based on either traditional learning environment (TLE) or virtual leaning environment (VLE) has its own advantages and disadvantages, it is reasonable to suggest that a pedagogical mode combining both VLE and TLE may be a better choice for online education. To our knowledge, no prior published research papers have reported a real online education program that adopted a combined teaching pedagogical mode and examined the related learning effectives. The current study intends to bridge this gap by empirically investigating whether or not a combined teaching pedagogical could be a better choice for university online education programs.

Keywords: teaching pedagogy, online education, MBA education

INTRODUCTION

Online college education programs have been growing over the past few years and this has attracted much research related to online learning issues (1, 4, 7, 11, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19). The National Center for Education Statistics reported that about 58% of universities and colleges have distance education programs (8), which are largely supported by so called Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). VLE can be defined as computer-based learning environments, both mobile and stationary and as either stand-alone systems or Internet accessed systems.

However some online education programs were not successful and some online programs have recently been suspended for various reasons. One key reason for this is that current online VLE systems have not sufficiently supported online learning, which is especially weak in supporting teaching pedagogy in education (14). Other possible reasons include largely static learning materials that are passive and unstructured without any indication of the close associations among relevant materials in different media; course content materials and choices being predefined regardless of learning process and learners’ differences (4); less interaction and user flexibility (9). As a result, some important elements of a Traditional Learning Environment (TLE) such as instant feedback from students and/or instructors on learning issues, closer feelings between students and instructors, rich communication and social presence (13), and a sense of university student identity, etc. are largely missed in VLE. Some published research papers emphasized the benefits and advantages of VLE while overlooking those missing elements in VLE.

The teaching pedagogy used in TLE, on the other hand, is based mainly on an objectivist’s learning model and has some key problems such as instructor-centered teaching pedagogy,
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passive learning from students, the same lecture notes fitting all different students’ learning needs, bored students in classroom, etc.

While a teaching pedagogy based on either TLE or VLE has its own advantages and disadvantages, it is reasonable to suggest that a pedagogical mode combining both VLE and TLE may be a better choice for online education. To our knowledge, no prior published research papers have reported a real online education program that adopted a combined teaching pedagogical mode and examined the related learning effects. The current study intends to bridge this gap by empirically investigating whether or not a combined teaching pedagogical mode could be a better choice for university online education programs. The next section will summarize our comprehensive literature on online learning and education, followed by a proposed research model for the current study. Section 4 presents research methodology and research findings are reported and discussed in Section 5.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning and Education Theories/Models in Related Research Literature

Learning and education theories/models can be broadly classified as either behavioural or cognitive. The behavioural model of learning/education is old and often referred as the traditional model of learning. Based on this model, the objective of teaching is to transfer knowledge from the teacher to the student. In the objectivists view isolation as the best learning environment for students (15).

A major cognitive model is constructivism wherein the learner plays an active role in formulating the building blocks of knowledge acquisition. The basic idea of the constructivist-learning model is that a learner must construct knowledge and a teacher cannot directly supply it. Constructivist learning model is viewed as a learner-centered, active process of knowledge construction. Individuals are assumed to learn better when they are forced to discover things themselves rather than when they are instructed (15).

Literature Review on Virtual Learning Environments (VLE)

Table 1 summarizes main differences between VLE and TLE (e.g., 12, 18).

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<th>TLE (Traditional Learning Environments)</th>
<th>VLE (Virtual Learning Environments)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time</strong></td>
<td>. Students and instructor convene once or twice a week for lecture hours</td>
<td>. Students connect to the online classroom whenever they have available time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Place</strong></td>
<td>. Students and instructor convene in a physical classroom</td>
<td>. Students connect to the online course from home, work, or a school computer laboratory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space</strong></td>
<td>. The instructor lectures during class time</td>
<td>. Students use online teaching modules to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interaction</strong></td>
<td>. Students are able to interact face-to-face with the instructor during lectures</td>
<td>. Communication occurs exclusively through electronic media (e-mail, discussion board)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>. Students receive immediate responses to questions asked during class meeting</td>
<td>. Students post questions to the online discussion; responses are generally not immediate</td>
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Many factors influence learning performance and Piccoli et al. suggest the generic learning framework in VLE (18) shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Factors Influencing Learning Performance in VLE](image)

**PROPOSING A RESEARCH MODEL**

In Figure 1, the design dimension of the generic learning framework presented in the MISQ paper (18) missed one key factor – teaching pedagogical mode that refers to different modes for delivering learning materials to students. Teaching pedagogy is one of the most important factors influencing learning performance in VLE (e.g., 4, 14, 15). Besides the two teaching modes of TLE and VLE, the teaching pedagogical mode combining VLE and TLE is another possible choice and one which has received relatively little research attention in the literature.

Based upon the literature review and discussion, a research model for the current study, specifically exploring the missed key factor in the generic online learning framework, is shown in Figure 2. In the figure, TLE is a control or baseline group. Combined VLE and TLE students group will be investigated to examine their learning effectiveness as compared to that of the baseline group (TLE group).
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A survey research methodology was used in the current study. Survey subjects are second year MBA students enrolled in the MBA Without Boundaries (MBAWB) program of Ohio University. Launched in 1997, Ohio University’s MBAWB has successfully used Problem-Based Learning Model (PBLM) and LotusNotes Domino Technology in its VLE. Unlike many current online MBA programs using only VLE teaching mode, this specially designed online MBA program combines both VLE and TLE teaching mode, and adopts PBLM. The MBAWB program at the College of Business, Ohio University has been ranked as one of the best accredited graduate business programs by US News and World Reports (20).

More specifically, while MBAWB students normally make use of Internet technology to do online learning, they have to meet the “residencies” requirements that they need to spend about three weeks each year at the campus of Ohio University for an intensive period of study. During the residency period, those learning activities such as key assessment, social interactions between students and between students & instructors, skill building and other tasks that can be best achieved in a TLE, are conducted.

Further, PBLM is used in all MBAWB courses where students are given real business problems and they have to construct knowledge themselves from learning materials to solve the real business problems. As a result, this combined VLE and TLE teaching mode is largely based on the constructivism learning model.

The MBAWB students normally have at least four years working experience and bachelor degrees from traditional education programs (TLE teaching mode) rather than online education programs (VLE teaching mode).

The subjects enrolled in the MBAWB program (total survey participation was 10) were asked to fill out a designed questionnaire assessing the effects of teaching pedagogical mode (TLE mode versus the combined mode) on their learning performance in the MBAWB program. The response rate was about 80%.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As shown in Figure 3, 50% of surveyed MBA students agreed that they learned more from the MBA largely supported by VLE than the one only supported by TLE whereas 12.5% disagreed.
37.5% felt no difference between the two teaching modes. In sum, nearly 88% of students thought that MBA programs largely supported by VLE could be either better or as good as the traditional MBA program supported by TLE. This clearly shows that the MBAWB program offered by Ohio University was generally perceived better than traditional MBA program offered in TLE.

As shown in Figure 3, all surveyed students disagreed that learning in VLE was boring as compared to that in TLE (75% disagreed and 25% strongly disagreed with the assertion). In other words, most students, if not all, would think that learning in VLE was more interesting than that in TLE.

This was an important and interesting research finding, which indicated that students in VLE felt more interested in learning in VLE than in TLE. This can be one of the main advantages of VLE over TLE.

As shown in Figure 5, another main advantage of VLE over TLE was that learning in VLE was more convenient than in TLE, especially for those adult MBA students with full jobs (62.5% students strongly agreed and 37.5% students agreed with the statement that taking online course was more convenient than that offered in TLE). For some adult MBA students, it may be impossible to do an MBA degree if no such an MBA program is offered largely supported by VLE.

In summary, our exploratory investigation shows that

(1) Due to the key advantages of MBA program supported by VLE such as convenience and more interesting, there should be a good market potential for MBA program in VLE to grow in the future.
(2) Incorporating suitable teaching modes in VLE is the key for the success of online MBA programs. A combined teaching mode of VLE and TLE can be a good choice.

(3) Those online MBA programs or other online programs that have had difficulties in keeping a high level of teaching quality and students’ satisfaction may need to consider revising their teaching mode by combining both VLE and TLE teaching modes.

REFERENCES


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