

A Symbolic Interactionist Study on Blended Learning in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Information and communication technology, such as computer, has been widely adopted in teaching and learning activities as a way of supplementing with conventional one-way pedagogy. The mixture of lecturing and activities mediated with information and communication technology is usually referred as blended learning. However, there are considerations on rationale behind its adoption in enhancing students' learning desires. Some support using blended learning to meet students' learning needs. On the contrary, under competitive nature of knowledge society, others may cast doubt on its effectiveness when students put emphasis on acquiring qualifications and ignoring essence of education. In a sense, the discussion is about how and why students perceive blended learning in that manner. By understanding how the perception is mediated, educationalists can incorporate the mechanism when designing teaching and learning activities. As symbolic interactionism is one of the theories in understanding how one perceive surroundings, this paper borrows the theory and probes into how university students perceive blended learning and the way in shaping their perceptions. Through semi-structured interview as a case study on undergraduate student in Hong Kong, this paper argues that student may not perceive ICT as a medium to experience learning. Perception towards blended learning can be mediated by the social desirable behaviours among people with whom he is interacting with. This paper calls forth educationists to take students' surrounding social environment into consideration before rationalizing and effectively enhancing an adoption of blended learning.

Keywords: Symbolic interactionism, blended learning, information and communication technology, higher education, Hong Kong.

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Introduction

Information and communication technology has widely shaped our society in many areas, including education. With an adoption of information and communication technology, blended learning has aroused aimed at enhancing students' learning experiences. Many previous studies link blended learning with students' learning outcome but fail in addressing how students perceive it as pedagogy. Besides, symbolic interactionism is rarely applied on this research area. This case study thus looks into the areas and fill in the gaps. By adopting symbolic interactionism, this paper probes into how university student in Hong Kong perceive blended learning. In the following sections, past literature will be reviewed first. Significance of this case study and methodology will then be explained. Analysis and discussions of this case study will be presented then. Before drawing a conclusion, contribution of this case study will be stated.

Literature reviews

This session is going to briefly review over previous literature on blended learning and introduce symbolic interactionism.

Blended learning can be defined as “combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction” (Graham, 2006, p. 5). Güzer and Caner (2014) provided one of the simple and organized overviews on the flooding literatures of blended learning. There are at least three different phrases of researching blended learning, namely “first attempt”, “definition period” and “popularity period” (Güzer & Caner, 2014, pp. 4597-4601).

“First attempt” was roughly around 1999 to 2002. This period marks an emerging of blended learning. According to Güzer and Caner (2014), Cooney et al. (2000) was one of the pioneers in researching BL by looking at the effect of designed activities on children in child care center by mixing two different factors, play and work, together. Their study laid a foundation for thereafter researches on BL (Güzer & Caner, 2014, pp. 4597-4598).

“Definition period” was roughly around 2003 to 2006. A large proportion of studies conducted in this period were on clarification and definition of blended learning. Besides, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) outlined the potency and contribution of blended learning in the spectrum of teaching and learning, especially related to university level (Güzer & Caner, 2014, p. 4598).

“Popularity period” has started roughly since 2007. Researches on blending learning in this period bloomed but mainly focused on two areas, “effectiveness” and “perception” (pp. 4598-4600). About “effectiveness”, one of its focus areas is on educational outcomes. For instance, Ginns and Ellis (2007) discovered that, when comparing with traditional face-to-face lecture, blended learning could help to improve educational outcomes among students. Melton et al. (2009) conducted similar study but failed to reach same finding. About “perception”, many studies stressed on perceptions on blended learning from the perspectives of teachers and students. For instance, Jarrahi (2010) and Calderon et al. (2012) showed that one of the motivations for teachers to keep adopting blended learning in their teachings is

constructive encouragements and responses from students and institutions. Gerbic (2010) found that students supported blended learning and believed that it helped their studying. Woods et al. (2007) and Dahlstrom and Bichsel (2014) were in line with the argument. Nonetheless, Vaughan and Garrison (2005) indicated that blended learning failed to help students in improving their cognitive performances. Fortune et al. (2006) and Olapiriyakul and Scher (2006) also illustrated that even university students preferred blended learning, their educational outcomes were no different when comparing with those students attending traditional face-to-face lecture. These research findings may cast doubt on whether blended learning can effectively help to instill and promote positive learning attitude and learning to learn environment among students.

Students may have formed various views towards blended learning as they have developed different attitudes towards surroundings. Interactionism seems to offer appropriate theoretical approach to this case study as it focuses at micro level of society by looking into how people interact. However, there are more than one theory under interactionism, such as phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. Basically, phenomenology looks into how experience shape one' perception toward his surroundings. Symbolic interactionism focuses on how individual is shaped through interaction with other without concerning the role played by experience. As this case study focuses on how undergraduate perceive blended learning rather than tracing the impacts from their past experiences, symbolic interactionism seems to be more appropriate.

Symbolic interactionism suggests that we assigned meaning to the world with three basic assumptions. First, our response is based on how we assign certain meaning to our surrounding. Second, the assigned meaning can be mediated through our interaction with others. Third, the assigned meaning is tentative and subject to further mediation (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). Meaning is thus socially constructed through the interaction among individuals' symbols.

Symbolic interactionism may question on an effectiveness in adopting blended learning as a mean to enhance students' learning outcome. Students' learning attitudes and learning outcomes can be mediated by how they perceive the blended learning. Since students are at the core of learning, their perceptions on blended learning and the ways of forming the perception deserve further considerations. As students may interact people with different values, such interactions may shape them different views on the purpose of studying and that in return affect the way of formulating their perceptions toward blended learning.

Significance of this case study

This case study links symbolic interactionism with researches on blended learning at higher education in Hong Kong. Although there were a lot of researches on students' perceptions towards blended learning, most of them focus on either measuring students' taste on blended learning or comparing students' preference between blended learning and traditional lecture (Drysdale et al., 2013, pp. 95-96). Few studies are about how students perceive pedagogy or practice of blended learning itself. Particularly, few attentions have been drawn on appreciating the rationale behind the formulation of the perception among students towards blended learning. Researches

on educational technology in understanding the reason why and the way of how it is adopted in a particular manner are inadequate (Selwyn, 2010, p. 66). Besides, researches on blended learning driven by theory of symbolic interactionism are rare (Graham, 2013, p. 325). To bridge these gaps and contribute a new shore in researching educational technology, this case study tries to unveil the reason and the way of formulation of perception towards blended learning among university students in Hong Kong.

Methodology

This case study focuses on an elective course supplemented with blended learning offered by one of the universities in Hong Kong. Enrolled students were all non-majored students ranging from year one Higher Diploma to year four undergraduate. Most of them were local Hong Kong students but some come from mainland China or overseas. After lessons, the lecturer uploaded a question to the Blackboard every week and students were required to attempt the question by writing a reflective journal on what they learned from previous lesson and uploaded to the Blackboard in around five days.

One local male undergraduate student signed the consent forms and participate into this case study. To encourage the informant to freely express themselves, the interview was conducted in Cantonese and lasted around one hour.

Analyses and discussions

The followings are analyses of the excerpts from conversations between a researcher (R) and the local student (LS) under perspective of symbolic interactionism. As we will see, interacting people does shape student in assigning meaning on his study which in return affect his formulation of perception towards blended learning.

When asked about assessment, LS proposed a linkage between academic performance with time allocation in courses.

R: You have to read articles before lesson. You need to have discussion in class. You also need to do journal after lesson. What do you think about this arrangement?

LS: If I only take this course in the whole semester, that is ok. That may make me read more. But I, in this semester, I already take less courses in this semester, may be five. But sometimes I take seven courses. Other courses (workloads) can be quite heavy.

LS: But if you engage in the discussion and reading in this manner, you may need to spend seven-hour investment per week. Comparably speaking, you spend less in other courses. Other courses may be your majored subjects, maybe course codes start with three or four. Practically, weighting of GPA (Grade Point Average) for these courses must be heavier.

LS: Time allocation will naturally spend much time on majored

subjects.

LS clearly valued majored subjects over non-majored subjects, especially when considering the weighting distribution of GPA. To him, the amount of effort spend in a course seems almost nothing to do with the pedagogy but with its weighting of GPA. In other words, LS concerned about grades.

It appears that earning marks is important to the student. Researcher is interested in finding out the rationale behind it. When asked about the value of marks, LS responded in this way:

R: If your result or GPA is affected, why is that important to you and how it affects you?

LS: I think before talking affecting your GPA, in term of your majored department, you may have interest in this subject before you are admitted to your majored department. You have interest and you want to involve more into it and study it.

LS: (But) you choose this (non-majored) course only because you may have other reasons such as time conflict or need to fulfill certain requirements. Naturally, you will not spend as much time as your majored subjects. Also, if you are talking GPA, thought it does not affect my futures a lot in my subject area, at least GPA comes first when you find a job, internship or placement, especially for your first job, after all.

LS explained why they were so concern about earning marks. As symbolic interactionism suggests, certain pattern of behaviour may be regarded as a path to future success. That pattern of behaviour then becomes kind of social norms and role model to follow. Graduating with a flying result is one of the patterns of social desirable behaviour in our society. Even though there was no much revealing from the interview on who interact with and affect LS, LS is likely to be influenced by the social desirable behaviour. Most likely, part of the influence may come from his parents, teachers and friends. Through interacting with them, it is possible that LS is shaped by the pattern of behaviour and that becomes his model to follow. To him, graduation with undergraduate qualification from university is not good enough. In order to meet with social desirable behaviour and to gain a competitive edge over the other university graduates, graduation with outstanding academic performance is desirable. This is especially important for a fresh graduate like him when looking for his first job. One of the indicators for outstanding academic performance is GPA, especially those of majored subjects. That already explains the reason why he has associated academic performance with time allocation of a course. To the student, the course is his non-majored subject and thus he assigned meaning of “finishing a task” on writing reflective journal so that this non-majored subject will not greatly affect his GPA.

The assigned meaning of “finishing a task” on writing reflective journal is further crystalized when the student described it as homework.

LS: When you write the reflective journal, it just reflects your

viewpoint. I think it is a little bit narrow. Reading can more effectively in enhancing your vision than journal.

LS: I think the activity of reflective journal is meaningless.

LS: It seems that I achieve nothing after completing the reflective journal.

LS: Nothing particular helpful to my learning in this course, if just refer to the reflective journal.

From above, LS seemed offered a negative viewpoint on reflective journal by suggesting that it was meaningless and not helpful to enhance his learning experience.

The afore-analysis outlines that formulation of students' perceptions towards blended learning comply with the social desirable behaviour and form his perceptions towards blended learning after interacting with others.

As discussed, being influenced from interacting with people, student's perception towards blended learning is shaped. This case study discovers that as the student interacted with those who stressed on pattern of social desirable behaviour, he has been shaped, and his perception of blended learning was thus affected. One of the implications from this case study is, we can learn a lesson from symbolic interactionism that if we want to implement something with its intended outcome, we have to consider the interaction among different individuals in the society first.

Contribution

This case study contributes to policy makers and educationists.

This case study may disclose negative social influence on students and its future implications to policy makers. Owing to influence of social desirable behaviour after interacting with others, university students will have certain attitudes with blended learning. Such attitudes may increase negative burden, unnecessary stress among students and lead the society towards utilitarianism. To reduce students' stress and shape a brighter society, something must be done on the social influence first. Policy makers may review and implement appropriate educational reforms in primary and secondary school curriculums and overall educational objectives for next generations in Hong Kong to create a favourable environment and instil students with reflexivity on certain social desirable behaviours like qualification, success and life. Besides, for the sake of students' development, policy makers may adjust allocation of resources on blended learning so that educationists can acquire reasonable spaces in achieving educational targets.

As this case study discloses how students perceive blended learning is related to their interaction with others, educationists may make use of the finding and design certain teaching and learning activities within the system to promote positive students' learning experiences and self-developments, say, through peer learnings and competitions. This case study may thus further contribute to educationists by unveiling a possible way of employing symbolic interactionism to motivate students' learning desires in blended or online learning.

Conclusion

To sum up, an integration of educational technology and employment of blended learning in teaching and learning activities do not automatically lead to an enhancement of students' learning outcomes. Successful implementation of blended learning depends not only on how it is used but also on how it is perceived. As above illustrated, how students perceive blended learning in return is shaped by social desirable behaviour and their interaction with others. For the sake of successful adoption of blended learning, we have to take students' surrounding cultural and social backgrounds into considerations. As social desirable behaviour can shape one in formulating his perception towards surrounding through interaction, further studies on the ways of how to mediate social desirable behaviour are necessary. Such researches not only can enrich our understanding on social desirable behaviour but also play an important contribution to different fields such as education and policy makers.

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