

# Dispelling the Myths of E-learning through Blended Learning

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## **Abstract**

E-learning is becoming increasingly popular. The rapid growth of the Internet and the exponential increase in the number of netizens has created significant interest among education providers to consider the use of e-learning to deliver instruction. Despite experiencing several setbacks at the turn of the century, e-learning has now proven effective as an instructional tool to providers of distance learning. E-learning has enabled some of these distance learning providers to utilise technology as a means to reach out to learners. These learners are spread out geographically over a large area or have limited time for frequent face-to-face interactions. As such, access to instructional resources via e-learning has been a crucial factor for distance learners. The Open University Malaysia (OUM) has proven that its blended pedagogy of learning model comprising both electronic and non-electronic learning resources works. It is today the leading distance learning provider in Malaysia. With about 53,000 learners enrolled since its first intake in 2001, the university has been able to support increasing enrolments due to its various e-learning solutions. Nevertheless, its success is due to its proper understanding of some of the issues and challenges associated with implementation. With this understanding, the impact on its group of learners has been generally positive. However, the continual addressing of issues is necessary. This includes establishing a culture of enthusiasm among its academics, tutors, learners and administrators. The paper describes OUM's experiences with e-learning and highlights the various issues and challenges.

E-learning was once regarded the miracle solution for distance learning institutions striving to reach out to learners over a wide geographical area. However, below 50 percent of distance learners studying through e-learning methodology can expect to graduate (Carr, 2000). E-learning had functioned on three myths. According to Zemsky and Massy (2004), the first myth was “if we build it they will come.” The second and the third myths were “the kids will take to e-learning like ducks to water,” and “e-learning will force a change in the way we teach.” Today, e-learning when used in combination with other modes can be effective in providing some of today’s learning needs for flexibility, 24/7 access and support for social constructivist learning. As predicted by Bersin and Associates in 2003, blended learning will replace e-learning. They believe that “blended learning solves the problem of speed, scale, and impact – and leverages e-learning where it’s most appropriate, without forcing e-learning into places it does not fit (p.1).”

More universities today are considering the use of e-learning not by itself but as a learning mode blended with other conventional ways of learning. We refer to this as blended learning. As Hoffman (2001) described, we could “start with a few online tutorials, add one synchronous event and a pinch of discussion forums for flavor, and stir.” Rossett, Douglass & Frazee (2003) defined blended learning as:

“. . . a planned combination of approaches, such as coaching by a supervisor; participation in an online class; breakfast with colleagues; competency descriptions; reading on the beach; reference to a manual; collegial relationships; and participation in seminars, workshops, and online communities”

### **Blended Learning and its Impact at the Open University Malaysia**

The Open University Malaysia uses a blended learning pedagogical approach when offering its programmes (see Figure 1). Comprising three main modes of learning (face-to-face learning, online learning (e-learning) and self-managed learning), various physical facilities have been provided and a range of learning media has been developed to help deliver instruction to its students. In this blend, the print module is the primary learning material in every course. Once developed separately on its own, OUM is today blending the other learning modes with the print module. The print module serves to drive various other learning activities. Students, for example, are expected to contribute to online discussions with their peers and tutors via a learning management system called myLMS. They could be asked to interact with additional materials uploaded in the myLMS such as web-based interactive lessons as well as audio and video streaming resources. Where appropriate, multimedia courseware that accompany several of the print modules are to be referred to. Thus, within the OUM blend of learning modes and learning resources (see Figure 2) are a variety of learning strategies to provide a richer learning environment to achieve significant learning. To a certain extent, OUM provides the variety (of learning modes and resources) to support all learning styles. However,

ensuring the right mix of modes and resources is crucial to provide optimal learning opportunities.

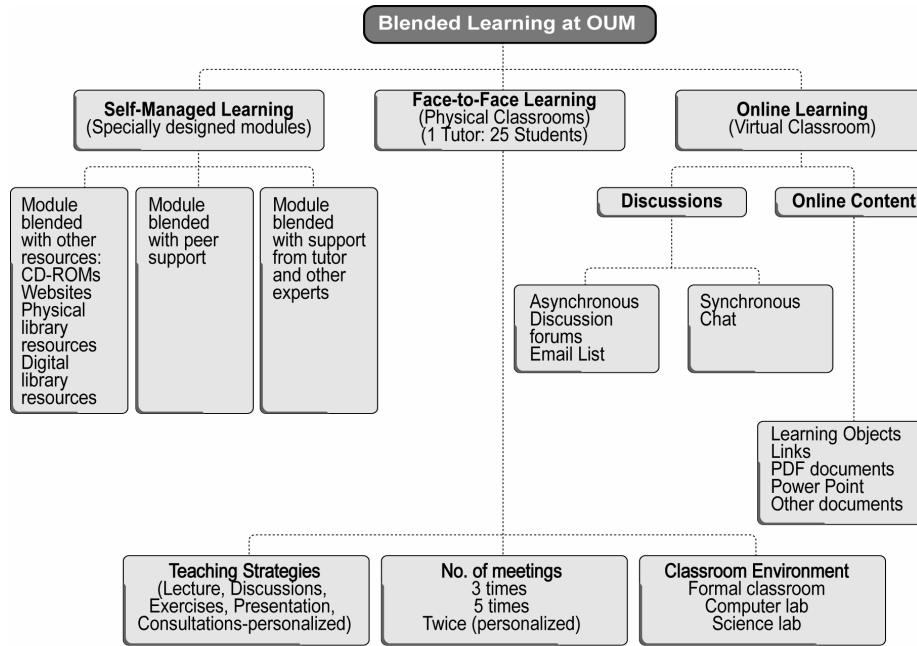


Figure 1. The OUM Blended Learning Pedagogical Model

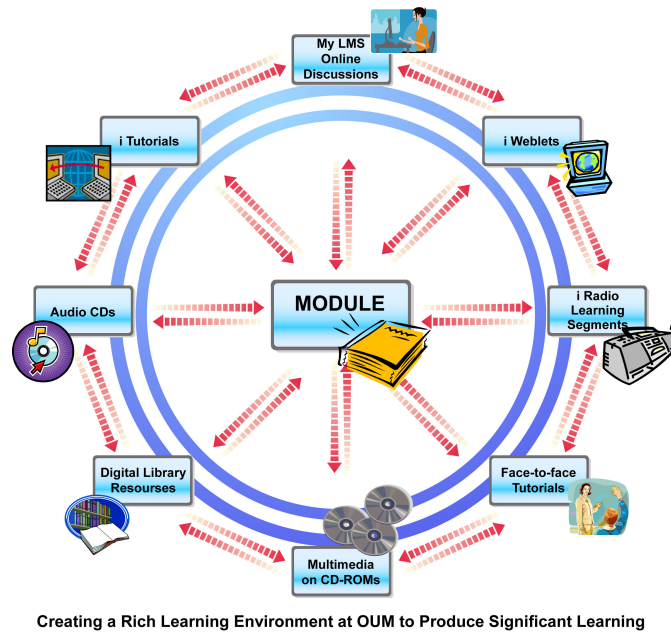


Figure 2. Creating a Rich Learning Environment

Generally, the blended learning pedagogical approach has enabled OUM to grow from an initial enrolment of 721 students in August 2001 to about 53,000 students today. It employs around 5,000 tutors to help deliver a total of 47 diploma, degree and post-graduate programs. As one of two local universities allowed by the government to offer open entry to qualified students based on fulfillment of the Required Prior Learning criteria, OUM will also be expanding to accommodate such learners.

A significant proportion of OUM's annual budget goes to the investment of ICT infrastructure. It is to be noted that its learners are spread out in 55 learning centres in small and large towns as well as capital cities located throughout the country. In recent years, OUM students come from some parts of Asia and the Middle East. Access to learning resources from anywhere at anytime must thus be provided, irrespective of time zones. The paper will highlight the use of e-learning at OUM within the context of blended learning.

### The Impact of Blended Learning at OUM

An OUM student will typically read the print module, think of how to apply some of the concepts in real life, attempt the questions, participate in the online discussion forums with their peers and tutors, attend face-to-face tutorials, seek advice online and visit some of the recommended Web sites. In addition, the learner can download documents that are found in the Digital Drop Box or access the iTutorials (see Figure 3), iWeblets (see Figure 4) or listen to an iRadio learning segment. Students can also peruse the digital collection subscribed to by the OUM library. There are more than 40,000 e-books and 50,000 e-journals. From the myLMS, students can read the latest announcements and messages posted by the university. In addition, when bored, he or she could click on *Learner Connexions*, an electronic monthly newsletter, to read some of the tips and pointers on how to study better, prepare for examinations, manage time, and so on.

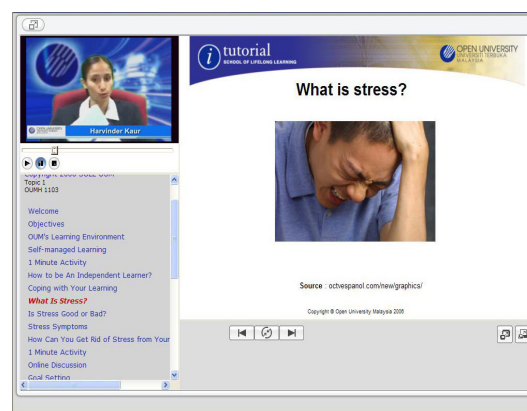


Figure 3: A screen-shot of i-tutorial



Figure 4. Screenshots of an iWeblet

One impact is the way blended learning has enabled OUM to leverage on technology to reach a wider audience no matter where they are. Students can access to learning resources and online forums via the myLMS platform at any time of the day and from whether they are.

Hence, delivery of content is more efficient and timely. In addition, online forums have enabled not only the socialization among students and tutors; but more important, these forums are supporting constructivist learning through joint collaborative learning where knowledge is built upon each other's postings in response to issues raised for discussion. This is ideal because it avoids the need for students and their respective instructors to be present at the same place or the same time. In addition, it has allowed students who are generally passive in the physical classroom to actively speak their minds, share their experiences and give their opinions online.

Generally speaking, based on verbal feedback during face-to-face dialogues with students, they are generally satisfied with the blended learning pedagogical model of OUM (Kuldip & Zoraini, 2004). Blending the 'e' with traditional modes of learning appears to be more effective than either conventional methods or individual forms of e-learning.

## **Addressing Challenges**

For any implementation to succeed, understanding its challenges and being able to address them are of utmost importance. One of the more effective ways when implementing new technologies is to develop or grow a new culture based on new ways of doing things. OUM has been able to establish, albeit slowly, to develop an ICT using culture for its administrative and teaching functions. Policies that support the new ways of doing things have been established by top management. Sufficient budgets have been allocated to acquire ICT equipment, resources and services as well as to employ the best talents. The best talents to support OUM's requirements and expectations such as the provision of services to the community or the development of learning systems and materials are equally essential. At OUM, several departments have been established to provide these ICT services, manage the OUM web portal, develop myLMS and develop the range of print and electronic learning materials. Another area is the training of academics and tutors on how to facilitate their students' learning in the blended learning environment.

Based on an e-learning survey of 35 OUM tutors, mostly in the Klang Valley, most OUM students were perceived to be ready for e-learning (Kuldip & Zoraini, 2004). Tutors were asked "How ready are your learners for e-learning?" They indicated that 32 percent of learners are at a high level of readiness (ratings of 7, 8, 9 or 10 on a scale of 1 to 10) and that 40 percent of learners are at a moderate level of readiness (ratings of 4, 5 or 6). Assuming that each tutor had 25 students each, the group of sampled tutors represented 875 students. It is to be noted that some of these tutors had two or three classes of tutorials with about 25 students in each tutorial. Hence, the group of tutors who responded to the survey could have represented up to 2,625 students.

### **Ensuring continuous access**

Having continuous web tone (not unlike dialing tone on the telephone line) so that students will have uninterrupted access to e-learning resources is crucial. There must be little downtime. Hence, the Information Communication Technology Services (ICTS) at OUM needs to ensure that downtime is minimal. In addition, ICTS provides every staff and lead tutor with desktops and notebooks with continuous access to the Internet. It has also created hot spots in almost every area of the university premises throughout the nation to provide seamless access to the Internet and thus to all OUM information and resources at the tip of their fingers.

### **Managing students without access to ICT**

Digital divide is an ongoing issue. While the percentage of local Internet users continues to increase beyond the current 25 percent, and while access to broadband is available only in the cities and larger towns, not every learner has access to the Internet, particularly if they live in the more remote areas of Malaysia. They may also not own computers or find it inconvenient to visit a cyber café. The nearest OUM learning centre may be situated hours away. As such, insisting that the only way to access learning

resources is via the Internet will be counter productive. Hence, the blended learning model has given the needed flexibility and continues to provide e-learning materials on CDs. Online discussions are not imposed on these learners. Face-to-face discussions with evidence submitted will be acceptable for such learners.

### **Changing the preferred teaching style of teachers**

Every teacher has a preferred teaching style. Grasha (1996) pointed out that there are five such styles: facilitator, expert, personal model, delegator and formal authority. In an initial study among 115 OUM tutors (Mohamed, Abas & Shamsudin, 2004), 58 tutors (50 percent) preferred to be “facilitators,” and 34 tutors (30 percent) “experts”. The remaining 23 tutors (20 percent) preferred to be either “personal model,” “delegator,” or “formal authority”. Hence, the teaching style preferred by 50 percent of OUM tutors is that of the “facilitator.” The facilitator style of imparting instruction is what OUM expects of its tutors in the classroom, both physical and virtual.

At OUM, the tutors are expected to facilitate learning instead of being the expert or the sage on the stage. Hence, OUM hires tutors who will be able to facilitate learning during the face-to-face sessions. The hiring of tutors is a systematic process whereby applications are invited through advertisements in the mass media. They are then short listed, interviewed and asked to attend the tutor training conducted by OUM. The training is held for a full-day face-to-face accompanied by some online training prior to the face-to-face training. These are held prior to their first tutorial session with OUM students. All new tutors are monitored during their tutorials to ensure their effectiveness in both the physical and online environment. They are replaced if found to be ineffective.

### **Changing the preferred learning style of learners**

Different learners have different learning styles. While some may prefer to study on their own, others prefer to do group learning. While some may prefer to listen, others prefer to discuss. With the blended mode of learning at OUM, although when put together, the modes will match every learning style, not every student is comfortable with every mode of learning that OUM provides. To address this particular challenge, OUM has developed a compulsory course for all students to take in their first semester to familiarize them with how to self-manage as distance learners. Called “Learning Skills for Open Distance Learners,” the module covers learning styles and covers the blended learning pedagogy. Also included are tips on how students can manage their time better and deal with stress. The print module for this course recently (in October, 2006) won the Commonwealth of Learning Award of Excellence for Distance Education materials.

A variety of resources (both print and electronic) have been developed by the Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CiDT) to support the varied learning styles. The *i*-tutorial (see Figure 4), for example, is instruction given by the tutor in a video recording session. These could be digital materials such as slide presentations, animations or video. The *i*-tutorial can be downloaded by students or saved into CDROMs. More courses are expected to include *i*-tutorials as one of the learning materials. *i*-tutorials can be

interactive to encourage active learning. Tutors can show, step by step, how a mathematical equation is solved. The student can then be asked to solve an equation and compare with what how the tutor solves it.

Video conferencing provides another interactive medium for OUM students. The video conferencing sessions are conducted during seminars held by facilitators in OUM Kuala Lumpur with students in Sabah and Sarawak. Called *i-seminars*, the recorded sessions are then made available online for future viewing. These are some of the resources that CiDT has developed. More are being explored.

### **Conclusion**

Blended learning at OUM includes both electronic and print modes of learning. What blended learning has been able to do is to democratise education by supporting the various learning styles. It also provides learning opportunities wherever the students are in the most flexible way possible. OUM is currently escalating efforts to integrate the various learning materials to create a more meaningful learning environment by interlinking them with face-to-face tutorials and/or online discussions. Activities in the print modules could be continued or brought into the face-to-face tutorials or conducted via online discussion. This provides a degree of continuity in learning. Reflection of the activities in the face-to-face classroom and further interactions in the online classroom could create better understanding of the subject matter and hence contribute to significant learning among OUM students. It is believed that as OUM progresses, the blended learning model will continue to evolve towards providing a learning environment that will contribute to producing graduates who are equal if not better than graduates from other universities.

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