

Unpacking the Advantages and Disadvantages of Blended Learning in Masters Education Management - A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

Purpose: This qualitative case study investigates the advantages and disadvantages of blended learning in Magister Education Management with a focus on students and teachers' perspectives.

Methodology: The study took a qualitative approach, with data gathered through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation analysis.

Results: The findings highlight the benefits of blended learning, such as flexibility, access to a variety of materials, and enhanced productivity and engagement. However, the study also identified flaws such as technical issues, a lack of face-to-face engagement, and a digital divide.

Applications/Originality/Value: The study's findings add to the corpus of research on blended learning in Masters Education by offering significant insight into efficient implementation. The study is significant because it informs the creation of successful blended learning methodologies that boost students' outcomes and instructor experiences increasing the quality of education in Magister.

Introduction Section

The Master of Educational Administration study program of FKIP-UMS accepts students from various provinces. Some of them come from NTB, South Kalimantan, South Sulawesi, East Java, and of course Central Java and its surroundings. Learning that takes place every Friday and Saturday is held with various models, depending on the lecturer. Ideally, it is face-to-face, or direct meetings in class. However, some teach via zoom meetings and some via blended learning. Those who are far from the lecture location, the learning models that they can follow are only zoom meetings and blended learning. Those who are close, usually have no obstacles related to the learning system. This article only focuses on blended learning used in the learning process in the study program. The reason is that in this model, many interesting facts are found in lectures that need to be discussed.

Blended learning as a mixed learning media between direct face-to-face and online media has been widely studied. Many things can be revealed and learned from this learning model. For example, its advantages and disadvantages (Hande, 2014), its support for English learning (Sheerah, 2020), the effectiveness of the model in improving lectures (Zhang, 2023), (Li et al, 2023), (Hamzah, 2022), the impact of online learning and blended learning (Ali, 2023), challenges and gaps in online blended learning components (Rasheed, 2020), (Ashraf et al, 2021), blended learning as best practice (Faraniza, 2021), (Kumar et al, 2021), students' and teachers' perceptions of blended learning (Attard & Holmes, 2022; Bouilheres et al., 2020; Dabbagh et al., 2019), and how blended learning is used in various educational domains (Al-Hyari, 2020; Bobbink et al., 2022; Menggo & Darong, 2022; Widjaja & Aslan, 2022).

Judging from a number of previous studies that have been presented and from various search engines available, researchers did not find any research on blended learning in the Master of Education Management study program. For this reason, this research is expected to add to the research corpus on blended learning in higher education and this is what makes the research new.

Next, the research results are expected to be used to improve the lecture system with the blended learning model in the study program and other institutions that use blended learning. Improving the quality of lectures can be done by considering a number of advantages and disadvantages of using blended learning.

Literature review

Blended Learning

The phrase blended learning appears to have been in use since the late 1990s, when the Internet and World Wide Web became prominent (Friesen, 2012). However, like many other Internet buzzwords about this period (e.g., new economy, e-learning), the precise implications have altered and then settled. Blended learning, which combines face-to-face and technology-mediated training, has been widely recognized since 2006. However, the terms "face-to-face" and "technological mediation" may require further clarification and context.

As a result, this study explores the etymology of the growing meaning of the phrase "blended learning," as well as the analytical significance of the opposing term that has come to be interpreted as "blended" in it. It provides these etymological and analytical perspectives to help clarify the present definition of "blended learning."

Blended learning is defined as the following: 1. Systems mix computer-mediated training with in-person instruction; 2. Hybrid education is defined as the careful integration of classroom online learning with in-person instruction experiences. 3. The deliberate blending of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences. As a result, there is broad agreement that in-person and virtual teaching and learning are critical components of blended learning (Hrastinski, 2019).

Blended learning combines traditional face-to-face classroom and e-learning experiences (Kumar et al., 2021). This method of learning is gaining popularity at many prestigious colleges across the world since it improves learning standards, increases exam passing rates, adds time flexibility, and eliminates distance constraints.

Traditional and online learning

Traditional learning is a classroom-based technique in which students engage with an instructor and other students to gain knowledge and skills. This style of schooling has been widely used for millennia. Traditional learning, also known as in-person or face-to-face learning, is a time-tested mode of education (Singh, 2023). This paradigm requires students to physically attend classrooms, interact with teachers, and connect with peers (Vallee et al., 2020).

Online learning is an educational technique in which the learner is geographically separated from the teacher and the entire educational process takes place over the Internet and communication networks (Alzahrani, 2022). Despite the benefits of online learning, students, administration, and teachers face several problems, whether in regular settings or in emergencies. For example, to enable this form of learning, an integrated infrastructure as well as certified and trained human staff are required.

Furthermore, teachers and students must have access to computers connected to communication networks as well as a fast Internet connection. As a result, the lack of technology and auxiliary tools may make it difficult to apply this type of learning method in underdeveloped countries. Other barriers to implementing online learning include certain students' lack of focus and frequent opportunities to speak, which can hinder the interchange of cultures, experiences, and knowledge (Danilov, 2020).

Research Methods

Research Design

Design of this research was qualitative case study. It was used to explore the strengths and weaknesses of blended learning Master of Education Management, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Indonesia. This research conducted six months, from January to June 2024.

Data collection and data

To collect the data, the study used in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were given to students, lecturers, and staffs. The interviews allowed participants to discuss perception and learning experiences. Observations of face-to-face and online were done to get better understanding about the learning environment.

Documents such as course materials, and evaluation were reviewed to provide additional context and perspective.

Data validation

To get the validation of the data, two instruments of validations were used, triangulation multiple data sources such as interviews, observations, and document analysis and the second was member checking, allowing participants check and verify the data and ensure the correct data.

Data analysis

The collected data were analysed by using thematic analysis, examining the themes in a holistic manner. The steps were as follows: reading and rereading interview transcripts and observation notes to get data understanding, then, making codes and themes based on the research questions, grouping codes and themes into larger categories such as strengths of blended learning and weaknesses of blended learning.

Findings and Discussion

Result

The findings of the qualitative case study are presented below, organized into themes that emerged from the data. The presentation of the findings is as follows: 1. advantages of blended learning, 2. disadvantages of blended learning.

Table 1. Advantages of blended learning

Theme	Information
Flexibility and Personalization	Students appreciate the flexibility of blended learning, which allows them to access course materials and participate in online conversations at their own pace. Instructors can tailor the learning experience to each student's needs.
Access to different resources	Students and teachers noted that blended learning provided access to a variety of online resources, including multimedia materials, online libraries, and educational websites.
Increased productivity and engagement	Students said blended learning helped them manage their time more efficiently, resulting in higher productivity and better learning outcomes. Instructors noted higher student engagement and motivation.

Table 2. Disadvantages of Blended Learning

Theme	Information
Technical Issues	Students and instructors stated that technological difficulties such as network issues and low internet connectivity hindered the learning process.
Lack of face-to-face interaction	Students and instructors felt that the lack of face-to-face interaction between teachers and students reduced the quality of feedback and support.
Digital Divide	Students and teachers stated that not all students have equal access to technology and internet connectivity, resulting in a digital divide that exacerbates existing inequalities.

Discussion

This study highlights several valuable reflections from both students and teachers regarding the benefits and limitations of blended learning in postgraduate education. The advantages include increased flexibility, a wider range of resources and materials, and enhanced productivity and engagement among students. However, certain disadvantages are noted, such as technological challenges, lack of personal interaction, and the issue of the digital divide.

To address these challenges, this study suggests the implementation of a holistic approach that encompasses several practical strategies:

a. Improved Teacher Training

Training programs focused on equipping teachers with digital skills and pedagogical techniques for online interaction can mitigate the lack of personal connection often observed in blended learning. For instance, incorporating methods such as synchronous virtual office hours and interactive discussion boards can enhance teacher-student engagement.

b. Enhanced Technology Infrastructure

Institutions must invest in reliable internet connectivity and provide access to adequate devices for both students and teachers. Subsidies or loan programs for students facing financial constraints could also help bridge the digital divide.

c. Social and Technical Support Systems

Developing peer mentoring systems and providing robust technical support can alleviate the sense of isolation and alienation reported by students. Virtual study groups, for example, can foster a sense of community, while accessible help desks can promptly resolve technical issues.

d. Blended Design Considerations

This The design of blended courses should ensure an optimal balance between online and face-to-face (F2F) components. Research indicates that a well-integrated mix can increase student engagement and motivation (Hrastinski,

2019; Smarty et al., 2021). For example, asynchronous materials can complement F2F interactions, maximizing flexibility without sacrificing the quality of engagement.

This study also reaffirms previous findings emphasizing the importance of accessibility in blended learning. As resources and classes become more adaptable, they offer greater freedom for students who cannot physically attend courses due to geographical limitations. However, the absence of sufficient social and technological supports can compromise learning quality. To illustrate this, Hrastinski (2019) argues that the success of blended learning largely depends on seamless integration between traditional and online teaching approaches. Similarly, Kumar et al. (2021) demonstrate that fostering social connections in online environments can significantly boost student motivation. These insights align with recommendations from Ali et al. (2023), who highlight the risks of alienation caused by technological inequities, and emphasize the need for free, easily accessible digital resources. In terms of implementation challenges, this study aligns with Gaber et al. (2022b) and Al-Hyari (2020), noting that technological deficiencies and reduced F2F interactions negatively impact learning outcomes. These findings stress the importance of tailored solutions to overcome technical obstacles and promote equitable access to technology.

Finally, the results of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on blended learning in postgraduate education. By offering a nuanced understanding of its benefits and limitations, this research provides actionable recommendations for higher education institutions. Specifically, the findings underscore the need for designing adaptive blended learning programs that are not only flexible but also address key challenges like interaction quality and technical support, thereby enhancing learning outcomes and student satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study aims at examining the merits and demerits of blended learning in Masters Education, learning outcomes and instructor experiences in particular. This qualitative case study aims at observing the merits and demerits of the blended learning approach in Masters Education. This is in line with other recent research findings on blended learning which have pointed out that there are a number of benefits of blended learning including flexibility and adaptability, availability of various resources and increase in productivity and engagement of the learners. However, the findings also emphasize limitations of blended learning, such as technology-related issues, lack of personal contact, and the problem of information access. This study has not only implications for policy and practice in Masters Education, but it also demonstrates the necessity of conducting further research in blended learning in this particular sphere.

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