The Current Situation, Problems and Suggestions on Blended Learning at Chinese Colleges and Universities

Shu-jun RUAN¹,a

¹Faculty of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Kunming University of Science and Technology, Kunming, Yunnan Province, China

a ruanshujun@kust.edu.cn

Keywords: Blended Learning, Education Informatization, Online Learning, Learning Environment, Curriculum System.

Abstract. With the rapid development of education informatization, blended learning has become one of the trends of China’s higher education reform. Especially with the influence of coronavirus, colleges and universities across the country have carried out the largest online learning practice, which has greatly accelerated the pace of education informatization. However, in order to follow the trend of reform, many colleges and universities hastily promoted blended learning before they were ready, which has led to some problems, such as insufficient support of the learning environment, increasing pressure on teachers and cooling of students’ enthusiasm. This paper summarizes the previous research of blended learning in China and other countries, surveys its implementation at Chinese colleges and universities, analyzes the existing problems, and puts forward some suggestions and strategies.

1. Introduction

In the recent ten years, blended learning has become an upsurge of educational reforms as well as a hot spot of teaching research at colleges and universities in China. Blended-learning is a kind of “online” + “offline” learning mode which combines online learning with traditional learning. Integrating the two approaches, we can give full play to the advantages of the two teaching organization forms, and improve the learning efficiency and learning depth of learners. “The Ten-Year (2011-2020) Development Plan of Educational Informatization of the Ministry of Education” points out: “in the information environment, students’ autonomous learning ability has been significantly enhanced, the innovation of teaching methods and education models has been progressed, and the role of informatization in promoting educational reform has been fully demonstrated. Therefore, we should give full scope to the unique advantages of modern information technology”. [1] In the information and network environment, the traditional teaching mode cannot meet the needs of the students. All colleges and universities are making use of information technology to create diversified teaching environments and explore blended learning. How to combine traditional learning with online learning, give consideration to classroom learning and autonomous learning, exploit the role of teachers as designers and guides, and give the rein to students’ subjective initiative is a common concern of university educators.
2. Research Status of Blended Learning at Home and Abroad

In 2000, the concept of blended learning was first proposed in the white paper on Educational Technology in the United States. [2] In 2003, Kaye Thorne, a British scholar, wrote in his monograph *Blended Learning: How to Integrate Online and Traditional Learning*: Blended learning is the most logical and natural evolution of our learning agenda. It suggests an elegant solution to the challenges of tailoring learning and development to the needs of individuals. It represents an opportunity to integrate the innovative and technological advances offered by online learning with the interaction and participation offered in the best of traditional learning. [3] In 2005, American scholars Curtis J. Bonk and Charles R. Graham systematically expounded the definition, development status and development trend of blended learning. They provide specific teaching designs and practical methods in their book *The Handbook of Blended Learning: Global perspectives, Local Designs*. [4]

Researches on blended learning have rising in China since the beginning of the 21st century too. In 2003, Zhu Zhiting and Meng Qi first introduced the concept of blended learning in their paper “Blended Learning in Distant Learning”. [5] In the same year, He Kekang also put forward the concept of blended learning at the 7th Global Chinese Conference on Computers in Education, and advocated the introduction of blended learning into curriculum learning. [6] In 2004, Li Kedong thoroughly expounded blended learning, and put forward eight steps of blended learning in his report “Blended Learning: An Effective Way of Integrating Information Technology and Curriculum”. [7] In 2005, He Kekang made a comprehensive summary of the previous studies by scholars at home and abroad, and put forward a new definition and significance of blended learning. He stated that blended learning is to combine the advantages of traditional learning mode with the advantages of network-based learning. In other words, it is necessary to give full play to the leading role of teachers in guiding, enlightening and monitoring the teaching process. At the same time, the initiative, enthusiasm and creativity of the students, the main body of the learning process, should be exploited. [8] After 2005, the research of blended learning has gradually risen in China. After 2010, the number of research projects and papers on blended learning have increased exponentially.

3. The Current Situation of Blended Learning in Chinese Universities

In the past decade, many Chinese colleges and universities have gradually tried to practice blended learning based on MOOCs, micro-lectures, network platforms, mobile apps and so on. In 2011, the Ministry of Education launched “The Undergraduate Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project in Colleges and Universities”. It was proposed to “centralize the advantages of the country’s colleges and universities, make use of modern information technology, give play to the talent advantages of colleges and universities and the knowledge and culture inheritance and innovation, organize colleges and universities to construct 1000 excellent video open courses and widely disseminate the development trend and latest achievements of culture, science and technology at home and abroad.” And further, to “upgrade and modify the existing national excellent courses, update and improve the course content, and make 5000 resource sharing courses”. [9] With the promotion of this teaching reform project, colleges and universities have carried out the construction of network course resource database, such as excellent courses, excellent video public courses and resource sharing courses. After 2012, Tsinghua University, Peking University and other
universities took the lead in constructing China’s MOOC teaching platform, and built such MOOCs platforms as CNMOOC, XuetangX and icourses. A variety of mobile apps, online teaching platforms have emerged, such as Chaoxing, DingTalk, Rain Classroom, etc.

Especially in 2020, due to the impact of the coronavirus, colleges and universities have accelerated the pace of education informatization and carried out massive online teaching and learning activities. According to a survey conducted by Xiamen University, which surveyed over 300 universities, 100000 teachers and 200000 students, more than 97% teachers and students experienced online learning during the epidemic period. However, most teachers’ mastery of online teaching platforms is between “intermediate” and “advanced”. [10] In terms of quantity, colleges and universities have successfully switched from traditional teaching to online teaching. However, from the perspective of quality, both teachers and students were just forced to practice online learning after receiving simple technical training or even no training at all. Their teaching and learning are at various levels, and it is still in a state of exploration in general.

In terms of learning platforms, there are a large number of online learning platforms, which are varied and scattered. According to a survey of 97 universities by Xiamen University, the online learning platforms used by the teachers were very diverse and scattered. A total of 66 online learning platforms were used in 97 universities, including 11 university or government platforms, accounting for 17%, and 55 market-oriented platforms, accounting for 83%. The average number of platforms used by each university was 6.9. [11]

Of course, when the epidemic ends, most online learning will return to traditional learning. However, this large-scale online learning practice has greatly promoted blended learning in China, and laid a broad foundation for the future development of blended learning.

4. Problems Existing in the Current Blended Learning Mode

There is no doubt about the advantages of blended learning. With more abundant teaching and learning resources and more diversified teaching methods, it breaks the space and time restrictions of the traditional classroom teaching and learning, arouses students’ enthusiasm and initiative, and improves learning efficiency. However, in the current practice of blended learning at colleges and universities, there are still some problems that cannot be ignored.

4.1. Insufficient Learning Environment

Compared with the traditional learning mode, blended learning has higher requirements for learning environment and needs more technical support. However, due to the limited conditions, many colleges and universities do not provide good environment for teachers and students. They are in lack of high-quality learning platforms, sufficient multimedia classrooms and equipment, fast campus network and other necessary conditions. Besides, many colleges and universities encourage or even require teachers to practice blended teaching, but they do not provide enough technical support, teaching training, stable and high-quality online teaching platforms and teaching resources. There are a variety of online teaching platforms and teaching resources, but they are a mixture of good and bad, so that the majority of teachers are at a loss. The lack of high-level control and guidance for the teaching system leads to the situation that many teachers are working alone, with no purpose and direction.
4.2. Imperfect Teaching System

In the trend of information-based teaching reform, colleges and universities are unwilling to lag behind in launching blended learning courses, and the teaching reform projects and papers are also growing rapidly. However, many courses have not been systematically planned and reasonably proved before implementation. In the process of practice, there are also problems such as unreasonable curriculum design and imperfect feedback mechanisms. Teachers do not take into account the actual situation and the needs of students, but just add some online learning content for the sake of reform. Online teaching resources are expanding, the good and the bad intermingled, but some course designers do not carefully select, integrate and reprocess the resources for students, only simply put some pieces together. Some MOOCs and micro-lectures are also relatively rough. The course designers did not conduct systematic research, curriculum planning and teacher training. The whole course is a combination of various network resources, and some even have low-level errors such as wrong information and language mistakes.

4.3. Increasing Pressure on Teachers

Many teachers are not familiar with the operation of computers, mobile phones and other equipment, so it is more difficult for them to learn the use of various intelligent teaching platforms and teaching software. Under the pressure of college teaching reform, these teachers need to learn new teaching methods, make micro-lectures, MOOCs, collect various teaching resources, etc. This additional load in addition to their daily work is imposing great pressure on them. Besides, making teaching plans, arranging teaching content, preparing teaching materials, guiding and supervising students’ online learning are also great challenges to teachers. Blended learning seems to reduce the teaching content; in fact, it does not reduce the workload of teachers, but does increase their pressure. Especially for older teachers, it is not easy to change the teaching concept and teaching mode that they have held and practiced for decades, and learn new teaching methods.

4.4. Students’ Waning Enthusiasm for Learning

At the beginning, students were very interested in blended learning, full of enthusiasm for new things. However, over a long period of time, especially when a number of courses take the form of blended learning, students soon lose enthusiasm. They begin to be perfunctory with online learning, and put limited investment in profound learning. Another problem is that since many courses use different e-learning platforms, students need to get familiar with a variety of online learning modes and carry out a variety of blended learning. Most of them are tired of coping with those platforms and APPs, suffering from unbearable hardships. When a student finish a course, the first thing he would do is to uninstall the APP. As to MOOCs, micro-lectures and other online learning content which requires learning time, many students just turn on the equipment to consume time, but do not really achieve the purpose of learning. For online exercises and tests, copying answers from each other or searching for answers on the Internet is a common phenomenon.

5. Countermeasures and Suggestions

Although there are some problems in the process of implementing blended learning in China, we cannot give up eating for fear of choking and stop exploring. With the development of modern educational technology, blended learning has become the trend of information-based teaching
reform in colleges and universities. Only through continuous practice, finding problems and solving problems can we better develop blended learning, improve teaching efficiency and meet the needs of students. For the problems discussed above, we can solve them from the following aspects.

5.1. Improve the Blended Learning Environment

The traditional learning environment cannot meet the needs of blended learning. In recent years, the blended learning environment has been greatly improved. For example, most schools have multimedia classrooms. However, in the face of a new round of blended learning reform, it is still necessary to continue to build and improve the teaching environment. Firstly, colleges and universities should try their best to improve the facilities according to the needs of teachers and students. For instance, it is necessary to transform common classrooms into multimedia classrooms, and improve the speed and stability of the campus network. Secondly, they should provide high-quality online learning platforms and resources. For the current numerous online courses and platforms, the government should provide guidance and supervision. Besides, market-oriented mechanisms should be introduced to achieve standardized management and continuous development. In addition, colleges and universities should provide technical service teams to solve the technical problems encountered by teachers, and provide professional help and support for teachers.

5.2. Construct Blended Curriculum System

Schools should not thoughtlessly follow suit, and rush to launch blended learning courses, when lacking sufficient preparation and perfect curriculum system construction. All teaching units should do a good job of preliminary investigation and preparation, understand the current situation and trend of discipline development, and carry out discipline construction and team building. The teaching team should fully understand the advantages and disadvantages of various intelligent teaching methods. They should also become familiar with network learning platforms. Then they should select teaching tools and teaching modes which are suitable for their own courses as well as for other teachers and students. Finally they need to formulate detailed teaching plans and conduct pilot teaching.

After considerable rounds of practice and feedback, they can constantly sum up the experience and lessons, reflect and look for improvement, and then promote it to a wider range of teaching and learning. For the construction of micro-lectures, MOOCs and other teaching resources, they should select topics, prove, design, record and promote in a planned and organized way. Teachers’ personal ability is limited. Schools should play the role of coordination and organization, integrate various teaching resources, organize teachers to carry out systematic and efficient teaching practice and exploration, and form a blended curriculum system with its own characteristics.

5.3. Establish Teacher Training and Reward Mechanism

Colleges and universities should organize effective training of blended teaching for teachers, help teachers to be familiar with the necessary teaching skills and operation skills, and improve their enthusiasm and self-confidence. Experts can be invited to offer guidance and training, impart advanced teaching concepts and successful teaching experience, point out the advantages and disadvantages of the current teaching mode, and put forward suggestions and guidance for future development. Organizing peers to observe and learn from each other, either between schools or within schools, is also a good way. The methods and experience of peers can provide valuable
reference for teachers, and also help them realize their own shortcomings and gaps. Peers can also ask each other questions and provide suggestions for improvement to make progress and grow together. Blended learning is a new learning mode, which requires teachers to study constantly. The support of the team members, superiors and subordinates are essential. At the same time, schools should establish and improve the incentive mechanism for teachers, give spiritual encouragement and certain material rewards to teachers, so that teachers who struggle in the front line and constantly study and improve teaching can be recognized and encouraged.

5.4. Improve Student Management and Supervision

Teachers should take students’ learning needs into consideration, carefully prepare teaching contents, design teaching steps, assign tasks, and keep students’ initiative and enthusiasm in the learning process. Teachers should manage and supervise students, especially when the students are interacting with teachers online and doing their online tasks. Teachers can manage students by group management, peer supervision and spot check. For example, online check-in, random roll call, in-class practice, in-class test and other methods can be used to supervise students’ attendance, so as to avoid the phenomenon that students quit teaching activities after the roll call. Online and offline teaching must be combined to form an integral whole, so that students can reap substantial benefits from it and they will be internally motivated. In the assessment phase, we should combine formative assessment with summative assessment, combine online assessment with offline assessment, formulate scientific, reasonable and feasible assessment requirements and measures, effectively evaluate students’ performance, and provide guidance for subsequent learning. In addition, schools should also guide and cooperate with teachers’ work, provide management support for teachers, strengthen the ties between departments and colleges, strengthen the contact between teachers, and coordinate the management methods and requirements for students.

6. Conclusion

When the coronavirus epidemic ends, how to apply the valuable experience of online learning to the classroom learning and implement blended learning is both an opportunity and challenge for colleges and universities, as well as a crucial opportunity for the development of blended learning mode. Blended learning is a hot spot of teaching at home and abroad, and also the focus of education reform in colleges and universities. However, we should not reform for the sake of reform and ignore the problems and deficiencies in reality. The fundamental purpose of blended learning is not to use online platforms nor to create digital teaching resources, but to improve the teaching efficiency and enhance the learners’ learning effects. Both education decision makers and ordinary teachers should recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, make full preparations, integrate the necessary teaching resources, and establish and improve the blended learning system of various courses. Only when schools and teachers are ready, can the courses be introduced to students, so that students can truly benefit from blended learning and improve learning efficiency.

References


