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Empowering Learners Through Blended Learning

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Blended learning appears to facilitate learner empowerment more readily than either face-to-face or fully online courses. This contention is supported by a review of literature on the affordances of blended learning that support Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) four conditions of empowerment: choice, meaningfulness, competence, and impact. Blended learning offers students choice and flexibility about when and where they can participate in the online portion of their course. The approach also appears to be consistent with their preferred method of learning as satisfaction tends to be higher than in fully online or face-to-face courses. Self-efficacy is typically stronger in blended courses compared to the other two instructional modes. Lastly, students in blended courses tend to perform better than their peers in fully online or face-to-face courses, hence have a greater sense of succeeding. Recommendations on blended course design to enhance learner empowerment are presented.

Keywords: blended learning; online learning; learner empowerment; engagement; course design; higher education

A major challenge facing faculty is to design the learning environment so that students feel motivated to learn and succeed in their courses or, in other words, to create an environment in which learners can become empowered (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996). Unfortunately, learner empowerment is often overlooked in higher education today as the current focus in North America and elsewhere is on enhancing student engagement (Trowler, 2010). When empowerment is used it is mistakenly seen as synon-

ymous to engagement, or it may be used in the sense of helping disenfranchised members of society develop the capacity to advance socially (Hur, 2006). While enhancing student engagement is a desirable goal, current research tends to center on ways of improving student engagement and retention in the broader context of campus life and little, if any, attention is given to helping faculty improve the student experience.

The focus of this article is to describe how the affordances of blended learning can support the empowerment of students in higher education and offer suggestions on ways that faculty can design courses to take advantage of these affordances. The meaning of blended learning is first clarified and then empowerment as an individual psychological characteristic and how it differs from engagement is discussed. Following this, research is reviewed that supports blended learning as an instructional model whose affordances support the conditions under which learners become empowered.

BLENDED LEARNING

At the most basic level blended learning, sometimes referred to as hybrid learning, is a mixing of online activities with face-to-face classes. Beyond that there is no consensus on the definition of the term. Generally speaking, some consider blended learning to be when some amount of the normally allotted face-to-face time for a course is substituted by online activities (Parsad, Lewis, & Tice, 2008). The former Sloan Consortium, now the Online Learning Consortium, stated that a course can be considered blended when the amount of online time replaces from 30% to 79% of the total course time (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007). Others are not concerned whether or not in-class time is replaced but choose to focus on different aspects of the blend. For example, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) view blended learning as "the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches and technologies" (p. 148). They see blended learning as having the potential to significantly transform higher education, particularly through development of communities of inquiry. Graham (2006) classifies blended learning into three categories according to its primary purpose – to enable, enhance, or transform learning – without reference to the relative amount of time spent online. Enabling blends are those whose purpose is to provide better access to learning by being flexible and convenient for students. Enhancing blends typically have some online activities for students and have course resources made available online which may result in some incremental changes in peda-

gogy. Transformative blends involve major redesign of a course and a shift from a traditional teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogy. The greatest potential for blended learning in higher education is for transformative blends as they facilitate intellectual activity previously not feasible without technology.

The diversity of approaches to blended learning is both a strength and weakness of the model. It is strength in that the model allows endless possibilities for restructuring a course to take advantage of the best features of the online and face-to-face environments; it is a weakness when one tries to study the affordances of the model as use of the term in one study may not be the same as in another. Fortunately, as seen later in this article, blended learning appears to be a sufficiently robust model that generalizations are possible across a wide range of instructional variables.

LEARNER EMPOWERMENT

The construct of empowerment as an individual psychological trait was conceptualized by Conger and Kanungo (1988) to explain employee motivation in the workplace, which until that point had no agreed upon meaning. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) extended the concept by developing a cognitive model of empowerment based on the intrinsic motivation of a task. They defined a task to be a set of activities, either assigned or chosen, aimed toward a purpose. The model has four cognitive variables called "task assessments" to determine the motivation of workers: (a) choice, (b) meaningfulness, (c) competence, and (d) impact (p. 669). The extent to which individuals perceive these four conditions in a task determines their motivation and satisfaction in completing the task, hence their level of empowerment. Important to note is that empowerment is context specific (Zimmerman, 1995); for example, empowerment in the workplace does not necessarily imply that an individual is also empowered at home. Empowerment is not a static trait either, but it can vary over time so that anyone may face empowering or disempowering situations (Zimmerman).

Frymier et al. (1996) argued that the basic principles of empowerment in the workplace also applied to the field of education (while at the same time acknowledging the differences between the workplace and educational settings). They stated that there are few extrinsic motivations faculty can offer beyond course grades, so a more promising paradigm is to challenge faculty to foster student intrinsic motivation by removing barriers that create feelings of powerlessness and enhance personal meaningfulness and respon-

sibility for their learning. In the same study the authors developed and validated an instrument to assess student empowerment. A factor analysis supported only three of Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) four dimensions: sense of impact, competence, and meaningfulness, but not choice. They rationalized not including choice as a dimension of intrinsic motivation by suggesting that students may not value choice since they are in the early stages of their training and do not have the expertise necessary to make choices. Another reason given was that students may value choice but were not used to making choices in their courses so choice did not emerge as a separate factor. Houser and Frymier (2009) appear to have accepted the initial findings of Frymier et al. (1996) as definitive and defined learner empowerment as having only the three dimensions without mentioning choice. Subsequent researchers in education and related fields appear to have adopted this definition without question (e.g., You, 2016). Frymier et al.'s rationale of not including choice as an important dimension of intrinsic motivation is somewhat specious because choice and customization are seen to be hallmarks of the current generation in higher education today (Tapscott, 2008). Therefore, choice as the fourth dimension of empowerment is retained in this review as it would be difficult to imagine that today's student would not be motivated by having optional pathways to choose when attempting to reach a goal.

Empowerment differs significantly from engagement. In a comprehensive review of contemporary literature, Trowler (2010) synthesized the variety of definitions in use and defined engagement as mobilizing student and institutional time, effort, and resources to enhance student experience, learning outcomes, and institutional reputation (p. 2). This implies that the institution or instructors take major responsibility for ensuring that students are engaged. On the other hand empowerment implies a shift of responsibility for learning from the institution or instructors to students. The role of instructors is not to simply create interesting activities in their courses that will engage students, but to create the conditions under which students are motivated to learn by the intrinsic nature of the design of the course. Empowerment tends to be a broader concept whereas engagement implies more of a task specific focus. Empowered students are necessarily engaged in their work, but engaged students are not necessarily empowered. Next each of Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) four conditions for empowerment and how blended learning research supports each is reviewed. Where research evidence exists blended learning is compared to fully face-to-face and fully online instruction with regard to empowerment.

CHOICE CONDITION

With respect to choice, the first condition, Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) model suggests that the more control individuals have over setting goals and determining how they will be accomplished, the more they will feel empowered. As an instructional model, blended learning typically provides students with the opportunity to choose when and where they can fulfill the online requirements of a course. A range of blended models have emerged that make use of varying proportions of online time relative to the face-to-face time. These include models that:

- Replace a portion (e.g., 30% to 79%) of face-to-face time weekly with online activities
- Alternate every other week between face-to-face classes and online sessions (e.g., 50% blend)
- Meet face-to-face for the first several weeks of the semester and then have the balance of classes online, except possibly meeting face-to-face mid-semester or at the end of the semester
- Have fully online lectures together with face-to-face tutorial classes or vice-versa

The reduced requirement to attend physical classes is especially advantageous to working students and those with family responsibilities because of the flexibility it provides them. According to a recent U.S. government report (Kena et al., 2016, p. 221), 41% of full-time college students worked. Of the full-time students 18% worked 20 to 34 hours a week, while 7% worked 35 or more hours a week which is the equivalent of working and studying full-time. Higher student employment numbers have been reported in Canada (52%) (Marshall, 2010) and in Australia (61%) (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). Low income students, particularly African-Americans and Hispanics, may benefit more from having this flexibility as their academic performance appears to suffer disproportionately from working while studying (Carnevale, Smith, Melton, & Price, 2015).

Although the above statistics may be construed as making the case for more online learning, to the contrary they support the case for courses that have both an online and face-to-face component. The on-campus experience of blended courses provides students with the campus life that they expect, socialization with peers, and interaction with faculty, while the online component frees them for other commitments. The convenience of blended courses appears to be a factor in this preference (Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2013; Owston, York, & Murtha, 2013). Building of community is another strength of a having face-to-face component in courses rather than

being fully online. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) contend that having face-to-face classes, particularly at the onset of a course, will help students develop a sense of community that can be carried over into online discussions. Face-to-face classes may also sustain student motivation when it typically starts to ebb in the middle or toward the end of online courses (Michinov & Michinov, 2007). Additionally, first year students especially need the support and help to develop high impact practices such as skill in interacting with diverse peoples, cultures, political views, and ideas that can best come from face-to-face experiences (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016, p. 15).

Design considerations

As an instructional model blended learning facilitates student choice, but faculty must do their part in building on the affordances of the model when developing course requirements. For example, if all students in a blended course were required to be online at a specific time for a synchronous activity the flexibility of time would be lost even though students could participate from a location of their choosing. Therefore, faculty need to minimize any requirements for synchronous online activities, be flexible in deadlines for assignments and participation in online discussion groups, provide students with choice of assignment topics, and permit students to adapt assignments and other course work to their specific interests assuming they fall within the boundaries of the course syllabus. By providing this kind of flexibility within a course Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) first condition for empowerment will be addressed.

MEANINGFULNESS CONDITION

Meaningfulness, Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) second criterion, concerns how well a task fits into an individual's value system or how much they care about a task. Accordingly the more students value what they are doing, the more they are motivated to invest energy and commitment to completing their work. Research shows that students tend to value and show greater satisfaction with learning in the blended mode than either fully online or fully face-to-face modes. Two categories of studies provide this evidence: those that survey only students in blended learning courses on their perceptions and those that compare students' opinions of their experiences in blended courses with those in non-blended courses.

With regard to the first category of studies, Owston, Garrison, and Cook (2006) surveyed students in one blended course in each of eight universities across Canada. The courses were in a variety of different subjects in the social sciences and natural sciences. Of the 741 students surveyed 70% overall agreed that they were satisfied with their blended course – responses ranged from 100% agreement for two small classes to a low of 65% for a very large enrollment course. The authors concluded that class size and the ability to communicate with the instructor and their peers explained the variability in degree of satisfaction. In another study Owston et al. (2013) found similar levels of satisfaction when students were asked to compare their blended course to other traditional courses they had taken, and also 70% said that they would take a blended course again if given the opportunity. The researchers reported that satisfaction in blended courses was related to course achievement, with higher achievers being more satisfied with blended learning. Madriz and Nocente (2016) surveyed 569 undergraduate students using an adaption of the same instrument used by Owston et al. and found similar overall levels of satisfaction and willingness to take another blended course, but reported significant differences across the seven courses surveyed. A freshman mathematics course rated highest in satisfaction, a finding that the researchers said was related to ongoing interaction with the instructor and engaging, but non-professionally produced videos of lectures. The University of Central Florida (UCF) reported higher levels of student satisfaction in a variety of blended courses with 85% agreeing that they were satisfied and 67% would like to take another blended course (Dziuban, Hartman, Juge, Moskal, & Sorg, 2006). They also attribute the high rate of satisfaction to better interaction within courses. Together the above studies indicate that, across a sizable number of universities and course subjects, a large majority of students are likely to be satisfied with their blended course experience. They also suggest the importance of at least one factor – interaction within the course – that appears to directly influence satisfaction.

Many studies have been undertaken that compare student satisfaction in blended with non-blended courses. The most significant in terms of sample size (N = 913,688) and subject area variety was reported by Moskal et al. (2013). They found that 52% of students rated blended courses as “excellent” while both fully online and fully face-to-face courses received 48% (p. 19). Further data mining revealed that three factors related to instructor characteristics predicted courses being rated excellent: (a) facilitation of learning, (b) communication of ideas, and (c) respect and concern for students. Moreover they found that neither field of study, course year, class size, nor student demographics were significant in the prediction of an

excellence rating. The researchers concluded that ability of the instructor to communicate was even more significant than mode of instruction. Unanswered is the question of whether instructor comfort and skill with a given teaching mode affected their course rating.

Several other recent comparative studies are of interest as well even though they were conducted with relatively small samples. Kumrow (2007) compared nursing students in blended and lecture format sections of the same course and found that blended students rated significantly higher their enjoyment of how their course was taught and the method of instruction. Student satisfaction in two sections of students enrolled in a human behavior course was compared by Forte and Root (2011). One section was in a blended format and the other in a web-enhanced lecture format. Students rated their satisfaction in the blended course significantly higher overall and on three of four subscales, teaching effectiveness, whether the course met their expectations, and overall format; however there were no differences in the fourth question on whether they were satisfied that they "learned much" (p. 93). Vernadakis, Giannousi, Tsitskari, Antoniou, and Kioumourtzoglou (2012) compared blended and lecture sections of a physical education technology course and found that the mean of a standardized educational quality satisfaction scale was significantly higher for the blended students as well as the ratings on all 12 scale questions. They attributed the higher blended ratings due to the course being more accessible and interactive, which cultivated students' interest in learning and exploring resources. Student satisfaction in blended and online versions of a course in a human resource development program was compared by Lim, Morris, and Kupritz (2006). Most relevant for this discussion is the finding that students perceived heavier workload and less support in the online group compared to the blended group. The researchers suggested that this finding was because students in the online group did not have a sense of emotional presence or belonging.

Design considerations

From the above review the importance of student interaction with their peers and the instructor within blended courses appears to be critical for creating positive perceptions. Hence to increase meaningfulness in the sense suggested by Thomas and Velthouse (1990), instructors must design their courses to create a strong sense of community. They should not only focus on cognitive presence in the online component where attention is most often given, but they should emphasize social and instructor presence as de-

scribed by Garrison (2011). This can be accomplished by creating interactive discussion forums where both students and instructors communicate on course-related topics. Instructors can arrange for in-class discussions to flow into online discussions to give all students an opportunity to participate. Online discussions can also be synthesized in class before introducing another topic. Instructors need to assign a portion of the course grade to discussion forums so that students realize that they are a valued portion of the course. Other ideas to create a sense of community include having a "coffee shop" online for students to chat about any topic of interest, and creating an FAQ forum where instructors can answer student questions about the course and students can help each other. Beyond these suggestions, Bonk and Zhang (2008) provide an extensive list of empowering online activities that can be used in courses.

COMPETENCE CONDITION

Competence, the third dimension in Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) model, refers to the belief individuals have that they can perform a task when they make an effort. This factor is what Bandura (1994) refers to as self-efficacy. His social cognitive theory suggests that individuals with low self-efficacy tend to avoid challenging situations that require learning new skills; to the contrary those with high self-efficacy tend to confront challenges and persist in the face of obstacles. According to Bandura individuals develop their sense of self-efficacy based on (a) successful previous experience with similar tasks, (b) when they see other individuals with skills similar to theirs performing tasks successfully, (c) when they receive support and encouragement, and (d) their psychological reaction to physiological situations such nervousness, fear, or pain. The ideal level of self-efficacy is when a task is slightly more difficulty than one's ability (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In the academic context self-efficacy can be interpreted as the belief in one's ability to successfully fulfill course and degree requirements. Its importance cannot be overstated. A meta-analysis of 109 studies showed self-efficacy to be the strongest predictor of college performance, ahead of such traditional academic measures as SES, high school grades, and college entrance exams as well as a significant predictor of college retention (Robbins, Lauver, Le, Langley, Davis, & Carlstrom, 2004).

There is a limited body of research on the relationship between self-efficacy and blended learning. For the most part it supports the contention that blended learning is an effective model to promote self-efficacy. In these

studies researchers have examined various factors along with self-efficacy to predict academic performance. For example, Lynch and Dembo (2004) studied self-efficacy in a blended undergraduate marketing course. They found that "self-efficacy for learning and performance" and verbal ability were the only significant predictors of final grades compared to four other variables studied – intrinsic goal orientation, time and study environment management, help seeking, and Internet self-efficacy (p. 9). Self-efficacy accounted for more of the variance in predicting grades (7%) than verbal ability (5%). On the basis of this study the researchers caution that learners with low self-efficacy may have difficulty completing a blended course. Similarly, Lim and Morris (2009) found self-efficacy was significantly correlated with two dependent variables, "perceived learning" and "perceived learning application," in a blended undergraduate curriculum course (p. 286). While the meaning of the first dependent variable is self-evident, the second was operationalized as students' perceptions of the value of the course learning objectives. Another study was concerned with the relationship between computer self-efficacy, which is a specific instance of self-efficacy defined as an individual's belief in their ability to successfully use technology, and blended learning. Zhang, Dang, and Amer (2016) found, in a large undergraduate course taught in a combined blended learning and flipped classroom format, that computer self-efficacy along with motivation and teaching method explained over half of the variance in the dependent variable intention to learn or continue to learn a subject. Of interest is that the instructor variable was not significantly related to intention to learn, suggesting that students are more autonomous in online environments where the instructor plays a less dominant role.

Two studies were identified in which self-efficacy in blended courses was compared to other online and face-to-face courses. Thai, De Wever, and Valcke (2017) examined self-efficacy in an undergraduate invertebrate course in which students (N = 90) were randomly assigned to one of four different instructional conditions: blended learning (50% in-class and 50% online), flipped classroom (lectures online, in-class problems solving), web-based lectures (traditional lectures supported by online videos of lectures), and traditional classroom lectures. Self-efficacy was assessed before and after the course using a researcher-adapted survey. Students in the web-based lectures performed significantly lower on the self-efficacy posttest than the three other methods when controlling for pretest self-efficacy scores. No significant differences were reported between the other three methods, although blended learning and flipped classroom students scored approximately the same but higher than traditional lecture students. The authors

speculate that no differences were found among these three methods because the four-week online duration of the course may not have been long enough for students to develop sufficient "learner presence" to affect self-efficacy (p. 123). In the other comparative study, Shea and Bidjerano (2010) examined self-efficacy and other variables in relation to teaching, social, and cognitive presence in the community of inquiry framework of Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001).They surveyed a large number of undergraduate students in blended and fully online courses, and found a stronger relationship between teaching presence and self-efficacy in blended courses than in online courses. The explanation for the difference may be because blended learning retains some of the traditional classroom conventions that support their learning, unlike fully online courses where students may be less confident.

Design considerations

What is evident from the above discussion is that blended learning is at least as effective as or slightly better than other modes of learning in facilitating self-efficacy or, to use Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) term, competence. The explanation for the possible advantage of blended learning may be because when students are working on the online portion of a blended course they have more time to reflect on the content and can follow up with questions in class or at a later time online if they have difficulties in understanding. This, in turn, would allow students to develop more confidence and motivate them to continue learning. An implication for blended course instructors and designers is to ensure there are sufficient opportunities for students to interact with the instructors by building into course learning management systems opportunities for students to ask questions openly where both their peers and the instructor can share responses. Suggestions for this were given in the discussion above about meaningfulness. Another implication is that instructors should design course assignments so that they are at the appropriate level of difficulty for students i.e., slightly above their ability level. Frequent feedback to students on their progress in the course would be another suggestion to enhance students' sense of competence.

IMPACT CONDITION

Lastly, the condition of impact refers to individuals feeling that what they do will make a difference in accomplishing their task (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Students will feel motivated if they believe that the work they are doing in their course or program will result in them succeeding, and to the contrary, if they feel what they are doing will not lead to success they will not feel motivated. Blended learning tends to facilitate success as students feel that they are learning more in blended courses compared to traditionally-taught courses (Owston et al., 2013), which as a consequence will motivate them to work harder. Their perceptions of learning more in blended courses is supported by the empirical literature as a consensus has emerged that students in blended courses on average perform better than in face-to-face or fully online environments. Again the research at UCF by Moskal et al. (2013) provides insight into the performance of a very large sample of students (N=913,688). The authors report that 91% of students in blended courses from across campus received grades of C or higher, while the success rate for both fully online and face-to-face courses was approximately 88% and students in lecture capture and blended lecture capture courses had a considerably lower success rate. Blended courses also had the lowest withdrawal rate (2.8%). They attribute success of blended learning to the flexibility students have which at the same time allows them to have social interaction in class.

Five separate meta-analyses provide additional evidence of the effectiveness of blended learning in facilitating student performance. Zhao, Lei, Lai, & Tan (2005) examined 51 studies comparing online and face-to-face courses. No significant difference in performance between students in fully online courses and those in face-to-face courses was found. The researchers also coded other possible moderating variables including what they called "media involvement" (p. 1860), which was a measure of the amount of online activities in a course. They found that courses when there was a "medium" amount of online activities in a course (i.e., a course that is 60% to 80% blended) students performed significantly higher than in fully face-to-face courses (d= .49); when there was a "high" amount of online activity the effect size was still significant but considerably smaller (d = .07). An effect size of 0.2 is considered to be small, 0.5 is medium-sized, and 0.8 is large (Cohen, 1988); thus nearly a medium effect was evidenced in courses where about 60% to 80% of the activities were online. The authors concluded that social interaction and instructor involvement were critical in explaining the findings of their study.

Means, Toyama, Murphy, & Baki (2013), in their oft-cited U. S. Department of Education meta-analytic study, found after examining 50 effect sizes drawn from 45 studies students in blended and fully online courses performed better than their counterparts in face-to-face courses. When they separated out those studies that compared blended with face-to-face classes, students in blended classes were found to perform higher ($g^+ = .35$, $p = .001$); they found no difference in performance when they examined studies that compared fully online with face-to-face. The authors concluded with a caveat that the superiority of blended learning may be due to additional learning time, resources, and "course elements that encourage interactions among learners" (p. 36). As discussed above the latter factor is one of the unique affordances of blended learning as students and faculty can interact in person and online. A very similar effect size was found by Bernard, Borokhovski, Schmid, Tamin, and Abrami (2014) who found that achievement in blended courses was significantly higher than in face-to-face courses ($g+ = .33$, $p = .001$).

Two other meta-analytic studies dealt with various moderator variables to see if they could explain the performance advantage of blended learning. Vo, Zhu, and Diep (2017) investigated student performance in STEM versus non-STEM courses using different end-of-course evaluation methods. They found an overall effect size similar to the above three studies in favor of blended learning over traditional instruction ($g^+ = .385$, $p < .001$) in their analysis of 51 studies. A more significant effect size over traditional instruction was found for STEM courses ($g^+ = .496$) versus non-STEM courses ($g^+ = .210$). The advantage of blended learning held regardless of whether summative or formative course evaluation methods were used. Secondly, a meta-analysis of 30 studies by Spanjers, Könings, Leppink, Verstegen, de Jong, Jeroen Katarzyna, and Merriënboer (2015) also examined course evaluation methods – subjective and objective measures – to determine if they had a moderating effect. Results favored blended learning over traditional learning, and revealed an effect size for objective measures that was slightly higher than for subjective measures ($g^+ = .34$, $p < .05$ and $g^+ = .27$, $p < .05$ respectively).

Design considerations

The above meta-analyses yielded remarkably similar results on the performance advantage of blended learning over traditional face-to-face learning. Hattie (2015) reported on the synthesis of over 1200 meta-analytic

studies of educational interventions involving about a quarter billion students and found the average effect size to be 0.40. He stated that the average effect size for studies that compare online and distance university courses to traditional lectures is 0.12. The studies cited above suggest that blended learning has an average performance advantage that is superior to online learning, but perhaps not quite as strong as the average educational intervention. A tentative design suggestion from the literature surveyed above is that instructors may find that employing blended learning in STEM courses may result in a greater impact on student performance (Spanjers et al., 2015). Another intriguing suggestion is that the proportion of course time devoted to online activities may have an impact. Zhao et al.'s (2005) study suggests that a medium about of online activity (e.g., 60% to 80%) results in better student performance so instructors may want to consider designing courses with a significant portion of the course online.

CONCLUSIONS

Students in higher education can become empowered when they are in courses that provide them with choice and flexibility, they are presented with an experience that is personally meaningful, they believe that they can succeed with a reasonable amount of effort, and if they know that what they do in a course will result in them succeeding (Frymier et al. (1996). As discussed blended learning, by its very nature, offers students choice about when and where they can participate in the online portion of their course. The blended approach also appears to be consonant with their preferred method of learning as satisfaction tends to be higher in these courses relative to fully online or fully face-to-face courses. The belief that they can succeed if they make an effort, that is, their self-efficacy, appears to be slightly better in blended courses compared to the other two instructional models. Lastly, students in blended classes tend to perform better than their peers in fully online or face-to-face classes, hence have a greater sense of succeeding.

While blended learning offers the above possibilities there is no assurance that students who participate in blended courses will somehow be transformed into empowered individuals. The role of instructors and the course design decisions that they make are crucial for fostering empowerment. Of utmost importance is for instructors to design their courses in ways that facilitate communication among students and between students and the instructor. This applies for both the face-to-face and online compo-

nents, however it is most critical for the online component where the importance of communication can be easily overlooked when students may be off working on their own. Another suggestion to enhance empowerment is to offer a variety of options in courses such as choice of study topics, assignments, discussion themes, and when and where assignments are completed. Instructors must make sure assignments and other course requirements are within reach of the capabilities of students – not overly easy, nor overly difficult – in order to enhance self-efficacy. Providing students with ongoing feedback is one more way of increasing the possibility of empowering them. All of these ideas are considered effective practices to promote student success when using any mode of instruction (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). What is clear is that if these effective practices are used in blended courses the likelihood of empowering students is greater than in fully face-to-face or online courses.

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