Managing a Blended Learning Environment

Sevillana G. Aureo[1] Michael R. Cangayao[2] Sunny R. Fernandez[3] Jo Ann M. Petancio[4]
Yvette Eve R. Villanueva[5] Maria Nancy Quinco-Cadosales[6]

[1]Department of Education Leyte Division, [2]Cebu South Hills International School,
[3,4,6]Cebu Normal University, [4]Department of Education Cebu City Division
Philippines

Abstract

Blended learning offers immense advantages to students – they stand to benefit from the structured practices of the classroom while learning at their own pace, owing to the adaptive and personalized nature of online learning (Ferrante, 2017). However, managing a school in a flexible learning environment brings a unique set of challenges. Building an effective blended learning environment requires careful planning and preparation. This paper aimed to provide adequate insights into the experiences in transforming a school into a blended learning school and the challenges encountered during the transition phase. It specifically contributed vision and wisdom into the management of a blended learning environment transitioning from the traditional. Qualitative case study research methodology was used in this study to determine how the school environment was transformed from traditional learning to blended learning. There can be no denying the fact that online learning is here to stay. Thus, the transformation of the school into a blended learning environment is noteworthy and worth emulating for other basic education schools in the country. It is a collaborative work of the people behind the meticulous process spearheaded by the principal to successfully transform the school into a blended learning environment preparing new generations to be well-rounded and globally competitive individuals.

Keywords: blended learning, case study, educational management, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The rapid pace of technological development in this time of the Fourth Industrial Revolution also corresponds to how fast knowledge becomes obsolete. What students learn in school in their youth may no longer be the things that they must apply in the workplace as adults. Hence the necessity for a kind of education that enables an individual to "learn, unlearn and relearn" (Ra, Shrestha, Khatiwada, Won Yoon, & Kwon, 2019). Such scenario poses a couple of challenges to educators and educational systems in general as there is a need to equip students with skills for jobs that may not yet be existing as of the moment.Schools, in response to the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, integrate technology in classroom instruction. Technology provides a great promise for students' learning and has fueled the imagination of those who are interested in bringing change in the achievement of all the learners. Blended learning, also known as hybrid classroom, is one of the approaches espoused by schools by combining most frequently eLearning and traditional face-to-face learning (Giarla, 2019). It includes physical, face-to-face interactions mixed with online, digital learning experiences. Blended learningis widely considered to be one of the most effective ways to teach, and blended programs can now be found at all levels of

education(Conway, 2005).Researches have shown that blended learning approach significantly improved the learning achievement of students (Wei, Shi, Yang, & Liu, 2017) and resulted in more active learning(Bower, Dalgarno, Kennedy, Lee, & Kenney, 2015). With online options for learning, students still strongly support face-to-face lectures and tutorials(Wong, Tatnall, & Burgess, 2014). A mixture of physical and digital learning opportunities of blended learning indeed caters to the students' needs and preferences for optimum achievement.

There are twelve common types of blended learning: 1) station rotation, 2) lab rotation, 3) remote or enriched virtual, 4) flex, 5) flipped classroom, 6) individual rotation, 7) project-based, 8) self-directed, 9) inside-out, 10) outside-in, 11) supplemental and 12) mastery-based (TeachThought Staff, 2019). Just as there are multiple types of blended learning that may be adopted, there are also variations on how these are implemented and managed in the school and even classroom levels. The use of technology in education specifically in managing a class demanded great challenge (Kulik, 2015).Such challenge is also true in carrying out blended learning. Significant issues in implementing blended learning were identified based on the results of research. These are cognitive overload for both teachers and students, communication delays that compromise learning experiences, technology reliability and performance issues, and institutional support for blended learning initiatives(Bower, Dalgarno, Kennedy, Lee, & Kenney, 2015). While these concerns sprang from individual cases in the implementation of blended learning, they may still be the same but to a different degree when blended learning is embraced at an institutional level.

Adequacy of time, resources and evaluation are considered critical for a successful implementation of a blended learning environment(Harris, Connolly, & Feeney, 2009). In another study, support staff, faculty and the learners themselves are considered as the most critical factors with technology as a secondary issue(Mitchell & Honore, 2007). Also, appropriate resources, the suitability of the course, and support from the senior management are deemed to be the essential factors for blended learning to be successful(Poon, 2013). From these studies it can be gleaned that institutional factor is indeed vital as resources both material and human are managed and allocated at this level.

While studies abound on the effectiveness of the blended learning approach and factors for its successful implementation, it is also noteworthy to be able to know how a blended learning environment is introduced and managed by senior management in basic education schools that formerly relied on traditional learning approaches in the classroom. This study will provide insights into the experiences in transforming a school into a blended learning school and the challenges encountered during the transition phase.

Research Objectives

This case study aimed to provide insights into the management of a blended learning environment transitioning from the traditional. More specifically, this study intended to:

1) describe how the school transformed into a blended learning school; and

7909

2) identify the challenges encountered during the transition period from traditional to blended learning.

Theoretical Framework

The Systems Management Theory is an offshoot of Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General System Theory. With systems abounding everywhere indicative of existing interrelationships between and among societal elements, a systems approach is also necessary (Bertalanffy, 1968). In this kind of approach, various alternative solutions are explored to be able to choose that one solution capable of bringing optimal results at minimal costs.Bertalanffy's work also advocated the interaction of an organization with its external environment and considered that being an open system is necessary for the survival of the organization (Chikere & Nwoka, 2015).

In this study, the school was considered an organizational management system with subsystems. The administration, faculty, staff, students and parents are subsystems. These subsystems are interrelated and interdependent on each other. On the other hand, the external .

environment is composed of the community and the industries that become sources of the curriculum and from time to time, inform the school of the skills much needed in the workplaces.

Incorporated into this framework are the managerial functions: planning, organizing, staffing, directing, and controlling. These functions were basically performed by the principal and werenecessary for the inputs to be processed. The external environmentincluded the Learning Management System (LMS) provider among others. The transformation process included the actual implementation of the blended learning approach in classroom instruction and the outputs were the students' acquisition of knowledge and skills. These knowledge and skills will be applied by these students as they enter the community and industries as part of the workforce in the future. The scope of this study however focused more on the functions of management and how these were essential in putting the processing of the inputs into action
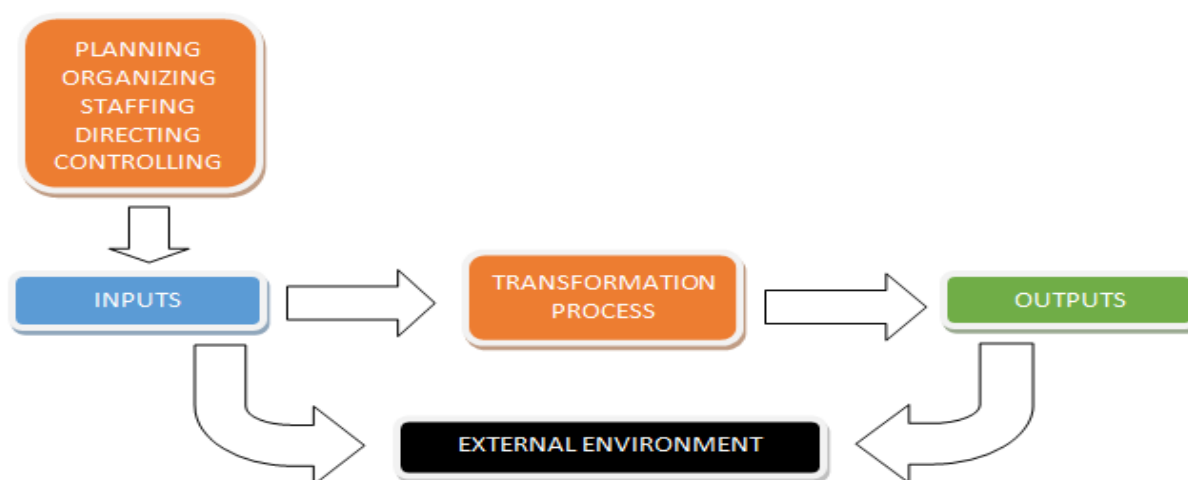
Figure 1. Input-output modelin transforming into a blended learning school

METHODS

Design

The qualitative case study research methodology was used in this study to determine how the school environment was transformed from traditional learning to blended learning. A case study was deemed fit to use since "how" and "why" questions lead to the use of case studies as one of the preferred research strategies (Yin, 2003). Also a case study is often utilized to observe an entity and report its interactions with variables of interest (Nock, Michel, & Photos, 2007). In this study, the individual being observed is the school principal and how he was able to introduce and manage blended learning in his school. This study was also qualitative in design since case studies collect detailed and qualitative data and rarely data that can be measured quantitatively(Nock, Michel, & Photos, 2007). This study also focused more on the management of the blended learning environment and not measuring its effectiveness.

As to the type of case study, this was descriptive since it intended to describe the intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In this study, it aimed to describe the management of the blended learning environment in the actual school under the leadership of its principal.

Unit of Analysis and Sampling

This single-unit case study aimed to look into the process of transforming the school into a blended learning school under the leadership of the principal. The specific context for this study is an international school in Central Visayas with a population of 200 students and 16 teachers.The school takes pride in its fully digitized library with add on platform that provides each student an online and offline access the more than 5000 developmentally appropriate books.

Principal's Background Information

The principal holds a post graduate degree in education. He recites graduate study courses at two universities while managing a school that offers preschool program, grade school and junior high school levels. Being an advocate of technology, he spearheaded the implementation of the blended learning method with the aid of a learning management system (LMS).

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews with the school principal were scheduled in according to his most convenient time. The interview focused on the concrete ways that the principal undertook to transform the school into a blended learning school from the traditional one and the challenges met during the transition. The interview lasted for an hour. Also, the team visited the school to validate the sources of evidence for blended learning environment.

To analyze the data, thematic analysis was employed. The data were examined closely to identify common ideas and patterns of meaning that surfaced most of the time. The results of the analysis were used to come up with a rich description of the case being studied. These were validated from the school principal being interviewed who in turn confirmed the results and enriched them further with relevant data.

Ethical considerations were observed in the study. Informed consent was secured prior to the conduct of the study. No section in the paper mentioned about the school and the key informant to protect their identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The school under study has been managed by a very competent principal who is also an advocate of blended learning approach and a proponent of this approach in the school. With the pedagogical leadership of the school principal, the school's education system has been transformedfrom traditional to a contextualized blended learning school system. The 'how' and 'why' of transformation of the school's learning system employing blended learning approach is discussed further in this study.

Transforming Traditional into Blended Learning School

The International School is now transformed into a blended learning school. The transformation was not done overnight. It went through a lot of process and different aspects of school management had been considered. From planning, organizing, staffing, directing, to controlling, different experiences were encountered by the principal and the school in general. Upon assuming principalship of the school, the key informant pointed out to have a redirection of the curriculum incorporating technology in the classroom and in the entire school system. The principal wanted to incorporate technology in the teaching and learning process. The principalwas guided with this premise as he said that *"...technology offers a compelling opportunity for school children to make use of their generation as an avenue to make education still relevant even if technology seems to replace the traditional system."* So, the school took a risk for a transformation of its education system and the school principal tailored the blended learning in their school context. The blended learning in the school has been realized and materialized in a span of three years. This happened because the principal, during the interview, expressed that he did the following for the school's transformation: 1) raised awareness among the school owners, teachers and students, 2) collaborated with the school's management and other stakeholders, 3) capacitated teachers towards implementation of blended learning, and 4) continued to monitor and assess the program.

Awareness

This study shows that transformation occurs when everybody in the organization is aware of the goal of the school. As Quinco-Cadosales (2019) mentioned that in the school, learning leaders make things happen. Their leadership abilities have an impact on the school's overall operations.In this case, the International School aims to actualize blended learning and incorporate technology in the classroom and in the entire school. Awareness among members of the school and other stakeholders is very important in transforming the school into a blended learning institution. This is manifested when the key informant said that *"I started raising awareness among my teachers that ICT in the classroom could spark interest among school children. To use manila paper, cartolina paper, cut out*

pictures as traditional method in creating learning materials comes in handy when teachers use slide decks as visual aids.” In addition, students were also informed and made aware of the responsible use of technology, as this is part of the blended learning approach. Information dissemination was done for the students to be aware of their responsibilities in blended learning. This is evident when the principal, during the interview, expressed that *“...Guidelines on the use of iPad was crafted. Information dissemination was conducted to get the students understand that the iPad is only used for educational purpose not for leisure…Students were made to understand on the responsible use of technology.”*Both teachers and students were aware about blended learning. It was also good that the school owner especially become aware of this system because at the end they are the ones to have a final say of 'yes' or 'no'. The awareness for this concept was made to actualize the plan for the school. This is manifested when the principal said that *“The blended learning I have materialized for my school is a three-year process. In those years, scaffolds were softly geared towards raising awareness among teachers and most especially the school owner.”*

Collaboration

It is also found out that the transformation of the school was made possible through collaboration. The collaborative efforts of the principal, the school owner, the system provider, and even the parents helped in realizing the contextualized blended learning in the school. Collaboration among the school's management, leaders and other stakeholders is very vital to materialize the goal of the institution. Since the blended learning approach applied here is in the institutional level, the brilliant idea of the school

principal was realized because there was a strong collaboration with the school owner and the system provider. This is evident when the key informant responded in the interview that

“Since the teachers are the frontliners on these methods, I was able to get approval from the school board to add flat screen TV in the classroom and provide each teacher a laptop that they could use daily as they carry out the expected content standard for the day.”

“To help the method become sustainable, I was able to source out a publishing company which could help sustain my Blended Learning Approach.”

“...so much consultations with our digital providers. I in fact scrutinized and questioned the sustainability of their digital solutions.”

“...I tied up with Powermac to capacitate the school in providing the students with the iPad.”

Capacity Building

The teachers are the school's immediate responders. They are in the classroom to bring out the best in their students. Teachers require the highest level of attention from school officials (Quinco-Cadosales, 2017).The results of this study also revealed that the school had done more for the teachers. Aside from providing them the access to technology and learning materials for blended learning, teachers were also capacitated through the school's initiative of sending them to trainings about blended learning approach. This is expressed by the informant when he said that*“Trainings were conducted on the forward and system thinking towards the employment of blended learning in our school's context. Digital trainings were provided three to four times all year round.”* Besides, the trainings capacitated teachers on how they implement blended approach in

the teaching and learning process. They are required to prepare their lessons aligned with the approach of the school. The teachers geared toward the successful implementation of the blended learning approach because of their capacity to prepare the lessons. This evidence is manifested when the informant said that *"The teachers in each learning area identified and allowed only applications that could be helpful in their subject. Teachers were asked to design worksheets to draw out clear output on the progress of learning among students. The principle on the use of Blended Learning was required when teachers write and design their lessons"*.

Continuous Assessment

Furthermore, the study revealed that the school continued to closely monitor and assess the program which is geared towards blended learning. Although the students were able to adapt with the teaching and learning process, monitoring and assessment was conducted so that the transformation is sustainable and blended learning is still practiced. This is evident when the informant said that *"Close monitoring and assessment of the program involving the use of the platform by the teachers were conducted in partnership with our digital solution provider. There is not much transition issues or problems that occur. The students were able to adopt with the teaching and learning process that we advocated."*

These findings of the study described how the International School transformed its traditional education system into blended learning school system. It was found out that the transition process was arduous on the part of school management especially the principal. It went through a lot of process and continuous planning to strengthen and maintain the system that has always been

considered by the school. Through the transition period, the school manager or the principal was able to plan, organize, staff, direct and control blended learning approach in the school. The principal conducted the following – awareness campaign, strong collaboration and linkages, faculty development, and quality improvement through monitoring and assessment in order to transform the school into a blended learning environment.

Challenges in Transforming the School into a Blended Learning Environment

Technical Readiness

The school under study hurdleda lot of challenges in transforming it into a blended learning school. It was revealed that preparedness and readiness of the system provider posed a challenge to transform the school because there were technical concerns that are yet to be perfected on their end. The learning management system (LMS) provider was not yet fully ready in terms of its technicalities but the system has already been applied in the school. The holistic readiness of LMS provider for blended learning affected the entire process of teaching and learning. This challenge encountered by the school management is manifested when the key informant said *"One prominent challenge is the holistic readiness of our Learning Management System (LMS) provider. It appears to me that while our LMS provider – a publishing company journeyed with my school as we venture on this platform… still the system is still having some technical challenges."*

Moreover, connectivity or network connection was also a challenge experienced by the school in transforming it into a blended learning institution. This should always be considered in this type of learning management system because the use of

7911

technology needs a wide range of connectivity. However, the provider of the school provided both online and offline access in using digital solutions. This is shared by the principal during the interview that *"Connectivity however was a challenge even until now. That is why the digital solutions that I utilized can be accessed online and offline."*

Parents' Reception

Aside from preparedness and readiness of the system provider, the school management also encountered another challenge with the parents of the learners. Readiness of parents to embrace shifting of learning materials from printed to digital ones had been considered by the school because parents are supporting their children in school. This is evident when the school principal said *"Another challenge that surfaced was the readiness of parents to shift from print materials to digital platform materials."*

Although it was mentioned that there are not much transition issues and problems that occur, still the school faced challenges in transforming the institution into blended learning. The following challenges were identified – readiness and network connectivity of the system provider, and readiness of the parents in embracing blended learning approach for their children. These challenges were beyond the control of the school management because this is more on the part of the provider and the parents. But still the school and the other stakeholders collaborate with each other, and it is assumed that solutions to these challenges are already at hand since continuous and close monitoring and assessment of the system or program was regularly conducted.

CONCLUSION

The prime mover for the school's metamorphosis into a blended learning school was the school principal who worked in close collaboration with the school owner, other stakeholders and the learning management system provider in the case of the International School in Central Visayas. The transformation was a rigorous process of collaborative efforts among all stakeholders primarily the principal who did the planning, organizing, staffing, directing and controlling for the school to become a blended learning institution. During the transition phase, challenges in terms of readiness of the system, network connectivity and readiness of parents were encountered by the school management. Yet, there were not much transition issues and problems that occurred. The students, who are digital natives, were able to adapt with the new teaching and learning process. Thus, the transformation of the school into a blended learning environment is noteworthy and worth emulating by other basic education schools in the country.

References

Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 544-559.

Bertalanffy, L. v. (1968). *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications.* New York: George Braziller Inc.

Bower, M., Dalgarno, B., Kennedy, G., Lee, M., & Kenney, J. (2015). Design and Implementation Factors in Blended Synchronous Learning Environments: Outcomes from a Cross-Case Analysis. *Computers and Education*.

Quinco-Cadosales, M. N. (2019). Learning leaders' gains from a development program. *Asia

Pacific Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences, 16, 17-34.

Quinco-Cadosales, M. N. (2017). Training framework for teachers. *Asian Academy Research Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities,* 4(3), 265 -285.

Chikere, C., & Nwoka, J. (2015). The Systems Theory of Management in Modern Day Organizations - A Study of Aldgate Congress Resort Limited Port Harcourt. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*.

Conway, A. R. (2005). *Beyond blended learning: A case study of institutional change at an Australian regional university. The Internet and Higher Education.* Australian regional university.

Ferrante, L. (2017). *Assessing the awareness academic staff in using e-learning tools:A case study.".* The Benefits Of Blended Learning. Retrieved from teachthought.com: https://www.teachthought.com/technolo gy/the-benefits-of-blended- learning/.

Giarla, A. (2019, September 18). *The Benefits Of Blended Learning.* Retrieved from teachthought.com: https://www.teachthought.com/technolo gy/the-benefits-of-blended-learning/

Harris, P., Connolly, J., & Feeney, L. (2009). Blended learning: overview and recommendations for successful implementation. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 155-163.

Kulik, A. (2015). *Effective teaching with technology in higher education: Road to Success.* American Research Journal.

Mitchell, A., & Honore, S. (2007). Criteria for successful blended learning. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 143-149.

Nock, M., Michel, B., & Photos, V. (2007). Single-Case Research Designs.

Poon, J. (2013). Blended learning: an insitutional approach for enhancing students' learning experiences. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 271-288.

Ra, S., Shrestha, U., Khatiwada, S., Won Yoon, S., & Kwon, K. (2019). The rise of technology and impact on skills. *International Journal of Training Research.*

TeachThought Staff. (2019, June 21). *12 of the Most Common Types of Blended Learning.* Retrieved from teachthought.com: https://www.teachthought.com/learning/ 12-types-of-blended-learning/

Wei, Y., Shi, Y., Yang, H., & Liu, J. (2017). Blended Learning versus Traditional Learning: A Study on Students' Learning Achievements and Academic Press. ResearchGate.

Wong, L., Tatnall, A., & Burgess, S. (2014). A framework for investigating blended learnign effectiveness. *Education + Training*, 233-251.

Yin, R. (2003). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods.* SAGE Publications.