

Mitchell, A. and Honore, S. (2007) Criteria for Successful Blended Learning. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 39(3), 143-149.

This study adopts an action research approach to enable the researchers observe, learn and thus improve the delivery of an MBA course to students from multinational companies using a blended learning approach. The study takes place over three years and the authors outline the changes implemented and the effects the changes had on the course and the students as the research progressed. Mitchell and Honore discuss the outcomes of the research and conclude that learning design and technology which they describe as the foundations of the course need to be high quality though they admit that technology is becoming a secondary issue as organisations become more e-enabled. They suggest the most critical factors are all the people involved from faculty and the learners to the support staff and propose that encouraging the right human conditions for a successful learning environment is more important in the virtual world.

Although the authors indicate their data collection methods and use triangulation they don't provide any indications as to the themes used to collect data. That said they clearly indicate their findings for each year and provide rationale for the changes implemented concluding with an overall view of what was learnt over the duration of the research. Research indicates initial negative experiences of the first group had an adverse impact on those starting in the second year of the course though the first group's experiences did not affect them as they started the second year of the course. Those who started in year three benefited from the changes implemented and the improved experiences of the first two groups resulted in less negative feedback to the final group. The final group appear to have been the most successful of the three but the authors admit that they cannot argue this was as a result of the improvements made as the group may have been an exceptional one compared to the others.

This research provides some interesting insights for me. The first being the perception of students that the blended approach was taken as a cost cutting exercise rather than to increase their learning experience. Most research indicates the reduction in training costs to organisations when discussing the affordances of virtual classroom technology. It is important therefore that the technology is marketed in terms of what it can do for the student. Secondly it was interesting to note the level of discussion between the first group

and the second group on the negative experiences of the first group. This was not something the authors had considered and it is an aspect which would have a significant impact on the adoption of the technology throughout our organisation. This indicates the need to take additional steps to ensure learners have a positive first experience with the technology. This leads to another point made by the authors which is the need for adequate resourcing to ensure appropriate technical support is available for learners and trainers alike. In addition extra support will be needed as learners get used to a new learning environment. Gilly Salmon's 5 stage approach for online learners may need to be revisited to see how it can be adapted in our modules. It is reassuring that despite the negative experiences there were positive outcomes for all the learners involved.