Value of Blended Learning in Supporting Leadership Development Programs

Ann Toler Hilliard

Bowie State University, Department of Educational Studies and Leadership, U.S.A.
draph1@juno.com

Abstract: The future is now! Blended learning is evident in professional development training for educational leadership development programs today. With the limitation of funding and time constraints, more professional development training organizations are infusing blended learning as another educational tool to use during the leadership development training process. The leadership development process continues after face-to-face training with the support of blending learning technology. Blended learning has many definitions, but the most common meaning for blended learning is used to show a combined effort with face-to-face instruction to meet the needs of participants in the instructional environment. Leadership development programs must include three dimensions for participants such as awareness of concepts, definition and procedures/policy, understanding of measurable skills and knowledge and the application of such skills and knowledge.   This study will discuss research related blended learning and its benefits, an approach to blended learning, vision and mission, professional development, collaborative leadership practices and learning communities, monitoring and evaluating program quality.

Keywords*:* blended learning, facilitators, professional development, participants, learning communities

Introduction

Leadership development training programs for school leaders are utilizing software programs to improve the delivery of instruction and assessment of participants' work.   Program participants are able to self-check their work before submission to program facilitators. Therefore, needed programs and technology tools are a must to have today in leadership development training programs. It is important for facilitators of the training program at the university to have the support from the leadership team at the university. The leadership team at various levels at the university should make sure that the infrastructure is in place to accommodate or support blended learning programs. It is important too, to have at the maintenance stage blended learning teaching programs that are strong. Blended learning programs should be mapped out properly strategically, updated and improvements should be clearly defined by facilitators in all planning and implementation stages and evaluation of new or improved technology for blended learning program activities. Blended learning programs should be updated only when it is necessary in meeting the current needs of participants. Regardless of the instructional methods for training, it is important to have quality course content.   Participants in leadership development training should give feedback at the end of each session in order for facilitators to improve program quality.   Regardless of training experiences for participant feedback is important (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). The leadership team at the university should support quality blended learning programs by providing needed resources to facilitators guiding the program to ensure that participants are receiving quality services.

What is blended learning and Its Benefits?

There is not any one definition for blended learning. However, the most common definition is using a percentage of online learning combined with face-to-face instructional services is a common definition. The benefits of blended learning are as follows: learning can be used easily for over long periods of time with limited instructional facilitation, learning gives times for participants to reflect on their own practices immediately and learning offers multiple contexts of practices globally (Graham, 2006)**.**

Blended learning is a practical framework that can be used to communicate a broad range of effective approaches to learning, teaching and leading. Blended learning uses various contemporary technologies to enhance learning, and the development of flexible approaches to course design and instructional methods to enhance participants' engagement (Queensland University of Technology, 2011)

An Approach for Blended Learning

From the literature review there is little information to suggest that there is a formal systematic approach to blending learning. The leadership development facilitators should seek common ways of using blending learning tools to engage participants in various training sessions by frequent engagement individually or as a group as follows:

1. Provide blended learning training that is relevant for program participants.

2. Use several technology tools to engage participants in a number of learning activities related to leadership.

3. Keep participants focused on immediate tasks and exercises during the training session.

4. Seek input/feedback from participants based on their views about blended learning practices used during the leadership development training experience.

5. Monitor how well participants are performing using blended learning based on tasks completion in a timely manner.

Some common tools used in blended learning training sessions are power point, videos and interactive whiteboards; virtual communication tools such as discussion boards, chat rooms and podcasting; social networking software such as blogs; e-learning systems and group collaborative software, mobile and face book learning (Gillani & Relan, 2007).

Vision and Mission

The participants in the leadership development program need to gain skills in writing a collaborative vision based on where the organization wants to go. Usually the vision statement's origin is based on values in essence what drives the organization toward its mission. The mission statement tells participants in the training program what the organization intends to do to get to where the organization wishes to go to achieve its vision. The participants in the leadership development program need to know how to articulate a typical vision and mission statement to a larger audience during the training experience (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007).

Professional Development Activities

Relevant professional development is a must for participants in the leadership development training program and the upgrading of skills and knowledge in order for these participants to keep up with the latest trends in online learning or blended learning at the university. The leadership team at the university should continue to update facilitators, faculty and students' skills and knowledge regarding new and improved technologies through blended learning. Therefore, it is important for university leadership team to communicate the online policy for new or improved programs; schedule differentiated professional development based on participants' needs, offer participants incentives to participate in program training. The facilitators of the leadership development program should also offer mentoring services to participants in order to show participants how to use the variety of technology management tools to enhance skills and knowledge in leadership (Krause, 2007). Research indicates educational district leaders are responsible for many tasks in school districts and at the university and these individuals must

have knowledge and know the expectations within the job description. District school leaders for example must show competence (*without this author altering words*) by:

1. Developing a broadly collaborative vision and mission to guide district decisions and to support change at the school level and knowledge of how to develop trust, that is a requisite variable in shared visioning, for school improvement by using data technology evidence to inform district decisions, and knowledge of the importance of professional development

2. Developing school culture and climate is critically important; therefore, the district leaders must apply knowledge of how to create a culture of trust, learning, and high expectations by building effective learning communities by the support of blended learning.

3. Knowing curriculum planning and how to develop the curriculum to motivate students in learning environments using various technology tools to enhance instructional services.

4. Infusing technology into leadership practices has become a recognized domain of practical knowledge essential to effective instructional leadership and that is why blended learning is so important.

5. Using best practices regarding management of a district organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment using blended learning.

6. Knowing how to craft systemic management and operations, organize education improvement efforts, coordinate accountability systems using technology, and create policy coherence that influences school outcomes and student learning.

7. Knowing the importance of creating systems that focus on school personnel and other
Needed resources related to common goals and creating processes by using technology that facilitates effective teaching, learning and leading, because there should be ways to encourage teachers to be leaders.

8. Supporting ways to promote the success of every student by ensuring the management of the district's organization, operation, and resources through monitoring and evaluating district management and operational systems by using technology systems.

9. Using human, fiscal, and technological resources within the district; promoting district-level policies and procedures that protect the welfare and safety of students and staff across the district.

10. Training others as leaders in the capacity for distributed leadership and ensuring that district time focuses on high-quality instruction and student learning by the use of blended learning support tools.

11. Making it a point to collaborate with faculty, families and caregivers, and district community partners; understanding of diverse community interests and needs; and best practices for mobilizing district community resources by the use of technology support systems.

12. Knowing how to collect and analyze data information pertinent to the district's educational environment, and using appropriate strategies and data technology.

13. Supporting the practices of inclusive leadership, and leadership for diversity.

14. Providing clinical experiences with the support of blended learning for all individuals or participants who are seeking certification for district leadership positions from the leadership development training programs (NPBEA, 2011).

Observations by educational experts affirm that an effective district leader must be reflective about leadership practices in order to improve student learning (Knapp, Copeland & Talbert, 2003). Using typical standards articulated by NCATE can guide the success of leadership development training programs, because these standards can give program facilitators a consistent way to plan, organize, implement, monitor and evaluate program effectiveness.

Collaborative Leadership Practices and Learning Communities

A continuation of learning must take place for participants in the leadership development training program. Therefore, collaborative leadership practices and learning communities are all assets to the professional growth of participants in the leadership development training program.

The collaborative practice is encouraged so that participants in the leadership development training program may have mastery of skills in the sharing of power, decision-making and valuable resources. The collaborative leadership practice helps to broaden the network of resources for participants during and after the training experience. The success of collaborative practices creates positive relationships through trust, mutual respect,

broader understanding of diversity and improves communication. Collaborative leadership practices offer a chance for participants in training to be full supporters for their areas of interest within the organization and within their own community (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

Collaborative learning for the participants in the leadership development training program are in a unique position to establish a viable learning community by using blended learning or e-learning opportunities. Facilitators of the blended learning community can create opportunities for participants to connect to various community technologies to extend the face-to-face into blended learning solutions that include pre and post time for online community building as a practice for participants long after the formal training experience in the leadership development program has ended (Chris lip, 2001).

The benefits of a collaborative electronic learning community for participants are many. For example blended learning communities are able to:

1. Extend interactive learning opportunities informally for all participants

2. Seek unlimited ways to receive and share knowledge and skills with others

3. Share relevant and practical ways to address problems and issues in education and business at the district or building level

4. Allow small and large groups of individuals to work on organizational projects through the use of technology without the expense of travel or hotel (Educes, 2009).

With electronic learning communities, online conferences could be help often for professional development practices. For conference activities, participants may view relevant videos and power point presentations in narrative format that encourage group interaction. Online and blended learning conferences give the participants the opportunity to ask questions, examine resources and network with other participants during the conference. After the conference has ended, if information was saved electronically, participants who wish could review selected presentations for more clarity.

There are many tools available for blended learning or online learning as follows:

1. Asynchronous Tools include discussion boards, calendar, group announcements, messaging or email, decision support tools, surveys and polls and website links.

2. Synchronous Tools include audio conferencing, chat, instant messaging, video conferencing, web conferencing and white boarding.

3. Content Integration includes narrated slideshows, interactive activities, streaming audio and video and web books.

4. Document Management includes document collaboration, permission based access, resource library and version tracking and control (Kaplan, 2002).

In order to have a clear understanding for tool use by participants, the facilitators must ensure that all participants know how to use the electronic tools with maximum proficiency during the leadership development training program.

Monitoring and Evaluating Program Quality

In order to have high quality assurance for all leadership development programs, it is essential that there is a monitoring system in place. Facilitators are responsible for the overall monitoring of the leadership development training program. The facilitators must also encourage participants to self-monitor their own performance too. Evaluation or assessment of the program can be time consuming; however, facilitators must have effective management skill and be able to monitor each assignment to see if certain requirements have met weekly and provide written feedback to participants through document collaboration (Quality Matters, 2008).

Conclusion

From all research, there is added-value to using blended learning in leadership development programs, because of the broad range of integrated and use of electronic tools such as audio, video and web conferencing opportunities and others. Blended learning has many advantages too, because it is cost effective, provides an opportunity for broader audience of diverse participants, many interactive capabilities and provides broader means of communication within learning communities on a global scale.

Bio of Author

Dr. Ann Toler Hilliard is an assistant professor who teaches in the Department of Educational Studies and Leadership at Bowie State University, U.S.A. As an assistant professor, Dr. Hilliard coordinates activities that provide professional experiences for those individuals who are seeking the opportunity to serve as a school administrator. She has held leadership positions at the building level as a principal, college program director, and district level as an academic achievement specialist in Maryland and in the District of Columbia and an international consultant in Europe and Asia. Her experiences as a leader in the area of administration extend from elementary school through graduate school. Dr. Hilliard's research interests include: Leadership Trends, Issues and Data Use, Relationship Building and Teaching, Assessment Standards for University Improvement, and Educators as Entrepreneurs. Dr. Hilliard earned a Doctor of Education degree, George Washington University; Master's of Science degree, The Johns Hopkins University; Master's of Arts and Teaching degree, Trinity University – Washington; B.S. degree, Elizabeth City State University; and earned Consulting Certificate from Harvard University and holds an Advanced Professional Certificate, Maryland State Department of Education, U.S.A.

References

Chrislip, D.D. and Flowers, J. (2001) The Change Project: David Chrislip. Collaboration:
The New Leadership. A conversation between David Chrislip and Joe Flowers.
www.well.com/user/bbear/chrislip.

Educause (2009). EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative Discovery Tool: Blended Learning Workshop Guide. Unit 6: Quality Assurance. Retrieved 19 June 2011 from http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI80076.pdf e-Learning Guidelines (2006).

Garrison, R., & Vaughan, H. (2008). Blended learning in higher education: Framework, principles and guidelines. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gillani, B.B. & Relan, A. (1997). Incorporating interactivity and multimedia into web-based instruction. In B. H. Khan (Ed.), Web-based instruction. Educational Technology Publications: New Jersey.

Graham, C. (2006). Blended learning systems. Definitions, current trends and future directions. In C.Bonk & C.

Griffith University (2008). Griffith Blended Learning Strategy: 2008-2010. Retrieved May 11, 2011, from http://www.griffith.edu.au/gihe/pdf/Blended-learning-strategy-FINAL.pdf

Kaplan, S (2002). www.icohere.com.

Knapp, M.S., Copeland, M.A., & Talbert, J.E. (2003). Leading for Learning: Reflective tools for School and District Leaders. Center for the Student of Teach and Policy, University of Washington.

Krause. K. (2007). Blended Learning Strategy. Retrieved 21 July from http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/pdf/blended-learning-strategy-january-2008-april-edit.pdf.

Littlejohn, A., & Pegler, C. (2007). Preparing for Blended e-Learning. London: Routledge.

Meyer, K. A. (2002). Quality in distance education: Focus on on-line learning. Retrieved 19 June 2011 from http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring141/shelton141.html.

National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2011).

Quality Matters (2008). QM Lit Review. Retrieved 14 July 2011 from http://www.qmprogram.org/files/rubric/litReview.pdf.

Queensland University of Technology (2011). Guidelines for the support of e-learning in new Zealand tertiary institutions, Retrieved 11 May 2011, from http://elg.massey.ac.nz/Guidelines-questions.pdf.