Preface to PEBL blended learning modules

Welcome to PEBL blended courses!

These courses have been developed by several academics under the auspices of the Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL) project supported by DFID's SPHEIR programme. The project addresses the critical academic staff shortages many East African universities are currently facing and enables universities to share scarce teaching resources through quality assured, credit-bearing degree modules, delivered through blended learning.

You may have heard of blended learning before. Nevertheless, we found it necessary to explain this rather modern method of learning. B*lended learning (*sometimes called *hybrid* or *mixed-mode learning*) is the use of traditional classroom teaching methods together with the use of online learning for the same students studying the same content in the same course. It is a "thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Classroom instruction time may be augmented by online learning experiences, and online learning can include varying degrees of interaction or just time alone in independent study and learning activities. However, in a quality blended learning experience, the content and activities of both in-person and online learning are integrated with one another and work toward the same learning outcomes with the same content. The various learning experiences are synthesised, complement each other, and are planned or orchestrated to run in parallel.

This mode of learning has been used all over the world for several years. In Africa many universities have a department/unit responsible for e-Learning and also have at least a Learning Management System (LMS). One of the most common open-source (free of charge) e-learning platform is Moodle. Moodle is being used by universities in East Africa like Makerere University in Uganda, Kenyatta University in Kenya, Strathmore University in Kenya, Open University of Tanzania, University of Rwanda, State University of Zanzibar, to mention but a few. Nagel, Van der Merwe, Bozalek, Ivala, Peté and Vanker (2015) also pointed out that some South African universities also use Moodle. However, there are also commercial platforms like Blackboard which are used by some universities.

Given the increasing number of learners willing to undertake university education and the shortage of institutions of higher learning that can take on all of them as full-time students, blended learning is the key alternative in Africa. Further to this, several individuals are calling for institutions to enable them to learn at their own pace as they work or attend to other needs. The same is the request by employers who wish that their workers get new skills. Blended learning is again a solution to this.

Blended learning is therefore very advantageous. It gives greater understanding of material and interest in the module since you will participate in group discussions (interaction with peers) and communication with the tutors online. There is a lot of flexibility since you can access the online platform with blended learning courses whenever and wherever you like. Your soft skills will be boosted since you will be communicating more and more with different kinds of people. Blended learning also motivates one to become a better time manager since most activities (or e-tivities) have deadlines. It also enables you to have a better understanding of the module which will make it possible for you to get good grades. Other advantages of blended learning for students include increased learning skills, greater access to information, improved satisfaction and learning outcomes, and

opportunities both to learn with others and to teach others given the opportunity for collaboration at a distance where individual students work together virtually in an intellectual endeavour as a learning practice. The additional types of learning activities improve engagement and can help students achieve higher and more meaningful levels of learning. You will also learn to be virtual citizens as you practice the ability to project yourself socially and academically in an online community of inquiry. Digital learning skills are becoming essential to be a lifelong learner, and blended courses help learners master the skills for using a variety of technologies.

As you take this course, you will also need to use a range of technologies or resources. There may be discussion activities that provide you opportunities to learn from the work of you peers and share your views as you create your own knowledge. The study guide should provide the detailed learning outcomes, tasks, activities/e-tivities, time plan and learning resources. Contact the tutor(s) if you have any questions.

Enjoy the courses!

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