International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning

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Volume 24, numéro 4, novembre 2023

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108561ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v24i4.7291

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Éditeur(s)

Athabasca University Press (AU Press)

ISSN

1492-3831 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Ali, R. (2023). Compte rendu de [Blended Learning Environments to Foster Self-Directed Learning, edited by Christo van der Westhuizen, Mncedisi C. Maphalala, and Roxanne Bailey (AOSIS Books, 2022)]. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *24*(4), 278–280. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v24i4.7291

International **R**eview of **R**esearch in **O**pen and **D**istributed **L**earning
Volume 24, Number 4

November – 2023

Book Review: Blended Learning Environments to Foster Self-Directed Learning

Editors: Christo van der Westhuizen, Mncedisi C. Maphalala, and Roxanne Bailey (AOSIS Books, 2022, 306 pages)
ISBN: 9781776342419 (pdf). https://books.aosis.co.za/index.php/ob/catalog/book/366

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Blended Learning Environments to Foster Self-Directed Learning is the eighth book in the Self-Directed Learning Series by North-West University, South Africa. The volume provides strategies and approaches to promote self-directed learning (SDL) in blended learning environments, featuring contributions from authors experienced in active learning strategies in online and blended learning contexts. They emphasise the importance of technology-enhanced learning, particularly blended learning, in improving students' overall learning experience by promoting SDL. The book, which is licensed for free use, consists of 10 chapters that delve into various pedagogical methods to enhance SDL in blended learning contexts. The target audience for this book is scholars and practitioners who are interested in enhancing SDL, specifically in blended learning environments.

The book begins by setting a theoretical foundation for the subsequent chapters. In Chapter 1, van der Westhuizen and Bailey highlight the importance of aligning the person-process-context (PCC) model with the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework to guide SDL. In this chapter, the authors propose a model for SDL and make a case for combining PCC and CoI to create optimal learning experiences for individuals in blended learning environments. This approach was quite effective in shaping the overall logic of the subsequent chapters. In Chapter 2, Kruger and colleagues offer a literature review to conceptualise inquiry-based, blended, and self-directed learning, and they elucidate the connections between these three learning approaches. Although this chapter is consistent with the book's overall theme and focus, it places particular emphasis on the affective domain of learning. The authors argue that the affective domain is a shared element among all three learning approaches and could serve as a catalyst for enhancing self-directed learning in online and blended learning settings.

In Chapter 3, Bailey and Breed delve further into pedagogical strategies to improve self-directed learning. They adopt the flipped learning method (as a blended approach) combined with cooperative learning to improve SDL in blended learning environments. The authors found that the use of metacognitive questions and cooperative learning, in the form of pair problem-solving, could offer students valuable opportunities to regulate their learning goals, leading to positive learning outcomes. This finding is interesting because the implementation of these pedagogical strategies could not only promote students' self-directed learning abilities but also cultivate crucial metacognitive skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-monitoring and evaluation.

In Chapter 4, Kemp and van der Westhuizen explore the use of computer-aided design and learning management systems to facilitate self-directed learning in an engineering graphics and design course offered in blended mode. The authors explain how the use of these technologies can encourage students

to take initiative and responsibility for their learning. In Chapter 5, Maphalala and Mahlaba discuss how blended learning can promote SDL in higher education, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors describe how the face-to-face component of blended learning can ease many challenges faced by students in online learning environments and enhance self-directed learning abilities, such as taking responsibility for learning, setting learning goals, and collaborating with peers.

In Chapter 6, Lotz and colleagues examine the potential of the flipped classroom approach as a form of blended learning to support metacognition and self-directed learning skills. They argue that if the approach is implemented effectively, it can foster these skills in students. In Chapter 7, Dhlamini investigates the readiness and flexibility of teachers to use blended learning and highlights the crucial role of teacher readiness and flexibility in technology use for effective blended learning implementation. Although this chapter emphasises the importance of flexibility, it could have been more focused on promoting SDL in the context of blended learning, which is the central theme of the book.

Chapters 8 and 9 present case studies that illustrate effective pedagogical practices for improving self-directed language learning in blended learning environments. In Chapter 8, Olivier and colleagues examine SDL in blended learning environments from the perspectives of *Sesotho sa Leboa* and *isiZulu* language modules, while in Chapter 9, Werlen and colleagues emphasise the significance of suitable online tasks in promoting students' SDL abilities within blended learning. Although both studies are context-specific, they offer distinctive viewpoints on how blended learning can be used to enhance SDL. In the final chapter of the book, Chapter 10, Bunt and van Deventer explore how blended learning and gamification can improve students' self-directed learning skills. Their study specifically focuses on the use of gamification to increase student engagement in blended learning environments, which can, in turn, facilitate the development and refinement of SDL abilities.

Blended Learning Environments to Foster Self-Directed Learning explores SDL in blended learning contexts from different angles. It covers a wide range of subjects, including the conceptualisation of SDL and blended learning, as well as pedagogical methods such as the flipped classroom and cooperative learning, and academic disciplines such as language learning, engineering, and education. Even though most of the studies featured in the book are small-scale case studies, they all contribute to the book's main theme and present some unique aspects or strategies for enhancing self-directed learning in blended learning environments.

The book contributes to the current scholarship on technology-enhanced learning, particularly in the area of blended learning, which has become a popular mode of delivery in recent years. The pedagogical approaches and technological solutions presented in the book could be beneficial for educators and higher education providers seeking to optimise learner engagement by improving students' self-directed learning abilities. This is especially important in the post-COVID-19 era, where education providers continue to explore avenues for improving student experiences amid rapidly changing teaching approaches. It should be noted, however, that the pedagogical practices presented in the book are context specific and may further modification or refinement to be successfully applied in other blended and online learning environments.

Overall, *Blended Learning Environments to Foster Self-Directed Learning* offers unique perspectives for improving SDL through blended delivery. The book provides a comprehensive examination of the topic, with a range of case studies and theoretical frameworks presented by experienced practitioners in the field of technology-enhanced learning. As such, it would be a valuable resource for scholars,

educators, instructional designers, educational leaders, and others interested in using technological innovations in education, particularly blended learning in higher education.