Exploring Online Communities to Help Foster the Development of Technology Supported Blended Learning in SD71

by:

Andrew Ferneyhough
B.A., University of Western Ontario, 1992
B.Ed., Vancouver Island University, 2005

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

VANCOUVER ISLAND UNIVERSITY

We accept the Process Paper as conforming to the required standard.

December 15, 2014

Randy LaBonte, Major Project Supervisor, Date:
Faculty of Education,
Vancouver Island University

Harry Janzen, Dean, Faculty of Education, Date:
Vancouver Island University

Copyright 2014
Abstract

Educators are realizing more and more that in order to prepare their students for our increasingly complex society, they need to adapt their teaching strategies. One avenue for this change in teaching practices is to offer access to blended learning environments. The purpose of this project was to explore online communities in order to help with the development of technology supported blended learning in School District No. 71 – Comox Valley. Working together with a fellow student at Vancouver Island University, a Google+ Community was designed to be a forum in which teachers and administration could share their resources, as well as their stories, related to blended or flexible learning. The project began with an in-depth look at blended learning and its ability to meet student needs followed by exploration of a variety of online communities to determine suitability to engage a dialogue about blended learning among teachers in the school district. Within a two month window (shortened due to a British Columbia teacher labour dispute), it was found that there was a clear desire to have a central mode of communicating online and sharing ideas about blended learning. The successes and limitations of the community were ultimately assessed as well as the future implications for the online community within the district. A small steering committee, created just for this purpose, decided in the end that the community should continue on as a place for all staff to share on ‘all’ learning, not simply blended learning, under the heading of ‘Share71’.

Google+ Community: [https://plus.google.com/u/0/communities/11179173037808325680](https://plus.google.com/u/0/communities/11179173037808325680)

Keywords: Blended Learning; Flexible Learning; Online Communities; Successful Mentoring; GooglePlus; Google+; School District No.71-Comox Valley
Acknowledgements

Marianne Williamson wrote that, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?”

For many years I asked myself who I was to be brilliant and talented. I would like to thank the following people for helping me realize that I could be that and more.

To Randy LaBonte, for agreeing to take me on as a mentee. I am very thankful for the suggestion that we move away from the creation of a resource and focus our attentions on the creation of something more active, more alive. I believe that my overall experience was much more rewarding and influential due to that small correction of course.

To Avi Luxenburg, your guidance and inspiration are the reason that I started down this path fourteen years ago. I would not be the teacher, nor the person I am today had you not convinced me that I did have the right to be brilliant.

To Marieke Holtkamp, my partner in crime. Right from our first project together: “To Skinner with Love,” I knew we were going to be a lethal combination. Thank you for all of your hours of editing as well as your shoulder to lean on when you stopped by my office.

To Ella, my daughter, who got to watch far too many episodes of “Jessie” over the last two and a half years. I hope it wasn’t too much of a hardship and I look forward to re-focusing my energies on you and our wonderful new family.

Finally, to the lovely Tina Pringle, who’s never ending support and love helped make this a manageable journey. Thank you for saying, “It’s nothing,” even when we both knew that it was definitely something.
List of Figures

Table 1 Project Timeline.................................................................................................................. 7
**Table of Contents**

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... iii  
List of Figures ....................................................................................................................... iv  
Chapter 1 – Introduction ...................................................................................................... 1  
   The Proposal .................................................................................................................... 1  
   Working Together .......................................................................................................... 2  
   Working with the District Technology Committee ......................................................... 3  
   Individual Project Objectives and Methodology .............................................................. 4  
   Online Community Topics .............................................................................................. 6  
   Project Timeline ............................................................................................................. 7  
   Phase II - A Second District Proposal .............................................................................. 7  
   Summary ........................................................................................................................ 8  
Chapter 2 - Literature Review ............................................................................................. 10  
   How Can Blended Learning Effectively Support Learning in Our Schools? ..................... 10  
   What is Blended Learning? ............................................................................................... 11  
   Why Blended Learning? .................................................................................................. 12  
   Recommended Programs, Resources and Methodologies ............................................. 14  
   Summary From the Research ......................................................................................... 17  
   Creating a Successful Online Community ...................................................................... 18  
Chapter 3 - Procedures and Methods ............................................................................... 20  
   In the Beginning ............................................................................................................ 20  
   Deciding on a Platform ................................................................................................... 22  
   Submitting the Proposal ................................................................................................. 22  
   Choosing the Community .............................................................................................. 24  
   Creating our Community ............................................................................................... 26  
Chapter 4 - Filed/Beta Testing and Findings .................................................................... 27  
   Timeline and Actions Taken ......................................................................................... 27  
   Evaluating Success ......................................................................................................... 30  
   Conversations Outside of the Community ....................................................................... 31  
   Conclusion of Field/Beta Testing .................................................................................. 33  
Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Recommendations .............................................................. 35  
   The Literature ................................................................................................................. 35  
   Perceived Successes/Failures and Implications of Major Project ..................................... 37
Chapter 1 – Introduction

The Proposal

With an increasing push for personalized learning, described in the BC Ed plan as “student-centered learning that’s focused on the needs, strengths and aspirations of each individual” (http://www.bcedplan.ca/actions/pl.php), it has become clear that there is a distinct need for flexible learning options within the brick and mortar classroom. Students in British Columbia have the ability to take courses at many online and independent schools throughout the province in order to meet needs that they are not able to have met in their neighbourhood schools. Parents and students are continually looking for alternative learning options that meet their learning needs. A solid example of this can found at the LearnNowBC Course Finder site, where Distance Learning (DL) options from around the province can be sorted and located using various filters (http://www.learnnowbc.ca/course_finder/ProgramFinder.aspx?ProgramTab=1). It is my belief that a truly flexible program involves an easing of responsibility for learning from the teacher and an increase of responsibility on the students and/or the family and home.

I chose to align my project with a colleague as both of our questions focused on the development and sustainability of ‘blended’ learning practices within School District No. 71 – Comox Valley (SD71). Although our topics were related and we worked in conjunction with each other, we each focused on our individual topics for completing our Masters projects: Exploring Online Communities to Help Foster the Development of Technology Supported Blended Learning in SD71 (my project); and Developing a Mentorship Model to Effectively Support and Sustain Flexible Learning Within School District 71 (her project).

For the purpose of this project, the term blended learning was defined using Michael Horn and Heather Staker’s definition. Horn and Staker (2012) define blended learning as “a
formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home” (p. 3).

Our overall goal was to foster technology supported blended learning through the use of an online community and the development of a mentorship model. We believed that a well-designed, robust, district-backed online community that was focused on blended learning would assist teachers in ‘breaking down the walls’ in the traditional face-to-face classroom. By sharing our resources and by developing mentorship opportunities, we believed that we could help teachers to realize some of the benefits that technology can provide in meeting the very specific demands of today’s learners.

The purpose of these projects was to develop an online community and mentorship model that would support and sustain blended learning practices in brick-and-mortar schools using current research around mentorship and blended learning practices. Our primary goal was to begin a pilot program in the few months before Christmas 2014 culminating in a second proposal that would outline the actions that we could recommend the district take going forward. The main purpose of this initial proposal was to outline the individual goals and aspirations that would allow me to stay focused on my particular role throughout this process. This would allow my partner and me to be working hand-in-hand while keeping our own objectives in mind.

**Working Together**

Traditionally, Master’s projects are an individual endeavour, however, the more my colleague and I spoke about our intentions the more we realized that we should be combining our efforts in order to better serve our district.

My colleague has spent the last seven years at Navigate, also known as North Island Distance Education School (NIDES) (http://www.navigatenides.com/). At the time of this
project she was the Vice-principal responsible for the FAe program (Fine Arts eCademy) as well as the ENTER (eCademy of New Technology, Engineering and Robotics) program. The FAe program is the program in which I am the Intermediate (grades 6-8) teacher.

I have been teaching at the intermediate level in SD71 since I began teaching in 2006. I have worked at five different schools, all brick-and-mortar, until moving to Navigate in September of 2013. The FAe program began as a pilot program in 2012/2013. In 2013/2014 it had a complete overhaul in staff, including my arrival along with two other teachers who were part of the first cohort of VIU’s OLTD program (https://www2.viu.ca/education/programs/diploma/oltd/). For years, I had been looking to ‘tear down the walls’ at my schools. To me, this meant doing whatever I could to take the 19th century model of teaching and turn it on its head. The FAe program has given me the opportunity to do just that. Along the way, however, I have learned about the many challenges that face a blended learning community. I have commented to many a peer that I have needed to put some of those walls back up.

The main goal for both of us was to bring as many of the teachings and resources that we had experienced in our two years with OLTD to our peers in SD71. My individual goal was to begin a discussion and provide a place to share resources and experiences. My colleague’s goal was to look at mentorship, to determine the best way to get what we, and others, know about flexible learning into the hands of teachers who wanted those resources and experiences.

**Working with the District Technology Committee**

For the 2014/2015 school year the district hired a full time Technology Support person. This was an increase in time from a .6, or half-time, position the previous year and we hoped to take full advantage of this increase in support time that the district was providing to technology implementation in the schools. It was our goal to work with the new Technology Support
teacher, as well as our Principal of Technology and others on the district technology committee to create a unique opportunity for teachers in our district.

My goal was not to create a single resource populated with links, but to create a space in which a dialogue could take place between teachers on the subject of flexible learning. Within this space teachers would be able to share not only the links to their favourite resources but also their trials and tribulations with those resources. These contributions could then be filtered by key or tagged words for those wanting to return at a later date. The resources shared in this community could then be extracted and put into a central resource page in the Learn71 portal (http://www.learn71.ca/) at a later date.

My partner’s goals were twofold. First, she intended to examine the current research relating to mentorship and flexible learning as well as current models of flexible learning to determine the pros and cons related to them in an organizational setting. Second, she would develop a mentorship model to support teachers in School District 71 brick and mortar schools to implement flexible learning practices.

**Individual Project Objectives and Methodology**

My goal was to create dialogue among teachers in SD71 on the subject of blended learning. I wanted to create a space where teachers could share articles, research videos and resources specifically related to this topic. It was important to me that this was more than simply about using technology in the classroom. This was about changing the way that many of our district's teachers deliver courses, sharing the responsibility of learning with students and parents.

Time permitting, we wanted to follow up on some of these discussions with some face-to-face mentoring time. My main objective for this community was to provide arguments, proof
and assistance in helping school staff to decide if blended learning was something they were interested and capable of initiating at their sites.

My literature review for this project (Chapter 2) focused primarily on blended learning; what blended learning is as well as specific examples of how it has been successful in schools. My research during the latter stages pertained more specifically to ‘successful’ online communities. Though we had a format in mind, I wanted to be thorough in my understanding of what programs or platforms have been most successful for other communities.

A brief sample of my research indicated that teachers required opportunities to engage and learn in similar ways themselves to those expected of students, and subject their learning to peer review and critique (Jacobsen, 2014). Websites such as the Galileo project of the University of Calgary (http://www.galileo.org) profess to provide a participatory learning ecosystem that engages teachers in scholarly communities of inquiry, along with their teaching colleagues, to transform their practices for a digital world (Jacobsen, 2014). A simple definition provided by Boetcher (2002) states that an online or virtual community is, “the gathering of people, in an online ‘space’ where they come, communicate, connect, and get to know each other better over time” (p.1). In an article written about ‘Communities of Practice’ by Etienne Wenger (1998) he refers to communities as a place where members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. Over the following few months I looked into what attributes made a successful online community and which vehicle was most recommended for those communities.

The vehicle that we planned to be using to begin with was Google Plus (Google+, http://www.plus.google.com). There were several reasons for this. One reason was that the teachers in SD71 all had access through a district Gmail account as well as access through their
own personal Gmail accounts. The second reason for using Google+ was that during our recent graduate work at Vancouver Island University, my partner and I were involved in several Google+ communities and had become very familiar with the strengths and limitations of this program. We were also able to ascertain some of the differences between successful communities and less successful attempts. We concluded from our experiences that some of the attributes of a successful community included: consistent and regular feedback to posts made by peers; a good mixture of videos and text based articles; specific and thorough labeling of contributions allowing for sorting into categories; and ability to connect to people’s personal, mobile devices such as tablets or smart phones.

We felt that the features of Google+ were the best way to share a growing site of searchable resources while at the same time allowing for rich discussion and the ability to ask questions.

**Online Community Topics**

We planned to introduce topics into the Google+ community on a gradual basis. Each topic would begin with a few articles and videos introducing that particular topic along with some general questions on what people felt about that topic and some sharing of personal experiences. Some of these topics included: blended learning; online communities; successful mentoring; Bring Your Own Device (BYOD); flipping the classroom; and gamification. The blended learning, online communities and successful mentoring were informative as well as inquisitive, meaning that we would be looking to start conversations and ask questions of those that became involved. For the others, it would consist of explaining that particular topic and then seeing who might be interested in trying it out in their classrooms. We would also be asking those that had made ‘first attempts’ for feedback on what went well and what did not. Having been involved for two years in courses such as ‘Social Media’ and ‘Gamificaton’, my colleague
and I were very excited to share some of these resources with our peers in SD71. Some of the issues however, such as BYOD, can be quite contentious, and we looked forward to the potential dialogue with our colleagues.

**Project Timeline**

Based on school starting back on September 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2014 below is a table outlining project dates and components.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Component</th>
<th>Anticipated Due Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Proposal sent to SD 71 (see Appendix A)</td>
<td>September 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Email sent to SD 71 staff (see Appendix B)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Google + community start up</td>
<td>September 15-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Mentoring research initiated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Meetings with district staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Interviewing past teacher mentors and mentees</td>
<td>September 22- November 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Google + community continues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Evaluation of Mentoring and recommendations</td>
<td>November 15- December 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Evaluation of Google + community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Evaluation of sustainability of mentoring program and online community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Completion of individual process papers for submission to VIU</td>
<td>December 1 - 15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Phase II - A Second District Proposal**

One of our final deliverables in this process was to create a ‘Phase II’ proposal in which we would outline/summarize what we learned during the past few months and formulate
recommended actions that could be implemented either by district staff on their own or in collaboration with us. It would be decided if the online community was successful, or showed promise of success, or whether it would be something that could or should be let go. We postulated that the community would become an integral part of the mentoring process, allowing for shared resources and ideas. It would also be determined if maintaining the community was something that either my colleague or I were interested in being involved in on a volunteer basis or something that a paid district employee should do.

We decided that with the climate around the labour dispute, that Phase I would involve more theory, discussion, and interviews with staff. We also decided to move the ‘ask’ portion of the district to Phase II of our project which would take place after this project was completed. It was our hope that the online community being backed by the district would improve its profile and strengthen the legitimacy of the initiative. Some predictions that we made about support required from the district included requesting teacher release time for potential mentors and mentees, the ability to work hand in hand with the district technology support teacher, and funding dedicated to hardware/software items and district technology support to maintain those items.

**Summary**

Due to the working climate at the time (Provincial labour dispute) and the tremendous amount of angst that we predicted would exist upon teacher's return to work, we had to curtail some of our ambitions and were somewhat more cautious about approaching and instigating than we would have been in other times.

Our main goal was to engage teachers in the tools and teaching strategies involved in blended learning environments. It was important to learn what others before us had done to make their online communities successful. We had seen many of these types of endeavours
wither away to nothing and wanted to do everything in our power to keep that from happening to our community.

My colleague and I were both very excited about using our Masters projects to further strengthen the learning opportunities in this district. Our hope was that through discussion, sharing of experiences, and the development of a mentor model, we could blend the best of both the distance and the face-to-face worlds.
Chapter 2 - Literature Review

How Can Blended Learning Effectively Support Learning in Our Schools?

Blended learning is a term that has been used for many years and with many different connotations. While definitions vary, in today’s context blended learning is generally thought of as a mixture between online learning and face-to-face (F2F) learning and is being touted by many as the future, the ‘saviour’ perhaps, of our education system. In my one year of teaching in a blended program (three days F2F and two days at-home) I had come across many benefits but also many challenges with this type of structure.

My goal for my Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership (MEDL) final project at Vancouver Island University was to create a well-designed, robust, district resource full of social networking tools, video resources and mentorship possibilities in order to make a difference in leading and guiding School District 71 - Comox Valley (SD71) teachers through the complex task of understanding what blended learning was and how it could be applied successfully in their classrooms.

In order to proceed with this it was extremely important for me to ask several key questions: “What is blended learning?”; “How have districts and schools been successful with its implementation?”; and “What forms of blended learning work best with specific grade levels?”.

In a later chapter, I discuss other blended learning initiatives in SD71 and the province of British Columbia, but for the purpose of this literature review I focus on specific studies undertaken worldwide. A sample of these topics include: the effects of using a specific online math program in an elementary mathematics program; the effects of a blended learning environment in an undergraduate nursing program; and the use of Web 2.0 tools in a Government and Global History course.
I also include a discussion of a selection of articles on blended learning that does not include a home learning component. Many believe that by integrating new methodologies such as BYOD, ‘flipping the classroom’, and gamification, we are providing a blended model within the confines of the ‘brick and mortar’ school. To expect or to even ask your average elementary teacher, administrator or parents to forgo a day at school and begin a day of home-based instruction is just not something that many established systems would be able or willing to embrace or consider. I chose to take a critical look at what the successful strategies employed by online teachers were and how our school district could start to incorporate those skills into the brick-and-mortar schools.

**What is Blended Learning?**

It is quite interesting to learn how one term can have so many different meanings. Some researchers are pretty clear that a ‘home’ or ‘away from school’ component is necessary while others leave that open to interpretation. Sharma (2010) notes that the term blended learning has been used for more than twenty years and its definition has been constantly changing during this period. The term blended learning was first used in the workplace to allow workers to continue working while being able to focus on their studies. In terms of defining the term Sharma (2010) states that in the world of education three definitions of blended learning are especially relevant: a combination of face-to-face and online teaching; a combination of technologies; and a combination of methodologies.

Moskal, Dziuban and Hartman (2013) provide some background on the subject by stating that the movement assumed various labels such as mixed mode, hybrid, and combined, but blended learning emerged as the dominant label for an educational platform that represented some combination of face-to-face and online learning. The authors discuss the process of defining what mixture of time should define a blended environment (60-40? 30-70?) and state
that most educational communities came to the conclusion that the mix is entirely contextual. This means that the amount of face-to-face versus online time may vary from course to course and teacher to teacher. Once again, the term online is used without specification of whether this is online from home or online at school.

Garrison and Kanuka (2004) argue that blended learning is an effective and low-risk strategy which positions educational institutions for the onslaught of technological developments that will be forthcoming in the next few years. As society and technology fundamentally alter the manner in which we communicate and learn, this inevitably alters how we think.

Staker and Horn (2012) in their Innosight Institutes article, “Classifying K-12 Blended Learning” take us into a somewhat more flexible view of the term by providing the definition of blended learning as “a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home” (p.3).

Pape (2010) also helps to expand our idea of blended learning by stating that it may involve using online tools to communicate, collaborate, and publish, to extend the school day or year and to develop the 21st-century skills students need. She then speaks of the Continuity of Learning, meaning that there are many ways that blended learning can help us to keep learning going in the case of such events as sick days, snow days, and even school closures.

**Why Blended Learning?**

Gonzales and Vodicka (2012) discuss the subject of Disruptive Innovation as that which brings about non-traditional changes to improve a system. They say that we are, “immersed in a paradigm shift in learning whereby blended learning has emerged as a flexible, differentiated,
updated approach to learning and it is therefore just the ‘disruption’ that we are looking for” (p.8).

When outlining the benefits of blended learning, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) note the ability of online learners to be both together and apart—and to be connected to a community of learners anytime and anywhere, without being time, place, or situation bound.

Piontek describes blended learning as a continuum between 100 percent face-to-face and 100 percent online learning, neither of which he contends are completely successful for most students. Assuming of course that his research is valid, it would be important to try and ascertain the drawbacks to each delivery method. Knowing the limitations of each environment, online and classroom, would help us to better formulate a plan for the development of our SD71 teacher resources for blended learning.

Piontek (2013) goes on to argue that self-directed learning is beneficial only for a small part of the population and that most students will benefit from some face to face interaction. He states that high achieving students may work at an accelerated pace while struggling students can work at a more relaxed pace. He feels that the future of education relies on ‘customization and personalization’. However, this statement confused me somewhat in that I am unsure as to whether Piontek is referring to ‘self-directed’ as schooling-at-home or schooling online because many would say that self-directed could just as easily refer to many F2F classrooms. I think we can infer that what he is basically saying is that the majority of students will have trouble 'going-it-alone' and need some degree of teacher direction, intervention or support.

Pape (2010) speaks of visiting a New York City classroom that was using Web 2.0 tools in their Government and Global History Course. She found that students previously uninterested in the coursework became more engaged once their teacher introduced these tools into her
classroom, giving students the opportunity to create work on the internet that could be shared with others.

When speaking of the uncertainty and dilution of the term blended learning due its many connotations, Sharma (2010) argues that blended learning is likely to remain an important concept in teaching since its overall focus is concerned with the search for ‘best practice’; i.e. the attempt to identify the optimum mix of course delivery in order to provide the most effective learning experience. This is a key notion and component of what blended learning could be for SD71 teachers.

Piontek (2013) notes that some people think that blended learning is not for the K-5 age-group. However he contends that this is the age group that may benefit most as they are the ones born into this age of technology. He also states that as we move from teacher-centric to student-centric learning, we need to determine how to make every student feel like they are the only student in the class. Pape (2010) supports the notion that blended learning is not just for intermediate and high school students but for elementary as well. She references a social studies class at the elementary school level in Jefferson County where students created blog journals assuming the role of one of the signers of the United States Declaration of Independence. One homework assignment required students to react to the convening of the Constitutional Congress by contributing to a wiki in character. Students no longer study historical events, they have become participants in the unfolding of history.

**Recommended Programs, Resources and Methodologies**

Many of the authors noted above agree that blended learning consists of some face-to-face and some online components, however many consider that we can achieve a form of blended learning by simply changing some of our in-class practices. Some of these methods
include: flipping the classroom, BYOD, Gamification and the use of Learning Management Systems.

Siegle (2014) describes two high school teachers, Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams, popularizing the instructional strategy of a flipped classroom and how the two science teachers stumbled on the idea when they struggled to reteach lessons for absent students. Siegle (2014) defines flipping the classroom as student work that traditionally has been called classwork, usually a lecture, is accomplished at home (e.g., viewing teacher-created videos) and what has traditionally been called homework, often assigned problems, is accomplished in class.

Barrett (2012) describes flipping as gathering information outside of class by reading, watching recorded lessons or listening to podcasts and then coming to class ready to solve problems and apply what they have learned. Barrett (2012) notes some of the reasons that people are turning toward this method: technological innovation supports it; policy makers, scholars, advocacy groups and others are seeing more and more evidence that students are truly learning; and the economic reality of strained budgets (the lecture is not going away because it still makes economic sense). Finally, Barrett (2012) also argues that teachers have been flipping the classroom for years. Any professor who has asked his students to study the material before class by reading a novel or chapter of a textbook has technically been flipping the classroom.

Siegle (2012) on the other hand describes some of the criticisms and challenges related to
the flipped classroom including: access to technology; the students’ need to be motivated; its
dependence on lecture; and finally that the concept of fully flipping the classroom every day is
not a manageable task.

Overall, Piontek (2013) seems to be confusing the issue of blended learning and
personalization. I would argue that flipping the classroom is a true component of blending
school with home, yet most practitioners of flipped classrooms are still video recording their
lectures or providing links to others’ lectures. One gets to see the confusion regarding blended
learning when authors begin mixing the framework of home/class/online with pedagogies such
as 21st Century Learning and project-based learning.

Marcoux (2014) states that BYOD is the future of education. She describes a future of
tables, phones and laptops and wearable technology, imploring teachers to explore the BYOD
option as the time is now. Marcoux recognizes the potential difficulties with privacy when
working with student-owned devices but sees it as a chance to spark healthy conversations with
parents and staff about how to effectively and safely embrace these devices. Marcoux also
encourages teachers to see what is happening within their schools. In order to create a successful
learning environment it is important for teachers to know how students are using the technology
in different ways.

Gamification is an increasingly popular form of delivering content and teaching skills.
According to research conducted by Piontek (2013) almost 60 percent of students play
educational games and that they want to use them to learn. As with BYOD, it only makes sense
that we at least attempt to merge the things that students are passionate about with how we go
about teaching them.
Another methodology which many feel can affect the success or failure of a blended learning environment is the teacher’s use of a Learning Management System (LMS). Al-Buaidi and Al-Shihi (2012), in a study of blended learning and learning management system satisfaction, found several factors affecting a teacher/instructor's satisfaction with tools to support the online part of blended learning. They state that LMSs and electronic learning have become an essential tool for stakeholders in education and training. They looked at several factors related to the success or failure of working with an LMS. These factors can be categorized as instructors’ individual characteristics (computer anxiety, technology experience and personal innovativeness), LMS characteristics (system quality, information quality and service quality) and organizational characteristics (management support, incentives policy and training).

**Summary from the Research**

My original question asked, “How Can Blended Learning Effectively Support Learning in Our Schools?” Before I spent 300 hours on a Masters Project, developing an online resource and community for teachers as mentioned in my introduction, I wanted to know what researchers had to say about the effectiveness of this type of learning and if it was worth my time and energies to bring it forward to the teachers and staff of School District 71.

What stood out for me through these readings was some of the terminology associated with blended learning. What particularly caught my attention were the repeated references to project-based learning, self-guided learning, and disruptive innovation. What resonated with me most was one reference to blended learning simply being an ongoing process in the search for ‘best-practices’. This more than anything made me want to pursue this endeavour further as I perceive ‘best practices’ as a term that can continually change shape as the clientele and educational settings evolve.
In the end I came to the conclusion that I didn’t really want, or need, to have a definitive definition of the term blended learning. The consensus throughout these articles seemed to be that blended learning consisted of a mixture of school-at-school and school-at-home. Piontek (2013) describes this best as just a matter of finding the balance between the two. However, I was not convinced that this was the case. I was confident that as I continued to explore research on this topic I would find that not all blended learning need consist of this particular mixture. I believed that practices versus simply medium may have just as much to do with shifting our paradigm.

One reason that I was stuck on not having a ‘home’ component as part of the definition of blended learning was that I know how hard it would be for many elementary schools to replace a day or two a week of school-at-school with a day or two of school-at-home. Because of this, I had to believe that we could ‘blend’ while still in a face-to-face environment. Perhaps I was attempting to stretch the definition too far. Perhaps my terminology should just be entitled ‘using technology for instruction’. My instinct told me that this is not the case. My experiences with blended learning, up to that date, had the parent much more involved in the learning process and the term ‘it takes a village’ had popped into my mind more than ever before. I thought that by framing it in terms of the ‘blended’ definition we could open up the doors for people to see that it is more than just about technology, it was about a frame of mind and a continued effort to take the sage off of the stage and put the power into the hands of the students and their families.

Creating a Successful Online Community

In her book, *Community Building on the Web* Amy Jo Kim (2000) found that in her ten years of building online communities that she consistently came up against challenges such as, “persistent identity, newcomer confusion, etiquette standards, leadership roles, and group dynamics” (p.2). She also spoke of patterns in virtual communities being echoed in physical
communities and that basically, “people are people, even in cyberspace” (p.2). I believe she is saying that even online, or especially online, that we should treat others the way we would like to be treated ourselves. In other words, if you were joining a new community what would you want from it? What would you need in order to be a successful member of that community?

Jacobsen (2010) states that professional dialogue and learning opportunities for a digital world need to be designed and led by professional mentors, teaching colleagues, and school leaders who model 21st century teaching and learning practices. This idea blended perfectly with my colleague’s focus during this project which was to bring local experts together into one place and give others a chance to ask them questions and ultimately provide mentorship opportunities.

Boetcher, Duggan and White (2002) speak about why people join virtual communities, what they want out of them, and steps to take in order to build your own. They suggest that the virtual community should be seen as just another tool in our toolkit, that it may be just as simple to pick up the phone or go for a coffee and not to rely on it to be successful as the only social outlet. In the end, they say, “Your community will be what you and your members make of it!” (p.1).
Chapter 3 - Procedures and Methods

In the Beginning

As part of our course in the Online Learning and Teaching Diploma (OLTD) course 502 (https://www2.viu.ca/calendar/courses/OLTD.ASPX) at Vancouver Island University, we were asked to begin thinking about our final Master’s question. My overall goal from the beginning was to be part of something bigger, to provide something for others versus creating something simply for myself or for my students.

I began by making inquiries with people who were already in the field. As a novice in this area I thought that perhaps they would know of provincial or national projects that were already under way and that could perhaps use the dedication of my time for a larger purpose. When I did not find a project that seemed to match my requirements, I decided instead to create something for School District No. 71 - Comox Valley (SD71) that could potentially be adopted elsewhere or be useful to other districts. This led me along the path of creating a resource that would be created by, and available to, everyone in our district. I did not know what or how at the time, however, I knew that my focus would be on blended learning. I wanted to take everything that we had worked on in OLTD and share it with my peers.

In order to have a better understanding of what blended learning was and how it was perceived by others it was only natural that this would be the focus of my literature review. This was not an easy process as the term itself seems to mean different things to different people and the more research I sifted through, the more confusing it became. There were those who argued that blended learning could take place within a brick and mortar school, that it was about the way we taught, not where or when we taught.

Eventually this led my colleague and me to an article by Heather Staker and Michael B. Horn (2012) that spoke of a shift in time, place, path and pace. This concept took any debate out
of this ambiguous term as it consolidated the many definitions into one idea. Each of these simple words comes with a host of larger concepts and play a significant role in changing the way we deliver our courses.

A shift in time opens up many opportunities. This brings in the debate around all-year schooling and blurs the lines between learning at school and learning at home. It may have a student completing their course over a two month period or a twelve month period. It leads us to concepts such as ‘flipping the classroom’ where students watch a lecture, such as in Khan Academy, and come prepared to discuss or to do homework in class.

A shift in place is the term most traditionally associated with blended learning: a mixture of being at home and being in a school. This can still be a main component of blended learning, however, we can now add to that vision the idea of students working in communal areas such as the library or hallways. It may also be linked with the idea of BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) in that we are no longer tied to the computer lab as the place where students must use the allotted computer during the allotted time.

A shift in path comes with a huge array of 21st century teaching techniques. It may involve an introduction to ‘Inquiry’ by asking students to ‘wonder’, to ask questions, and to explore their interests. It may also involve having students learn through games and/or simulations. A game such as ‘Lure of the Labyrinth’ (http://labyrinth.thinkport.org/www/) mixes oral, reading, mathematical and problem-solving skills all into one. A program like this would have traditional teachers wondering who’s discipline this would fall under and who gets to claim the learning outcomes.

A shift in pace can mean that a student may work at their own speed as in watching tutorials which they can stop, re-wind and re-watch. I am currently teaching in a ‘blended’
program where my students and parents are responsible for the mathematics part of the curriculum. Students and their coaches are responsible for choosing the pace at which they complete each concept, unit and ultimately their grade level.

A big part of the process through this journey has been describing what we mean by ‘flexible learning’. We wanted our peers to think of blended learning in a new light. The phrase ‘time, place, path and pace’ has allowed us to bring many of these complicated concepts back to a simple idea. Whenever one of my peers posts on a lesson idea or a concept that they have employed in their classrooms I could link it easily to one of these four terms.

**Deciding on a Platform**

During the summer break of 2014 my colleague and I met with my Vancouver Island University Master’s program supervisor and one of our OLTD peers. Our goal was to discuss and refine what our final project would look like. Up until that point I was certain that I was going to build a resource that would have a selection of links and discussion options available. It was brought up that many resource pages have come and gone, are hard to promote, and end up being full of dead links. What might be more valuable was a place where teachers and administrators could discuss topics and recommend resources which could then later be searched by a ‘tag’ when someone was ready to use that resource. As we were all very familiar with the Google+ program we decided that this would be the vehicle through which we would begin our discussion with our peers.

**Submitting the Proposal**

In a discussion with my colleague and my supervisor, we decided that Chapter One of our Masters project would serve doubly as our official proposal to the district. Our first goal then was to create a document that would not overwhelm senior staff but be detailed enough to outline both our joint, as well as our individual goals. Writing the joint proposal went quite smoothly, it
was the re-writing of this proposal for our individual chapters that proved somewhat more challenging.

Once the joint proposal was written, we were then forced to reckon with the 2014 labour dispute in BC. Teachers had been out of schools on strike since the second week of June and were still not back into schools until October of the same year. We did not want to submit the proposal too early and have it get lost in the shuffle, but we also needed to leave the administration enough time for their thoughts and suggestions. We knew that we could not send this out to teachers until at least a week or two after a return to work, and we were getting quite concerned whether or not we would have sufficient time to complete this task in our required time-frame.

Eventually the labour dispute was resolved and we were able to email our proposal to our District Superintendent. The document was also cc’d to our Principal of Technology as well as the District IT Support teacher. Another unexpected delay came when the Principal of Technology asked us if we would first sit down with another group in the district. This group of administrators had been looking at getting a discussion going based on 21st century skills and he wanted us to compare notes before we launched our project.

During this meeting several things were decided upon. One was that we would go ahead as planned with our vehicle (Google+) as well as our topic (Flexible Learning). The hope was that at a later date, if this was successful, we could turn this into a dialogue about ‘learning’ and not just blended learning. Secondly it was agreed that our IT Support teacher would add a link in the new SD71 portal space to our community as well as help us to extract any valuable suggested resources that were provided during discussion, and add them to a resource page within that portal. Our final ‘ask’ was permission to use the blanket emails for teachers and administration
to send out reminders/invitations throughout the district every two weeks for the next two months. This too was accepted.

**Choosing the Community**

Prior to taking the OLTD courses at VIU I had had limited experience with online communities. I had been a member of Facebook as well as Twitter, but neither of these were very prominent in a professional sense.

A professor at the University of Regina who was later one of my OLTD course instructors played a large part in promoting Twitter as a vehicle for connecting teachers when he spoke at a SD71 professional development day seminar. This was the first time that many of us were exposed to the benefits of connecting online and sharing ideas and resources.

Another teacher in our district created a social networking community in a program called Ning (http://www.ning.com/) and for several years it was used predominantly by a group of teachers calling themselves the *Comox Valley Computer Using Educators*. At its peak there were roughly 70 members involved in the community.

In speaking with this teacher he mentioned that at some point Ning decided to begin charging a fee. Though our district superintendent was willing to pay for it, the teacher decided that “engagement was spotty” and he decided that it was not worth it to continue. He went on to note that when surveyed about lack of contributions, teachers stated that they really liked the concept but simply didn’t have the time. He felt that at the time the amount of teacher training involved with using the Ning platform combined with a much greater reluctance to use social networking as a tool for communicating about education were also reasons for its demise. As a successful host of several current Google+ communities his opinion was that people are much more willing to participate in technology than they were even five years ago as well as the ease with which Google+ allows you to engage.
In searching for the right community my colleague and I obviously had to consider Facebook. During our OLTD courses we were provided with many examples of how teachers were using Facebook in the classroom as well as other uses such as creating connections for Parent Advisory Councils (PAC) as well as for staff. I think that one of the reasons that we did not want to use Facebook for our community was that we currently have a PAC Facebook page that is experiencing some growing pains. In our experience there was something about Facebook that leads people to become more casual in their correspondence. They are used to saying what they feel on their own Facebook pages and therefore forget to filter some of their thoughts when interacting in this more public, professional atmosphere. For this and other reasons we decided to look elsewhere for our program of choice.

Even though Twitter was already an established mode of communication within our district, my colleague and I instantly agreed that it would not suit our needs. In our opinion 140 characters simply does not give you the opportunity to recommend, reflect, and debate like we wanted our community members to be able to do. Our personal experiences in Google+ communities were much more effective and engaging than our experiences in Twitter.

As mentioned in my literature review, the research clearly shows that for an online community to work the program needs to be user friendly. What we needed was to find a vehicle that was easy to learn, or was already being accessed by SD71 personnel. We decided to go with Google+ for several reasons: we knew SD71 personnel had easy access to it; we knew it was very easy to learn; and, we had several good experiences with it ourselves during our OLTD courses at VIU.

For several years students and teachers in our district have had access to School District 71 Gmail accounts. Many teachers have used this Gmail account to share documents, send out
forms, and create websites and blogs. It seemed only logical that we use an application that was part of the Google Suite.

As an online course, the instructors of the OLTD program demonstrated a variety of different media with which to communicate such as blogging through Weebly (www.weebly.com), creating forums and discussions through Moodle and Desire2Learn (https://d2l.viu.ca/), as well as using programs such as Blackboard Collaborate (http://www.blackboard.com) to participate synchronously online. During the two years of the program we had the opportunity to experience Google+ as well in a variety of different ways. One instructor used it in a more casual sense for us to post our thoughts and any links that we might come across. Another instructor used it more formally as the hub of their program. We were given points for posting certain resources. We were also given more points for lengthier, thoughtful discussion which was left to us to determine. It was this hands-on experience that allowed us to see the ease with which members can post, respond, categorize and communicate.

**Creating our Community**

Finally, the process of actually launching our community was fairly simple. With all that we were hoping to say and all that we were hoping to hear from others we did not want to barrage them with multiple posts all at once. We had already scripted the email that would go out to all teachers and administration in the school district. We had planned out what topics we would introduce and in which order. The only thing left to do was enter our introduction posts and wait for the ‘requests’ to come pouring in. On October 17th, 2014 we pressed the send button and launched our community to the district.
Chapter 4 - Filed/Beta Testing and Findings

Timeline and Actions Taken

The first week after launching our community was a very exhilarating experience for both of us. We had about ten members sign up right away and were approving two to three more requests each day. We were both spending our evenings happily posting and responding to others comments. One of my initial comments about bringing a ‘home day’ into a brick and mortar school provided for some good discussion and debate.

About a week and a half in, however, we started to hit a saturation point. We were still receiving approximately one request a day to join, but members were not submitting or responding to posts. For the next week it felt as if this was a community for my partner, myself and one other district employee alone. This prompted us into our first stage of triage. We had to start analyzing what the ‘walls’ were for our potential members and how we could take some of those walls away.

It was interesting to note along the way that the challenges that we were facing were exactly the challenges referred to by Amy Jo Kim in her book, Community Building on the Web (Kim, 2000). Kim found that in her ten years of building online communities that she consistently came up against the same challenges such as, “persistent identity, newcomer confusion, etiquette standards, leadership roles, and group dynamics” (p.2). Though I do not think that these descriptors cover all of our challenges, it is very interesting to look back and compare our findings with hers.

One of the first walls that we attempted to break down was the lack of knowledge about Google+ itself. My colleague promptly entered two links on how to use the program as well as potential uses for the program. In retrospect, we realized that these instructions may also have been helpful outside the community, such as in an email, versus inside the community.
The following few weeks were very stressful. It felt as if we were riding a roller coaster. One night we would have two people post comments and feel that we were back on track. This would be followed by two days of inactivity leaving us to think that the program was doomed. We quickly realized and were reminded that this, like communities attempted in the past, was not going to miraculously happen on its own. Luckily, we had thought about, and read about, some of these challenges in advance and were prepared to take action. In reading the research in advance the words were simply words on a page. Now that our community was in play, the words took on a whole new meaning within context.

One of the first actions taken was to email people directly and ask them if they would post on a given topic or a topic of their choice. While my focus in this project was to look at successful online communities, my colleague’s focus was to look at successful mentorship tactics. This was our chance to reach out to those in the district that we knew were already embracing flexible learning practices and had mentorship experience or potential. As stated by Jacobsen (2010), professional dialogue and learning opportunities for a digital world need to be designed and led by professional mentors, teaching colleagues, and school leaders who model 21st century teaching and learning practices. This community was our chance to bring these local experts together into one place and give others a chance to ask them questions. Of the seven people that I contacted in this manner, four of them contributed to the community within 24 hours. The information that I received from the remaining three was also very helpful as it provided feedback to improve our methods.

A second tactic we used was to promote our community at staff meetings around the district. Between the two of us we were able to get to five district meetings in order to describe our venture.
A third tactic was continual promotion of the community while we were out in our day-to-day lives. As mentioned in more detail later in this document, one of the successes of this community was the dialogue that it created outside of the online community. At least two of our members joined up and commented shortly after speaking with them at the grocery store or at a volleyball game.

A fourth tactic involved the pre-planned emails to district staff. I say pre-planned, but the topics put forward actually changed as we tried to adapt to the interests of our audience. Following each bi-weekly email, we usually had two-three new people sign up for the community. Though we had several staff in the district apologize and thank us for the invitation, we only had one person politely ask us to be removed from our mailing list.

I think that one of the best and most successful tactics used was a prompt response to people’s comments. I noticed a distinct difference in the conversations where we replied within minutes or hours to those that were not replied to for days.

At one point, about five weeks in, I was becoming very nervous that the community was not moving forward; there had been a few days of no contributions and I was worried that we were grinding to a halt. I knew that I had one card up my sleeve that I was hoping not to play until desperately needed. I had been told by my program coordinator at VIU that she would be willing to have the three VIU OLTD cohorts involved in a community that we were creating. The reason that I did not want these people involved at the beginning was that I wanted SD71 staff to see colleagues that they knew and respected in the online community. I did not want them entering the community just to see a bunch of excited Master’s students talking about new ideas and getting scared away. However, with what I felt was a dying community, I emailed the coordinator and asked her to send the invite out to the three OLTD cohorts. In the end, only
seven or eight of these students signed up and to this point I think that only one instructor has made a contribution.

As of the writing of this paper we currently have 46 members, both in and outside of the district with what seems to be a gradual but continual interest in joining and contributing to the community.

**Evaluating Success**

On November 17, 2014 we met with the same group of individuals that our Principal of Technology SD71 had assembled prior to our launch. Our mandate was to assess and discuss the success of this community and to determine if it was something that they wanted to continue, with or without our assistance.

The group began by scrolling through the community together and discussing the highlights. Everyone there agreed that this was a successful venture thus far and were very impressed with the dialogue that had occurred. They believed that 45 members (on that date) was a respectable amount and were impressed with the gradual (almost daily) addition of new members.

We discussed some possible roadblocks, challenges and recommendations for going forward. This was based on conversations that we had had with others about their hesitations to participate. These included (a) people feeling that the topics were ‘too brainy’; it was mentioned that some teachers did not feel that they were able to contribute at that level; (b) it was too ‘techy’; members were turned off by the focus on computer programs and overwhelmed by the work required to begin these programs; (c) the comments were not ‘timely’; meaning that they would make much better use of contributions that they could use in the coming days or weeks. One of our best posts was on Remembrance Day activities; (d) the fact that people had to sign up for a Google+ account. This alone kept some from going any further; (e) people are just shy or
not confident about their contributions; (f) even if they signed up, they did not feel like their thoughts were worthy of submission. This was mentioned to me outright by two separate people; (g) too busy; many people stated to me that they loved the idea and that they wanted to get in there at some point, but they simply did not have the time; (h) a general negativity towards blended learning, Navigate, and the Independent Learning Communities (ILC’s) in the district. The ILC programs have caused a great deal of friction within some of our high-schools and this has left some teachers unwilling to contribute to its future success.

In looking forward in regards to this community we agreed on several items. We agreed that (a) we liked this format/vehicle over any others; (b) it should carry on as the official ‘Learning in SD71’ discussion page, meaning that its focus would now be broadened out to all learning versus simply the blended learning focus; (c) our IT Support teacher would help to maintain the community and that the two of us would continue to monitor and contribute to the community; (d) a permanent link would be set inside the Learn71 portal currently being developed by the district technology committee; (e) continued correspondence would be sent out to district teachers and administration inviting them to the community and offering new topics for discussion; and (f) resources that were shared by people in the community would be placed into a ‘resources’ page in the SD71 portal.

**Conversations Outside of the Community**

One of the most surprising and gratifying outcomes from this project was the conversations that were generated outside of the community itself. I would say that I spent double the amount of time speaking with people in parking lots, at volleyball games and in the hallways than I did inside the online community. For every person that was actually commenting within the Google+ community, I would find two others that were ‘lurking’ in the community and would feel free to speak to me at length face-to-face. Due to shyness, time
constraints or any other host of reasons, teachers and administrators consistently demonstrated to me that they were aware of the material being posted and would later make comments about it in person.

One teacher would consistently quote my posted words back to me in the halls. When asked if he would post his remarks on the site versus saying them in person he would reply with, “No, I don’t want to be a negative Nelly,” to which I would reply that the whole idea was to create discussion, argument, and conversation versus simply having me spouting out words of wisdom. These discussions alone provided me with some great insight into the challenges of creating a successful community. This same teacher engaged me in a two hour discussion on self-directed learning and gamification. Following this conversation I changed my topic of discussion for the day and gave him the perfect opening to recommend some of his favourite programs. Once again, he proved to me that he had the ideas, he was reading my content, and he was passionate about spreading the word of blended learning, but simply did not feel comfortable stating his opinions online.

A second example of the community spreading out into the face-to-face world came at a recent staff meeting. While working through the process of re-evaluating our school mission, vision and values I was asked to speak regarding my vision for our future. Because our vice-principal had been reading through our community she thought that I might have something to contribute. During this conversation I brought up the reference from the Innosite Institute (2012) about improving, “student control over time, place, path, and pace” (p.3). We had been working for hours over the course of several staff meetings, trying to refine a very complicated, wordy definition of our ‘purpose’. Within several minutes it was agreed upon by many in the room that this short sentence said much of what we were trying to say in a much simpler form. We agreed
to try and rework our statements around this notion. For our work in our Master’s program as well as our work in the Google+ community to spill over into something as meaningful as playing a role in the creation of a school's vision for the future was very rewarding.

A final example of an offline conversation came at a student volleyball game. A principal of one of my previous schools approached me and asked how I felt about starting a blended learning program in her school. She had ideas about selecting or approaching specific staff, and which grade levels she would use. She had considered taking one of the four pods in the school and turning it into a ‘blended pod’. She had a host of other ideas that I could tell had been coursing through her mind and which she was desperate to discuss with someone. This conversation was hugely important to me as the topic of her questions was exactly what I had been told for several months, and by many different people could ‘never’ happen. When bringing up the notion of a blended component within one of our brick-and-mortar schools I have been repeatedly told that it is just not possible. My goal from the very beginning was simply to spark a conversation exactly like this one, and here it was.

These conversations did several things for me. They proved to me that administrators and fellow staff in this district knew enough about my work, and respected my opinion enough to ask for my thoughts on the matter. They also showed me that we were not as far away from my ‘futuristic’ vision as I had once thought. Originally I thought we would base the success of our community on the conversations within. Going forward, I realize that I will be basing its effectiveness on the amount of conversation, and actions taken, as a result of the online component.

**Conclusion of Field/Beta Testing**

I must admit that this was a very emotional experience. Having the fate of your Masters project in the hands of other people is not something that I might willingly attempt again. What
it did do was force my partner and I to problem solve, to communicate and to be engaged at a level that could not be equalled by simply creating a website or lesson plans. It forced us into exactly the type of situation that we are attempting to put our students into. As scary as it was, there has been a great deal of accomplishment and camaraderie that have come with the implementation of this community. I really do hope that our efforts are not for naught, and that we, educators inside and outside of SD71, can use this resource to better our practice.
Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Recommendations

From the moment we were told by our instructor that our final Masters assignment would be project based I knew that I would create something that would allow me to share my experiences from my time in the Online Learning and Teaching Diploma (OLTD) program at Vancouver Island University (VIU). The pedagogy in our courses was so sound and the resources so integrated and contextual that in my mind, blended learning was the path that we as a profession must follow in order to keep up with students’ changing needs. Since I began teaching in 2005 I have been hyper-sensitive to the fact that we are teaching in a nineteenth century model. Everything that I have done, my work on Inquiry, my focus on technology and even how I interact with my students has been to break down the four walls that surround my classroom. The past two years of teaching in a blended model (3 contact days - 2 at-home days) at the Fine Arts eCademy at Navigate in Courtenay BC have found me attempting to put some of those walls back up. This has demonstrated to me the fine line between freedom and success. It has made me very aware that if teachers want to head in this direction, then they are going to need support from each other, as well as support from a strong group of mentors who have been testing these waters for years.

The Literature

Following my first round of research for my literature review, I allowed myself to come to the conclusion that it did not really matter what blended learning was, and whether it had a home component or not, it was what we did with it going forward. However, I came to realize that much of my knowledge base, and many of the conversations that I was having and will continue to have, came from that core set of research. I believe we can disregard the arguments about how to define blended learning and focus on the elements of why it is needed and how it can be implemented.
For me the most useful idea and phrase came from Horn & Staker (2012), stating that blended learning was all about creating a shift in student control over time, place, path and pace. It is a catchy, simple phrase that to me encompassed everything that blended learning has to offer. Everything else that I had read before and after that simply seemed like wordier ways of explaining that same idea.

Sharma (2010), after explaining the history behind the term blended learning, describes three definitions of blended learning that are especially relevant: a combination of face-to-face and online teaching; a combination of technologies; and a combination of methodologies. Moskal, Dziuban and Hartman (2013) reviewed the various labels that had been used such as mixed mode, hybrid, and combined, and stated that blended learning emerged as the dominant label for an educational platform that represents some combination of face-to-face and online learning. Pape (2010) brings to the conversation that blended may involve using online tools to communicate, collaborate, and publish, and most importantly to extend the school day or year to develop the 21st-century skills students need. In my opinion these are all just different ways of elaborating on the Horn & Staker concept.

When Gonzales and Vodicka (2012) discuss blended learning as the Disruptive Innovation that we are in need of, they are speaking of the ability of online learners to be both together and apart—and to be connected to a community of learners anytime and anywhere, without being time, place, or situation bound. Piontek (2013) says that almost 60 percent of students play educational games and that they want to use them to learn. He also states that self-directed learning is beneficial only for a small part of the population and that most students will benefit from some face to face interaction. We as educators have realized over the years that learning is much more successful if students are engaged. We are going to have a much better
chance at engaging them if we can make obvious links to their future careers as well as connecting to the technologies and passions that they are currently immersed in.

My research on successful online communities seems to reflect the simple concept of treating others the way you would like to be treated. Kim (2000) speaks of common challenges in online communities such as, “persistent identity, newcomer confusion, etiquette standards, leadership roles, and group dynamics,” and adds that, “people are people, even in cyberspace” (p.2). Jacobsen (2010) states that professional dialogue and learning opportunities for a digital world need to be designed and led by professional mentors, teaching colleagues, and school leaders who model 21st century teaching and learning practices. Each piece of evidence that I found about successful online communities could basically be restated as how do I do this? What are the rules and expectations? Who is in control or who can identify with? Do I feel safe enough to contribute my ideas?

Many of these findings allowed me the ability to communicate and share my ideas on flexible and blended learning with confidence. As teachers in the district have started to email me, or engage me in conversation at a sporting event, I have been able to state my case and then offer them a piece of research to demonstrate that I was not just making it up.

**Perceived Successes/Failures and Implications of Major Project**

In Chapter Four I spoke of a small group of people that were initially asked to help with the launch of this community, then later asked for their feedback on the success/failure and future of this community. Some of the successes from that meeting included: success with membership; success with quality of conversations; and success in terms of the conversations that were beginning to take place outside of the community. A success that can be added to these is the simple fact that we created a small steering committee whose sole purpose is to foster a greater sense of discussion and community between all members of our staff here in SD71.
The limitations as discussed in Chapter Four can be summarized as: teachers feeling incapable of joining the Google+ community or of contributing to the discussion once logged in; teachers being too busy; a lack of interest in the content or content not being ‘timely’ for what they are currently doing; and finally that the topic of blended learning was simply too narrow a focus to attract people’s attention.

In evaluating what we could have done differently, there are several things that I would recommend in order to alleviate some of the challenges that we encountered. Though we did manage to get to several meetings in order to promote our community, more exposure in advance of launching the community would have been beneficial. I would also have liked to better prepare a few key people in advance of the project being launched. Due to the provincial strike action, we were not allowed to use the district website to communicate with others. This left us only being able to communicate with some key potential supporters once the community was up and running. I think my main piece of advice is that a community such as this, unless it is inside a course where students are awarded points or grades for participation, is quite unlikely to develop overnight. We had a small timeframe with a limited subject matter. I think that it is important for us and for others in similar situations to be patient and persistent and to have faith that in the end, people do really want a place to share experiences and to learn from their peers.

That said, success or failure of this online community was only one component of the success of our projects as a whole. The fact that recently my Principal asked my opinion on a blended learning pilot project in the face-to-face schools is something that I deem to be a positive outcome. As well, the fact that three different teachers from across the district have asked for my opinion on bringing a blended learning model into their schools. Finally, the fact that my colleague has started to build a network for mentorship in the Learn71 portal, along with the
other outcomes are all indicators that what we have accomplished here is to begin a district wide dialogue about alternate forms of instruction. This was as much, or more, than we could have hoped for in the beginning.

**Future Implications**

The immediate implications following this project are somewhat simple. I will continue to assist our IT Support teacher with the maintenance of the Learn71 Google+ community. I will continue to re-tag people’s posts, making it easier for people to find what they are looking for, and I will flag potential resources that the IT Support teacher can add to the district resource page. I will continue to respond to people in a timely and thoughtful manner in the hopes that eventually all staff in the district have a central place in which they can share and discover new ideas.

The ‘big picture’ future implications of this project for me as well as my colleague are somewhat daunting. If we cast ourselves as district specialists in this field of blended learning, and we want to maintain that status, then we have a lot of work to do in terms of keeping ourselves current and useful to others. When my Principal asks me which the best LMS to pilot a new program with, I better be able to answer that question or know who to contact with expertise in that area.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this was a task rife with risk and challenges. Creating a website for a course or a resource page for the district as I had originally intended would have been much safer. However, I am quite sure that I would not have had half the amount of engaging conversation nor built both my confidence and my reputation in this field had I followed one of those paths.
A quote by Kim (2000) caught my attention during the initial research stage. She spoke of patterns in virtual communities being echoed in physical communities and that basically, “people are people, even in cyberspace” (p.4). This may seem very obvious, but what it reminds us is that we should treat others the way we would like to be treated. If I were joining a new community what would I want? What would I need? This is the notion that I attempted to keep in mind along the way.

This community may ultimately shut down or it may go on to be a successful avenue for teachers in both SD71 and beyond. Either way, it has helped spark the conversation around bringing blended learning to the face-to-face schools as was my hope. Simply by seeing who signed up and who engaged me in conversation outside of the community, I now have a better understanding of who in the district is interested in this concept and will know who to contact in the future.

My partner and I are both strongly committed to the continued success of this community, whether it continues in the Google+ vehicle or not. In the end, it must be kept in mind that, “Your community will be what you and your members make of it!” as stated by Boetcher (2002, p.3) This means that we have and will continue to do our best to keep the community alive, but in the end it will be up to the community to decide its direction and its fate.
References


Appendix A: Letter to SD 71 Management

August 19, 2014
Sherry Elwood, Superintendent
School District 71 - Comox Valley
607 Cumberland Rd.
Courtenay, B.C., V9N 7G5

Dear Ms. Elwood,

We, Marieke Holtkamp and Andrew Ferneyhough, are currently enrolled in the Vancouver Island University Masters of Education (Leadership) Program after finishing two years of coursework to obtain our Graduate Diploma in Online Teaching and Learning. We have each been assigned the task of completing a Major Project that is comprised of approximately 300 hours and 12,000 words. We have each been assigned a mentor (Alissa Pratt and Randy LaBonte) and would like to develop and implement a district program as the focus of our studies.

Our project is based on two main guiding questions: “Can the creation of an online community help foster the development of technology supported flexible learning in School District 71?” (Andrew’s focus); and “Can a mentorship model effectively support and sustain flexible learning practices for teachers in School District 71?” (Marieke’s focus). Though we each have an individual primary focus, we will be working together as a team.

It is important to note that ‘Blended’ learning is often associated with an ‘at home’ component and has had a variety of definitions attached to it. As we wish to have it encompass more than that, we will be using the term ‘flexible’ learning throughout this paper so as to include a variety of in-school techniques and programs that release the teacher of some of their traditional roles and place the responsibilities, place, and time requirements into a more flexible realm.

Our overall goal is to foster technology supported ‘flexible’ learning through the use of an online community and the development of a mentorship model. We believe that a well-designed, robust, district-backed online community that is focused on Flexible Learning will help assist teachers in ‘breaking down the walls’ in the traditional face-to-face classroom. By sharing our resources and by developing mentorship opportunities, we believe we can help teachers to realize some of the benefits that technology can provide in meeting the very specific demands of today’s learners.

This document serves as an outline to what we propose to create, what we are asking for from the district, as well as a brief summary of the literature reviews contained in our Master’s papers.

If you have any questions for any of us throughout this process please contact us at the addresses below.

Marieke Holtkamp - marieke.holtkamp@sd71.bc.ca
Andrew Ferneyhough - andrew.ferneyhough@sd71.bc.ca
Sincerely,
Andrew Ferneyhough and Marieke Holtkamp
Appendix B: Letter to SD71 Teachers

Dear Colleagues,

Marieke Holtkamp and Andrew Ferneyhough are currently involved in their Masters of Education (Leadership) at Vancouver Island University. Our final project will involve creating an online community focused on flexible (blended) learning and then developing a mentorship model for the district. We will be working with Rob Moore and Kara Dawson throughout the process as we hope to have our efforts carried on when our course is complete.

As the traditional definition of blended learning often involves a home component and we would like to focus on blended learning within ‘brick and mortar’ schools, we would like to use the term ‘flexible learning’ in its place. The best definition we could find for this type of learning in a single sentence is as follows:

“a program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home.”

‘Student control over time, place, path and/or pace’ This is a concept that many of you employ on a daily basis and it is our hope to clarify, discuss, debate and ultimately share our resources as a learning community. Concepts and methodologies such as BYOD, Gamification, and flipping the classroom are all concepts that we have been studying during our OLTD course at VIU and are excited to share and discuss with our peers.

We have created a Google+ community which is divided into a variety of sections. Within each section we will begin with resources defining and providing resources on that particular topic. Our hope is that if you are interested in that particular area, or if you have some prior experience, be it good or bad, that you will share that knowledge with us.

We will then be working with select staff that would like to experiment with a mentorship model. Marieke’s research has shown that there is no better way to reduce fear, and build confidence as well as sustainability than hands on experience with a tool or topic.

If you are interested in being a part of our adventure please contact through email or signup to our Google+ community at https://plus.google.com/u/0/communities/11179173037808325680.

Sincerely,
Marieke Holtkamp and Andrew Ferneyhough
Appendix C: Google + Site

https://plus.google.com/u/0/communities/111179173037808325680