STUDENTS' OPINIONS ON FACEBOOK SUPPORTED BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT
The first purpose of this study was to determine students' opinions on blended learning and its implementation. The other purpose was to explore the students' opinions on Facebook integration into blended learning environment. The participants of this study were 40 undergraduate students in their fourth semester of the program. Participants had no prior experience in Blended Learning Environment, but they were well informed about online distance education. A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches was used in this study. Quantitative data were collected through a scale called as "Students' Views on the Use and Implementation of Blended Learning" and qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions. Based on the result of the study, it appears that students have quite positive opinions on blended learning and its implementation. The highest score given to face-to-face environment throughout the process of implementing blended learning. However, students have also positive opinions on the blended learning method. The findings from this study indicate that Facebook may be an appropriate tool for communication and interaction whereas, the online environment may be appropriate for sharing content, homework / projects.

INTRODUCTION

21st century brings different challenges for educational institutions. Many institutions are embracing the new technologies into their system. Technology has a vital role to play in building up 21st century skills, and today's students come pre-skilled with technology proficiencies to schools and a built in acceptance for new technologies.

New technologies can contribute to universal access to education, equity in education, and the delivery of quality learning and teaching. Furthermore, the development of Internet technologies has resulted in the delivery of a great majority of distance learning being conducted through the Internet. Besides, these new technologies have also changed teaching paradigms. In recent years the terms like e-learning or online learning have occurred as a result of the integration of new technologies in education. E-learning, or online learning is continuing to grow and it has increased the demand for distance education. The system of online learning has been largely used in higher education, and a lot of studies have been done to discover both its strengths and weaknesses (Pohl, 2004; Markovic, 2010). Many higher education institutions today have multiple modes such as on-campus, at a distance, online or a blended learning for teaching (Wang, 2010; Yuen, 2010; Taylor & Newton, 2013). There have been a number of factors impeding the large quantity of technology in education across all sectors as well as universities. In recent times, factors (such as information explosion, twenty first century skills, demands of workplaces, easy access to technology) have emerged which have strengthened and encouraged moves to adopt technologies into classrooms and learning settings (Ugur, Akkoyunlu, & Kurbanoglu, 2011).

Discussions on some disadvantages of e-learning, or online learning environments such as lack of face-to-face communication resulting in inhibiting the socialization process of individuals bring new approaches and new environments. This new environment called as blended learning, hybrid or mixed learning combines e learning and classical learning environments (Lim, Morris, & Kupritz, 2006). Blended learning combines face-to-face and online experiences to engage learners, and extend learning beyond the classroom walls. Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal (2004) emphasized that blended learning should be viewed as a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment.

Definition of Blended Learning

As Clark and Mayer (2007) noted that there is no exact definition of blended learning and it may refer to different meanings for different people. Singh and Reed (2001) define blended learning as a learning program where more than one delivery mode is being used with the objective of optimizing the learning outcome and cost of program delivery. Blended learning is used to describe learning that mixes various event-based activities, including face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning, and self-paced learning" (Valiathan, 2002). Generally, blended learning is defined as any combination of learning delivery methods that includes face-to-face instruction with asynchronous and/or synchronous computer technologies (Osguthorpe & Graham 2003). In the same context, another definition of blended learning is the effective integration of various learning techniques, technologies, and delivery modalities to meet specific communication, knowledge sharing, and information needs (Finn & Bucceri, 2004). Mortera-Gutierrez (2006) outlined that blended learning is the combination of multiple approaches to learning, combining several different delivery methods, such as collaboration software, web-based courses or computer communication practices and traditional face-to-face instructions. Mayadas and Picciano (2007) define on the other hand blended learning as simply a combination of on line learning and face-to face instruction. The authors discussed blended learning as the mix of different didactic methods and delivery formats which are independent. According to Tucker (2012), "Blended learning is any combination of face-to-face instruction and online learning. Tucker takes together of instructional mediums – in person and online – to maximize learning outcomes for students. Staker and Horn (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. Staker and Horn (2012) define blended learning from student perspective and it is a student-centric definition. Consequently, blended learning is defined as a combination approach and the different definitions of blended learning show us diversity and strength of this type of learning. Blended learning gives learners and teachers a potential environment to learn and teach more effectively.

For the purposes of this paper, blended learning means integrating the online and face-to-face formats to create a more effective learning experience than either medium can produce alone and took the form of a combination of face-to-face classroom teaching with lecture and class formats and the use of an asynchronous online environment with supporting social media (Facebook). According to Shih (2011), blended learning that integrates online and face-to-face instruction could create an effective teaching and learning experience for both instructors and students.

In blended learning environment, students are able to communicate at their own pace and consider comments and responses; however, we need more space to extent communication and relationship between peers and lecturers. Facebook was chosen as supported media in the study. Researchers assumed that to integrate social media (Facebook) into an Instructional Design Course could help create a sense of community among students; furthermore, the interactions among students that take place outside of classrooms can prove to have pedagogical values through thoughtful instructional designs. The researchers chose Facebook, because the site's popularity ensured that a large number of students would already be familiar with its layout and operation, and would be comfortable utilizing it during the term (McCarthy, 2010).

In today's students are currently enrolled in higher education with a new set of characteristics and values. They are heavily engaged in social media (i.e., blogs, twitter, podcasts, wikis, social network sites, virtual worlds, video sharing and photo sharing) and Internet that play an increasingly important role in their social and academic life (Monaco & Martin, 2007). Most of the studies showed that social media tools support educational activities by allowing active participation, collaboration, interaction, information and resource sharing (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008; Mason, 2006; Selwyn, 2007). Social media has emerged as a highly useful personal communication technology (Tess, 2013).

Students today have more autonomy, collective personality, connectivity and interaction besides, they ask socio-experiential learning opportunities in their learning contexts and also construct their knowledge. Educators need to consider how to meet the needs of their students by utilizing social media and Internet. Recently, social media has started to use both in daily lives and teaching - learning process (Manca & Ranierit, 2013). Today Facebook is considered as one of the most popular platforms for online social media among youth and university students. As Selwyn (2007) stated Facebook has quickly become the social media of choice by university students. Therefore, it is inevitable to integrate social media into the education.

There has been rapid growth in blended learning researches focused on its implementation and students and teachers' opinions on the implementations (Hsu, 2011; Lopez-Perez, Perez-Lopez, & Rodriguez, 2011; Perez

Marin, Santacruz & Gomez, 2012; Al-Qahtani & Higgins, 2013) or on usage of social media in education (Bosch, 2009; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010; Yang, Wang, Woo, and Quek, 2011; Coklar, 2012; Irwin, Ball, Desbrow and Leveritt, 2012; Manca, & Ranierit, 2013) but very limited research focused on using blended learning environment through social media (McCarthy, 2010; Shih, 2011; McCarthy, 2013).

The first purpose of this study was to determine students' opinions on blended learning and its implementation related to easy use of web media, online media, content, face-to-face media, blended learning method and evaluation. The other purpose was to explore the students' opinions on Facebook integration into blended learning environment. Two questions were addressed in the current study:
1.   What are the students' opinions on blended learning and its implementation?
2.   What are the students' opinions on Facebook support in blended learning environment?

METHODOLOGY
A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches was used in this study. Quantitative data were collected through a scale called as "Students' Views on the Use and Implementation of Blended Learning" to answer the question 1, qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions to answer the question 2.

The Study Group
The participants of this study were 40 students in their fourth semester of the program. From their first to third semester, they had taken courses such as "Information and Communication Technologies, Programming Languages, Computer Hardware etc." Therefore, all of them were advanced computer users. Participants had no prior experience in Blended Learning Environment, but they were well informed about online distance education.

Data Collection Process: The data required for this study were collected by the researchers through a scale on learners' opinions on blended learning and its implementation, additional data were gathered by open ended questions relating to facebook support.

The Scale of Students' Views on the Use and Implementation of Blended Learning: The scale developed by Akkoyunlu and Yılmaz-Soylu (2006) consists of 50 expressions with scores from 1 to 10. There are two main sections, the first 35 expressions aim to highlight the learners' views on the use and implementation of the blended learning method (easy use of web environment, online media, content, face to face media, blended learning method and evaluation) the remaining 15 expressions are used to determine the students' views on blended learning in general.

On a ten-point Likert scale, anchored with notations "0 = not at all", and "10 = totally true" the students were asked to assign a score between 1-10 for each expression. From "1- 5" is regarded as "low", from "5.01-7" as "Medium" and "7.01-10" as "High". In order to ensure a high reliability, the test repeat method was used and the alpha reliability coefficient of the first section was determined as α= .78, for the second section as α= .79 and in general as α= .78 (Akkoyunlu & Yılmaz-Soylu, 2006).

Open-ended Questions: Open-ended questions were posed at the end of the semester in order to quantitatively determine the views of students on blended learning and its implementation, and then address them in detail. Thus, through open-ended questions, students were given an opportunity to explain their feelings concerning any difficulties they had during the course and share their experiences on online learning environment and face-to-face sessions. Besides, the students' opinions on Facebook support in blended learning environment were also determined through open-ended questions.

Procedures of the Study
Background of the Course: "Instructional Design" is a core course of the undergraduate curriculum at the Department of Computer Education and Instructional Technologies (Faculty of Education) The students take the course in their forth-academic semester. Approximately 60 students enroll to the course each academic year. Researchers decided to implement the blended learning model in "Instructional Design" course. Therefore, researchers redesign the course content for blended learning environment. First of all, researchers analyzed the course objectives with the aim of deciding which of them were to be achieved through the online method and which of them were to be accomplished within the face-to-face learning environment. Secondly, the parts were defined with part of the course for classroom instruction and the other part for the online instruction. Thus, same learners were involved in online and face-to-face learning activities. This model was defined as Type 1, a blended classroom involving the same learners in both face-to-face and online activities

by Osguthorpe and Graham (2003). Secondly, researchers decided to use Facebook as supported media and mixed with face to face and the online environments in the study. One week the students received the course over the web and facebook, the next week they were exposed to face-to-face education for two hours. Lastly, researchers redesigned the course content and developed the course text and online material. The content of courses was designed according to principles of tutorial instruction. Information in texts was presented in small units followed by questions. Animations, graphs and pictures as visual materials were also planned and used by the researchers. According to Kerres and de Witt, (2003) the learning objectives of the course and the learning environment have to be analyzed in order to define required time for online and face-to-face activities.

Blended Learning Environment: In this study the course was delivered in a blended format includes the online and face-to-face formats with supporting social media (Facebook). Online learning environment was constructed by WordPress web template system to implement the study. The minimal approach was adopted for both content and appearance in designing online learning environment. Links defined at the beginning of the term were released in time parallel to face to face learning and updated regularly (announcements, weekly assignments, etc.) Online learning environment was also displayed on mobile devices. Online learning environment was all open for registration of students and after a week their IDs were defined and their authorization were increased. Then, online learning environment was closed for the registration. Students accessed the online learning environment with a user name and a password. Only students and course instructors/researchers were allowed to access to the online learning environment. A Facebook group was created parallel to online learning environment. Student engagement with the course *Facebook* page was strongly encouraged by the course instructors; however there was no formal assessment or incentive associated with students' participation. Students were also encouraged to share their opinions, experiences, with their classmates. The instructor and students also used the "message" function to communicate with each other. Interactions on Facebook were typically short and direct. The instructors acted as moderators by responding to questions and comments, keeping the discussion on track and evaluating student performance in the process. In other words, the Facebook environment allowed for peer-to-peer, student – instructors, and instructor – student communication and gave students opportunities for sharing their experiences, questions etc. with each other and with the instructors.

The instructions, course materials assignments, pre-discussions, discussion questions were shared through weekly links. Students could ask any questions on the course using comment box available under the each links.

Students' assignments were displayed on the homepage. Comments and explanations were send to the students using boxes available under the assignments, and discussions were possible with students. One of the characteristics of online learning environment was to define categories, in this way, assignments were categorized according to topics and when clicking the category link or students' username, it was possible to reach their activities and comments.

Face-to-Face Sessions: The face-to-face meetings were held every two weeks. During the time in between, the instructors communicated through online environment and facebook . Syllabus of the course and learning environment were presented to students on the first face-to-face session. Before face-to-face session, the students were asked to read the course notes pertaining to that week's content provided on the online learning environment. During face-to-face sessions the questions of students concerning the course content and the points which could not be understood by students were discussed face-to-face and resolved.

Participation in the online environment, facebook and face-to-face sessions was obligatory and students were encouraged to participate and contribute to the process. Besides, the students' reflective reports and their feedback were also gathered in several ways.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Findings of the study according to the questions are listed hereby below:
What are the students' opinions on blended learning and its implementation?
General mean score obtained from the questionnaire corresponds to 7.40 (Table 1). The scores as presented above are categorized as follows: "1-5: low", "5.01-7: medium", "7.01-10: high". The average score is at high level.

Table1. Student's opinions on implementation and reliability results of BLE dimensions

	M	SD	Cronbach α
Ease of use of Web Environment	7.59	1.31	.84
Online environment	7.25	1.60	.84
Content	7.48	1.60	.94
Face-to-face environment	7.73	1.70	.92
Evaluation	7.62	1.92	.89
Blended Learning Environment	7.16	1.41	.88
Total	7.40	1.16	.94

It is found out that the highest mean corresponds to face-to-face aspect of this implementation (= 7.73). This finding can be explained with students' study habits and face-to-face interaction could be met their expectations on the face-to-face interaction of students with each other and with the instructors. The students may prefer in the face-to-face session for communicating with instructors. Results of the findings showed that face-to-face interaction is a must for students. Students' answers that supported these findings include the following:

"Face to face learning was more efficient because we got immediate feedback. During the face-to-face sessions we repeated the subject in online environment and face-to-face instruction helped me understand the course concepts better. So, I preferred face to face sessions." H. A
"Face-to-face instruction was a better way for me to learn the content/course materials. I liked the teaching way of class. The teacher used an interesting way to teach us. Being in a class with face-to-face communication was more convenient for me, and the face-to-face learning environment contributed to my overall satisfaction of the course"" İ. Ö.

"We received the information in the online environment and ensured a higher level of learning. However, Face-to-face interaction reinforced me and met my expectations since the course instructors provided us with guiding information." D. A.

As Dzibuan, Hartman and Moskal (2004) stated, "students are still able to anchor their learning experience on the familiar face to face class meetings". However the highest mean corresponds to face to face aspect of this implementation, as Table 1 showed that students' opinions on the use and implementation of the blended learning method (easy use of web media, online media, content, face to face media, blended learning method and evaluation) are also at high level. Findings showed that the blended learning was highly appreciated and positively rated by students. Blended courses offer flexibility both in time and space for students. That is why, students could be positive about the blended learning environment (Dziuban, Hartman, Cavanagh, & Moskal, 2011). Use of blended learning technology could provide students with the flexibility to learn at their own pace and other outside responsibilities. The results of open-ended questions concerning students' opinions on online environment demonstrated that blended learning environment adds to the interest of students.

"I had access to lecture notes whenever I needed and I could ask the questions which sticked in my mind. It was a flexible environment and studied whenever I wanted. Face-to-face course was a good method which enabled us to ask the details about the topics we did not understand. "

"I like the practice of blended learning (a combination of online learning with classroom learning). Compared to classroom learning, I found it easier to participate in online discussions in blended learning." F. K.
Most of the studies showed that the most efficient approach for learning-teaching process is neither the use of only face-to-face instruction methods nor only web-based methods; but, it is the combination of both these approaches by taking their most attractive aspects that produces the most effective approach (Adas & Wafa, 2011; Ginns & Ellis 2007; Futch, 2005). As Yuen (2010) stated Blended learning, which is a relatively new learning approach, has the quality to have an influence on teachers, students and instruction activities.

What are the students' opinions on Facebook support in blended learning environment?
Students were asked to determine their opinions on facebook support in blended learning environment. The question was "which environment you prefer facebook or online developed for the course to conduct the activities." Students' answers were grouped into two categories as interaction and content. 18 students preferred online environment whereas 13 students preferred Facebook. In the next step, in order to get more

detailed answers, students were asked to share their opinions on Facebook usage in the process and compare Facebook and online environment.

Students anticipated that Facebook support would enhance the quantity of information passed from instructors to students and facilitate interaction between students regarding course content. In other words, students underlined that Facebook should be used for communication and interaction, giving immediate feedback and motivation whereas, the online environment should be used for sharing content, homework / projects and providing the belonging of the course.

Comments from the students reflected this feeling quite well:
"When Facebook used in order to inform us about activities, it helped and guided us to go to online environment. Sometimes it was not easy to access the online environment in any time, but it was easy to access Facebook in any time and in anywhere. However, it was very useful to use the online environment to share the content and to find detailed learning activities." C. O.
"We used the online environment for only the course, however, I was already on Facebook, the page was a quick and easy way to get information and keep up to date. Therefore, it was great idea and allows much quicker and convenient access to needed materials and/or information." M.T.

"When the course content was shared only in the online environment sometimes students may not see them. I always checked first Facebook for the course information and then go to the online environment. Besides, if we had any question on the course it was so easy to get answer or immediate feedback." S.Y.
"We could reach the announcement about the course immediately through Facebook, because I was already on Facebook, the page was a quick and easy way to get information and keep up to date. Therefore, it was useful to use Facebook for communication but online environment was better in order to upload the course content or our projects. Therefore, both of them were very practical for online activities." B.K.

Students underlined that Facebook allowed much easier access as it has already become part of their lives.With the increasing popularity of smart phones, Facebook is within their fingertips. Since "everyone uses it every day", they regarded Facebook as "more immediate and direct than online learning environment. Many of these students are using technology and social media in their daily lives and social media has mostly been part of their lives, they use it seamlessly on a daily basis (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010). As Shih (2011) underlined the interaction between teacher and students is important and may influence students' learning motivation and effectiveness. Baran (2010) cited that his empirical research revealed students felt that the use of Facebook in the classroom strengthened their communication as a group and felt that Facebook was a valuable part of their distance education course.

CONCLUSION
The purpose of the study was to measure students' opininons on blended learning and its implementation and explore the students' opinions on Facebook integration into blended learning environment.

Based on the result of the study, it appears that students have quite positive opinions on blended learning and its implementation. The highest score given to face-to-face environment throughout the process of implementing blended learning. However, students have also positive opinions on the blended learning method.

The findings from this study indicate that Facebook may be an appropriate tool for communication and interaction whereas, the online environment may be appropriate for sharing content, homework / projects.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY
This study has a limitation and a discussion of the limitation of this study deserves examination. The study is implemented within the period of a spring term to a small group of students who do not have previous experience on blended learning. This limitation might limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should involve larger numbers of students to be able to generalize the results. It would also be interesting to compare the effects among solely online instruction, *Facebook*-integrated blended learning, and face to face instruction.

The results can be seen as recommendations of how to combine face-to-face learning and social media components with online learning components from students' point of view. They prefer Facebook components for the dissemination of information to communicate each other.

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