

# An investigation of blended learning experiences of first-year Chinese transnational program students at an Australian university

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The extensive uses of information and communication technologies (ICT) in higher education have reformed the traditional classroom-based study mode. Blended learning, the combination of online and offline learning methods, has become an essential teaching and learning strategy for both instructors and students. An increasing number of Chinese students choose to conduct their undergraduate study through China-Australia transnational programs. Due to the differences in teaching and learning styles between Chinese and Australian universities, the perceptions of transnational students on blended learning strategies may impact their study experience and the adaptation to a different environment. Although previous studies have investigated learning experiences and adaptation issues of Chinese students from various perspectives, limited studies have explored the perceptions of Chinese transnational program students on blended learning in their first-year Australian study. This study describes a series of preliminary qualitative findings of these students blended learning experiences, especially the online section, in an Australian university.

**Keywords:** Blended learning; Online Learning; Transnational education; Chinese students; Higher education

## Introduction

Blended learning has been proposed as a solution to achieve the goal of improving students' engagement, accessibility and flexibility in the process of ICT-embedded study (Bonk & Graham, 2012). The term, "blended", implies several meanings on the basis of different perspectives. Researchers (e.g. Bonk & Graham, 2012) summarize that blended learning is a study mode that combines traditional face-to-face styles with online learning methods. In this study, blended learning refers to the combination of offline and Internet-based study approach. The students' online study mainly focuses on investigating experiences through Internet-based learning platform, for example, Blackboard. With the rapid development of ICTs, many unknown questions in blended learning emerge and need to be addressed. Kim, Bonk, and Teng (2009) argue that the topic of blended learning in Asian countries (e.g., China, Korea and Taiwan) and the use of blended learning in a cross-cultural phase should be investigated in depth and systematically.

Transnational education has become an important part of modern higher education (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). A growing number of Chinese students choose to conduct their undergraduate study through transnational programs, for example, China-Australia mode, which allows students to experience different cultural environments and educational settings. In particular, transnational program students normally need to study in a Chinese university for at least one year. Due to the differences in culture and education between China and Australia, however, many Chinese students struggle with the transition from a domestic to an international environment. To understand students' cross-cultural learning experiences, many educational researchers have explored relevant topics from their specific perspectives, such as blended learning in Chinese and Australian higher education (Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Piggott, 2011; Tang, 2013), issues of using blended learning (Bonk & Graham, 2012), and adaptation of ICTs in different cultural environments (Chen, Bennett, & Maton, 2008).

## Literature Review

A number of researchers have investigated relevant issues about Internet-based blended learning in Australian and Chinese higher education. For the Australian context, Bliuc et al. (2011) explored the

use of blended learning in different curriculums, such as arts and engineering. Furthermore, students' learning experiences and perception of blended learning strategies have also been identified through critical analysis (Bliuc et al., 2011). According to these research studies, researchers have concluded that students can experience both online and offline study approaches through blended learning depending on their study demands. The positive perceptions of Internet-based blended learning are mainly reflected in three phases: the flexibility of study mode, the abundant resources of the Internet, and offline interactions. Meanwhile, some negative aspects are identified as well, such as information overload, influences on learning and teaching productivity, and the balance between online and offline activities.

For the Chinese context, many Chinese researchers have investigated students' experiences of blended learning (Tang, 2013; Zhang & Han, 2012). Some studies have resulted in many similar findings to those of Australian researchers. For example, in accordance with Graham, Allen, and Ure (2003), Tang (2013) also suggested that the Internet-based blended learning approaches can help students to gain knowledge without the restrictions of time and space. Zhao (2008) resonated with Ellis, Goodyear, Prosser, and O'Hara (2006) who claimed that the Internet can provide a great many educational materials to students. Particularly, based on an investigation of using blended learning strategies in an English course, Zhang and Han (2012) identified that Internet-based blended learning strategies may motivate Chinese students' self-learning interests and develop autonomous studying skills. Many Chinese students are used to rote and passive learning styles and lack critical and creative thinking (Chan, 1999). In a blended learning environment, students may use Internet-based tools to learn independently rather than only relying on instructors and textbooks (Zhang & Han, 2012). The mixed learning and teaching methods not only provide various educational recourses, but also establish a flexible environment for both instructors and learners (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). Hence, studying in such a blended learning environments may provide learners with more opportunities for thinking and studying autonomously and so enhance their motivation and self-regulation (Tang, 2013).

## **Research Gaps and Questions**

According to the literature above, it is apparent that few studies have been conducted with the intent of identifying the learning experiences of Chinese transnational programs students to the blended learning environment in Australian universities. Therefore, this study aims to explore Chinese transnational program students' first-year study experiences in Australian blended learning environments. On the basis of previous studies and introduction above, this study proposes to explore the following research questions:

What are the learning experiences of first year China-Australia program students in Australian university through online environment?

## **Research Methodology**

Six undergraduate students who studied in first-year China-Australia programs at an Australian university participated in this research project. Ethics approval for the project was obtained and the participants were each given a pseudonym to protect their privacy. They include four female (Yan, Hua, Min and Qian) and two male (Lun and Gang). Yan, Hua and Lun are from an accounting major. Min, Qian and Gang are from a design major.

To investigate the students' online learning experiences two focus group interviews were conducted. There were three participants in each of the two groups. Accounting students were in group one with the design students in the other group. Each interview took approximately one hour. Questions focused on exploring students' online learning experiences of different educational settings and identifying the potential problems that they may struggle with. Based on students' answers, initial understandings of using blended learning strategies in the selected transnational programs were analyzed. A thematic analysis was used to understand collected qualitative data systematically. In order to obtain precise and in-depth answers, the researcher used Chinese to interview each group and then translated the responses into English.

## Results

### The experiences of learning online in Australian university

On one hand, some participants identified that the Internet is fundamental tool in their study. With regards to the ways of using Internet in study, three participants from the accounting group and one student (Qian) from the design group thought that blended modes are more useful in their study, especially in the Australian university. These students provided various views of the reason why blended learning methods were important to their study in the Australian university. They pinpointed that online learning platform, for example, the Blackboard system, was one of the most useful learning online tools. According to interviews, these students agreed that many learning recourses can be found on Blackboard. On the Blackboard system, they can have a comprehensive understanding of the aim, goal, teaching/learning activities and assignments for a subject. For instance, Lun, from the accounting group, stated:

There are a lot of online tools that I used during my study. Instructors also apply some online tools during teaching. In specific, I think the blackboard is the most useful online tool. It is a systematic online learning tool and it makes our study flexible and productive. For example, when I want to know the course content, such as reading list, videos and slides, I can easily find out them in the system and do not need to spend more time to search for relevant materials online by myself. Many instructors in my major usually upload the most important learning recourses in the system week by week. Therefore, students can clearly understand what they need to know before and after a class. However, when I study in my Chinese university, there are limited uses of such kind of systems during study. My Chinese university also did not have such useful system, which has all necessary functions for study.

Compared to participants who agree that the blended learning mode is more helpful, two students (Min and Gang) from the design group prefer to study in offline environments. For example, Min claimed:

Courses of design majors need to create art works through computer software, online tools and hand-drawing. When students need to ask questions about drawing something or request tutors' feedback on specific drawing techniques, I think online learning strategies are difficult to help students to require feedback effectively because sometimes designing or drawing is hard to explain. So face-to-face learning is essential in my major. Although there is a great deal of online resources, for some courses in my major, I think that it is difficult to learn some specific knowledge through online platforms directly because communication with instructors and peers is important to have inspirations when I want to create something new or different. Therefore, I think online learning is not very useful sometimes for design major. I prefer to study in a face-to-face environment.

Based on these statements above, it is apparent that Internet-based tools, for example, Blackboard, can provide various learning resources to students. Furthermore, students who study in different majors have their own understandings and requirements on the use of Internet-based learning tools in traditional face-to-face environments.

On the other hand, some participants identify that their Chinese university does not provide useful online learning tools for supporting teaching and learning compared to the Australian university. According to the analysis of their feedback, main issues are highlighted by students: lack of useful online tools, unnecessary information overload, and limited uses of ICTs in teaching.

Yan and Hua, from the accounting group, noticed that although the Chinese university has an online learning system, students did not use it because instructors let students use textbooks during study rather than uploading learning contents through the online learning system. Specifically, Hua also mentioned:

The online learning system at my Chinese university is not very useful to study. For instance, the online library does not have enough resources and the interface and layout

design is not very good. That platform is different to Blackboard that is provided by the Australian university. The platform of the Chinese university seems an online forum, which has information that is irrelevant to study. I just use it to watch videos and do other types of online entertainment.

Qian and Gang, from the design group, highlighted that they did not have any particular blended learning experiences in the Chinese university period of the whole transnational program. In particular, Gang stated:

Compared to my Australian learning experience, I think I did not have impressive study activities that were taught through blended methods. In Australian university, instructors always use Blackboard and other online tools to assist in teaching. Some of them are good at using online tools to design specific interactive sections that encourage students to think of taught contents and question instructor and peers. However, in my previous Chinese classroom, it is difficult to have such kind of learning experiences. I just need to read textbooks and listen to the instructors. It seems to study in a high school rather than a university. The Chinese learning styles become obstacles to adapt to Australian university. For my transnational program, there are limited courses that aim to introduce Australian learning styles. Chinese university only arranges English course but this is not good for us to adapt to the real Australian classroom.

According to students' feedback, it is obvious that there are many differences of using online learning tools, recourses and study methods between Chinese and Australian universities, for example, instructors' use of ICTs and the online learning systems provided by universities. These differences may become obstacles when students start to learning in an Australian university.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the online learning experiences of six first-year Chinese transnational program students in an Australian university. The results revealed students' experiences on the use of Internet-based learning strategies, including preferences for teaching and learning approaches, online study platforms and the issues of using online strategies. Depending on the differences of course contents, learning styles and educational environments, educators and students may consider how to use Internet-based tools in teaching and learning activities (Ellis et al., 2006). These findings resonate with previous research studies conducted by Bliuc et al. (2011) who concluded that the effective integration of face-to-face and online learning is an important aspect during teaching and learning.

On the basis of these results, some results are similar to previous studies (Graham et al., 2003; Tang, 2013). For instance, students feel more flexible when studying in a online learning environment, which resonates with Graham et al. (2003) and Tang (2013), who identify that online learning can provide more flexible teaching and learning approaches in traditional study mode. Comparatively, this study also reveals potential research gaps. Due to the particular settings of transnational programs, students usually have learning experiences in both Chinese and Australian universities. When these students come to Australia, the blended learning environment provides a different study style to this particular group of learners. Therefore, understanding potential problems by both educators and students may be beneficial. For instance, the different ways of using blended learning in different majors of transnational programs. It may be beneficial for future studies to focus on exploring the blended learning experiences of Chinese transnational program students in Australian universities in depth.

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Dai, K. (2015). An investigation of blended learning experiences of first-year Chinese transnational program students at an Australian university. In T. Reiners, B.R. von Konsky, D. Gibson, V. Chang, L. Irving, & K. Clarke (Eds.), *Globally connected, digitally enabled*. Proceedings ascilite 2015 in Perth (pp. 419-423). <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2015.945>

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