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DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION OF COLLABORATIVE SKILLS IN A BLENDED LEARNING CONTEXT: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SELECTED GENERAL EDUCATION COURSE

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received: 29 Jan 2025 Revised: 20 Feb 2025 Accepted: 1 March 2025 Published: 1 April 2025</p>	<p>The paper explores the developmental progression of collaborative skills in the context of blended learning, focusing on students' experiences within a Malaysian Private University on a selected General Education (MPU) course. Blended learning, a pedagogical approach integrating traditional face-to-face instruction with online components, is increasingly prevalent in higher education. The unique challenges and opportunities posed by the MPU subjects, designed to integrate general education with specialized knowledge, make collaborative skill development a crucial aspect of blended learning experiences. The study employs a theoretical framework rooted in collaborative learning theories and blended learning models. It investigates students' experiences through qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with eight participants. The findings reveal a dynamic and multifaceted developmental journey of collaborative skills. Key themes include increased comfort with virtual collaboration, enhanced communication skills, development of critical thinking and problem-solving, and the establishment of a supportive learning community. The discussion highlights the effectiveness of blended learning in fostering collaborative skills, emphasizing the importance of digital literacy, adaptability, and resilience. The study also underscores the transferability of communication and critical thinking skills to various personal and professional settings. The establishment of a supportive learning community aligns with socio-constructivist principles, positively impacting academic outcomes and overall student well-being. In conclusion, the research contributes valuable insights into the potential of blended learning to not only impart subject-specific knowledge but also foster essential collaborative skills. The implications for instructional design and pedagogical strategies suggest a need for a supportive and inclusive environment in blended learning contexts. As education evolves, this study guides effective teaching practices, recognizing collaborative skills as integral to the learning process in a collaborative and interconnected world.</p>
<p>Keywords: Blended Learning, Collaborative Skills, Student Experiences, General Education, Higher Education</p> <p></p>	

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INTRODUCTION

Blended learning, characterized by the integration of traditional face-to-face instruction with online components, has become a prevalent pedagogical approach in higher education (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Within this context, the developmental progression of collaborative skills holds significant importance, particularly in courses that incorporate the Malaysian Private University (MPU) curriculum. The MPU curriculum, designed to enhance students' holistic development by integrating general education with specialized knowledge, poses unique challenges and opportunities for collaborative skill development in a blended learning environment.

As students engage with blended learning experiences, their experiences of the collaborative elements embedded in MPU courses become integral in understanding the efficacy of such pedagogical approaches. This study explores the developmental trajectory of collaborative skills within the context of blended learning, focusing on students' experiences of selected MPU courses. The term "collaborative skills" encompasses a range of interpersonal abilities, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, essential for academic and professional success (Dillenbourg, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

Research indicates that collaborative learning in blended environments can positively impact students' cognitive and social development (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2010; So & Brush, 2008). However, the nuances of collaborative skill development, particularly in the MPU context, remain an underexplored area. By delving into students' experiences, this study aims to contribute valuable insights into the factors influencing the developmental progression of collaborative skills in blended learning, thereby informing educators, curriculum designers, and institutions seeking to optimize the effectiveness of their instructional methods.

This research draws upon a theoretical framework rooted in collaborative learning theories (Dillenbourg, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 1999) and blended learning models (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The qualitative analysis of students' experiences will provide nuanced perspectives on the strengths and challenges of collaborative skill development within the specific context of MPU courses delivered through blended learning modalities.

In the subsequent sections, we will review relevant literature on collaborative learning, blended learning, and the MPU curriculum to provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding the interplay between these elements. The findings of this study hold the potential to inform educational practices and policies, promoting the continued evolution of blended learning methodologies in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Collaborative skills are integral to the success of individuals in the 21st century, and their development is particularly crucial within the context of blended learning environments. Blended learning combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning, providing a unique platform for cultivating collaborative skills. This literature review explores the developmental progression of collaborative skills in a blended learning context, focusing on students' experiences within the selected General Education courses.

BLENDED LEARNING AND COLLABORATIVE SKILLS

Blended learning environments offer a dynamic and flexible platform that facilitates collaborative learning experiences (Graham and Halverson, 2022). The combination of in-person interactions and online activities provides students with diverse opportunities to engage in collaborative tasks, fostering the development of

essential skills such as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The integration of digital tools and resources enhances the collaborative learning experience, making it essential to investigate how students perceive the development of their collaborative skills in this context.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF COLLABORATIVE SKILLS

Collaborative skills development is often viewed as a dynamic process that evolves. According to Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978), individuals progress through various stages of collaborative learning, moving from simple interactions to more complex and structured collaborations. Blended learning environments provide a unique setting for students to navigate these stages, as they engage in both face-to-face discussions and online collaborative activities (Garrison and Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Understanding the developmental progression of collaborative skills in a blended learning context is crucial for educators and instructional designers.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Students' experiences play a significant role in the effectiveness of blended learning experiences. Research suggests that students view collaborative activities positively in blended courses, emphasizing the importance of peer interactions and online discussions (Davies, Howell, & Petrie, 2010). Positive experiences are linked to increased engagement, motivation, and satisfaction, ultimately influencing the developmental trajectory of collaborative skills (Picciano, 2009). Exploring students' perspectives provides valuable insights into the factors that contribute to or hinder the progression of collaborative skills in a blended learning context.

GENERAL EDUCATION COURSES (MPU) IN MALAYSIA'S HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

Nik Liyana Mustapa and Sakinatul Raadiyah (2024) addressed that the implementation of Mata Pelajaran Umum (MPU) courses in Malaysian Institutions of Higher Learning highlights the conceptual framework, scope, and objectives of these courses, emphasizing their role in holistic student development. MPU courses, introduced as a structured initiative by the Ministry of Higher Education, aim to equip students with moral values, soft skills, and a broader understanding of Malaysian history and society. Studies indicate that these courses contribute positively to students' personal and intellectual growth, fostering communication skills, critical thinking, and national identity. Research by scholars such as Ruzaini Ijon et al. (2021) and Ng & Iswandi (2017) supports the relevance of MPU in bridging educational gaps and enhancing employability. Despite criticisms regarding course overload, findings suggest that MPU remains essential for producing well-rounded graduates in line with national education goals. However, continuous improvements in pedagogy and curriculum structuring are necessary to maximize their effectiveness and ensure alignment with contemporary educational needs.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the numerous benefits of blended learning for collaborative skill development, challenges exist. Issues such as technological barriers, unequal participation, and varying levels of digital literacy may hinder the optimal development of collaborative skills (Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013). However, these challenges also present opportunities for educators to design interventions and support mechanisms that address specific needs and enhance the overall collaborative learning experience.

The developmental progression of collaborative skills in a blended learning context is a multifaceted and dynamic process. The integration of face-to-face interactions and online components within General Education courses offers a unique environment for students to evolve through different stages of collaborative learning. By understanding student experiences, educators and researchers can gain valuable insights into the factors that influence the effectiveness of collaborative skill development in blended learning environments. This knowledge can inform instructional design, pedagogical strategies, and support mechanisms, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of collaborative skills among students.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the developmental progression of collaborative skills in a blended learning context, focusing on students' experiences within selected General Education courses. The study aims to provide insights into how collaborative skills evolve in the context of blended learning environments, shedding light on the effectiveness of such instructional methods in fostering collaborative abilities among students.

The research design employs a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews adapted from Vasodavan, DeWitt, and Alias (2022) with eight selected participants to gather in-depth insights into their experiences, challenges, and successes in developing collaboration from the selected general education subjects on the progression of their collaborative skills before and after they were involved in project-based assignments.

SAMPLING AND QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

We use stratified random sampling to ensure representation across the eight students across diverse disciplines, academic levels, and demographic characteristics. For analysis, we employ thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2007) on interview data to identify recurring themes related to students' experiences of collaborative skill development.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic Analysis (TA) is a widely used qualitative research method introduced by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2007). It is a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Unlike other methods such as grounded theory or discourse analysis, TA is flexible and can be applied across different theoretical frameworks.

Braun and Clarke propose a systematic yet flexible six-step process:

1. Familiarization with Data
 - Researchers immerse themselves in the data by reading and re-reading transcripts, notes, or documents.
 - Initial thoughts and observations are noted.
 - The goal is to become deeply familiar with the content.
2. Generating Initial Codes
 - The data is systematically coded using short labels that capture meaningful segments.
 - Coding can be done manually or using software (e.g., NVivo, ATLAS.ti).
 - Codes can be semantic (explicit content) or latent (underlying meaning).
3. Searching for Themes
 - Codes are grouped into broader themes based on patterns within the data.
 - Themes capture significant patterns that provide insight into the research question.
 - This step often involves mind-mapping or clustering related codes.
4. Reviewing Themes
 - Themes are checked against the entire dataset to ensure they accurately represent the data.
 - Researchers refine, merge, or discard themes that do not hold enough meaningful data.
 - A thematic map or diagram is often created to visualize relationships between themes.
5. Defining and Naming Themes
 - Themes are given concise, informative names that reflect their essence.
 - A detailed analysis of each theme is developed, including how they relate to one another.
 - Subthemes can also be identified if necessary.
6. Writing the Report
 - The final analysis is written up with supporting quotations and examples from the data.
 - The report explains how themes were identified and interpreted.
 - The discussion connects findings to existing literature and research questions.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

We have obtained informed consent from all participants before data collection. We have ensured the anonymity of participants and treat all data with confidentiality.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The developmental progression of collaborative skills in the blended learning context was a dynamic and multifaceted process, as perceived by the students participating in the selected General Education course. Through a careful analysis of the qualitative data gathered from interviews, surveys, and reflective essays, several key themes emerged, illustrating the evolution of collaborative skills over the course duration.

1. Increased Comfort with Virtual Collaboration:

Students expressed a noticeable increase in comfort and proficiency in engaging in collaborative tasks within the online environment. Early in the course, some participants reported apprehension about the virtual setting, but as the semester progressed, they became more adept at utilizing online platforms, communicating effectively, and coordinating tasks with their peers.

S1: At the very beginning, I don't think that the group project is working since we are discussing everything online. But then, I feel it working now because tasks are more organized in Microsoft Team.

2. Enhanced Communication Skills:

Participants recognized a substantial improvement in their communication skills, both written and verbal. The asynchronous and synchronous online interactions prompted students to articulate their thoughts more clearly, express ideas succinctly, and provide constructive feedback to their peers. This improvement in communication skills was seen as valuable not only in the virtual context but also in face-to-face interactions.

S4: I enjoy working in the group more during the project rather than before this. I believe that after we did the project, my communication skills are improving.

S7: I am able to give feedback to my teammates when needed and I see this as improvement as before this I am very scared to give my opinion.

3. Development of Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving:

Collaborative activities in the blended learning format encouraged students to think critically and work collectively to solve complex problems. The ability to analyze information, synthesize ideas, and collectively arrive at solutions was a recurring theme in students' reflections. This development of critical thinking skills was attributed to the diverse perspectives brought to the table by team members.

S4: When we have a problem, we will solve it as a group. For example, during the time that we are looking for sponsors, we find it very difficult to start and we do not know how to do it. But soon after the discussion with the group, we came across a solution that benefits everyone.

S7: Everyone will have a different point of view and when we combine it, we get a good and wide perspective that will move us further.

4. Establishment of a Supportive Learning Community:

Many students highlighted the formation of a supportive and inclusive learning community as a significant outcome of collaborative activities. They emphasized the importance of creating an environment where all voices were heard, fostering a sense of belonging and collective responsibility for each other's learning.

S2: I enjoy this group project as I think we are able to support each other. I mean that everyone has their own role to make the project a success. Besides, the tutor always tells us to have ownership of the project and we can voice out anything that we feel necessary.

S5: My collaborative skills have improved before and after the project. I don't really like working in a group before this but I enjoy it more after I completed the project. Of course, there is a hiccup here and there but we manage to overcome it with discussion.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that a blended learning approach can effectively contribute to the developmental progression of collaborative skills among students in a General Education course. The integration of both online and face-to-face elements allowed for a diverse range of collaborative experiences, catering to various learning preferences and styles.

The observed increase in comfort with virtual collaboration aligns with the growing importance of digital literacy and remote teamwork skills in today's interconnected world. As the students navigated the challenges of online collaboration, they developed not only technical proficiency but also adaptability and resilience.

The enhancement of communication skills is a crucial outcome, transcending the immediate context of the course. The ability to articulate ideas effectively and provide constructive feedback is transferable to various personal and professional settings. The development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills further underscores the value of collaborative learning in cultivating higher-order cognitive abilities.

The establishment of a supportive learning community resonates with the socio-constructivist principles underpinning collaborative learning theories. The sense of community not only positively influenced academic outcomes but also contributed to students' overall well-being and motivation.

In conclusion, the developmental progression of collaborative skills in a blended learning context within the General Education course was marked by a transformative journey. The findings provide insights into the potential of blended learning to foster not only subject-specific knowledge but also essential skills that are increasingly vital in the rapidly evolving landscape of education and beyond. As institutions continue to explore innovative pedagogical approaches, the implications of this study may guide the design and implementation of effective blended learning experiences that promote collaborative skill development.

CONCLUSION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In conclusion, the exploration of collaborative skills development within the context of blended learning has provided valuable insights into the evolving landscape of education. The study focused on students' experiences of selected General Education courses, shedding light on the nuanced progression of collaborative skills in this innovative learning environment.

Throughout the developmental journey, it became evident that blended learning, with its combination of online and face-to-face elements, offers a unique platform for fostering collaborative skills. The findings suggest that students perceive blended learning as a facilitator for effective teamwork, communication, and shared problem-solving. The integration of digital tools and virtual collaboration spaces seems to play a pivotal role in enhancing students' ability to work collectively, transcending traditional boundaries of time and space.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of instructional design and pedagogical strategies in shaping the collaborative learning experience. Educators in blended learning contexts should strive to create a supportive and inclusive environment that encourages active participation, diverse perspectives, and equitable contributions. This requires thoughtful integration of both synchronous and asynchronous activities, allowing students to engage meaningfully with course content and each other.

As the educational landscape continues to evolve, the insights gained from this research contribute to the ongoing dialogue about effective teaching and learning practices. Recognizing the significance of collaborative skills not only as a desired outcome but also as an essential aspect of the learning process, educators can tailor their approaches to harness the full potential of blended learning environments.

In conclusion, the developmental progression of collaborative skills in a blended learning context is a dynamic and multifaceted journey, shaped by various factors such as technology, pedagogy, and student engagement. By

understanding and addressing these factors, educators can continue to refine their practices, ultimately preparing students for success in a collaborative and interconnected world.

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