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A Review of Academic Motivation and Student Engagement in Blended Learning within the Chinese Educational Context

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Abstract:
This review examines the academic motivation and student engagement within the blended learning environment in China. Blended learning in the Chinese context encompasses unique factors that shape its implementation. These characteristics are important in fostering academic motivation by catering to diverse learning needs. Student engagement is explored through the various dimensions enabled by blended learning. This review also examines the relationship between academic motivation and student engagement, highlighting that the motivational aspects inherent in blended learning contribute to sustained engagement and improved learning outcomes.

Keywords: academic motivation, student engagement, blended learning, Chinese education

1. Introduction

Blended learning, an educational approach combining face-to-face instruction with online learning, has gained attention in recent years especially in the post-pandemic era. This learning method offers flexibility and accessibility, addressing the various needs of students while enhancing their engagement and learning outcomes either in the online or physical classroom (Graham, 2013). The integration of digital tools and resources into traditional classroom settings provides opportunities for tailor-fit learning, fostering a more interactive and student-centered environment (Boelens et al., 2018). However, one critical factor influencing the effectiveness of blended learning is students' motivation to learn within this dual-mode framework.

In the Chinese curriculum, blended learning is viewed as a way to improve traditional teaching techniques by offering flexible and individualized learning opportunities. It answers the increased need for updated teaching that is consistent with China's education reform goals, which prioritize student-centered learning, creativity and critical thinking (Li & Wong, 2021). Blended learning in China is frequently adapted to meet a framework of the national curriculum. However, integrating digital platforms allows for more active learning and evaluation to increase students' learning skills (Zhu, 2020).

Academic motivation is an educational construct that encompasses different factors driving students to engage in educational activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to Kintu et al. (2017), motivation is a crucial factor in influencing student involvement, perseverance, and academic achievement in blended learning. Motivation might be even more important in blended learning, when students must manage both online and in-person learning settings. The link between motivation and engagement is further complicated by the asynchronous and autonomous character of online components, which demand greater

degrees of self-control and perseverance from students (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Another educational construct to be considered in blended learning is student engagement. Fredricks et al. (2004) define student engagement as the level of active participation in academic work, which encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects. Since it is seen to be one of the best measures of academic success and student retention, it is a primary subject of educational research (Trowler, 2010). The National Survey of Student Engagement (2007) defines student engagement as the amount of time and effort that students put into their classroom studies that lead to experiences and outcomes that constitute student success, and the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Blended Learning in the Chinese Educational Context

Blended learning, combining traditional classroom instruction with online learning components, has been widely adopted in China, especially in higher education (Zhu et al., 2020). Chinese educational institutions have increasingly implemented blended learning models to provide flexibility, encourage student autonomy, and improve learning outcomes (Wang et al., 2022). This shift has become more prominent with the rapid development of technology and the demand for more student-centered learning approaches. However, the effectiveness of blended learning largely depends on students' motivation, which plays a crucial role in how they engage with both online and offline elements of this educational format (Liu et al., 2021).

Due to the Chinese government's recognition of the value of technology-enhanced learning, a number of frameworks and regulations have been established to support blended learning (Wu et al., 2020). In an effort to increase student engagement and learning results, universities all across the nation have started using blended learning methods. In a research on the use of blended learning at a Chinese institution, for instance, Zhang and Zheng (2021) discovered that students' academic performance and motivation were greatly enhanced by integrating online materials with in-class activities.

Moreover, a trend toward integrating technology into early education has been reflected in the implementation of blended learning in elementary and secondary school settings (Zhang et al., 2022). According to Wang and Chen (2021), differentiated instruction was made easier by blended learning environments, which enabled teachers to meet the various learning requirements of their students. In an educational environment that is changing quickly and where traditional pedagogies may not be sufficient, this flexibility has become essential.

2.2. Features of Blended Learning

Blended learning is known for providing flexibility, encouraging learner autonomy, and utilizing digital resources to aid in the learning process. These characteristics are essential for producing dynamic and successful educational experiences in a variety of circumstances.

2.2.1. Flexibility

Blended learning's flexibility enables students to access learning materials, participate in conversations, and complete assessments at their own pace and convenience. This flexibility is especially useful for students who must balance academic work with other responsibilities, such as job or family obligations (Graham, 2013). According to Garrison and Kanuka (2004), the flexibility of blended learning not only makes education more accessible, but it also enables students to take charge of their learning by interacting

with knowledge in a way that works best for their specific schedule.

Blended learning environments fit a variety of learning methods and preferences, allowing students to revisit lectures, study instructional materials, and access additional resources as needed. This flexible learning strategy promotes deeper comprehension and retention of knowledge (Means et al., 2013). However, other studies warn that flexibility must be carefully designed to prevent overwhelming students with too much choice, which might lead to procrastination or disengagement (Broadbent & Poon, 2015).

2.2.2. Autonomy

Learner autonomy is another distinguishing feature of blended learning environments. This autonomy refers to students' greater responsibility for managing their own learning, which includes time management, goal planning, and self-assessment (Vaughan et al., 2013). In blended learning, students are frequently asked to engage in self-directed tasks such as completing online courses, participating in asynchronous conversations, and undertaking independent research. This change from teacher-centered to learner-centered education allows students to take an active role in their learning process (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

According to Liu et al. (2010), students in mixed learning settings report higher levels of intrinsic motivation and satisfaction when they have a sense of control over their learning activities. However, the level of autonomy must be proportionate to students' preparation for self-directed learning, as not all learners possess the required abilities for independent study (Broadbent & Poon, 2015).

2.2.3. Digital Tools

Utilization of digital technologies is essential for the establishment of mixed learning settings. These technologies include learning management systems, multimedia materials, online quizzes, and collaborative platforms like discussion boards and social media (Alammary et al., 2014). The incorporation of technology not only aids in the delivery of knowledge, but it also enables communication and cooperation among students and teachers.

Hrastinski's (2008) research emphasizes the usefulness of both synchronous and asynchronous digital technologies in mixed learning settings. Synchronous learning tools, such as video conferencing and live chats, enable real-time contact and feedback, whereas asynchronous resources, such as discussion forums and recorded lectures, allow learners to engage with information at their own speed.

2.3. Academic Motivation in Blended Learning

Academic motivation is essential for understanding students' behaviors and outcomes in blended learning environments. Intrinsic motivation refers to the internal drive to engage in an activity for its inherent satisfaction or interest, while extrinsic motivation involves external incentives such as grades, rewards, or teacher approval (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Both forms of motivation can significantly influence the learning experience and success of students in blended learning. However, they may function differently in the Chinese educational context due to cultural and systemic factors (Guo et al., 2021).

Intrinsic motivation is highly valued in blended learning, as it leads to deeper engagement and self-directed learning. Research indicates that students with higher levels of intrinsic motivation are more likely to benefit from the autonomy and flexibility provided by blended learning (Li et al., 2021). These students often take advantage of online resources to explore topics of interest, engage in self-paced learning, and develop critical thinking skills (Huang & Luo, 2020). However, studies also suggest that fostering intrinsic motivation in Chinese students can be challenging due to the traditionally exam-oriented and teacher-centered education system in China (Yan et al., 2019).

Cultural factors can also affect intrinsic motivation. Some researchers argue that Chinese students may initially struggle with the self-regulated aspects of blended learning because they are accustomed to receiving structured guidance from teachers (Cheng & Chau, 2016). Despite these challenges, when intrinsic motivation is effectively nurtured through meaningful tasks and personalized learning paths, it can lead to positive outcomes in blended learning settings (Zhang et al., 2022).

Extrinsic motivation plays a significant role in the educational experiences of students, often driven by external factors such as exams, grades, and parental expectations (Li et al., 2020). In the context of blended learning, extrinsic motivators can serve as powerful tools to encourage participation and completion of online tasks. For instance, students are often motivated to engage with the online components of blended learning when they are linked to graded assignments or assessments (Huang et al., 2021).

However, dependence on extrinsic motivators can undermine students' intrinsic motivation and lead to surface-level learning, where students focus on completing tasks for rewards rather than for genuine understanding (Lai & Chen, 2018). Therefore, the challenge for educators in China is to strike a balance between providing necessary extrinsic motivators and fostering a learning environment that encourages intrinsic motivation (Guo et al., 2021). This balance is particularly crucial in blended learning, where students are required to be more autonomous and self-regulated.

2.4. Student Engagement in Blended Learning

Through the combination of asynchronous and synchronous modes, blended learning can bring together various teaching and learning activities while facilitating differentiated and personalized instruction (Boelens et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2018). The benefits of synchronous and asynchronous classes aims at extending thinking and discourse over time and space and is specifically directed to enhancing student engagement (Vaughan et al., 2013). Therefore, numerous authors identify blended learning as a fertile ground to optimize student engagement (Halverson & Graham, 2019; Taylor et al., 2018).

Halverson et al. (2014) mentioned that engagement was often used in blended learning publications although it was rarely defined. Nevertheless, these authors and other recent literature reviews indicated that there were few studies focusing specifically on student engagement in blended learning (Halverson et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2017; Raes et al., 2019). Most existing publications also investigated single courses (Raes et al., 2020), specific activities (Foogooa & Ferdinand-James, 2017), or aspects of student engagement (Berry, 2019). Consequently, given the potential for enhanced student engagement in blended learning, numerous authors have called for pursuing research on student engagement in blended learning (Manwaring et al., 2017).

2.5. Academic Motivation and Student Engagement

Understanding the relationship between academic motivation and student engagement is essential for developing effective educational strategies that enhance student learning experiences.

Motivation is a critical foundation for student engagement, according to several studies. Higher levels of engagement result from motivated students' increased propensity to devote time and energy to their academic pursuits (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As students are more likely to get fully immersed in the subject matter, actively seek out difficulties, and exhibit a sincere interest in learning, intrinsic motivation - the act of doing activities for their own sake - has been associated with deeper cognitive engagement (Reeve, 2012).

On the other hand, extrinsic motivation - doing things to get rewards from outside sources or stay out of

trouble - can also affect engagement, but in different ways. According to Martin and Dowson (2009), an excessive dependence on external incentives could diminish intrinsic drive and result in surface-level involvement, even if extrinsic motivation can initially establish interest, especially in organized learning situations. In order to encourage student engagement, teachers must strike a balance between extrinsic and intrinsic motivating techniques (Dweck, 2017).

A number of motivational theories provide light on the connection between engagement and motivation. According to Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, people have basic psychological demands for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Students' intrinsic motivation is increased when these demands are satisfied, and this leads to increased engagement with educational activities. Also, according to the Achievement Goal Theory, students' motivation and engagement levels are influenced by the kinds of objectives they pursue. Compared to students with performance objectives, which prioritize grades and peer comparison, students with mastery goals—which are centered on personal development and understanding—tend to show higher levels of intrinsic motivation and engagement (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). This emphasizes how crucial it is to foster a growth attitude in learning environments to increase motivation and engagement.

3. Conclusion

This literature review on academic motivation and student engagement emphasizes how important their relationship in determining how students learn in a blended learning modality. Student engagement levels are greatly impacted by contextual elements, such as teaching methods, classroom dynamics, and cultural influences, particularly in the setting of Chinese education. To increase engagement and academic achievement, effective teaching strategies should balance extrinsic and intrinsic motivators, establish supportive learning environments, and consider the various needs and backgrounds of students.

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