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Lived Experiences of Teachers & Students on Blended Learning

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Abstract: This study explores the implementation of blended learning in Henan Province, China, through the lived experiences of teachers and students. Drawing on a phenomenological approach using semi-structured interviews, the research investigates 1) the current status of blended learning implementation, 2) teachers' experiences with blended learning, and 3) students' perspectives on the impact of blended learning on student outcomes. The study aims to identify best practices and culturally-sensitive strategies for optimizing blended learning in the province. Literature review reveals the transformative potential of blended learning, alongside considerations for cultural context, technology integration, and effective teacher training. The research employs thematic analysis to draw insights from interviews with 10 teachers and 20 students at two selected universities in Henan, China. Addressing critical gaps in geographic context, this study holds the potential to inform and enhance blended learning practices in Henan Province and foster deeper learning experiences for both teachers and students.

Keywords: Blended Learning; Lived Experiences; Cultural Sensitivity; Semi-structured Interviews; Henan Province; Teachers; College Students.

1. Introduction

The integration of technology in education has brought in a transformative era that challenges traditional teaching methodologies and giving rise to innovative approaches such as blended learning. This educational model, characterized by the strategic integration of face-to-face instruction and online learning activities, has garnered global attention for its potential to revolutionize the learning experience (Hrastinski, 2019; Smith & Hill, 2019). However, the implementation and impact of blended learning are complex and multifaceted. It is influenced by diverse factors ranging from theoretical foundations to cultural, economic, and technological considerations. This research embarks on a comprehensive exploration of blended learning and focuses specifically on the lived experiences of teachers and students in Henan Province, China. Situating this study within the context of Henan is pivotal, given the distinctive cultural tapestry of the region, shaped by Confucian values, economic nuances, and technological dynamics. The study seeks to uncover the intricacies of blended learning in this locale, addressing critical gaps in existing knowledge and offering practical insights to enhance its effectiveness.

Blended learning is grounded on various established theoretical frameworks such as constructivism, learner-centeredness, and social learning theory (Cronjé, 2022; Kumar et al., 2021) [1]. These theories form the foundation upon which blended learning emerges and develops. They foster deep learning, critical thinking, and self-directed skills. As this approach gains prominence on a global scale, understanding its theoretical frameworks becomes crucial especially when explored into the context of Henan Province.

Blended learning manifests through diverse pedagogical approaches. Each possesses unique strengths and applications. From the flipped classroom to project-based and problem-based learning, these approaches underscore the adaptability and versatility of blended learning (Nedeva et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the success of these implementations is contingent upon navigating the network of cultural, economic, and technological factors. The unique cultural context of Henan, as characterized by Confucian values emphasizing respect for authority and collectivism, adds a layer of complexity to the integration of blended learning (Chen & Zhu, 2018; Lee, 2019). Furthermore, economic disparities between urban and rural areas emphasize the imperative for inclusive infrastructure development and resource distribution (Wu et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2021). The evolving technological landscape requires continuous professional development for educators, ensuring they adeptly integrate emerging tools into their pedagogical practices (Turnbull et al., 2021).

While blended learning offers an array of benefits, challenges such as the digital divide, unequal access to technology, and the need for ongoing teacher support cannot be overlooked (Kumar et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges holistically is essential to laying the foundation for sustainable and impactful blended learning models in Henan Province. China's rich educational history, which is derived richly from teacher-centered cultural model, encounters a tessellation with blended learning (Chen & Zhu, 2018). Striking a balance between the active, autonomous nature of blended learning and deeply ingrained cultural values is pivotal. Moreover, the country's technological progress and the regional disparities demands targeted initiatives for inclusive and effective implementation (Song et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2022).

China embraces diverse models of blended learning, from the flipped classroom to project-based learning and online platforms (Yang & Chen, 2020; Leung et al., 2019). However, a measured and contextually appropriate approach is crucial to avoid oversimplification and align blended learning with the specific needs of Henan's educators and students. Despite a rich global body of literature on blended learning, a geographical gap is evident, particularly concerning Henan Province. This study aims to bridge this void by examining the interplay between theoretical frameworks and cultural

contexts, tailoring teacher training to local needs, and developing culturally relevant assessment methods. Addressing these geographically specific research gaps holds the promise of unlocking the full potential of blended learning in Henan, ensuring its effectiveness, cultural sensitivity, and enduring impact on the educational landscape of the province.

2. Study Objectives

2.1. General Objective

This research aims to investigate the lived experiences of teachers and students engaging with blended learning in Henan Province, China. The primary aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current status of the implementation, challenges, and impacts associated with the implementation of blended learning in the province. By addressing critical gaps in existing knowledge, this study seeks to contribute practical insights to enhance the effectiveness of blended learning in Henan.

2.2. Specific Objectives

A. To describe the current status of the implementation of blended learning in Henan Province, China.

B. To investigate teachers' lived experiences on blended learning;

C.To explore students' lived experiences on blended learning

3. Review of Related Literature

3.1. Blended Learning in General

Blended learning, the strategic integration of face-to-face instruction with online learning activities, has ignited a paradigm shift in educational landscapes worldwide (Hrastinski, 2019; Smith & Hill, 2019). This methodology transcends geographical constraints and empowers learners to progress at their own pace, which caters to diverse learning styles and fostering personalized learning experiences (Kumar et al., 2021). Understanding its nuances and implications within the Chinese context, particularly in Henan Province, necessitates a deeper dive into its theoretical foundations, pedagogical applications, and interplay with cultural, economic, and technological factors.

1) Theoretical Foundations

Blended learning is based on established pedagogical theories. Constructivism, which emphasizes active knowledge construction through hands-on experiences, aligns perfectly with the blended approach where online resources and interactive activities scaffold meaningful learning (Cronjé, 2022). Additionally, learner-centeredness, which advocates for tailoring learning activities to individual needs and preferences, finds resonance in blended environments where diverse online resources cater to a range of learning styles and abilities (Kumar et al., 2021). Furthermore, social learning theory underscores the potential of blended learning to cultivate collaborative learning through online forums, group projects, and virtual discussions (Dakhi et al., 2020). These theoretical frameworks, woven together, create a fertile ground for fostering deep learning, critical thinking, and self-directed learning skills within the blended ecosystem.

2) Pedagogical Implementations

Blended learning manifests in various pedagogical approaches, each with its distinct strengths and applications. The flipped classroom, where lectures are delivered asynchronously online and class time is dedicated to application and interaction, exemplifies how technology can enhance in-person learning (Nedeva et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2021). Project-based learning, which leverages online resources for research and collaboration, further empowers learners to engage in authentic problem-solving activities (Kumar et al., 2021). Problem-based learning, where challenges are tackled through a blend of online research, group discussions, and presentations, fosters critical thinking and communication skills within blended environments (Chen et al., 2020). These, alongside countless other approaches, demonstrate the versatility of blended learning and its potential to transform traditional pedagogy into an engaging and interactive experience.

3) Cultural, Economic, and Technological Considerations

The success of blended learning in Henan Province may hinge on careful consideration of the unique cultural, economic, and technological factors at play. The cultural context in China, with its emphasis on respect for authority and collectivism, necessitates the design of blended learning experiences that maintain respect for traditional teaching methods while integrating technology seamlessly (Lee, 2019; Cheng & Ding, 2021). Economic disparities across rural and urban areas may create unequal access to technology (Wu et al., 2020). This emphasizes the need for infrastructure development and equitable distribution of resources (Kumar et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2020). Additionally, the evolving technological landscape requires continuous professional development for educators to integrate emerging tools and platforms effectively (Turnbull et al., 2021). Understanding these intricate factors and their interplay is crucial for designing culturally appropriate, economically inclusive, and technologically sound blended learning models in Henan Province.

4) Challenges and the Path Forward

While the benefits of blended learning are well-documented, challenges cannot be ignored. The digital divide, unequal access to technology, and potential for distraction necessitate efforts to bridge inequalities and foster responsible technology use (Kumar et al., 2021). Effective implementation requires addressing teacher training needs and providing ongoing support for navigating the complexities of this evolving approach (Zhang et al., 2022). Moreover, ensuring equitable participation and promoting meaningful interaction within the blended environment demands careful planning and intentional strategies (Zhang et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges holistically paves the way for building sustainable and impactful blended learning models in Henan Province.

3.2. Blended Learning in China

China's educational system is anchored in a long-standing legacy of teacher-centered pedagogy. As such, it finds itself at a crossroads with blended learning. While this approach promotes active learning and student autonomy, its implementation must navigate deeply ingrained cultural values like respect for authority and collectivism (Chen & Zhu, 2018; Yao, 2019). Striking a balance is key, which is by fostering engagement through collaborative online activities while maintaining teacher guidance within blended environments (Yao, 2019). For instance, incorporating peer review forums for online content can leverage collectivism without disregarding respect for authority through teacher

facilitation and feedback mechanisms (Trivedi et al., 2023).

China's impressive technological progress is accompanied by disparities in access. This creates a potential "digital divide" that can exacerbate educational inequalities (Kumar et al., 2021). While urban areas boast sophisticated e-learning infrastructure, rural regions in China struggle with unreliable internet and technology (Song et al., 2019). Bridging this divide requires targeted initiatives on multiple fronts including infrastructure development, mobile learning solutions designed for low-bandwidth environments, and equitable resource allocation (Song et al., 2019). Additionally, initiatives like teacher training in mobile learning methodologies and offline alternatives can ensure inclusivity regardless of access levels. Effective implementation of blended learning is contingent to empowering educators through comprehensive professional development (Zhang et al., 2022). Equipping teachers with pedagogical skills to design engaging online activities, manage blended environments, and integrate technology smoothly is crucial (Zhang et al., 2022). This goes beyond basic technology training and covers areas such as cultivating student-centered online discussions, crafting interactive learning modules, and leveraging data-driven insights to refine their practice (Rasheed et al., 2020). Moreoever, cultivating a supportive community of practice among educators can facilitate knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer learning (Zhang, 2020).

1) Common Models of Blending Learning in China

China adopts different kinds of blended learning models. One of the most popular is the flipped classroom model, which is commonly utilized for delivering instructions for English, mathematics, and the sciences (Yang & Chen, 2020; Cai et al., 2019). Through this model, Chinese students learn various concepts through online pre-recorded lectures or interactive modules while the classroom time is solely dedicated to practical applications of knowledge gained from the theories (Xu et al., 2019). These are carried out through face-to-face discussions, problem solving activities, and collaborative projects (Xu et al., 2019). Meanwhile, certain universities in China, including Wuhan University and Tsinghua University, use project-based learning model wherein students work on real-world projects that often involve online research, virtual collaborative tools, and presentations that are both done online and offline (Leung et al., 2019). In recent years, China has also introduced several online learning platforms used that offer pre-recorded lectures, interactive exercises, and online assessments. Some of these tools include WeChat (Zheng et al., 2021) and XuetangX (an MOOC platform) (Jiang & Ma, 2021;).

2) A Measured Approach to Success

While blended learning holds immense potentials, oversimplification and unrealistic expectations can spoil its success. Therefore, it is important to note that potential challenges like ensuring equitable participation, contending with digital distractions, and cultivating self-regulated learning is critical in blended learning implementation (Kumar et al., 2021). Evaluating the effectiveness of blended learning models in Henan Province requires adopting robust research methodologies that take into account factors such as student engagement, learning outcomes, digital literacy development, and cultural acceptance. Data-driven insights should inform continuous improvement and adaptation to ensure that blended learning evolves to meet the constantly changing needs of educators and students in this Chinese region.

3.3. Teachers' Lived Experiences on Blended Learning

Many teachers report positive experiences with blended learning. They highlight increased student engagement, deeper learning, and improved self-management skills (Sahni, 2019). In South Korea, a study found that English language teachers adopted blended learning for its potential to personalize learning and enhance student autonomy (Kim & Yoon, 2021). Nevertheless, blended learning has its own share of downfall. Adapting to a new method, managing technology, and ensuring equitable access can be daunting.

1) Subject-Specific Experiences

Blended learning thrives in language acquisition, combining online vocabulary practice with in-person conversation activities. Studies in Spain and Brazil report teacher satisfaction with improved student motivation and communication skills (Rivera, 2019; Finardi, 2019). In terms of sciences and mathematics, online simulations and visualizations can enrich these subjects. However, teachers in the US emphasize the importance of balancing screen time with hands-on activities and addressing individual learning needs

2) Common Threads and Emerging Themes

Effective implementation requires ongoing training in technology integration, pedagogy, and classroom management (Anthony et al., 2022). A study in the Philippines emphasize the importance of collaborative learning communities and peer support for teachers transitioning to blended learning (Villanueva et al., 2023). Successful blended learning environments foster collaboration among teachers, students, and families, as highlighted in the study of McKenzie et al. (2022). Initiatives like online learning communities and parent workshops can bridge the gap and support learning beyond the classroom (McKenzie et al., 2022). Therefore, addressing the digital divide and ensuring all students have access to technology and effective support is crucial. A study in Jordan underscores the need for targeted interventions and resource allocation to achieve equitable access (Abusalim et al., 2020).

3.4. Students' Lived Experiences on Blended Learning

Across diverse contexts, students report increased engagement owing to interactive online activities, personalized learning paths, and opportunities for self-directed exploration (Sahni, 2019). A study in Turkey highlighted student enthusiasm for gamified learning modules in science (Can & Dursun, 2019). Technical difficulties, distractions, and navigating the online environment can lead to frustration (Kumar et al., 2021). In India, some students expressed concerns about feeling overwhelmed by the digital workload, while a study in India revealed anxieties about inequitable access to technology (Kumar et al., 2021). Furthermore, cultural contexts shape student experiences (Zhang et al., 2022; Al-Maroof et al., 2021). In the Philippines, a study found blended learning fostered collaboration and critical thinking in social studies (Cunningham, 2021), while a study revealed challenges adapting to student-centered online discussions due to cultural norms emphasizing respect for authority (Magbanua, 2023). In terms of language learning, students in China appreciate the flexibility and accessibility of online language learning platforms, allowing them to practice vocabulary and

grammar at their own pace (Li et al., 2022).

For math and sciences, interactive simulations and visualizations in blended science classes can make abstract concepts more engaging (Heilporn et al., 2021). However, some students also emphasized the importance of hands-on experiments and teacher guidance alongside online activities (Kumar et al., 2021). Furthermore, online collaboration tools can foster global connections and critical thinking skills. Some students appreciate the opportunity to connect with peers from different cultures, but also highlight the need for strategies to combat online bias and ensure everyone feels comfortable participating (Lim et al., 2020).

3.5. Research Gap

Admittedly, there seems to be a rich body of literature investigating lived experiences of teachers and students on blended learning. Thus, there is no issue in terms of the sufficiency of literature and studies tackling blended learning; nevertheless, the current body of literature and studies appears to be lacking in terms of geographical contexts. While blended learning boasts global presence, its implementation and impact vary significantly across regions, and in this case, China. This study, focusing on Henan Province, China, aims to address crucial gaps in geographical context. Examining teachers' and students' lived experiences through a culturally sensitive lens will inform best practices for blended learning in Henan.

After carefully reviewing the existing literature on the subject, key research gaps are formulated: First, unveiling the interplay between established theoretical frameworks and the unique cultural fabric of Henan, considering Confucian values and their influence on blended learning experiences. Second, tailoring teacher training and support to address specific needs and challenges faced by educators in Henan Province to ensure effective technology integration, classroom management, and ongoing support within the local context. Third, developing culturally appropriate assessment methods to measure the unique learning outcomes fostered by blended learning in Henan, aligning with local learning goals and cultural nuances. By addressing these geographically specific research gaps, this study holds the potential to unlock the full potential of blended learning in Henan, ensuring its effectiveness, cultural sensitivity, and long-term impact within the unique tapestry of the province's educational landscape.

4. Methods

This study will adopt a qualitative research method, specifically a phenomenological method. Primarily, this method shall use a researcher-developed interview questionnaire containing open-ended questions to collect qualitative data from the participants. It aims to capture the lived yet subjective experiences of the participants on blended learning.

4.1. Study Design and Locale

The interview method will obtain data through a question-and-answer between the researcher and the participant. The researcher will use a semi-structured interview questionnaire and will involve a total of 10 teachers and 20 students who will be selected from the two representative universities for interview. As such, there will be 30 participants for the interviews, which ensures data saturation. According to Braun & Clarke (2016), a qualitative study needs at least 12 participants in order to reach data saturation. The interview method will be used to understand students' and teachers' lived experiences on blending learning. The interview questionnaire will first be validated through a consultation with three (3) experts in the subject. These experts should demonstrate expertise in the field related to the subject under investigation, which includes expertise in non-traditional teaching methods, curriculum design, educational management, etc. The questionnaire will then be modified, changed, or improved based on their comments or feedbacks. Furthermore, considering that the participants will be respondents, the researcher will translate the questionnaire in the most contextually-accurate translation to ensure that no important meanings or nuances are omitted. Moreoever, participants will answer in their native language, most particularly in Chinese, and subsequently will be translated to English by the researcher.

According to the situation of the interview, the interview time is 20 minutes to 2 hours, because the interview time is too long and the information is too large, which will affect the disgust of the interviewee; while the interview time is too short, and the answer to all the interview questions cannot be collected.

The risk may be that during the interview process, the school or individual cannot be interviewed due to unexpected or irresistible factors, such as earthquake, typhoon, resignation, stressful events, etc. If this happens, adjustments will be made in due course.

The beneficiaries of this research will be students, teachers and schools. This study will address key gaps in the geographical context, inform and enhance blended learning practices in Henan Province, and promote deeper learning experiences for teachers and students, as well as promote high quality and high-level development in schools.

In order to ensure data validity, the researcher will utilize a number of mechanisms that includes: (1) audit trail, which will detail the research process from the planning to data collection and may include the recruitment methods, interview protocols, data analysis, and reflexivity; (2) member check, which involves sharing the research data and their corresponding interpretations with the participants who provided them to give them the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of the data and their interpretation.

4.2. Study Participants

4.2.1. Sample Size and Sampling

The study participants of this research are composed of two groups: (1) teachers and (2) students at two selected universities in the Henan Province. The participants will be meticulously chosen to represent distinct academic disciplines and educational tiers that will ensure a multifaceted perspective on blended learning. Teachers are composed of educators across different departments. A sub-stratum may be included to cater diversity in teaching experiences in terms of tenure. The college students are composed of individuals actively enrolled at two of the higher education institutions in Henan Province. They are selected from various academic majors and academic levels. The quota sample is ten (10) teachers and 20 students from two higher education institutions in the province of Henan.

The selection of teachers and students in this paper is carried out by the quota sampling method. A total of 10 teachers and 20 students were selected.

Teachers: Ten (10) teachers from two representative

universities were selected for interviews. When selecting teachers, teachers of different ages, genders, professional titles, colleges, and educational backgrounds are selected. Both male and female teachers of different genders are guaranteed to be covered; teachers of different ages are guaranteed to be 45-60 years old, 30-45 years old, and 20-30 years old are covered; professors, associate professors, and lecturers of different titles are guaranteed to be covered; liberal arts, science, and engineering are guaranteed to be covered by different colleges. Teachers with different education backgrounds are guaranteed to cover Ph. D., master's, and undergraduates so that the sample distribution is more balanced and can meet the overall survey requirements.

Students: Twenty (20) students from two universities were selected for interview. First, the students of the two schools are classified (gender, year level, department) to determine the proportion of students in each category in the overall population. Then, a certain number of students are selected in each category by using chance sampling. Ensure that students of different genders are covered; ensure that freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors are covered; ensure that liberal arts, science, and engineering colleges in both institutions are covered; ensure that students from rural and urban areas are covered; ensure that student's grade from excellent, good and unqualified students are covered.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are fundamental in exploring the lived experiences of teachers and students in blended learning in Henan Province, China. The study prioritizes confidentiality, privacy, and informed consent. Detailed information about research objectives, procedures, and potential outcomes will be provided to participants, ensuring voluntary and informed participation. Collected data will be treated with utmost confidentiality, with identifiers removed to safeguard participant anonymity. Cultural sensitivity will be maintained, respecting local norms and values in Henan Province. Ethical approval will be sought from relevant institutional review boards to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines and standards. Before a participant is included into the participants' list, and prior to the conduct of the interviews, they will be informed that the researcher will carry out audio-recording and note-taking in order to ensure accurate transcription of responses. If the participants do not feel comfortable of this part of the interview process, they have the freedom to opt out of the study.

In regards to collected data, aside from removing identifiers of the identities of the participants and using pseudonyms, all notes on qualitative data will be stored in a secured steel cabinet with a padlock. Furthermore, transcribed data, which also underwent member checking, will be stored digitally in a password-protected Google Drive account. Only the researcher will have access to this account. One year after the data collection process, the stored data will be deleted permanently. Notes on the responses of the participants will also be torn or destroyed completely.

5. Conclusion

Given the qualitative nature of this study, the analysis will primarily involve thematic analysis of the gathered qualitative data. Descriptive statistics will not be employed since the focus is on exploring the nuances and meanings embedded in participants' narratives.

Thematic Analysis. After the collection of data, the researcher will transcribe responses from the participants. To ensure that these transcribed data are accurate and reflect the opinions and insights of the participants, repeated readings of interviews, audit trail, and member checking will be employed by asking participants to check and review the transcripts and make corrections, revisions, or adjustments to make the data more accurate and reflecting of their opinions. Then, the researcher will identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the qualitative data obtained from the interview. This process will involve coding and categorizing data to uncover recurrent themes related to e-learning pedagogies. and member checking will aid in familiarizing with the data. Open coding will follow, allowing for the identification and labeling of patterns and concepts. Subsequently, axial coding will organize these codes into broader categories and explore their relationships. Finally, selective coding will refine and finalize core themes that emerge as significant across the dataset. This interpretive approach captures the nuanced meaning embedded in the qualitative data.

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