

The Attitudes of Social Work Students towards the Efficacy of Applying Blended Education

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Abstract:

The current study aims at identifying students' attitudes towards blended education in achieving theoretical knowledge in addition to practice skills for the casework. It also tends to determine the benefits of applying blended learning. This study is a quantitative research and uses a measure of social service assessing students' attitudes toward the effectiveness of blended learning application. The study has taken place at the Higher Institute of Social Service in Alexandria, and the study sample consists of 600 male and female students. The results of the study show that there are differences between male and female attitudes in using blended education in achieving theoretical knowledge and in acquiring practical skills in favor of females. The study also confirms the existence of differences between rural and urban attitudes regarding the use of blended education in gaining theoretical knowledge as well as in developing practical skills for the benefit of urban students. Moreover, the study stresses that there are many obstacles students face in taking advantage of blended learning.

Key word: attitudes, efficacy, blended education, professional practice skills

Introduction:

The recent developments and the massive changes in the labor market are reflected upon the teaching processes and strategies in high education stages moving from traditional teaching methods to methods that are more suitable to students' mindsets meeting their needs and achieving performance effectively and efficiently and the targeted learning outcomes. As a result, it has become necessary to search for teaching strategies that can help to raise students' attention and enable them to participate in the teaching situation and engage them in thinking about what they learn; thus, this results in acquiring information and using them in solving problems (Kelada, 2009).

Electronic learning is done through educational environments of both the educator and the learner providing limitless and continuous communication. The electronic learning environments refer to "a system that includes providing a good content and preparing a proper interactive interface that include proper tools for presenting the content and achieve the interaction." (Saleh, 2005, p. 59).

Many forms and types of electronic education including blended learning (BL) which has become the focus of many educators and academics as Smith (2016) referred that blended learning focuses on providing learning in an interactive flexible manner through many variable and interesting methods that help finding learning environments suitable for the learners.

Blended learning emerged as a new method of learning combining the traditional face-to-face teaching methods with the remote learning through the virtual educational environment with its features and properties. No doubt that each method has its special characteristics, both positive and negative ones, as well as its needs. Blended learning includes the best characteristics that meet learners' features and the learning objectives targeted by the end of the education semester. Therefore, the best qualities of both traditional learning and remote learning are blended and, thus, the term "blended" has emerged as a result of the integration between both learning methods. (Hashem, 2017).

The blended learning strategy has many qualities and benefits, according to Abdul Basset (2007) and Salama (2006), include the education process and outcome quality. It does not tend to deprive the learner from the fun of communication with peers and teachers, but rather it attempts to make use of the technological advances in the design and application, decrease learning and training costs, and enhance the ability to reach knowledge in any time and place."

Several local, Arabic and foreign studies and research have proved the significance and efficacy of blended learning in the learning-teaching process, improving learners' skills and academic achievement, as well as, their attitudes towards learning and learning material (Melton, Graf & Chopak-Foss, 2009; Vallée, Blacher, Cariou & Sorbets, 2020; Ahmed, 2010).

The research of both Alfiqi (2012) and Mohamed (2017) has concluded the influence of the blended learning in developing the cognitive achievement and skill performance of students at different stages. In addition, Aly (2012) refers to the effectiveness of a program based on blended learning in increasing achievement and creative thinking in Math, and the works of Radzimski, Leung, Sargent & Prat (2021) agree with that. The study of Almasry (2012) confirms the efficacy of using the blended electronic learning in teaching an English program, and Klimova (2021), Pikhart & Klimova (2019), and El-Maghraby (2021) agree with that.

According to Vo, Zhu & Diep (2020), a significant improvement in students' performance in blended learning programs has been noticed. Stimulating learning and self-efficacy as well as blended learning has a major impact on the achievement of high-school students (Rafiola, Setyosari, Radjah & Ramli, 2020).

Shehab (2020) Referred to the significance of applying the blended learning and the necessity to hold training programs for science teachers to increase their awareness of the efficacy of applying the blended learning.

Also Abdel-Haq (2021) refers to the importance of providing practitioners and researchers with a comprehensive framework that identifies the basic features and the reasonable reasons to apply blended learning. The research of Bruggeman et al. (2020) also indicates the features of the teachers which are conclusive in undertaking blended learning in high education according to the experts. They present two sets of features of blended learning teachers; seven adaptive features such as recognizing the educational need for change or linking techniques to learning processes in a creative manner and four non-adaptive features such as the need for a clear understanding of blended learning or for the worry about the technology's implications.

Previous studies have shown that blended or hybrid learning has many qualities in improving academic achievement and providing students at different stages with many skills .The studies have also confirmed the necessity of training educators in undertaking the blended learning programs to achieve the desired efficacy.

Several educational institutions in different countries adopted the application of the blended learning strategies. In response to the instructions of the Egyptian Ministry of High Education to apply the hybrid (i.e. blended) learning, all subjects, including the subject of the practice skills of casework method, have been taught to senior students of High Institution of Social Work.

Accordingly, the researcher in this research seeks to confirm the efficacy of blended learning in achieving the academic content's objectives of the subject of professional practice of casework method. The research problem can be summed as follows: What are the attitudes of students towards the theoretical and scientific benefits of the process of teaching the curriculum through blended learning in terms of increasing cognitive achievement and developing the skills of professional practice of casework method?

Study Significance:

1. Corresponding to the Egyptian Ministry of High Education's instructions and recommendations regarding blended (i.e. hybrid) learning in education.

2. A response to the international and local recommendations to apply modern teaching techniques in teaching as well as the recommendations of studies and conferences
3. Working on providing the students with the skills required for merging technology in education
4. Participating in the introduction of a new mechanism that enables communication between the staff and students on one hand and on the other hand among the students in order to hold more conversation and discussions
5. Upgrading the students' cognitive achievement and developing the skills of professional practice of case work method
6. Identifying the blended learning ability to achieve the educational content objective

The study's objectives:

The current study aims at identifying the following:

1. Students' attitudes towards blended education in achieving theoretical knowledge
2. Students' attitudes towards blended learning in enhancing practice skills
3. The obstacles confronted by the students in benefitting from the application of blended learning and attempting to overcome them

Study hypotheses:

1. There are differences between male and female attitudes about the use of blended education in achieving theoretical knowledge.
2. There are differences between male and female attitudes in relation to the use of blended learning to develop practice skills.
3. There are differences between rural and urban attitudes in terms of the use of blended learning in achieving theoretical knowledge.
4. There are differences between rural and urban attitudes about the use of blended learning to achieve practice skills.
5. It is to be expected that there will be obstacles among students in using the blended learning.

The study's concepts:

1. Attitudes: An attitude is defined as “ a state of mental disposition that creates a dynamic impact on the individual’s response that enable them to make the right decisions whether by acceptance or decline in the situations and problems they face or it is an organization of the believes that enable a person to select his/ her favorite response.”(Al-laqany & Algamel, 2003).

An attitude is defined as an acquired relatively- stable disposition of people which determines the individual’s response to certain things, ideas or persons.(Waly & Mohamed, 2004, p. 141).An attitude includes the main subjects in examining situations, the power of situation, the change in situations, individual’s behavior and the relations between situations and behavior (Kahle & Valette-Florence, 2012; Minton & Khale, 2014).

The researcher defines the attitudes in terms of the current study as: the responses of the sample’s individuals, i.e. senior male and female students in the High institution of Social Work, to the items of the attitude scale designed for this study by acceptance, decline or neutral response.

2. Blended Learning:

It has many other names such as Blended Learning Mixed Learning, Dual Learning, Integrated Learning, and Hybrid Learning. It is defined as one of the forms of learning or teaching in which the e-learning is merged with traditional class education within one framework: E-learning tools such as computers and networks, computer labs and smart classes are used, and the students and teachers also meet face-to-face from time to time (Zeitoun, 2005).

The blended learning model is a means of merging face-to-face teaching in school classes with virtual online classes environment (Doering, 2006; Ferdig, Cavanaugh & Freidhoff, 2012). In other words, blended learning includes merging activities in different environments including face-to-face teaching and e-learning with its special steps (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

Blended learning is generally defined as a mix of strengths and qualities of face-to-face learning activities in the class and online learning to achieve more convenient benefits.(Stain & Graham, 2014) Blended learning is also used in professional development and training (Lothridge, Fox & Fynan, 2013).

As for the purpose of the current study, the researcher defines blended learning as an education-learning strategy that depends, in introducing the content, on merging the use of modern education

technology (i.e. remote learning) and the traditional methods (i.e. face-to-face lectures) in order to find an attractive and interactive education-learning environment to achieve the targeted educational objectives in a better manner.

3. Professional Practice Skills:

The Skill refers to “[a] type of a mastered performance directed to achieving a certain simple or complex work or mission and it consists of a series of works, behaviors or motions performed by the learner in a speedy manner and with the least effort and cost and in the shortest time.”(Zeitoun & Al- Abdullah, 2008, pp. 22-23).

Professional practice is defined as practical application of the theoretical hypotheses and it is a means of testing the validity of such hypotheses, so the practice is the sound scale of what is possible or not.(Badawi, 1993, p. 323) It is also defined as using information, training and professional skills, as well as values, moral and methods of professional social work in order to offer social work for the clients(Assukary, 2000, p. 410).

The professional practice of social work is the professional roles undertaken by the social workers as a practical application of the theoretical knowledge to test their validity as a convenient scale of such validity or to reach new knowledge to achieve the pre-set professional practice(Asrougi, 2008, p. 55).

One of the purposes of this research is that the researcher defines the professional practice skills as social work students’ ability to understand the professional practice skills for serving casework and to apply them in practice.

4. Efficacy:

It is defined as “the ability to affect and achieve goals to reach the desired results at maximum limit.”(Zeitoun, 2002). It is also defined as the ability to achieve the desired results according to the previously set standards (Atayb, 2010).

For the purpose of the present study, the researcher defines the efficacy as: the effect of blended learning on students and achieving the desired objectives of teaching the professional practice skills program of casework method both theoretically and practically.

The study theoretical bases: many attempts were made to reach a consistent theory that explains the attitudes forming and acquiring process, including:

1. Learning theory: Learning theories mainly focus on the relation between certain stimuli and certain responses resulting there from.

They also analyze the human behavior into types, habits and responses issued basically on a random response that was repeated and then reinforced (Alkindary, 1995, p. 342). These include conditional theories and their role in forming attitudes and this theory focuses on incentive, motivation, stimulus, response and habit. Pavlov and States are of such theory's pioneers as they consider conditional learning laws apply to acquiring attitudes (Karen, Vernoy, Williams & Vernoy, 1991, p. 555). Hence, the student gains attitudes from his/ her colleagues and teachers while trying or adopting some actions or attitudes in behavior through imitation.

2. Self-perception theory: One of the theories that explains attitudes as Daryl Bem adopts a different direction is this theory; he believes that in order to identify our attitudes and beliefs, we should monitor our behavior and then we shall be able to determine our attitudes. Therefore, this theory refers us to notice our explicit behavior to deduct our internal status, which means that our behavior is the best indication of our attitudes and impulses. Without focusing on the explicit behavior, it is hard to define our attitudes. The attitudes, thus, are usually unclear as an individual's behaviors help us understand and know them (Halonon & Santrock, 1997, p. 127). Therefore, an attitude can be explained through perceiving the self as an individual perceives the subject or the event related to his/ her objectives through understanding the elements of an environment to cope with them properly with the correct behavior; hence, the attitudes form and develop under the influence of individual's perception of the subjects and events as part of the environmental elements. Thus, the students' attitudes towards blended learning are based on their actual behavior in terms of their ability of cognitive achievement and the skills related to the professional practice of the casework method.

Methodology:

This study is a quantitative study. Therefore, the researcher can, by applying the a quantitative study, identify the youth positive or negative attitudes (i.e. research dependent variable) towards the efficacy of applying blended learning in developing the skills of professional practice of the casework method (i.e. research independent variable). While the comparative study aims at identifying the similarities and differences between youth attitudes according to their societies (i.e. rural and urban) and their gender (i.e. male and female).

The study subjects include 1500 male and female students in the fourth year of the Higher Institute of Social Service in Alexandria. A simple random sample was chosen where 600 students (300 male and 300 female students) were selected according to the following criteria: 1. They are new fourth-year students at the institute. 2. Students must have access to the Internet to allow them to pursue e-learning (lectures). 3. Students regularly attend lectures at the institute to enrich the practical side as well as the theoretical side. The Higher Institute for Social Service in Alexandria was chosen as it responded fully and quickly to the Ministry of Higher Education's instructions regarding blended learning (i.e. hybrid), as the lectures were broadcast via the Internet as well as the regular face-to-face lectures weekly. Both the theoretical and applied aspects of the study were conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021.

The study tool is the scale of social work students' attitudes towards the efficacy of applying the blended education in developing the skills of professional practice of the casework method prepared by the researcher.

Scale preparation and development steps:

- a. Collecting and determining the scale's items: In this stage, the researcher determined the scale topic and its purpose, and reviewed theoretical literature and previous studies, research and scales related, both directly and indirectly, to the scale topic.
- b. Brief description of the scale: It consists of 50 items, including three aspects:

First aspect: students' attitudes towards benefitting from the theory and increasing cognitive achievement through blended learning, 14 items.

Second aspect: students' attitudes towards practical benefitting and developing the skills of professional practice of casework method through blended learning, 24 items.

Third aspect: obstacles and difficulties facing students in benefitting from applying blended learning, 12 items.

The scale has three values: agree, neutral and disagree and three degrees: 3, 2, and 1 respectively. Thus, the maximum scale score is 150 points, the medium score is 100 points, and the minimum score is 50 points. Therefore, the high score refers to an increase in positive attitudes and vice versa. The scores of the first aspect range from (14-42), the second aspect's scores range from (24- 72) and the third aspect's score range from (12- 36).

C. scale validity: content validity: The researcher presented the scale to 10 social work professors to evaluate the items in terms of form and their relation to the study subject according to the evaluation results and then modified the form and eliminated some items based on their agreement, not less than 80%.

Table (1): Validity statistics

	R	p
theoretical knowledge.	0.848*	<0.001*
practice skills.	0.832*	<0.001*
Difficulties	0.718*	<0.001*

r: Pearson coefficient

*: Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$

d. Scale reliability: The researcher applied the scale to 10 students not included in the study sample and reapplied it fifteen days later on the same group of students. She calculated the Spearman correlation coefficient. The scale reliability was 0.89 which is an accepted ratio that confirms the scale validity for application. The scale reliability was shown through Cronbach ' alpha, which was 0.92, so this means that the scale was of high reliability.

Results:

First, study sample characteristics:

The male respondents were 50% and the female ones were 50%. The vast majority of the sample individuals were of the age group from 18 to less than 22 years, 71.7% due to selecting the senior students. Most of the sample members were residing in urban regions, constituting 61.8%, followed by those living in rural regions, about 37.2%.

Table (2): The differences between male and female attitudes about the use of blended education in achieving theoretical knowledge.

Gender	Averages	Standard deviation	(t) test	Significance
Male	38.45	7.63	4.026**	Significant at 0.01
Female	40.55	4.84		

The previous table shows that there are very statistically significant differences at $p = .01$ between the average responses of the sample members, males and females, on the first aspect: male and female attitudes about the use of blended education in achieving theoretical knowledge. Due to the difference in gender favoring

female respondents. Thus, referring to the increase in positive attitudes among female towards blended learning and confirming the efficacy of applying the blended learning type as the female respondent achieved more theoretical benefit from blended learning and an increase in the cognitive achievement compared to male respondents of the study sample.

Table (3): The differences between male and female attitudes about the use of blended learning in achieve practice skills.

Gender	Averages	Standard deviation	(t) test	Significance
Male	66.96	12.08	6.007**	Significant at 0.01
Female	71.44	4.54		

The previous table shows very statistically significant differences at $p = .01$ between the average responses of the sample members, male and female, on the second aspect: male and female attitudes about the use of blended learning in achieving practice skills. There is a difference in gender favoring female respondents; referring, hence, to the increase in positive attitudes among female towards blended learning compared to male students. In other words, the female respondents achieved practical benefit from blended learning and in developing the skills of professional practice of casework more than the male respondents did.

Table (4): The differences between rural and urban attitudes about the use of blended learning in achieving theoretical knowledge.

Region	Averages	Standard deviation	(t) test	Significance
Rural	37.17	8.93	5.911**	Significant at 0.01
Urban	40,89	3,79		

The previous table shows very statistically significant differences at $p = 0.01$ between the average responses of the urban and rural respondents on the first aspect: rural and urban attitudes about the use of blended learning in achieving theoretical knowledge; referring, thus, to the efficacy of blended learning for urban students more than the rural students in terms of theoretical benefitting from blended learning and the increase in their theoretical knowledge.

Table (5): The differences between rural and urban attitudes about the use of blended learning to achieve practice skills.

Region	Averages	Standard deviation	(t) test	Significance
Rural	66.62	13.36	4.386**	Significant at 0.01
Urban	70.73	5.39		

The previous table shows very statistically significant differences at $p = .01$ between the average responses of the sample members ,the

urban and rural respondents on the second aspect: rural and urban attitudes about the use of blended learning to achieve practice skills, favoring the urban respondents; referring, therefore, to the efficacy of blended learning for urban students more than the rural students in terms of practical benefit from blended learning and developing the skills of professional practice of casework among them.

Table (6): The percentage of students' attitudes towards the obstacles facing the students in benefitting from blended learning

Attitudes percentage	N	%
Disagree	185	30.8
Neutral	65	10.8
Agree	350	58.3
Total	600	100

The previous table shows that the percentage of respondents who agreed with obstacles from blended learning was 58.3% while the percentage of violators was 30.8%, and finally the percentage of neutral respondents was 10.8%. Therefore, it constitutes an indication of increased positive trends in the study sample towards increasing the obstacles students face in taking advantage of blended learning.

Figure (1): The difference in attitudes between male and female respondents on each aspect.

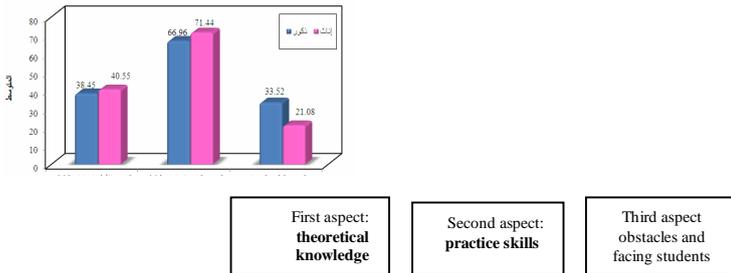
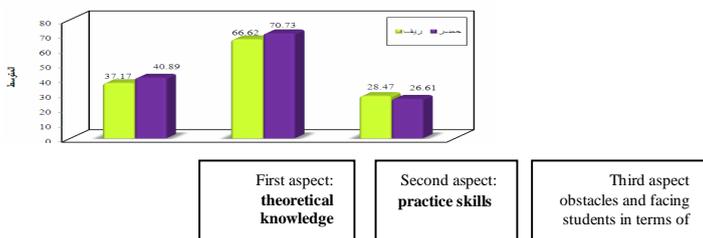


Figure (2): Shows the difference in attitudes between the rural and urban respondents on each aspect.



Discussion:

First ,as for the study sample's characteristics, the female respondents' percentage was 50% and the male respondents' percentage was 50%. The vast majority of the respondents were of the group age (18- 22 years) constituting 71.7% due to selecting the sample members of the senior students of the High Institute of Social Works. In addition, most of the respondents lived in the urban regions, i.e. 61.8% followed by those living in the rural regions, i.e. 37.2%.

Second ,the results of the study show that there are differences between male and female attitudes in using blended education in achieving theoretical knowledge for the benefit of females .It increased their comprehension abilities, raised their level of achievement, helped them retain information for a long time, increased the attractiveness of the scientific material, facilitated access to information, and raised the quality of The educational process.

The researcher attributes that to the females' interest in following up on the scientific material and being keen on it, and the availability of the Internet for them. On the other hand, the males, especially being in the fourth division, have a job that distracts them from theoretically pursuing subjects more than females.

The results of the study also show that there are differences between male and female attitudes regarding the use of blended learning in achieving practice skills for the benefit of females. This goes back to their ability to analyze educational situations and individual cases increased ,in addition to studying and diagnosing the case, and determining the appropriate professional intervention increasing their ability to apply professional principles to the way the case works.

The researcher attributes this to the availability of motivation among female students to continuously apply and directly practice what has been learned, which polishes them with many practice skills more than males.

These results are consistent with the results of many previous studies that indicated the importance and effectiveness of blended learning in the learning/teaching process and increasing the level of the learners' skills and academic achievement, as well as, improving their attitudes towards education and the academic materials, including Vallée et al. (2020),Radzimski et al. (2021), Klimova (2021) and Pikhart & Klimova (2019).

Third ,the results of the study show that there are differences between rural and urban situations regarding the use of blended learning in achieving theoretical knowledge as well as in acquiring practice skills for the benefit of students in urban areas .The researcher attributes this to the interest of urban students in using technology more than students in the countryside as well as the increased interest in feeding the Internet in Urban areas more than the countryside.

The study also confirms that there are many obstacles that students face in taking advantage of blended learning. For instance, the respondents indicated sudden and frequent interruptions to the Internet. More examples of common obstacles include the lack of computers and the lack of Internet access to their homes, as well as their poor skills in using computers, and that blended learning is expensive.

Recommendations:

Based on the study results and observations of the study, the researcher offers the following recommendations:

1. It is necessary to spread the culture of blended learning in the learning/teaching process through forums, lectures, workshops and conferences, etc.
2. Applying the blended learning strategy in introducing university curricula is essential
3. Continuing to introduce training programs using state-of-the-art in strategies and educational methods to offer students the skills of merging technology into learning is important to be considered.
4. It is necessary for the relevant authorities to adopt the blended learning that uses e-learning tools upon designing the blended learning environment to improve the educational outcomes of different academic curricula.
5. Spreading the awareness of the role and efficacy of blended learning in different educational stages in order to improve achievement, skills and attitudes is also recommended.
6. Training the staff members in applying and developing blended learning programs needs to be taken into consideration.
7. It is important to emphasize the significance of universities role in focusing on introducing thee- learning into blended learning in universities.
8. One of the recommendations is to spread the technical awareness among the students and train them in using recent technologies in learning.
9. Holding training programs for staff members is essential to introduce them to how to use blended learning in educational situation to enrich the educational process and enable increasing academic achievement among the students.
10. It is necessary for the educational foundations and training centers to hold training programs for social workers in designing blended e-programs to be used in practical application of their professional roles.

Suggestions for future research:

- Social work teachers' attitudes towards the efficacy of blended learning in reducing students' dropping out of school
- Post-graduation students' attitudes towards the efficacy of blended learning in developing their professional skills.

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