

Beyond Stalemate: Seeking Solutions to Challenges in Online and Blended Learning Programs

Paula Charbonneau-Gowdy
Universidad Andres Bello, Santiago, Chile
paula.charbonneau@unab.cl

Abstract: Concerned calls for more empirical research in the area of fully or blended online learning approaches have yet to be heeded. The concern is not unwarranted given that most higher learning institutions worldwide are moving increasingly to partial or complete online course offerings. Our own work in this area has been directed at uncovering challenges in Virtual Learning Environments (VLE's), particularly those related to participatory issues that are being recognized in educational scholarship from a sociocultural perspective as the essence of successful learning, regardless of the field. The high stakes involved in learners' proactive and critical participation in knowledge building through social interaction online, as opposed to passive assimilation, are closely connected to effective programs and their desired outcomes. We have argued that understanding the barriers that prevent these participatory practices involves a multifaceted perspective, including the voices of learners, and importantly, teaching practitioners. The significant quantitative and qualitative data we have generated in the different phases of our longitudinal inquiry using case study methodology have revealed disturbing challenges in the programs. These issues are primarily rooted in the degree of active participation on the part of many learners, especially in essential social interactive practices and this despite the commitment, enthusiasm and support of instructors for the VLE modality. Yet without significant student engagement and responsive participation not only are learning goals jeopardized, but so too is the underlying cost structure that often is assumed to support such programs. We are left with seeking a way forward. To do so, in this paper, we apply the investigative work we have done to emerging frameworks for evaluating these online programs. Our aim is to uncover a clear and evidenced-based argument for solutions to offer to key stakeholders and concrete steps they can take for improving their blended modality program offerings. The results of this exercise we believe provide an accessible roadmap for action for the large-scale online program in our investigation and new insight for online learning more broadly.

Keywords: Program evaluation framework, Virtual Learning Environments, large-scale online programs, social e-learning approaches

1. Introduction

At a recent e-learning conference I attended, in a conversation with a fellow attendee, I was asked about my current research. Aware of the keen interest we both shared in e-learning, I began with academic earnest to summarize the inquiries I was conducting into large online learning programs and details of some of the major findings. I described the various challenges, especially student retention and interactivity issues that I had uncovered in these innovative programs. I explained my efforts to get at the roots of such issues that were occurring despite the apparent and generally held, good intentions of the various stakeholders - the institution, instructors and learners. My colleague listened closely. At the end of my explanation, her sole response was quick and unexpected. "So what are the solutions?" she asked.

Indeed, what *are* the solutions to the challenges we are facing in establishing successful higher education online learning programs? Scholarship in the area of fully online programs, like Massive Open Online Courseware (MOOC's) or their hybrids, so-called Blended Learning Programs, in its general enthusiasm for the potential capacity and value of these programs for knowledge generation and building communities of inquiry, has been accused by some as "hype mixed with promise" (Prinsloo, 2016). From this perspective, there are no problems and thus no need of solutions. Yet, even e-learning enthusiasts realize the elephant in the room - that despite the successes of these innovations, there are nagging tensions and disparities including: firstly, student attrition (Tait & Gore, 2015), secondly, the fact that efforts to increase student engagement remain generally unsuccessful, and thirdly, cost benefit drivers being questionable (Hülsmann, 2016). And with little sign of abatement in the trajectory of online programs replacing, or at least complimenting traditional classroom courses in higher education, the only way forward is to find new avenues for solutions to these tensions. In other words, my colleague's quick retort was indeed pertinent.

Research in e-learning spaces that has spanned two decades suggests that the reason for the weaknesses of many VLE's programs does not lie in the use of technology, but in the basic education systems that support these programs. As Steve Jobs, founder and former CEO of technology giant Apple, once remarked in an interview with *Wired*: "What's wrong with education cannot be fixed with technology" (Wolf, 1996,n.p.). It is one thing to provide a plethora of increasingly more powerful tools; it is another to ensure effective systems for learning to take place. Indeed, saddled with the shortcomings of an educational system that with the support of teachers and decision-makers for over a century has promoted learners to consume content and learning materials rather than produce, it is not surprising that the powerful, collaborative-based technologies that promote interactive and engaged knowledge production, are being slow to take hold.

It is precisely these kinds of tensions that we have been uncovering in our longitudinal inquiry into a fully online distance-learning (DL) program (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2016; 2017) offered by an international network of affiliated private universities. Armed with the responses to the longitudinal inquiry that revealed the nature and source of these tensions, we are left with further questions:

1. What tools are available that could help evaluate our online programs?
2. In what ways, if at all, do our research findings align with the framework of such a tool?
3. What solutions, if any, can this framework offer for moving forward in order to respond to the tensions we have uncovered in the online programs?

Our aims in embarking on this exercise are twofold. They involve finding a) potential solutions to the issues that are holding back many stakeholders involved in these online programs in our context from experiencing their "real" value and b) possible openings for a broader more structured discussion on how to evaluate and ensure that such online programs offer effective opportunities for learners to change, in terms of adopting both *21st century learner identities and learning skills*.

In this paper, we begin with an in-depth review of the various inquiries that form part of the longitudinal study (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2016; 2017) we have been involved in researching since 2016. We focus particularly on the more recent inquiry. Once the details of the longitudinal study have been explained, we draw on the literature in program evaluation to respond to the questions listed above. Our focus is on how these particular online programs might look through the analytical lens of a formal program evaluation tool. Our intention is to inform future development of online programs in our context and others in the field who, like us, are looking for avenues to improving the benefits of these emerging programs for all stakeholders. With reports suggesting that in 2016, 700 universities worldwide offered 6,850 large-scale online courses with 58 million individuals enrolled in at least one such course (Class Central, 2017), the urgency of finding solutions, in our mind, appears critical.

2. Summary of the longitudinal study

2.1 Background and context

Our study began in 2016 and has consisted of two phases at this point. The ongoing large-scale distance language-learning program was launched initially with a 10-week pilot in 2014. The corporate Network of private affiliated universities offered the program to over 500 employees and faculty in their institutions across Latin America. At the time, it was considered an innovative English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning program. It boasted the combination of a) an online platform, called Learn Social (LS), primarily intended for course materials, for writing and listening practice, as well as material for regular testing, and of b) access to small-group (8 to 20) weekly videoconferencing sessions, using Zoom technology, for speaking. It is this latter online f2f feature of the program that draws parallels with current blended learning programs. In many ways, the framework of this program suggests a 'flipped classroom' scenario, where individual theory and practice precede authentic and interactive f2f discussion, in this case online, of the material. Participant learners in the program are expected to spend two hours or more completing drag and drop, fill-in the blank, sentence completion exercises, as well as listening to audio/video footage and responding to questions in order to familiarize themselves and hopefully acquire the vocabulary and structural content, regarded necessary to communicate in the follow-up video-conferencing sessions. Interaction with other learners is expected in peer correction of short writing and listening assignments in the LS platform as well as in discussions in the Zoom classroom.

2.2 Theoretical underpinnings

The theoretical framework of both the first and second study is situated within the sociocultural paradigm established by Leon Vygotsky (1991). We continue to locate much of our e-Learning research efforts within this paradigm for the importance it places on the *contexts* of learning and the recognition it gives to the myriad influences that exist within learning spaces. Our work in e-Learning over the last seventeen years has laid the basis for our epistemological beliefs that learning is a situated practice that hinges necessarily on the presence of engaged social interaction and where context is all important. From this perspective, our driver has been to examine online education in order to “explicate the relationships between human action on the one hand and the cultural, institutional and historical situations in which the functioning occurs, on the other” (Wertsch, del Rio & Alvarez, 1995, p. 11). From a sociocultural perspective we see the advantages to human development of the dialogical interaction with more capable others in teaching and learning processes. Also, we believe that this interaction in terms of effectiveness can far surpass what pre-programmed, computer-led instruction can achieve (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2015, Neuman & Celano, 2012).

It is these beliefs and understandings that support our excitement and hope for e-Learning and the growing affordances that technology advances offer for such interaction. At the same time, we recognize that technology is not just a set of new tools, rather the extension of human beings’ capabilities (Kurzweil, 2012) that are leading to changes in the way we learn and importantly to individuals themselves, i.e. teachers and learners, who make use of these emerging technological affordances (Cutrim-Schmidt, 2006). But these changes are not automatic. Cutrim Schmidt adopts a *relational* view of technology that prioritizes an understanding of the nature of technologies as being dependent on the action in which they are used as opposed to *deterministic* (technology as dominating and controlling human action) and *instrumentalist* views (technology as a neutral tool) - views that have dominated much of the scholarship in e-Learning, up to this point. (Hinkleman & Gruba, 2012).

A *relational* view supports our preoccupation with how the use of technology is influenced and influences practices and individuals and sheds a spotlight not only on context but the identities that are being constructed within contexts of learning. In the field of Second Language Education (SLE), the field in which we research and teach, Norton’s (2000/2013) foundational work on identity over the last two decades, and the considerable research it has spawned, has led to our understanding that identity, or a sense of self, is multiple, fluid and dynamic. Important to our study is her explanation that identities are inextricably tied to contexts. Drawing from Bourdieu (1994), she uncovers in her research how complex powerful forces that exist within learning sites, including VLEs, determine the nature of the identities that individuals, including teachers, take up in their practices. Norton argues (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p.36) that advances in technology in the new world order have led to the fact that the spaces where learning and socialization take place “have become increasingly de-territorialized and unbounded, and the systemic patterns of control more invisible”. These invisible controlling forces help explain the new and complex ways individuals, both teachers and learners, are navigating these spaces differently.

These ideas laid the groundwork for our study in our attempt to understand and analyze how teachers in these sites are responding to this movement and to the nature and patterns of control that bind their and their learners’ practices as well. We drew on two studies that help shed light on learners and teachers’ roles in VLE’s. Both of these studies, along with the theoretical framework we have laid out above, contribute later in this article to our discussion of a framework for moving on to solutions.

Hampel and Hauck (2004) conducted a study on one of the first audio/video large-scale international online language programs offered by the Open University in Great Britain. In their study, they outlined some of the many advantages to learning that teachers potentially can accomplish in these kinds of programs such as:

- providing expansive learner feedback,
- promoting learner-learner communication and interaction,
- allowing socialization to take precedence over structural accuracy,
- giving access to meaningful communication to learners across linguistic and geographical boundaries.

Yet, from the vast experience acquired from offering Open University courses, along with the scholarship in this area, the authors also drew attention to the presence of challenges and the demands that these courses place on teachers. Interesting to our own inquiries, was their focus on task design and tutor support. Similar to the online program in our inquiry, the Open University program had a general standardized program website developed by designers with pre-established materials prepared by central academics including program information and assessments. They also shared similar goals to encourage learner-learner collaboration and interaction both on the website and in audio/video platforms. Their findings indicated that technical issues and an unacceptable level of learner-learner collaboration were the two major impediments to the success of the initial program. Similarly, in our initial learner-focussed inquiry, we found that some participants lacked the opportunities necessary for building the kinds of self-directed and empowered learner identities that research has shown lead to optimal sustained learning. Again these barriers were found to be due to a lack of institutional support in terms of technical infrastructure. At the same time, we shared with the Open University study a common challenge, i.e. low levels of learner-learner collaboration.

The second study informing our inquiries was conducted by Kozlova and Zundel (2013) and examined the strategies that five foreign language instructors used to engage learners in conversations through multimodalities. Framed by a qualitative methodological paradigm, they analyzed twenty-five synchronous sessions as well as interview and questionnaire data to understand if and how these instructors succeeded in engaging learners to interact in collaborative meaning-making online. Significant to our inquiry are their findings that indicated that levels of engagement of learners in the meaning making were linked to two qualitatively different pedagogies used by the instructors. For one instructor, for example, the emphasis was on students providing a correct final product as opposed to the learning development process. Additionally, in this particular instructor's case, guided support involved providing correct answers for students to practice and use. For other instructors, the learning was more of a collaborative effort in meaningful dialogue between the teacher and students in order to achieve successful performance. The theoretical perspectives represented in the two types of teaching instruction in the Kozlova and Zundel (2013) study seem to mirror the pedagogies underlining the strategies that instructors in our programs were forced to adapt due to the constraints of the platform in contrast with the audio/video sessions. The Kozlova and Zundel study (2013) helped us to frame our understanding and analysis of the various learner engagement levels that teachers were able, or unable, to promote in the context of our inquiry. In other words the control of teaching and learning pedagogies, including less successful ones in terms of promoting interaction, were rooted in the expectations of program designers and decision makers. Kozlova and Zundel's study (2013) was conducted with high school students whereas our interest lies with higher education settings, thus a distinctly different set of circumstances in many regards.

2.3 Description of Phase One Inquiry

The initial study of the pilot program (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2016) focused on *learners* in the online program. The questions that guided this initial inquiry were centred on:

- the actual lived experiences of a group of learners in the online, networked language-learning environment from their perspectives;
- how the value and sustained nature of their learning experiences were influenced by the various levels of investment of their institutions, teachers and other learners;
- to what extent these influences supported their agency and engagement in interactive practices.

This phase of the longitudinal study generated extensive quantitative and qualitative data from a post-pilot survey of 370 participants, a follow-up questionnaire, field notes and over 17 hours of interviews, conducted online with learner participants. A deep analysis of the data sets revealed encouraging findings in terms of general satisfaction with the program - not surprising perhaps, given the vital opportunity it gave to people in these Latin American countries who suffer from limited access to quality English language learning practice, essential to their countries' development. At the same time, findings also indicated that the levels of engagement in social-based learning, i.e. the Zoom classes and collaboration activities on the Social Learn platform, were far from ideal. Given the essential nature of social interaction to learning, these findings might explain the lackluster end-of-pilot language test results. These results revealed only a 40% pass rate for those who were linguistically prepared to continue to the second course in their level. Framed by sociocultural theory, these findings revealed that while it appears possible for such large-scale, well-designed DL programs

to meet educational challenges, addressing deeply-rooted contextual issues and the investment of teachers to promote agency and learner-learner interactivity, would need to be of prime concern in order for a majority, rather than a minority of learners, to work towards achieving their potentials and goals. Since the original pilot, the programs have continued to be developed and been expanded to other private higher education European institutions within the same corporate Network.

2.4 Description of Phase Two Inquiry

The second phase of the longitudinal study (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2017) sought to respond to the concerns from the first phase by uncovering the perspectives of *teachers* in the expanded DL program. We argued that despite the ostensible importance in educational narratives given to teachers, their voices are much less apparent in practice. Often, institutional aims and curriculum programs are developed, schedules and students assigned, standardized tests created, evaluations of teachers carried out and quality assurance applied with little input and/or feedback from faculty. Even as the classroom door closes, regardless of the powerful roles that teachers *appear* to have, these control factors, as well as an array of other contextual “nested” forces – political, cultural, economic and historical, that impact all learning settings (Maguire, 1996), dictate much of what teachers and learners do and accomplish. Emerging research is indicating that e-learning settings are no exception (Sambursky, 2013, Delgaty, 2017). It is surprising that little is known about how these various factors and forces influence teachers’ identities and practices as they begin to enter virtual teaching environments (Hanson, 2009), especially in the current climate where the widespread growth of large scale online distance programs is moving at an incredible pace, and yet in which quality appears to be lagging (Fini, 2009, Baggaley, 2014).

The questions that guided the second inquiry in the longitudinal study were:

- What were the prime concerns of these teachers in this large-scale DL program?
- How did this group of DL teachers perceive their roles in supporting successful learning in these programs?
- In what way, from their perspectives, did contextual issues influence their identities and teaching practices?

The paucity of e-Learning research that is responding to questions about context, identities and the new roles that teachers in multiple fields of education are facing in DL sites has not gone without notice. Cook (2009) reveals that solutions to narrowing the gap between e-Learning research and informed practice, lie in changing our questions to include ones that unravel the complexities of context and the institutional structures that support e-learning practices. Derbel’s (2017, p. 147) recent observation in reviewing the literature on BL can be applied to most online programs. She concludes from her review that in order to move forward and fully understand these programs, “thick descriptions” of the interconnections are needed”.

Sixteen of twenty-two instructors teaching in the expanded online program participated in our second phase, teacher-focussed qualitative inquiry. Of these self-selected participants, nine attended online 50-60 minute individual or focus group interviews, totaling 425 minutes approximately. The data collection period took place from January 9 to March 20, 2017.

It is important to point out that the instructors represented a cross-section of nationalities sought out from among their colleagues in their respective institutions to teach in the online program by Network administrators. They were chosen apparently due to their combined experience, abilities and professionalism as teachers in f2f teaching, and interestingly as one participant reported, “our flexibility” – the latter comment aimed at reflecting the patience with ‘the unexpected’, an apparent requirement for teaching in an online space. A few of the participants had previous experience in teaching in VLEs, but for most, their work in the Network’s DL programs was their first ‘real’ introduction to fully online programs. Importantly, all were active enthusiasts for teaching within these kinds of modalities.

2.5 Methodologies

In both phases of the longitudinal study, we chose to conduct inquiries within a qualitative paradigm. Given that we were seeking to unpack the complexities of those experiences in the multiple contexts of various online groups and classrooms, we were confident that the ethnographic tools available within this paradigm

would best enable us to access and analyze the kinds of data we needed to respond to our questions about online learning experiences. We argue here and with others that these rich sources of generating knowledge are crucial to understanding the complexities of online learning programs and the VLEs they create. Like all human systems, these programs and environments are dynamic and inextricably connected to contextually-specific social, cultural, historical, economic, political and pedagogical realities and influences (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2017; Meskel and Ouaj, 2013; Derbel, 2017, Goertler, 2017). Also, in our goals to create highly interactive and collaborative learning environments with these systems, where learners and instructors use the myriad technological affordances to enhance participation and communication, we consider that the tools within a qualitative paradigm combined with emerging powerful technologies that can support the collection and analysis of data generated, offer promising hope for solution gathering.

2.6 Findings

It was clearly evident from level one evaluations, based on learner satisfaction and self-reports, that participants appreciated the opportunity offered by their employer to learn English online instead of in a traditional learning context. The majority reported that they felt that they had made progress in many of their language skills. A cross-referenced analysis from three data sets in the initial inquiry – the interviews, survey and questionnaire all indicated that many participants expressed a desire for further program offerings. The data clearly revealed that select groups of learners did report increased fluency compared to their abilities at the onset of the program. Importantly, testimonies of increased confidence, active investment and evidence of self-directedness of those who had dynamic experiences in the Zoom classes, were enlightening. The results strongly suggested that appropriate uses of technology, combined with effective learning and teaching approaches, offer opportunities for quality and sustained learning despite the challenges in these large-scale distance online programs.

Yet, data from the various data sets from both inquiries in the longitudinal study led to the uncovering of some contradictory messages, so called “mixed messages” that were embedded in the online program. Despite a) the obvious enthusiasm and experience of the instructors in this program, b) the strong motivation of learners and c) the highly incentivized decision-makers in the Network that launched the program, it was clear that results of the program were a concern for many of these stakeholders. Not only were the concerns centered on the somewhat mediocre test scores of learners, but more importantly, on reports of the lackluster engagement and investment of many learners towards social interactive learning and communication reflective of 21st century skills.

A close analysis of this data indicated “mixed messages” on several levels. At the learner level, there were expressions of strong motivation and recognition of the cultural capital that was to be gained through active participation in the program. These gains consisted of both increased language competencies and also the digital literacy skills to be had that could serve lifetime learning. These messages did not match the messages of resistance and reluctance of learners to engage with others in the f2f online classroom, or to share and comment on peer’s work in the Learn Social Platform, in order to take advantage of the enriched opportunities that the technologies offered. These latter reactions were found to be connected in part to unfavorable conditions that existed for some learners from a lack of institutional infrastructure and support and/or the traditional practices of certain instructors who were unable to encourage social learning practices especially in the f2f Zoom classes. In these cases, the participants relied instead on more conventional tools available in the LearnSocial Platform, where they reported they felt more in control of their learning, but where they worked alone or solely with the tutor. There was strong support in the data that demonstrated that these more marginalized participants, by missing out on an opportunity for peer learning, also failed to construct more powerful identities that would allow them the confidence to use new language skills in authentic situations.

At the instructor level, the empowered roles as 21st century educators with experienced and/or emerging expertise to affect changes to sociocultural practices in this innovative setting, conflicted with other messages expressed by the same instructors. Other messages the same instructors reported reflected their discouraged, marginalized roles in which many were resigned to settle for abandoning their goals and accepting a lack of control with regard to learners’ resistance to interactive practices and to weaknesses in the program. A disregard for task-based, constructivist teaching approaches that rest on deductive learning, agentive learners and social interaction was evident. Instead, their practices reverted to a return to traditional teaching practices, based on Power Point presentations and PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) teaching methods, i.e. information transfer pedagogies.

Strong evidence indicated that these contradictory messages were related on the one hand to favourable conditions within the program, such as:

- consistent regular faculty online meetings with practical discussions of content and teaching strategies;
- solicitation of instructors' own materials for a shared resource bank;
- provision of a central information source for faculty in the Community of Practice platform;
- support for teacher reflective practices through periodic mentoring by an administrator;
- invitations to instructors to host faculty meetings;
- a 24/7, immediate response from the program coordinator to instructor problems.

This support sent a strong message of appreciation of the value of instructors' work and expertise on the part of the administrators of the program. Rosario summed up her acknowledgement of the administration's appreciation of her work in the words: "I know I have that backup, I have that support so I feel good." (Interview, February 10, 2017).

Yet, on the other hand, the 'other' message emanated especially through:

- the expectations of instructors by administrators to have learners work in the platform supported by its traditional pedagogies;
- and in the area of testing – where again assessments were pre-set by program decision-makers, based in traditional pedagogy and were out of the control of instructors.

In both cases, according to the data uncovered from the data sets, the "mixed" messages had a detrimental effect on the instructors' identities in terms of their power to control the outcomes of their teaching efforts.

"Mixed messages" at the Network level were evidenced by administrators who, on one hand, evoked being visionaries in recognizing, conceiving and developing the innovative online program and ensuring active practical ongoing support for instructors. On the other hand, these same administrators demonstrated questionable expertise in the choice of materials and assessment tools, uncharacteristic of social learning constructivist approaches, that conflicted with the 21st century goals to which their discourse and the online program they developed supposedly aspired. The favourable messages that administrators offered through their support empowered and validated their instructors and evidenced their leadership qualities in program development. Yet, importantly, unreasonable emphasis placed on expectations from learners in the LS platform, an over-emphasis on assessment, the questionable effectiveness of the testing materials and the lack of control in decision-making in the formal testing process afforded to instructors, left detrimental messages to instructors and misdirected messages to learners.

Based on our findings, we concluded that the mixed messages visible in the sometimes unfavourable identity changes of key players in the program and arguably rooted in the power structures of such systems, are an important part of the justification for the downsides of this particular online program. We also acknowledge that the practical solutions that emanated from recommendations from the participant instructors themselves during interviews, while viable and appealing, lack the theoretical basis that scholarship has shown will lead to significant and sustained changes in education - the kind of educational change that many of us in e-learning envisage for this century. Likewise, we also acknowledge that ethnographic research designs such as we have employed in both inquiries, along with the Sociocultural Theory that grounds this research, while important in terms of untangling the complexities of large-scale online programs, may have limited impact when disseminated to teachers, decision or policy makers (Kiely and Rea-Dickins, 2009).

How do we move forward? How do we provide solutions that are accessible to all stakeholders at all levels? How do we as promoters of e-learning refrain from eulogizing about digitalized technologies in education (Selwyn, N. (2011a; 2011b) and from providing more than a disparate array of individual cases? Instead, how can we begin a process to find interconnectedness between the elements that support effective online programs (Wang et al., 2015)? What structures can we use to exploit our research efforts and outcomes to inform the common goals stakeholders involved in large-scale online learning programs seek?

In the next section, we outline the steps we propose for moving forward in such a trajectory. We begin by first briefly reviewing the literature on program evaluation wherein we sought a framework that could respond to our purposes. Next, we describe the basic elements of the framework and apply it to the findings in our longitudinal study, those highlighted above and in earlier more detailed reports (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2016; Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2017). We then argue how this exercise reveals new insights that can inform stakeholders at multiple levels for future iterations and developments, not only in the specific online program that has been the focus of the present longitudinal study, but also perhaps more broadly in other contexts as well.

3. Moving forward

Our search for formal structures that might operationalize the results of our longitudinal study of the large-scale online program have led to a return to the literature, in this case to the field of program evaluation. Norris (2006, p. 59) defines evaluation as “the gathering of information about any of the variety of elements that constitute educational programs, for a variety of purposes that primarily include understanding, demonstrating, improving and judging program value.” This area of educational research has been active since the early 70’s. As Gruba, Cárdenas-Claros, Suvorov and Rick (2016) point out, the scholarship in program evaluation represents a diverse field that has evolved significantly from reflecting a drive for accountability, to more recent efforts to involve key stakeholders in the evaluation process. In our perusal of this field, we have found a paucity of examples of program evaluation structures that we can apply to our findings. This gap is in part due to the fact that large-scale 100% online programs are just emerging in higher education, albeit rapidly, and also as pointed out above, most efforts to evaluate these online programs are local initiatives in institutions that have their own institutional evaluation systems. A case in point, Porter, Graham, Spring and Welch (2014, p. 193) report that of eleven universities they investigated with regard to evaluation of their blended courses, eight relied on already existing course evaluation methods used for traditional classroom teaching, only three created specific evaluations for blended learning and one conducted no evaluation at all. These findings clearly suggest a critical area of e-learning research that is yet to be explored.

For our purposes in the large-scale online program, we have chosen an evaluating framework developed by Gruba et al. (2016) aimed at blended programs. We rationalize that in the case of the large-scale program, which is the subject of our investigation, the components of the program are the same as a blended learning modality. In both there is an online platform and also a f2f component; the only difference being that in the program in our inquiry, f2f classes are held online in Zoom. Given the unique challenges that both blended learning programs and the large-scale program share, we believe the framework for evaluating the former has a strong potential to inform the latter.

Built on the work of Kane (2006) and Chapelle (2014) in the area of assessment and grounded in developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011) and action research (Bax, 2011), the program evaluation framework developed by Gruba et al. (2016) for blended learning programs is characterized by the following criteria:

- an argument-based approach, meaning evaluations are done through the use of arguments that are intended to support claims about the technology-supported program (Chapelle, 2014);
- is applied to four considerations of the program: purpose, appropriateness, multimodality and sustainability (Gruba and Hinkleman, 2012);
- involves three levels of operation- *micro*, *meso* and *macro* (Gruba and Hinkleman, 2012);

The advantages of the framework are considered to be its flexibility in adapting to a variety of contexts and that it is dynamic and able to evolve as new evidence from changes to programs are gathered. Also, given the nature of large-scale programs, this particular framework has the added appeal of including all levels of operation.

In Figure 1, we provide a version of the framework adopted for our particular context and reflecting arguments we have developed around the major findings of our investigation.

Consideration	Levels		
	Micro(classroom)	Meso (university)	Macro (international Network)
Purpose	Are the technology tools available used consistently and for their intended program purposes by learners and instructors?	Are the benefits of the online programs made clear to individual institutions and directors?	Do the goals of the online program conform to Network aims and objectives?
Appropriateness	Do the technology tools available to instructors and learners actively support current 21st century social learning practices?	Are the values of the online program shared by institutions in <i>practice</i> as well as in <i>theory</i> ?	Are the approaches advocated in the program sensitive to the various cultural realities of participants?
Multimodality	Are a variety of technologies and materials available to teachers and learners to enhance lessons and respond to different interests?	Can the participating institutions make commitments to providing reliable technology infrastructure for their employees who participate in the online programs?	What efforts have been made to ensure participants in the online programs develop digital literacy skills that can lead to lifelong learning?
Sustainability	Do the majority of learners display ongoing interest in continuing in the program? Is there evidence of learners pursuing learning online outside the classroom and beyond program demands?	Can institutions ensure time available and support for their employees to maintain an ongoing commitment to the online programs?	What steps have been taken to develop and respond to grounded critical evaluations of the program? Is there a rigorous process in place to provide more than learner satisfaction evaluation of the program?

Figure 1: Large Scale Online Program Evaluation (Adopted from Gruba et al., 2016, n.p.)

Beyond consisting of a series of simple checklists, reminiscent of traditional program evaluation processes, this framework is a complex heuristic based in interpretive perspectives. The framework is able to unravel the complexities of online large-scale programs, is centred in all levels of stakeholders and offers powerful and dynamic ways to elucidate, appraise and adapt to evidence in the large-scale program, even as it evolves. Indeed, based on the data we have gathered the program we have investigated has evolved significantly over the period of both stages of the investigation. Importantly, the framework of the evaluation tool is dialogic. In other words, it allows for stakeholders at the *micro*, *meso* and *macro* level to consider the validity of the claims through discussion and then choose to rebut or accept them as valid. In that appraisal process, there is an avenue for stakeholders to establish an agenda for improving the program or to build on its strengths. In other words, it offers *viable solutions* to the challenges that the large-scale program in our study faces based on the grounded evidence that our inquiry has generated, instead of reporting solely on the issues.

To illustrate the value of the program evaluation in terms of solutions, the following example may be helpful. If we look at the *Micro* level and under the heading *Consideration of modality*, the framework proposes a claim that there is a discussion invited about whether there is variety of tools being used in the program. Our evidence clearly indicated that this was not the case and indeed many of the instructors in their testimonies shared the feelings of being “hand-tied” in terms of exposing their students to 21st century digital skills and the power of emerging tools to support interactive practices. Many offered practical suggestions of strategies and tools that could respond to this shortcoming. If we look across the matrix at the *meso* level under the same multimodal consideration, by examining the argument about whether participating higher education institutions were providing the technical support for their employees to use the technologies in the program, the answer in some cases would be negative. In reflecting on this realization through discussion, we might predict that the institutions that were at fault would be made more aware of the disadvantaged positions their employees were having to assume and the costs at the *micro* level to learning. As a result, there may be more impetus on the part of these stakeholders to more actively seek ways to improve this scenario.

At the *macro* level, the argument around objectives raises policy issues regarding program goals. Discussions at this level, supported by the framework arguments, could be assumed to sensitize these key decision makers to consider the disjuncture between the claims they make in their policies, i.e. their Discourse, and how, in reality, they build a blended program around these goals. For example, institutional decision makers may claim that one of the goals of their large-scale program is to offer opportunities for developing 21st skills to employees, the majority of whom live in contexts across Latin America where many are denied such enriching possibilities. Yet, at the same time should they not recognize that advanced digital skills developed through exposure to a wide variety of emerging technologies must be an integral part of their program? Are they aware that many individual employees may lack those skills? Those reflections at this level could have the potential to lead back to making the kinds of changes that instructors in the program voiced as restraining them from assuming control over their teaching practices and the goals they have for their learners. At the same time, decisions made at the macro level could conceivably put added pressure at the institutional level to increase technology infrastructure, which in turn would have positive implications for learners. Further examples of how this framework can be operationalized highlight, we strongly believe, the dynamic connections not only *across* the same *Consideration* category and the three levels but *between* the various *Consideration* categories as well.

4. Conclusion

The trajectory towards large-scale web-based learning will only continue to accelerate. Whether the model of learning that is adopted becomes anachronistic and unresponsive to 21st century needs, as is the case for most models that continue to support traditional institutional learning, will in large part hinge on the practices and decisions of early trailblazers. If we are to avoid the pitfalls and havoc wreaked on individual learning development that has occurred in f2f environments for over a century, it is imperative that all stakeholders in learning be involved. In this paper, we have reviewed some of the evidence we have found that suggests that although there are exciting gains to be had in the online modality offered in this large-scale program, disturbingly familiar issues surfaced as well. No doubt, other programs of this type are witnessing the same. It is clear that there is truth to Job's remark, that throwing technology at a problem will not fix it. Further ethnographic, social-based research we believe is at the heart of uncovering the contextual issues that are unique to each setting. We have argued here that developing an evaluation framework to affix the findings of our research could be advantageous for connecting these findings to dialogue at all levels and for arriving at concrete solutions. In this process, we see a means of not only responding to my fellow conference attendee's concern for solutions, but also of spreading the kinds of messages that e-learning researchers are voicing, but are not yet being heard.

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