3-M Model for Uncovering the Impact of Multi-level Identity Issues on Learners' Social Interactive Engagement Online

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Abstract: A growing trend in higher education institutions (HE) to move course offerings to Blended Learning (BL) modes is challenging many of our traditional views and practices of teaching and learning. Part of the problem is that many of those working within these institutions at the *macro, meso* and *micro* levels have stubbornly resisted abandoning the view that knowledge is imparted by the institution and that knowledge is consumed by students. Advances in technology have upturned this positionality as learners and institutions alike realize that roles are evolving in the process of education. Tracking the scholarship on BL, for example, reveals a major issue preventing successful learning outcomes is reticence on the part of learners to be socially interactive and engaged online. Through the lens of socialcultural and identity theories and a conceptualization of engagement being composed of behavioural, emotional and cognitive components, this paper aims to respond to a call for greater insight into this pressing issue. With findings from a recent qualitative longitudinal study of a BL program in a large private-for-profit university in Chile we unravel the complex social psychological aspects that contribute to learners' willingness, or unwillingness, to engage in interacting with others and with content online – an essential determinant of successful learning and quality BL programs. A critical discussion of the findings from multiple qualitative data sources reveals that the general lack of undergraduate students' incentive to develop agency and adopt empowered learner identities characteristic of active participators online, is strongly influenced by the assumed or imposed identities of teachers, academic leaders and institutional decision makers that create a climate that fails to nurture community building in these contexts. Abundant evidence suggests a model for BL in HE that could lead to decisive, strategic and coordinated action at each level and measurable improvement in student online learning engagement and outcomes.

Keywords: Blended Learning, higher education, learner engagement, *macro-meso-micro* level inquiry, identity theory

1. Introduction

Being drawn into much of the hype surrounding online learning and its promise for redefining HE was unavoidable in scholarship just over a decade ago. Indeed, few researchers in e-learning, our lead author included (Charbonneau-Gowdy et al. 2012), would have disagreed with Garrison and Kanuka's (2004) prediction that Internet information and communication technologies would be "the defining transformative innovation for higher education in the 21st century" (p. 96). The affordances of new and emerging technologies permitting learners to be both together and apart and simultaneously allowing connection to a community of learners anytime and anywhere without limitations set by time, place or situation was considered at the root of this transformation (p. 96). Included in this vision for HE was an image of institutions at the forefront of a revolution in education and responsible for redefining how we communicate, learn and thereby how we think. With much enthusiasm, HE and its leaders set out new policies for Blended Learning (BL) programs that they assumed would lead to mitigating their fiscal and pedagogical challenges and deficiencies (Steinart et al. 2006) while at the same time would offer solutions to liberate classroom learning experiences from the traditions that constrained them for decades and limited their results. At the heart of seeing the potential for BL to transform HE learning experiences, claimed Garrison and Kanuka (2004), was the recognition of the power of ICTs to provide a forum for a community of inquiry to enter into free and open debate and critical discussion of Internet accessible information upon which to build and construct new knowledge - the hallmark of higher education (p. 97). Indeed, this enthusiasm for ICT-based learning heralded the best of times for HE and the future of BL.

Since those early heady times, part of the excitement and initial hope for BL transforming traditional teaching and learning practices have faded (Brown and Charlier, 2013). There has been much controversy. On one side of the argument, we would cite the research of Allen, Seaman, Poulin and Straut (2016) that produced statistics indicating that distance education enrolments in the USA, including BL, continue to grow despite an

overall drop in HE enrolment. Based on these statistics, one could conclude that there has been an increase in interest in this modality of learning. Indeed, the findings also show that a majority of *macro* level institutional academic leaders (71.4% in 2015 compared to 57.2% in 2003) rate the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face (F2F) instruction, and are far more positive about the learning outcomes of BL as compared to fully online education (p. 5). It is important to point out that there are no standardized ways to assess the effectiveness of these programs that can justify the claims of better outcomes. In support of the other side of the controversy, Allen et al.'s statistics also reveal that while BL programs continue to grow, only 29.1% of chief academic officers, i.e. at the *meso* level of institutions, believe that their faculty actively embrace the online modality. Statistics indicate that these academic leaders remain hesitant about the future success of BL in their institutions. Importantly, the authors of the study report that since their first study in 2003, they have witnessed little change in faculty attitudes. These frontline players along with learners at the *micro* level of institutions seem on the same page especially in their lack of acceptance of the value and legitimacy of online education (p.3). As Allen et al. (2017) point out: "A continuing failure of online education has been the inability to convince its most important audience – higher education faculty members [and we would add, many students as well] – of its worth". (p.26). In such a scenario, too often these key players are faced with no choice but to struggle reluctantly with the demands of their new roles in the learning process (McGill, Klobas and Renzi, 2014).

The picture reflected in Allen et al.'s (2017) statistics is uncannily similar at all three levels – *macro*, *micro* and *meso*, to that which we were evidencing in Chile when we first set out to find reasons for the general lackluster results in the outcomes of our HE institution's BL programs. Early findings in our longitudinal study highlighted that key to the successful implementation of these programs takes more than the enthusiasm of institutional leaders. Something that we as educators recognized was disturbingly lacking was the active engagement of learners, at the bottom of the institutional hierarchy, in the use of the technology available to them as part of the BL programs being offered. Yet, aligned with Brown and Charlier (2013) we believed strongly "question of use [engagement] is a fundamental precursor to overall effectiveness" (p. 40). Anecdotal reports from all three levels that were confirmed by evidence from our initial mini-study indicated that students were slow to involve themselves in opportunities for online learning particularly when it included interactions with others, F2F or in online discussions. Our readings of a broad range of scholarship in technology-based learning convinced us that learner reticence to actively interact online is not unique to our context but could be considered largely universal. Scholars have *highlighted the critical importance* of such learner interactions (Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2018; Clement, Vandeput and Osaer, 2016; Halic, Lee, Paulus and Spence, 2010) especially in relation to teaching effectiveness, course design and the affordances of technology tools within BL programs. Yet, there is an obvious gap in the literature that establishes a more nuanced *understanding*, beyond the default motivation argument, for why learners engage actively in social interaction, or more often do not, in the context of BL programs, especially over the long term. Our inquiry was aimed at responding to recent calls for expanding the research to address the lack of knowledge in this area (Güzer and Caner, 2014; Sun and Rueda, 2012). We were also aware of the reported need for more studies in BL that lie within the qualitative paradigm (Steinart et al., 2006) and that go well beyond reports of participant satisfaction data (Brinkley –Etzkorn, 2018; Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, and Chang, 2015). In conducting our longitudinal study, we chose to focus on the participants at all three levels of the institution:

- *Macro* level institutional leaders who represent the International Network to which our private-for-profit institution is affiliated;
- *Meso* level Academic leaders - the BL program director and her coordinators;
- *Micro* level faculty and their undergraduate students enrolled in the BL EFL courses.

The longitudinal study was framed by questions about contextual factors and the nature of identities at all three levels that could be used to support our understanding of and theorizing about what makes successful BL programs. Our aim in the present paper is to use those findings and adopt a general stance to trace the reasons that we believe can explain a lack of participation and investment in social interactive behaviours online in the BL programs on the part of learners, in this case undergraduate students from a cross-section of disciplines learning English as a foreign language. In assuming this position, the two questions guiding our inquiry were the following:

1. What is the nature of identities being mediated at all three levels of the BL program?
2. What inferences can be drawn from the identities of stakeholders at each level to explain their impact at the micro level, most importantly on the lack of participation and investment of students in online social interaction and thus their engagement in learning?

In this paper, we first provide the reader with an overview of the various phases of our longitudinal study (Charbonneau-Gowdy and Chavez, 2018). Next, we build on the theoretical framework that we used to support the study by providing a deeper examination of the powerful role that identity plays in learning and the complex ways that identities are influenced in learning contexts. We also explain from our reading of scholarship and our combined extensive experience in the practice and research of e-learning how the theory of identity and the construct of investment can support our argument that the students' lack of *behavioural, emotional* and *cognitive* engagement online in our institutional BL programs is a direct result of influences at all three levels of the institution. We then describe details of the design of the study and the results of the various inquiries at each level that led to our findings. Next, we draw from these findings to illustrate the connections we make between multi-level institutional influences and students' lack of engagement in online interaction in the context of their BL programs. We believe that uncovering the connection between learners' identities and the nature of HE contexts is key to an understanding of how we can influence successful learning and quality BL programs. At the end of the paper, we offer a model that could provide a lens through which to assess what is happening in other BL contexts. In so doing, we are striving to rekindle the initial hopes for BL as a vehicle for educational transformation, particularly in HE.

1.1 Backdrop: Overview of the Longitudinal Study

Our original longitudinal inquiry was aimed at gathering an understanding of the complex social realities within an English BL program at a private-for-profit university in Chile. Our research and teaching experience in BL for close to two decades on three continents - Europe, North America and South America, combined with our knowledge of scholarship in the field of e-learning and the broad field of education in general, convinced us that *context is everything* when it comes to innovation and assimilation of new approaches. For it is in the context of formal learning in which technology is deeply embedded, that as Hall (2007, n.p.) points out, people and institutions are mediating "significant changes in the scope and nature of human cognition", and are redefining their roles and sense of selves, their *identities* in this new paradigm of education. We argued in our report of the longitudinal study (Charbonneau-Gowdy and Chavez, 2018) that the combination of rising marketization forces, ideological growth in neoliberalism and interest in digital technology, is having an impact on education at all levels (Duchêne and Heller, 2012). These forces are being played out especially in BL contexts where what it means to be a "good" teacher, "good learner" (De Costa and Norton, 2017), "strong" institutional leader or academic administrator is in flux. Importantly, the identities being mediated by individuals at all these three levels and the actions that they precipitate are inextricably intertwined.

The longitudinal study took place between 2016 and 2018 at a Chilean university. The university forms part of a corporate network of private affiliated universities worldwide – referred to as the Network. Other than an initial Network BL pilot conducted across their universities in Latin America, the study focussed on an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) BL program in one of the universities in the corporate Network – a large, private university in Chile. It is important to point out that the Chilean university functioned according to Network directives and much of the decision-making regarding the BL program offered in Chile was made at the Network level.

The longitudinal study consisted of the following five individual inquiries (see Figure 1):

- A two-stage inquiry into the BL program offered at the Network level across South America (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2017);
- A 6-month inquiry into the coordinators' perspectives and experiences in administering the Chilean private university BL program (Charbonneau-Gowdy and Cechova, 2017) across various campuses of the university;
- A 6-month Action Research with the Director of the BL program and an inquiry into her efforts to incorporate a BL approach in her own teaching (Charbonneau-Gowdy and Frenzel, 2018);
- A study of BL teachers' perspectives teaching in the same BL program (in publication process);

- A 6-month inquiry into the experiences of a small group of adult learners in the BL Chilean program (Chavez, 2018).
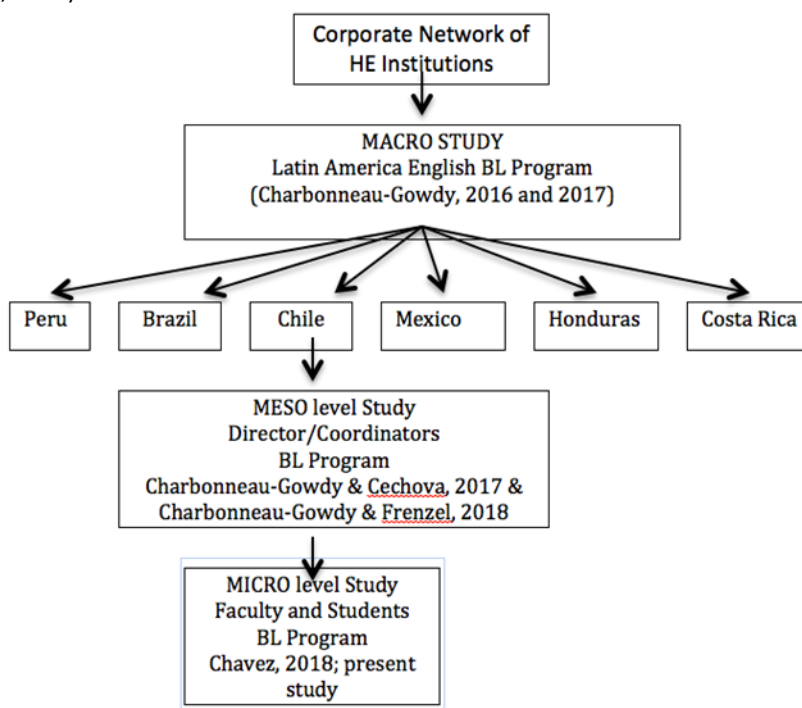

Figure 1: Overview of Levels of Inquiry in the Longitudinal Study

In a later section of this paper, we argue how the identities being mediated at each of these levels impacted the learners at the micro level and their learning within the BL programs. First, we lay the theoretical framework for that discussion.

2. Theoretical Framework

Much of the measure of success of BL programs in the last decade seems to have been tied to the results of student satisfaction surveys (So and Brush, 2008). Yet, as any 'good' educator will attest, a view that conforms with what e-learning scholars are affirming (Moreno, Cavaozotte and Alves, 2016), a far more telling and valuable way to measure learning in these spaces can be found in examining the behaviours of learners. 'Real' learning, i.e. the kind of learning we as educators should be seeking to inspire in our students, is evidenced by active engagement in the social construction of knowledge, in signs of critical thinking and increasing self-directedness, both online and in the F2F classroom modalities that make up BL programs. Ideally, as Garrison and Kanuka (2004) point out: "A blended learning context can provide the independence and increased control essential to developing critical thinking. Along with the increased control that a blended learning context encourages is a scaffolded acceptance of responsibility for constructing meaning and understanding." (p. 98). In other words, BL contexts can be the ideal place to promote behaviours that are tied to the identity profiles critically needed in the new knowledge economies and in the rapidly evolving demands of the world of work. In traditional contexts, students that excel are those that can reproduce information. Nowadays, it is in the social connectedness of individuals and their ability to think differently and act independently, that they are esteemed both in academic contexts and in the marketplace. Social learning technologies tied to BL programs are an ideal vehicle for developing such social identities and capabilities, but only if individuals choose to invest in taking advantage of such opportunities.

Our preoccupation with identity and a socio-psychological perspective of learning contexts particularly in our research of BL contexts has been to a large degree influenced by the seminal work of Norton (2013) and the extensive research it has spawned in SL education, the field wherein our research lies. We have assumed this theoretical perspective, believing strongly that learning, digitally supported or not, is primarily a sociocultural activity and that adding digital technology to the process is ultimately direction-changing in terms of how individuals build their subjectivities. Both Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Feenberg's (2008) critical

postmodern theory of technology as socially constructed practices-in-action remind us that learners' identities are mediated in BL settings and that there are both external and internal forces that influence that mediation.

Norton (2013) explains that learners invest in active learning when they engage with others to co-construct knowledge, with the expectation that they will acquire a broad range of symbolic and material resources by doing so – for example, accreditation, greater knowledge, social status and increased competencies. Their investment is contingent on the dynamic negotiation of power in the various fields, including HE institutions in which they find themselves (Norton, 2013). It is these conditions of power that can debilitate or promote learners to engage in learning opportunities. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1991), Norton breaks down the typical dichotomy between labelling learners as motivated or not motivated and instead uses the construct of investment to explain the struggles that learners face in deciding to engage in learning opportunities with others. Many examples in scholarship, as is the case in our institution in Chile, describe lackluster student performance, passive learners and disappointing success rates characterizing BL programs. These conditions, as seen through the lens of identity theory indicate that the contexts of learning are not conducive to empowering learners to develop agency in their learning and to assume self-directed behaviours (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p.37). The relations of power that are preventing this development must be understood in order to be dismantled and for learners to become empowered to take on the identities and agency that most educational institutions are promoting, at least in their policy statements, for their students.

Another view of engagement that helps us to explain the dynamic willingness of learners to exploit opportunities for interactively co-constructing knowledge online is one proposed by Fredericks, Blumenfield and Paris (2004). Although their research is conducted primarily in a school context, the concept of engagement that they describe resembles in many ways that of investment and is useful for our purposes. As with the construct of investment, they argue that the nature of learner engagement is tied closely to contextual factors. They distinguish three, at times overlapping types of engagement: *behavioural*, *emotional* and *cognitive*. Behavioural engagement is categorized as conduct that reflects interest, adherence to requirements and persistence. In a BL scenario, students could be considered behaviourly engaged if they showed enthusiasm for the course, both in class and online by completing assignments, asking questions and maintaining interest until the end of the course. Emotional engagement is described as the presence or absence of anxiety, a demonstration of feelings of belonging to the class community and happiness to be involved. In a BL scenario, emotional engagement might be displayed by students' active involvement with others both in class, during group work and through open and candid online discussion as well as a generally positive outlook about participating in the activities. Finally cognitive engagement can be explained as investment in opportunities to learn, self-regulate and being strategic. In a BL scenario, students who go beyond what is asked and for example seek opportunities and information online to increase their capabilities and knowledge and to share those gains with others would be an example of this type of engagement.

As alluded to above, despite the move by HE institutions, at least at the discourse and policy level, to move from traditional pedagogical practice to more engaged learning and innovative teaching approaches and modalities, progress has been slow (Andres, 2017). Declines in student performance and enrolment, uncommitted learners and high dropout rates have been on the agendas of most universities and colleges worldwide, including in Chile, over the last few years (OECD, 2013). The temptation to see BL as a method of moving away from purely F2F programs, with their stubbornly unchangeable information transfer-based teaching/learning, i.e. lecture-based practices, towards what appears to be a forum for active, engaged and creative teaching and learning, has been an attractive alternative for many institutions, particularly with an eye on the bottom line. Yet, in many cases these aspirations have led to disappointment when it comes to capturing learner attention and engagement (Vaughan, 2007).

Three recent studies in particular that examined the issue of student engagement in BL programs inform this report. The first is by Vanslambrouck et al. (2018) who conducted a qualitative study to uncover the cognitive engagement habits of sixteen working adults in Belgium enrolled in a BL program. Extensive interview data revealed little in the way of self- regulated behaviours on the part of the students. Not surprisingly, the same participants requested more involvement by the professor to act as a role model in online forums. In other words, one can assume from this request that there was a lack of community building strategies on the part of the teacher of the course - those kinds of strategies that affirm the value of each individual in the community of learners and thus is a means of identity empowerment. Like the findings in our inquiry at the micro level

and with faculty, their actions had important implications for the investment of learners in the interactive online forum.

Another study conducted in a BL context that helped in the building of a case for the effect of contextual issues on learner participation online was that of Van Laer and Elen (2019). In this case as well, the online cognitive engagement of participants in the study were examined, but this time using a quantitative methodology. One hundred and fifty-one students, again in a Belgian university, were involved in the study. The participants were divided into three groups – two receiving guided support, which were referred to as "*cues for calibration*" whereas the other group did not. The authors found that learners did benefit in terms of their self-directedness and goal-directed behaviours when cues for calibration were provided online through functional and cognitive validity feedback from others, both faculty and tutors. While this study does not specifically refer to the interactive behaviours of the participants with peers and teachers that we consider crucial to learning, we can assume that the "*cues for calibration*" from others were digitally supported and thus were instrumental in the changes that were recorded.

In a third study in BL conducted in Canada by Vaughan and Cloutier (2017), the authors employed survey and interviews in their data collection to reveal three salient strategies that could enhance learner interaction and participation online:

- the presence of online office hours for student and faculty interactions using web-based conferencing tools,
- peer support and mentoring made available with the use of social media for assignment completion;
- social media applications provided to promote and communicate student-led academic and social events.

Each of these findings supports our argument that learners' online interaction is contingent on the importance that is placed on building community by the coordinated efforts of faculty, academic and institutional leaders. These efforts in turn provide a climate that is enriching and supportive in terms of learner identity and knowledge mediation.

Armed with this theory and literature, in the next section we provide further details about the longitudinal study and its findings. This information will serve as a lens through which we critically discuss the contextual influences on learners in our institution's BL programs and support out aim to develop and propose a model for assessing our own HE context, and perhaps others as well, with an eye to adding to the dialogue on improving conditions for promoting learner engagement in BL.

3. Methodological Details of the Multi-level Research Design

As explained above and illustrated in Figure 1, the longitudinal study and its findings that form the backdrop to our model consisted of five inquiries. In this section, we categorize the inquiries into the three levels of the institution – *macro*, *meso* and *micro*. We describe salient features of each of these contexts and how they contributed to the overall climate and our findings.

3.1 Macro –level Context

The original impetus to offer a English Language Learning (ELL) BL program in the Chilean university originated from above – from Network decision makers in the parent company office. In 2016, the Network Parent Institution decided to pilot a 10-week distance language-learning program across Latin America to over 500 employees and faculty working in their affiliated universities on the continent. The first of our five inquiries that formed part of our longitudinal study was a two-stage examination of the experiences and perspectives of both learners (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2017), and subsequently teachers (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2018) involved in the initial pilot program. This research was instrumental in preparing for our follow-up Chilean-based inquiries for two reasons: 1) the results provided *macro*-level insight into the goals and directives of head office decision makers regarding how they envisioned BL programs to operate across the institutions and 2) the findings offered a glimpse into the identity positions that teachers, learners and administrators were expected to take up in the BL programs at the lower institutional level, including in the Chilean one in which we work. In Table 1 and Table 2, we summarize findings from the 2-stage macro-level inquiry.

Table 1: Findings and Results of Macro Level Inquiry – Learners

Disturbing Findings	Results
Pre-set one-size fits all platform with materials based on traditional pedagogy;	Many learners prevented from exploiting the professional development opportunity and from adopting 21st century skills
Less than effective testing materials – considered « a joke » by some BL teachers (Interview, January, 2017)	Many learner participants revert to traditional learning practices without scaffolding to help change their practices
Lack of technological infrastructure support offered to learners from some universities (eg. in Chile)	
Traditional teaching practices assumed by some pilot teachers in the program.	Failure of the program in some cases to promote identity empowerment; instead, learners display a lack of confidence and hesitancy to be interactive social learners

Table 2: Findings and Results of *Macro* Level Inquiry – Teachers

Findings – mixed messages	Results
Strong support from administrators to provide open communication and involvement of faculty	Willingness and openness to try to new approaches –active promoters of e-learning practices.
Feelings of being appreciated by administration: "I know that I have that backup" (Interview, February 2017)	Lack of control of materials destabilize many instructors in terms of their confidence and in their openness to adopting social learning practices
Teachers "allowed" little control over testing and program materials – for example, the ILMS learning platform & traditional testing materials	Confused and fearing reprisal some teachers resign themselves to disregard task-based constructivist teaching (approaches that promote deductive learning, agentive learners and social interaction) and revert to traditional practices
Lack of faith on the part of faculty in the restricting, restrictive and traditional nature of course materials	Disempowered instructor identities, forced to 'settle for less' and forgo principles and goals as effective 21st century educators

We concluded in our investigation of the Network's *macro* level BL pilot that the Network decision makers were well-intentioned trailblazers in offering such an innovative large-scale program in South America. For many who took part, the pilot program represented a unique opportunity in the South American context to assume empowered positions as speakers of English and the personal and professional advantages that accompanied that ability. On the other hand, elements of the program structure reflecting head-office decision-making detracted from exploiting this opportunity. Our study's findings in both the learner inquiry (Table 1) and teacher inquiry (Table 2) uncovered examples of some questionable decision-making on the part of the Network. The results In terms of the repercussions for learner and teacher identities suggested reasons for the lackluster attainment of otherwise noble Program goals to provide quality 21st century learning opportunities through BL. Indeed, although attitudes remained positive about BL, learning outcomes based on Network-wide test results were generally somewhat disappointing.

3.2 Meso-level Context

The second and third inquiries in Figure 1, (Charbonneau-Gowdy & Cechova, 2017; Charbonneau-Gowdy & Frenzel, 2018), that form a further part of this report involve the *meso* level context of the program administration – both the coordinators and Director of the BL program in Chile. In both inquiries, conducted between August, 2016 and January, 2018, based on a qualitative Action Research approach to data collection, similar findings were uncovered (see Table 3), this time with data from interviews, field notes and observations collected over the overlapping inquiry periods.

Table 3: Findings and Results of *Meso* Level Inquiry – Coordinators and Director

Findings	Results
No one had experience with that. Nobody. Nobody who was in charge, no teachers, no managers. I even think nobody in Lawrence [a pseudonym for Network) (Interview, January 30, 2018).	Director and coordinator ill-prepared and ill-equipped for assuming the roles as leaders in a BL program Academic leaders assume disadvantaged and uncomfortable positions in terms of mentoring others and taking on an "expert guide" role
Administrators struggling with "letting go" of traditional practices and adopting more learner-centred, dialogic teaching practices in their own classrooms	Academic leaders forced to adopt identities as "less-valued" and accepting lack of control over positive changes to learning results
I try to do my best. I spend so much time but I don't feel valued (Interview, October, 2016)	
Evidence of high stress-levels in teaching and administering of their daily professional practice	Disempowered in their working lives Displayed Identities as "unconvinced doubters" rather than embracers of a BL modality.

Despite the directive from above to put courses online, these administrators found themselves in the undesirable and awkward position of leading a BL program to which they felt little in terms of conviction that it would be successful. To carefully guide other teachers to adopt these practices in a BL setting was seen by each of these *meso* level administrators, to be somewhat beyond their present capabilities. In this disadvantaged and uncomfortable position, the Director and coordinators candidly shared that they had misgivings about the success of the BL approach to learning. It is little surprise that the programs they administered, i.e. the learning and teaching at the *micro* level, were fraught with problems, both technical and pedagogical.

3.3 Micro-level Context

The studies at the micro level are those listed as fourth and fifth in Figure 1 above. Some contextual information about both faculty and students is important at this point. Professors in the university, especially in the ELL BL program, are primarily part-time, who, in order to make a decent living wage, scramble for teaching positions in the cities in which they are located, sometimes even among several other public and private universities. Their jobs in the university hinge on their availability to accept to teach courses with sometimes little advance knowledge and/or planning, and generally with no employee benefits, and in some cases a lower than acceptable wage. Many spend exceptionally long hours in the classroom - up to 40 hours a week of HE teaching, which defies finding time for preparation and/or reflection, let alone professional development.

The student population in the institution comes from a mixed background both academic and socio-economic. Generally, students and their families assume a significant financial burden to attend the university. Indeed, many students are full time students, and simultaneously, full or part-time employees of local businesses. Students enrolled in the university are registered in majors, or "schools", from which they hope to attain their professional degrees. English Language Learning courses (ELL) are a prerequisite for graduation and for many, an undesirable one. The academic culture, as in most institutions in the country, is reflective of the Chilean culture at large – heavily divided socio-economically, a stubborn resilience to maintaining the status quo in the face of change and an inordinate reliance on standards and testing as an indication of academic success and self-worth.

In the teacher inquiry (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2018), a qualitative case study was conducted between August 2017 and January 2018 (Table 4). Seventy-seven instructors were asked to participate in our qualitative study. Anonymity was assured and strict ethical guidelines were adhered to in an effort to encourage transparency on the part of the participants. Forty-two teachers completed the questionnaire; nineteen attended online individual 35-45 minute individual interviews, twelve females and seven males of a mixed range of teaching experience. The interviews totalled eleven hours approximately.

The qualitative case study inquiry into learner perceptions of the BL program (Table 5) took place between August and November 2017 (Chavez, 2018). It was conducted with nine students enrolled in one of the BL courses for evening students - five females and three males aged 18 to 35. Four of the participants were unemployed, and five had full time jobs; several were married and, in some cases, had children. Of these initial nine students, three females and one male participated in interviews. Primary data sources included: observations, field notes, a questionnaire, and focus group and individual interviews. One of the co-authors of this paper was the teacher of this group of students. Her stance as an insider in the inquiry, with several years of experience as a BL teacher in the program offered an advantageous perspective in analyzing the data that emerged.

Table 4: Findings and Results of *Micro* Level Inquiry – Teachers

Findings	Results
I feel like I can't shine. (Interview, Dec. 2017). Teachers report unreliable and unstable access to LMS, large mixed ability classes, obligatory poor quality materials.	Teachers voice a sense a lack of control over the quality of one's teaching
I'm an online police. (Interview, Dec. 2017). Teachers describe struggle to follow the directives of the program for keeping track of online activity, apply tests and grades.	Forced to assume identities that do not conform with their visions of being a 'good' teacher
Evidence of compliance by teachers for fear of not being offered further employment	A climate of fear and instability leads many teachers to adopt disempowered and insecure identities as professionals
There are some islands. (Interview, Dec. 2017). Lack of community building and support among faculty and training organized by administrators.	In the absence of community support and training many teachers position themselves in a disadvantaged position in BL context
Results from highly rigid, complex and burdensome testing systems plus criticism from Head Office "experts" reflect their poor teaching approaches	Feelings of being portrayed as incompetent by *meso* and *macro* level academic "experts"

Table 5: Findings and Results of *Micro* Level Inquiry – Learners

Findings	Results
My learning is only 30% on the Platform but 70% in class. (Personal Communication, Oct. 2017). Students conflicted about whether the effort online is worthy of investment and time compared to other priorities.	Learners question the value in terms of symbolic and material resources of investing in online activity
It is very important that there is a teacher and other people. (Field Notes, Nov. 2017) Students recognize the value of social learning.	Some learners express a sense of being deprived of access to social interaction online
The platform comes from abroad…here in Chile it is not normal. (Interview, Oct. 2017). Lack of relevance of materials is destabilizing for students.	Foreign content in international programs leads to marginalized learner identities.
I feel I know nothing… I recognize my weaknesses…this has made me depressed...I close myself (Interview, Oct. 2017).	Course designs that are heavily information-based and grade –driven result in disempowering a majority of learners.
We pushed each other…a different pressure but not bad pressure. We worked hard. (Interview, Nov., 2017)	Transformative potential of social learning empowers and leads to persistence and self-directedness
I did not have the habit [to write in the online forums] (Interview, Nov. 2017). For these students, social learning must be a learned behaviour.	Social encouragement and ongoing community building are prerequisites for learners to adopt engaged behaviours

For the teachers in this inquiry, program conditions prevented many from working towards an ideal identity as a teacher and instead were forced to fall back to traditional roles as gatekeepers and information distributers. These conditions included: overly large classes, mixed ability students, LMS platform technical issues, a highly complex, structured and burdensome course design and testing system, inadequate materials, a lack of training and inexistence of a strong faculty supporting community. Based on the evidence that was uncovered, most teachers in the program felt forced to adopt passive and disempowered identities as teaching professionals – all the more so as they recognized the precariousness of their employment in the institution.

In the case of the learners, the in-depth qualitative evidence suggests that while this particular group of learners generally recognized the value of learning of English to their present material and symbolic capital, the BL program failed to deliver the tools and opportunities that led them to invest in engaging both online and in F2F classes. Findings indicate that their lack of engagement can be tied to elements of the course design

that marginalized and discouraged many learners from actively investing. These elements included: insufficient opportunities to socially co-construct knowledge with others, a lack of expert guidance for developing the habits and skills that would help these particular learners to excel in the new modality and materials that were challenging and pertinent to their realities. Instead of assuming self-directed and empowered identities as learners, for the most part the majority of students displayed passive, anxious and non-committed behaviours with regard to learning language. One thus could see little hope for these individuals to make significant progress in meeting their language learning goals using a BL modality, or in achieving the student profile goals that the policies of the university aspire to promote.

4.   Discussion - a wider view

In this section, we return to the questions that guided the overview we sought in conducting the longitudinal study and discuss the implications of our findings for building a model to guide future BL programs in this HE institution setting.

RQ1: *The nature of identities at all levels of the BL program*

In the individual cohorts of the longitudinal study that we have described above, there is a clear indication of identity issues that existed at each level of the institution.
- a leadership identity characterized by top-down policy making and whose unilateral decision making often conflicts with its aims for promoting quality and innovative teaching and learning;
- a program administration forced to accept a disadvantaged position in their academic leadership identity having being placed in a learn-as-we-go scenario that is at odds with its desire to fulfill its mandate to offer strong guidance and support;
- a teaching faculty that is marginalized in terms of its decision-making and power to apply, share and strengthen their 'good' teaching practices in a challenging cultural reality and with the ever-changing demands of a BL modality for which they have little or no training;
- a context where learners with varying forms of capital are positioned as the 'real' victims amidst the "systemic patterns of control" (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 36) existing within the program. As a teacher in the program, Anna remarked: "*Here students are not permitted to learn, they are permitted to pass the course*." (Interview, December, 2017).

In this same context, it has been often remarked that students are lazy, irresponsible, dependent and excessively grade-driven. Indeed, there are many stories of payment for online work being proffered by students in the BL courses (Personal Communication, July, 2018). Many in the institution choose to explain away such learner identities as culturally based and immutable. From our view, these descriptions reflect and at the same time run counter to behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement characteristics (Fredericks, 2004) that we as stakeholders in education aspire to in BL and that in our minds are a true measure of its success.

Q2: The impact of the multi-level institutional identity construction on learner participation and investment in online social interaction and engagement
It is not surprising to find evidence that the identities of students are misaligned with the learner profile that the BL programs are meant to inspire and promote in our institution. The proof of this disjuncture is in the all too vivid examples cited above of students anxious, unwilling and unknowing of how to invest in actively engaging in online activity and interaction. For most students, the risks are too great. The changes to be made are too deep. In Darvin and Norton's (2015, p. 37) words the "wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power" that could result from engaging and interacting online, is seen as untenable especially given the identities as learners that they mediate or more precisely that powerful and often invisible forces have constructed for them as students in the institution and indeed historically in their academic settings.

We argue that viewing the wider context of this BL setting through the lens of identity, and basing this discussion on the findings serves to clarify the contextual elements at all levels that impacted the unsuccessful engagement of learners in our study in online collaborative interaction. Through this wider lens, our data clearly indicates a context in which institutional leaders have neglected to see a) the importance of their collaborative and informed decision-making with regard to content materials, technologies and course design; b) the essential need to empower their academic leaders and most importantly, faculty through professional

development, ongoing expert support and security of employment and c) the detriments involved in imposing an invasive, highly structured and of questionable value quality assurance and testing climate. A sense of strong community building is obviously absent in this context - the same kind of community building we so strongly wish to promote among learners online.

Unravelling the forces existing within a BL program that counteract what we hope for in terms of goals is an invitation to reflect on transformational solutions. Indeed, with this understanding come challenges to change the conditions that allow the disadvantaged positions in which learners are often placed. What can guide those changes? In Figure 2, we provide a visual of what that model for the changes that we are proposing might look like. Unlike the prescriptive and all too often lengthy checklists of best practices, albeit well-intentioned, that exist in much of the scholarship on BL aimed at improving learner engagement (El-Deghaidy and Nouby, 2008; So and Brush, 2008), this model we believe serves as a wider and more powerful lens on which to base BL program decisions at all levels. Through the lens of an identity-based model we envision stakeholders at all levels through such an exercise gaining a deeper understanding of how each of the strategic decisions made or actions taken in designing and delivering BL programs impact the identity of others and especially those of learners. Simplistic in appearance but powerful in its potential outcome, the model requires questions being posed and reflective action at each level about the consequences of our decision making in BL programs.
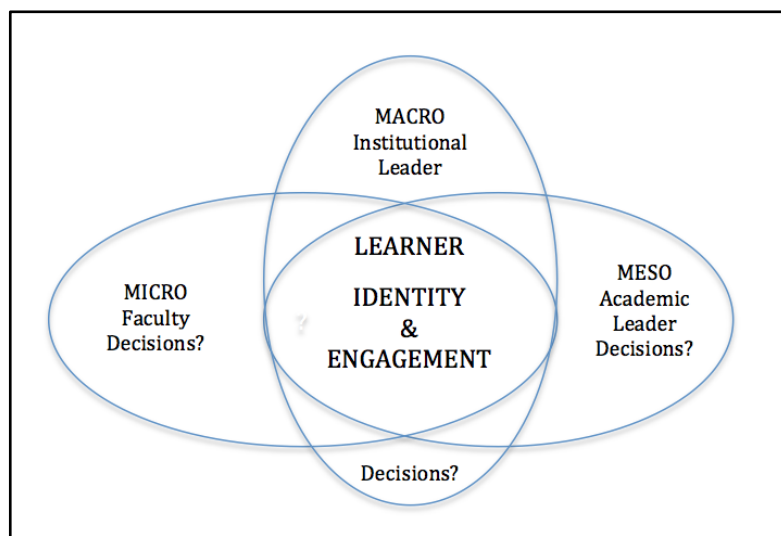
Figure 2: 3M Model for Promoting Active Online Learning

Will the choices we make at each level lead to the empowerment of learners and allow learners to become behaviourly, emotionally and cognitively (Fredericks, 2004) engaged in BL spaces? Will our BL programs respond to the current primary goal of education to empower individuals to direct their own learning across multiple settings and throughout their lifetimes (Sharples, 2000)? Or, will our decisions in terms of technology, content, teaching, faculty training, program administering, design and testing, to name a few, position learners as disadvantaged and drive a wedge in their sense of being able and/or willing to take advantage of opportunities to build community and learn collaboratively with others through interacting online, as is so often the case nowadays? We are encouraged by the groundbreaking research that is beginning to appear in e-learning scholarship, highlighting the importance of connecting identity theory to our understanding of online spaces (Fong, Ling et al, 2016; Dudek and Heiser, 2017) and our decision making. Much more scholarship is called for given the evidence that learners' lack of engagement online continues to be a critical weakness in BL that is still epidemic and widespread. From our perspective, avoiding the questions that our model raises spells further years of disappointing outcomes in BL and its continued failure to lead to the major transformations in education to which many of us in the field of e-learning have long envisioned.

5. Conclusion

"A clear vision and strong support are necessities when moving to the blended environment. Only then can this modality not just succeed but become a transformational force…" (Moskal et al., p.20)

Vision and support are both reflective of human interaction and its connection to transformation and also of effective educational and community-minded organizations. In moving towards that vision and support, it is worth keeping in mind what the celebrated economist Henry Mintzberg (2017) has cautioned - that making greater strides in the challenges that currently face education, and we include here BL education, will require a perspective of it as a *human practice* rather than a science. Reporting on the findings of our longitudinal study, we have adopted that human practice perspective. We have examined individuals in BL practice through the lens of identity theory and focussed on the kinds of identities that are being mediated at all levels of the BL program. In this paper, we have emphasized a direct connection between a) institutional BL operational decision-making and b) the disturbing reluctance of students to engage online with others in learning communities – communities that are fundamental for acquiring skills and knowledge. In our view, abundant and compelling findings from across the institution at every level strongly suggest an agenda for change at each of these levels in the delivery of BL programs. The model we provide (Figure 2) hopefully will serve as a heuristic, not a perfect tool in any sense but a workable guide for such change in our institution and perhaps in others. While many of us in education immersed in this digitalized age share a common goal to promote and extend the boundaries of technology in the development of quality 21st century learning opportunities, especially as learning moves increasingly online, we believe it will take systematic research and evaluation at all levels of our institutions with an eye on the sociocultural nature of our human practices to ensure these goals are soon met.

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