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## Blended learning for non-studio courses: Interior architecture student experiences

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### Abstract

Despite these huge efforts in university teaching and learning, still the fact remains that in design education context students have difficulty in being motivated and self-directed in non-studio courses. Thus, the study analyzed the effectiveness of a blended learning to contribute design students' engagement with non-studio courses. It also investigated how blended learning could develop a responsive and social learning environment, while increasing the quality and flexibility of educational content of the delivered module. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used to obtain data on students' attitudes. The results revealed that the computer-mediated learning influenced positively student ability to integrate module knowledge to design studios and improvement of academic outcomes.

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*Keywords:* Blending learning; a responsive and social learning environment; non-studio course; interior architecture

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### 1. Introduction

Blending learning is becoming increasingly important in higher education in an attempt to meet the changing needs of students and accomplish course learning objectives more successfully. With the move towards a more learner-centred and blended educational experience in universities in Turkey, as elsewhere, students' learning become more dynamic, interactive and motivating. Despite these huge efforts in university teaching and learning, still the fact remains that in design education context students have difficulty in being motivated and self-directed in non-studio courses. As reported by many studies, their individual responsibility for learning is also likely to be low in those courses. In that sense, the study analyzed the effectiveness of a blended learning to contribute design students' engagement and motivation with non-studio courses. It also investigated how blended learning activities could develop a responsive and social learning environment, while increasing the quality and flexibility of educational content of the delivered module.

There are many definitions of blended learning, which is also called as hybrid or mixed learning. According to Garrison and Kanuka (2004), blended learning is a combination of face-to-face (f2f) classes with online teaching.

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While some studies define courses as blended courses, in which their substantial portion (24%-75%) is delivered online, others consider blended learning as any combination of f2f and online instruction. Within this respect, the success of blended learning is not solely based on a simple integration of class-room teaching with digital media (De George-Walker and Keeffe, 2010). Since the use of blended learning resources may produce changes in learning patterns and practices (López-Pérez, Pérez-López and Rodríguez-Ariza, 2011), its implications in critical education contexts should be analysed, such as interior design context, which is based on design studio education as a core process of ‘learning by doing’ (Schon, 1981) and embraces numerous forms of (i) representations, such as: visual, verbal, tactile and written; (ii) assessment types, such as design reviews, juries and studioworks; and (iii) teaching methods, such as desk/individual crits, group tutorials and lectures. Different than other disciplines, it is rich in teaching, learning and communication potential and thus, represents a series of advantages to combine face-to-face classes with e-learning modules, where both the instructors and students could enjoy the possibilities of new information and communication technologies (ICTs).

## **2. Educational Context: Interior Design Education**

In interior design education it is essential to gain knowledge on technical, social cultural and technological issues along studio teaching. Design studios are assumed as the core of the curriculum in interior design education, where designing is a matter of analysing, synthesising, evaluating and presenting ideas of a creative solution (Demirkan and Afacan, 2012). Despite the huge efforts in design teaching and learning, still the fact remains that in design education context students have difficulty in being motivated and self-directed in non-studio courses. As reported by many studies, their individual responsibility for learning is also likely to be low in those courses. According to Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence in Carnegie Mellon University (2012), there are three main issues: (i) students do not see the relevance of the material to their studio practice; (ii) students have a naïve conceptualization of creativity; (iii) students are not confident about the skills required work in non-studio classes. Additionally, interior design in its otherness or difference to other design disciplines makes the learning process more complex by requiring a detailed level of the following concepts: furniture selection and layout, interior material and finishes, decorative elements, colour theory, furniture design, fabric selection (Gurel and Potthoff, 2006). Thus, in recent decades, many universities and interior architecture schools have adapted an active learning strategy to improve their education. Active learning is an appropriate context, (i) where students could formulate their own goals and pursue them; (ii) which provides an increased feeling of autonomy and belonging through self directed learning, working in small groups, group discussions and classroom presentations, particularly in problem-based environments; (iii) where students are engaged more extensively in a particular topic. Within this framework, the present study focuses on the active learning strategy combined with blended learning and investigates how it affects the academic achievement and learning process of interior design students in a non-studio course.

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1. The Settings and Participants*

The institution, where the study took place, is Bilkent University, Department of Interior Architecture and Environmental Design. In the curriculum of the department, “IAED 342 Building Performance” module with a focus on sustainable indoor environmental quality is one of the non-studio courses, which is offered as a must course for the third year interior architecture students in every spring semester. Within the framework of the study, this course was redesigned in the Spring Semester 2010-2011 and a total of 80 third year interior architecture students were enrolled to the course (11 male, 69 female). The reasons to choose the module for the study are as follows: (1) examinations of course evaluation forms for the module in the last 10 years showed that most of the students were not engaged with the course content and could not stimulate interest in the subject; (2) they had difficulty to link the gained knowledge into their studio projects, although they found the topics quite important for the interior design practice; and (3) the course gpa is usually low and the students were passive learners, who just

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