

The flipside of Blended Learning

Summary: While blended learning and the lifelong learning sector may appear to be a good fit, there is reason to hesitate before uncritically embracing a blended learning approach. This article argues that blended learning requires skills on the part of the learner, which they may not have developed, and suggests that not all forms of blended learning are necessarily innovative. Furthermore, technology enhanced learning is often considered a cheaper option to face-to-face, but high levels of teacher input are required to produce a quality experience. The article argues for a learning design approach to planning blended learning and a realistic appraisal of the resources it requires.

Blended learning appears well suited to the needs of the lifelong learner. The uncertainties of the job market within the constantly shifting global economic landscape have led commentators to assert that “students currently pursuing higher vocational education will have professions that do not yet exist” (Cremers, Wals, Wesselink, Nieveen, & Mulder, 2013, p. 208). In this insecure environment, programmes that allow students to work and study at the same time have “an expanding role to fulfil” (Aggarwal, 2008, p. 283). Even better if they allow for an integration of working and learning, to create “a hybrid learning configuration as a social practice situated at the interface of school and workplace” (Cremers et al., 2013, p. 208).

Blended learning – in which aspects of online and traditional, face-to-face learning and teaching activities are combined – could be the solution. Blended learning could take the best from both face-to-face and online learning models to keep learners connected to their studies whilst immersed in the workplace, or allow for learning opportunities in balance with domestic responsibilities. However, while blended learning is regularly associated with pedagogical innovation (Gerbic, 2011), there may be reasons to hesitate before uncritically embracing a blended model for lifelong learning. This article will explore some of the more questionable aspects of blended learning practice and argue that only by careful design, planning and appraisal will a blended approach be an effective and sustainable option for lifelong learning.

Self-regulated lifelong blended learning

Kristensson Ugglå (2007, 216) argued while most people may “imagine lifelong learning as a free offer, as an invitation to a process of cultivation”, in reality we are forced to adopt the identity of the lifelong learner if we wish to remain adaptable to vicissitudes of global workplace. According to Fejes (2008, p. 87) the lifelong learner was thus “constructed by and is constructing a neo-liberal governmentality”, a process of transformation of subjects into educable, responsabilized citizens by the state. Within this context, institutions of formal education such as Universities have expanded to become sites of “biopolitical production, where students come not merely to earn a degree in anticipation of

landing a job, but also, to learn to configure and manage them-selves” (El-Shall, 2014, p. 601).

Technologically rich learning environments often stress their capacity for supporting self-regulated learning, as students manage their freedom to learn in more flexible ways and take an active part in the co-construction of knowledge in online discussion groups and wiki activities (Sølvberg & Rismark, 2012; Su & Beaumont, 2010). Yet, El-Shall (2014, 602) suggested that the link to neo-liberalism of the emergence of self-regulated learning is clear, when “the students are responsible for other students’ grades and when they are responsible for regulating instructors through evaluations”, arguing that this works ‘to serve corporate interest, but not to improve the quality of education itself’. It is for this reason that she is critical of the emergence of for-profit Universities specialising in online and blended approaches. The emphasis on meticulously rule-bound online interactions between tutors and students (for example, in managing each other’s roles within learning teams) is, she argues, to prepare learner identities for the contemporary workplace rather than for learning per se.

Do the learners have the skills?

While the neo-liberal agenda may demand self-regulated learning, it is apposite to question whether all students are equipped with the necessary skills to learn in online or blended classrooms. There is evidence that while students may have a developed facility with the use of social media outside of an educational context, their use of the same technologies for learning is limited (Kennedy et al., 2010; Lim et al., 2010; Selwyn, 2008, 2010, 2011b). Kennedy & Judd (2011: 127) showed that, irrespective of students’ “near-ubiquitous” use of web-based communication and search tools “students are challenged by *scholarly* information seeking at University”. Kennedy & Judd (2011: 131) argued that, contemporarily, there is a greater need “for educators to assist students in honing their information literacy skills”. Knowing how to use a search engine is not equivalent to knowing how to identify and evaluate specialized sources of communication. That task necessitates a high degree of critical digital literacy.

What educational institutions do with the web is different from its uses outside of education. Crook (2011) identified several levels of disparity between the traditional practices of educational institutions and the recreational uses of technology. Crook (2011) suggested that processes of inquiry, collaboration, publication and literacy were different inside and outside school contexts. For example, the outcomes of inquiry need to be further systematised and documented within a school context, while there is no pressure to do this out of school. In recreational contexts, collaboration is informal and characterised by “evolving co-ordinations among peers, whereby a cumulative shared perspective is allowed to grow” (Crook, 2011: 16), whereas in school, collaborations are much more goal-defined and are structured towards “negotiated consensus” (16). Web-based publication outside of school involves conversational posts within personal communities. In contrast, students lose control over their audiences in school, and the culture of camaraderie is replaced by one of assessment. Literacy, which is orientated to multimodality outside of school,

becomes much more focused on text and oral fluency within the educational context. Crook (2011) argued that consideration of the context of the technologies is vital to understand what can be done with them and what skills need to be developed in relation to them.

Even outside of education, the creative and productive use of social media may involve a much narrower section of society than the celebration of co-creation might suggest. For example, Selwyn (2011: 7) argued that there was “little evidence that social media applications are being used by the majority of users in especially innovative, participatory, interactive or even sociable ways”. This is a far cry from the much vaulted new “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006: 3).

It would appear necessary for students to have the opportunity to develop skills to participate in digital culture in both learning and recreational contexts. In the context of education, Lim et al. (2010) suggested that this would inevitably involve a shift in the identity of learner and teacher: students become knowledge builders and teachers become co-learners. However, this shift is not easy to achieve. Lim et al. (2010) used the example of a wiki, an easily editable website used as a collaboration platform in educational contexts, to show that students favour co-operation over collaboration approach, sticking to clearly defined tasks, and being hesitant to probe or challenge each others’ ideas. For Lim et al. (2010: 214) the solution rests in changing cultural beliefs about learning so that “learners use technology for knowledge construction as opposed to instructors using technology for knowledge transmission”. The research indicates, therefore, that students need to be taught both how to learn with digital technology, and how to be creative, on their own terms, with technology outside of learning contexts.

Don't believe the hype: is it really innovation?

It is also to be questioned how much of blended learning is really innovative. Gerbic's (2011) review of the literature on teachers’ views of blended learning found that there were widely varying levels of integration between elements of face-to-face and online learning. This is critical, because as Gerbic (2011: 230) argued, the “need for integration is one of the most critical issues in blended learning”, without which the approach to learning cannot be said to be “blended” at all but rather “dissonant” or “disintegrated” (Gonzales, cited in Gerbic, 2011: 225-6).

Developments hailed as blended learning innovations can sometimes be seen as the repackaging of older retrograde pedagogies with technology added on. The ‘flipped classroom’ concept is arguably one of these. If traditional tutor-centric lectures are simply video recorded to be watched by students outside of the classroom, this does nothing in itself to create more active learning opportunities for students. This kind of learning experience needs to be designed with care, otherwise the learning content is simply transferred online to compete with many other stimuli for the students’ attention. Even the most dedicated self-regulated learner might struggle to prefer a badly recorded ‘talking head’ lecture over the myriad of distractions available online. It is at times like these that being in the physical presence of the teacher might just help a lot.

The 'flipped classroom' concept may be just an over-publicised version of more considered blended pedagogies that the hype obscures. Nevertheless, 'buzz words' such as these are often the ones that capture the imaginations of those that make policy decisions about education. Nothing can illustrate this more effectively than the way the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) phenomenon has spread throughout the education world. Yet, the emergence of what became known as the xMOOCs, i.e. those based on traditional University courses, were pedagogically speaking, a backwards step in online course design. Combining video lectures with quizzes and unstructured discussion forums, early xMOOCs ignored the pedagogy of online learning and went ahead regardless. Despite their popularity, evidenced by enrolment figures in tens – even hundreds – of thousands, the low completion figures (percentages in single figures) have been a source of concern (Parr, 2013). The bigger problem, however, is, as Laurillard (2014) pointed out, that MOOCs in no way solve any of the world's pressing educational problems. Instead they provide education for the wealthiest and most qualified population for free. It is significant that the typical MOOC student already has a degree (if not two or three), and for that reason possesses the skills for self-regulated learning that a MOOC requires. Laurillard (2014) argued that the methods used in a MOOC were "not sophisticated enough" (para 9) for teaching a broader range of students, even if continuing professional development (CPD) courses aimed at their teachers might possibly work.

Sustainable futures for blended learning

The excessive numbers of students on a MOOC has meant that personalised communication with a tutor is impossible. This may make it look like the technology is replacing the need for teachers. However, this is far from being the case. In many ways, online and blended learning may require more teacher input than the traditional face-to-face approach. In order to design effective online teaching and learning activities it is necessary to understand subject content, pedagogy and technology. This may require highly skilled input from a new set of online learning professionals such as learning designers as well as extensive collaborations between subject tutors, learning technologists and digital media producers. Even then, the online content still needs to be taught, and moderation of forums or personalised student feedback can take a great deal of skill and many hours of work.

So, while governments and their advisors may be drawn to innovations such as MOOCs to provide CPD to skill the workforce for the globalised economy (BIS, 2013), the cost-effectiveness of such an approach may not be all that it appears. Moreover, adding an online element to traditional delivery may be seen as a cost-cutting measure, since there is a widespread belief that online will be cheaper than face to face (Koenig, 2011). However, there is reason to believe that technology enhanced learning can cost more than other methods (Laurillard, 2006). In the UK, the Government response to recommendations from the Further Education Learning Technology Action Group (FELTAG) has been to mandate "the inclusion in every publicly-funded learning programme from 2015/16 of a 10% wholly-online component, with incentives to increase this to 50% by 2017/2018" (BIS, 2014, p. 16). This represents a massive step-up of

blended provision in the lifelong learning sector within the UK. Such an approach requires a very careful approach to designing the teaching and learning activities as well as an analysis of the costs involved. Without that, such initiatives may turn out to be educationally ineffective or unsustainable in terms of finance or teacher workload. If the success of an approach depends on more tutor hours than an institution has the means or inclination to pay for, then it will not work in the long term. Teaching needs to be resourced.

Concluding thoughts: the importance of learning design

Blended learning can be successful, but only if it is designed with care, and not rushed into without first analysing the associated learning benefits and the time and resources necessary to make them happen. The learner's prior knowledge and skills need to be taken into account when making decisions about what form the learning will take. At the London Knowledge Lab, UCL Institute of Education, we have been developing a set of tools to assist teachers plan for a move to online and blended learning provision. The tools have been developed with input from teachers and are free for the community to use. These are the Learning Designer (available at learningdesigner.org) and the CRAM tool (available at <http://web.lkldev.ioe.ac.uk/cram/index.html>). The Learning Designer is a web-based tool to help in the creation and sharing of learning designs (e.g. blended learning lesson plans) and to support the integration of learning technology. CRAM (the Course Resource Appraisal Model) is a Java based downloadable application that helps analyse the costs and learning benefits of teaching in face-to-face, online or blended modes. Teachers or planners can model the kind of learning experience they envisage and see at a glance what resources will be required to bring it into being. Only a realistic assessment of the time and skill that it takes to teach effectively online will produce high quality blended learning experiences.

These learning design tools help foreground the pedagogy of online or blended approaches by keeping the learner experience at the centre of decisions about teaching with technology. Technology cannot replace the teacher – the teacher needs to design the conditions for learning to take place both when s/he is present and when s/he is not. Blended learning has the potential to play an important role in the lifelong learning sector, but it can only do so if it is designed with the learner in mind.

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