

Using Blended Learning to Accommodate Different Learning Styles

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Introduction

The rapid growth in the use of learning technologies, particularly the use of the Internet and web-based communication, has provided teachers and tutors with many more opportunities to explore the most suitable mix of teaching and learning styles for a given task.

For some time now the Government has encouraged greater adoption of new education technologies, particularly networked technologies, in their drive to expand provision, widen participation and stimulate a greater acceptance of lifelong learning. Certainly Ufi/Learndirect has benefited from this commitment from Government, but mainstream education has also benefited from a huge investment in the infrastructure supporting networked learning.

These investments have been shown to benefit a wide variety of students studying across the full spectrum of provision. Many of the benefits, for example, are being felt by students who are:

- Remote from a traditional centre of learning like a university or college
- Disabled or suffer some learning difficulty and who are supported with assistive technology
- Non-traditional learners – work-based, parents with young children

What Is Blended Learning?

Before proceeding any further it is vital to get an understanding of what blended learning is. In a study carried out for the Higher Education Academy, Sharpe et al (2006) suggest the term blended learning was attributed in the 1980s to the Open University's model of blending distance learning with face to face support. They do, however, point out that the term is now rather ill-defined and that it can mean different things to different people/institutions/organisations.

The University of Hertfordshire's, Blended Learning Unit (BLU) CETL, state that they aim to "develop, promote and evaluate the combination of established ways of Learning and Teaching and the opportunities offered by technology in order to improve students' learning and increase flexibility in how, when and where they study".

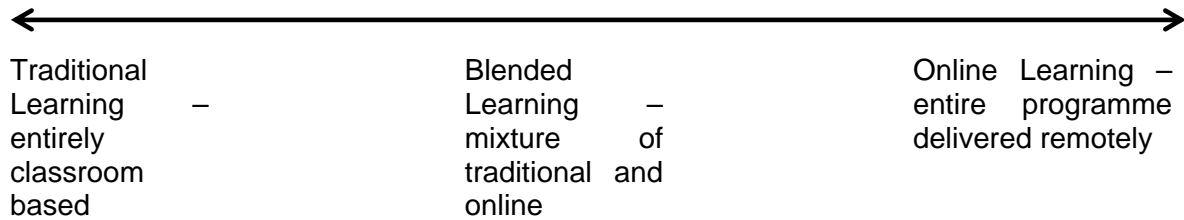
Significantly the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTa) describe it as a "combination of face-to-face and on-line delivery," which they believe "suits a wider range of learning styles."

Such a blend of e-learning and class-based learning combines the any time/pace/place advantages of online facilities and materials, often through a mix of media, with opportunities for tutor support.

The most effective learning has always involved the use of different strategies and techniques to maximise knowledge acquisition and skill development. For example, university programmes usually combine lectures, seminars, group projects and, quite often industrial visits and placements, to offer students a variety of different learning opportunities.

Many pedagogists have accepted that blended learning is about developing skills and knowledge by engaging and challenging the learner in different ways.

Fig. 1
The Educational Experience in a Blended Learning Mix



As is illustrated in Fig 1, the traditional learning style requires massive investment in buildings and classrooms but does offer the learner face-to-face contact and support. At the other end of the spectrum we find online learning, which can be delivered anywhere, anytime (asynchronously), for example at the learner’s home or workplace, and offered at a time to suit them. Although the latter may be perceived to be less expensive for the provider of the online programme, learners may feel isolated and this may affect motivation and student retention. Blended learning offers some of the best of both worlds: face-to-face tutor support and contact with peers alongside the ability to work remotely, for example be sent and submit work electronically.

When developing a blended learning experience we need to populate the whole spectrum with learning opportunities that are appropriate to the learner and the situation. Contrary to perceptions, blended learning isn’t a cheap option as it requires substantial investment in the educational technology and support. In addition, as will be discussed later in the article, it does involve very careful planning and preparation for it to be successful.

The Challenge to Develop Blended Learning

As educationalists we are being challenged by the DfES and funding councils to see how we can integrate the use of learning technologies to develop blended learning experiences in the programmes we offer. Both the DfES and HEFCE e-learning strategies refer to blended learning.

“Blended with traditional methods, replacing some of them, e-learning allows a new relationship with learners to develop. It takes them beyond the confines of the traditional classroom, extending collaboration and enabling teachers to bring new resources into their teaching, culled from a world of digital libraries.”

“Colleges and universities are experimenting with new blends of campus and distance learning, and different mixes of online and face-to-face methods to create more flexible learning and accreditation opportunities.” DfES (2005)

HEFCE (2005) state that “the early concentration on infrastructure has given way to a focus on pedagogy, and on connecting electronic communications with other processes, in a new blend of approaches to learning and teaching. Distance learning is now seen as one end of a continuum where e-learning offers opportunities across all programmes and all education sectors.”

So Why Blended Learning?

For many tutors the reason for providing blended learning is that it works, enabling them to support learning that focuses on the best learning style for each student.

It is in the tutor's best interest to provide as many opportunities for the learner to access the educational content as possible, and in a way that the student can learn without finding the experience difficult or off-putting. Learners don't just like one way to learn, so we should provide as many ways for them to receive their educational programme as possible. This is where e-learning "blends" come in.

We can all learn anywhere, anytime, anyplace as there are opportunities to learn all the time and all around us. We can learn in the home, workplace and even travelling (mobile or "m-learning"). Educational programmes can be tailored to the kinds of useful delivery media that are convenient, user-friendly, and (most importantly) serve the needs of the learner. TechDis – the JISC service to improve provision for disabled students through technology - argue that using blended learning can offer a great variety of presentation methods and can revisit materials covered previously in class and these materials can be more easily adapted to learners' needs. So, for example, using e-mail discussion forums for group work can assist learners with communication barriers (TechDis 2003). Disabled learners can benefit greatly from e-learning as it not only allows for distance and flexible learning, but also enables them to use a range of assistive technology to access those resources which would otherwise present them with significant barriers.

Further Benefits of Blended Learning: empowering learners and teachers

Using a blended learning approach can improve the quality of the learning experience, and in so doing, extend the scope of the tutor. This can be achieved through:

- Individualised learning experiences for all learners, including those who are disadvantaged, disabled, exceptionally gifted, have special curriculum or learning needs, or who are remote, or away from home/work;
- Personalised learning support - personalised information, advice, and guidance services help learners find a suitable course, with seamless transition to the next stage of their learning, which might include online applications/enrolment as well as an e-portfolio to take with them;
- Collaborative learning - this offers a wide range of online environments to work with and learn from other individuals or groups of learners as well as tutors, and develop the cognitive and social skills of communicating and collaborating;
- Virtual learning environments (VLEs) – learners can take part in active and creative learning with others through simulations, role-play, remote control of real-world tools and devices, online master classes, or collaboration with other schools or organisations;
- Flexible study, with learning on demand, anytime or anywhere, to meet learners' needs wherever they want;
- Wide access to digital resources, shared tools and information systems.

In addition, the Sharpe et al (2006) study found that some universities see other benefits of blended learning, notably:

- The ability to support operating in a global context;
- Offering greater efficiencies, especially with increased student numbers/group sizes;
- The support it can offer professional/work-based skills development

Getting the Blend Right

The blended learning mix will offer a variety of teaching and learning styles, course materials and learning technologies such as:

- Traditional classroom/lecture theatre/laboratory environment
- CD-ROM/DVD
- E-mail/SMS
- E-books

- VLEs, including message boards and chat rooms
- asynchronous online delivery/tools, like wikis and blogs
- synchronous online delivery/tools, like instant messaging

The best approach to developing a blended learning pedagogy is to evaluate the materials and practices you have already been using with your learners and see how your programmes can be improved or enhanced with technology.

The right solution for each programme, and indeed each learner, depends on the balance of learning provided within the blended learning mix. Success will only come from blended learning where a review of the learning programme enables it to be broken down into modules, and where the tutor can assess the best medium to deliver each of those modules to individual learners.

When developing the blend you need to be clear about the level of learner autonomy that you are seeking to build into the programme. If you require learners to take responsibility for their own learning and, in so doing, select how, when and where to learn, they must have the responsibility, skills and motivation to make those decisions for themselves.

The design of the blended learning mix needs to be built around the fundamental ways in which people learn. Individuals acquire knowledge and skills through a blend of many different experiences such as reading, observation, collaboration, trial and error, guided practice, application and experimentation. These same learning principles should be built upon to develop your blended learning programme. One learner may favour books and e-learning while another may prefer interactive activities such as discussion forums, workshops and virtual laboratories to cover the same learning. A holistic approach has to be taken to the development of blended learning programmes if they are to be successful. The various elements of learning should really be viewed together, as one solution, not broken up and treated as separate components. Meaningful connections between teaching, tutoring/mentoring and e-learning content, will lead to a more robust programme which supports and maintains motivation.

Evaluating the Blended Learning Mix

It isn't easy to create a truly effective and balance blended learning mix, but by monitoring and improving your balance of teaching styles and methods, you will see the value of this approach and what works best. Learning programmes that effectively blend multiple learning strategies and styles represent the very best of traditional teaching methods and exemplars for the future. They do, however, require the tutor to be aware of the need for holistic programme development. This emphasis on overall programme design and development requires practitioners who understand the pedagogy of learning and who can maximise the potential of the learning technologies that are available to them.

Conclusions

The concept of blended learning has been with us for some time and really builds on the good practice of blending teaching and learning styles for the benefit of the learner. Tutors who adopt a variety of teaching styles are more likely to offer their learners a more rewarding and successful educational experience. This is as true when e-learning and online learning are added to the mix, as it would be for integration of practical work and industrial visits. The potential of new technologies can be maximised when you see how best to blend e-learning with existing programmes to the benefit of learners.

E-learning is a valuable tool to have at our disposal when building and delivering our educational programmes and we should be using it wherever appropriate to enhance our provision and offer tailored learning to meet the needs of our learners.

One challenge for the future is to see how we can work with learners to add the growing use of social (Web2.0) tools and technologies into our blend, so that we can incorporate, for example, smart phones and iPods into our teaching and learning mix. However, the question might be, 'will our students let us', as these technologies are very personal to the individual and many students don't want work mixed with leisure/pleasure.

Further Reading/Information

If you are interested in knowing more about blended learning then read the review of UK literature and practice undertaken on the undergraduate experience of blended e-learning for the Higher Education Academy by Rhona Sharpe et al - see references below.

You may want to review the work of the Blended Learning Unit (BLU) CETL at the University of Hertfordshire. There is an annual Blended Learning conference organised by the BLU together with the Higher Education Academy. The next conference is scheduled for 14 June 2007. More information will be available from the BLU website at: www.herts.ac.uk/blu

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