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What is the hoopla about blended learning: something old is new again

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Abstract

The recent focus on blended learning has led so many educationalists in corporate training and academia to believe that a new educational phenomenon has been discovered. In reality, the blending of face-to-face instruction with various types of non-classroom technology mediated delivery has been practiced within the academic and non academic environments for more than four decades. Who does really want to know the real story of blended learning? Blended learning sounds like a nice idea- mixing a traditional classroom environment with online components – but is it actually effective? However, with the explosion of blended course delivery in recent years- despite the lack of research in this area- educational institution and corporate training take this position for granted. This study explores capabilities of blended learning and its impact on the future of learning environments. Particular focus in this article is given to the role of affective domain in face to face learning, and how to design a blend.

Keywords: e-learning, blended learning, affective learning, blend components, distance learners, hybrid.

1. INTRODUCTION

The pace of change is so fast that those who keep their distance stand to be marginalized on permanent basis. Technology provides countless opportunities for learning and development that it is no longer practical for educators to keep their distance. The new learning technologies offer ways for every professional involved in education, or in training to play an active role whether as a trainer, instructional designer, or content person (Brave, 2002).

Instructor led training has been the basic process of education for ages. Now a new method of instruction promises to take a noteworthy position in presenting learning, via electronic means which is called e-learning (Zenger & Uehlein, 2001; Hensley, 2005). The concept of e-learning is becoming a reality in most advanced and advancing countries around the world. Apparent failure of e-learning in delivering its promises of fulfilling learners, and trainers' educational objectives, led to the creation of blended learning as a solution (Morrison, 2003). Because e-learning did not turn out to be the magic bullet that many proponents were harkening it to be, thus the concept of blended learning

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was conceived. Of course, blended learning is not a new concept. It has been with us since the time man started to learn. The term was not coined until the late nineties. E-learning practice did not indicate the demise of a classroom. And regardless of some of the buzz, the direction of learning has not shifted a great deal over the past several decades. In its early stages, blended learning meant mix of classroom and e-learning. Now the term is used to describe a solution that combines several different delivery methods, such as collaboration software, web-based courses, and knowledge management practices (Valiathan, 2002).

In defining e-learning there are two options: 1) such as coaching, classes, and mentoring; 2) e-learning classes, on- line help system, templates, decision support tools, and knowledge bases. Rossett & Sheldon (Rossett & Sheldon, 2001) note that there are many options and encourage combined systems, which they call "brick and click" or" blended learning." Most definition of blended learning follows the concept that it is a "blended" solution between e-learning (on line or click) and classroom learning (face to face or brick). Blended learning can combine the positive aspects of the two learning environments, classroom based learning and e-learning (Bonk & Graham, 2006). However, some experts are now taking a broader view which goes beyond e-learning and classrooms. Martyn (Rossett, Douglas & Frazee, 2003) state that blended learning is a blend of delivery methods that have been preferred and produced to accommodate a range of learning requirements of diverse spectators in a array of subjects. Blended learning is the combination of two or more methods which may include the blend of:

- Class room instruction with on line instruction
- On line instruction with access to teacher
- Simulations with structured courses
- On the job training with informal sessions
- Managerial coaching with e-learning activities

In theory, blended learning is great. But there is not enough research evidence to support its effectiveness. Furthermore, the important question to ask is: Do the students like it?. Rossetti, & Douglas (Rossett, Douglas & Frazee, 2003) suggest that the term e-learning is fuzzy and it could mean different things to different people and organizations. Technology has already transformed our personal and business lives, but its influence on learning and expansion has been inconsistent. E-learning has grown progressively, but its potential has been exploited.

1.1. Why Blended Learning

Blended learning is a mixture of the various learning strategies and delivery method that will optimize the learning experience of the user. Blends can be a blessing or a curse. How one gets his desirable blend depends on the way one likes to create solutions to his problems. The important thing is to find an approach that suits one's purpose. Learning happens as a result of some kind of an experience that may take place. This experience might be very different for each learner. That is why individual difference has to be taken into consideration. Banathy (1968) recommends that: "needs, aptitudes, achievement, variations of time needed to master a specific task, abilities to deal with abstractness or correctness, degree to which a learner needs to be guided, abilities to deal with complexities, abilities to manipulate objects, degrees to motivate creativity", be contemplated.

The goal of blended approach is to mingle the best aspects of both face to face and online instruction. Classroom time can be used to engage students in advanced interactive experiences. On the other hand, the online portion can provide students with multimedia-rich content at any time of the day. This allows for an increase in scheduling flexibility for students. Beside flexibility and convenience for learners, blended approach could result in learning gains and increased enrollment retention (Clark & Mayer, 1968).

Blended learning is on the rise in higher education throughout the world. Large percentage of instructors in higher education stated that they are using blended learning in their institutions (Bonk & Graham, 2006). The concept of blended learning is rooted in the idea that learning is not just a one shot event. Learning is a continuous process. Blending provides various benefits over using any single learning delivery medium alone. A single delivery mode inevitably limits the reach of a learning program or critical knowledge transfer. Whereas, a virtual classroom is inclusive of remote learner. There are several reasons why use blended learning:

1. Learners not only learn more, their interaction and satisfaction improves
2. Several linked options for learners, in addition to classroom training increase increases learning.
3. Speedier performance on world tasks in blended learners.
4. Adults learn most and best by more than one way.

Blended learning is not off the shelf solution. Nor there is a perfect recipe for it, there is only the selection of learning delivery channels that best meets your learning needs and learning requirements. Unfortunately, most educators and corporate trainers do not know how to create the right learning blend. The point of providing learning that works is the learning that focuses on the best learning style. This is an important point that separates successful from unsuccessful programs.

1.2. Importance Blended Learning

So the need for blended learning is simple. People learn differently, learning outcomes are achieved differently, and one approach cannot possibly fit all needs. In addition the convenience and flexibility of a variety of delivery methodologies means that more training can occur when and where it is needed, thus enabling the personnel to be efficient and highly skilled. So there is no need to wait until there is enough learners to fill the class (Hofmann & Miner, 2010). Convergence of new pedagogy (change in emphasis from teaching centered to student centered learning paradigms), new technologies (internet, www, and PCs) and new theories of learning (brain based learning and social constructivism) are enabling entirely new models of teaching and learning and that this change is of sufficient enormity to be described as an educational transformation or paradigm shift. A nexus for the development of these new models has been the online environment.

More than half of all college courses now reportedly use internet based resources, and about half of all courses in public research universities have a course web site. A third of all college courses employ a course management system to facilitate access to online resources and interactions (Twigg, 2003). Blended learning should be approached not merely as a temporal construct, but rather as a fundamental redesign of the instructional model with the following characteristics:

- A shift from lecture – to student – centered instruction,
- Increases in interaction between student – instructor, student – student, student – content, and student – outside resources,
- Integrated formative and summative assessment mechanisms for students and instructor.

Research has shown that while student success and high levels of student and instructor satisfaction can be produced consistently in the fully online environment, many faculty and students lament the loss of face-to-face contact. Blended learning retains the face-to-face element, making it the "best of both worlds."

Why blended learning is important? "Over the years, many groups of people have asked this same question. These groups have included classroom teachers and others in the field of education, but have also included people in the business filed as well. Blended learning makes up the "fastest growing use of technologies in learning – much faster than the development of online courses (Dziuban, Hartman & Moskal, 2004)

Because of the interest in blended learning, there have been many research studies done to find the potential strengths and weaknesses of blended learning as compared to just the traditional classroom or e-learning. Educators seem to have the most interest in blended learning, for obvious reasons. Because of this, much of the research on blended learning has been around classroom situations. All levels of education have been researched with blended learning, from the elementary school grades up to graduate school. Ironically, the notion of blending is nothing new. Good classroom teachers have always blended their methods-reading, writing, lecture, discussion, practice and projects, to name just a few, are all part of an effective blend. One clear advantage of blended learning in education is its connection with differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction involves "custom-designing instruction based on student needs" (Buckley, 2002).

One obvious advantage of blended learning is its ability to maximize effectiveness by matching the best medium for each learning object (course segment). Here are some of the benefits of a few of the mediums that might be used: Classroom is good for workshops, coaching, exercises, feedback on activities and paper-based tests (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Self-paced e-learning is good for simulations, online case studies, interactive learning modules, e-mail, bulletin boards interactions, online assessments, and other forms of CBT (computer based training). Live e-Learning is good for application exercises, online coaching, and interaction between students, online feedback, assessment, chats and instant messaging.

1.3. Blended Learning in Practice

What is labeled "blended learning" is typically one topic, offered in numerous ways, or a hodge-podge of different training offerings under the same topical umbrella. The other typical definition of blended learning we often encounter requires participants to do some pre reading prior to attending a class, attend a live class, and participate in an on-the-job assignment or a webinar that checks back in with the trainees. In select cases this might be a blend. Unless the three disparate offerings are integrated to ensure a cohesive delivery of the learning objectives, the trainees will dismiss one or more elements of the training because they perceive completion of those elements as optional.

We are so familiar with the standard learning model of sitting quietly in class while listening to an instructor at the front of the room that we often forget how powerful activities and visceral experiences can be when learning new information and skills. Once you've designed a new training class, put it aside for two or three days, then come back and look at it anew to assess whether you can convert some of the lecture material or other sedate portions of your training into experiential activities. Blended learning is more than offering a variety of delivery technologies, however. It represents a shift in the profession. It takes time and effort to be successful at blended learning. Trainers need to embrace new ideas about the way they design content, the way they facilitate programs, and the way participants learn. It is a simultaneous learning curve and a change implementation. It is exciting and fraught with potential mishaps. But if the required time and effort are expended, the promise of blended learning will come to fruition.

An e-Learning course may not have the same level of support that a classroom course has. Faculty members need to be experienced in e-Learning or have substantial professional development in order to provide high-quality instruction. Also, although there may be some economies in e-Learning delivery because classroom infrastructure requirements are reduced, effective e-Learning instruction can be expensive to produce, deliver, and support. For these reasons, many colleges and universities offer "blended learning" that combines e-Learning within a system of traditional, face-to-face instructional delivery.

Students must come to terms, however, with the fact that previously successful learning approaches may not be nearly as effective in the blended environment. In a sense, they must relearn how to learn. Characteristics that describe generation who were born between 1965-1980 include:

- Works to live rather than lives to work
- Views jobs within the context of a contract
- Demands clear and consistent expectations
- Is kept productive by having fun while working
- Views money as part of a larger equation defined by overall contribution
- Sees versatility as providing security

Those who were born between 1981-1994 have the following characteristics:

- Tend to live for the moment
- Are attuned to the immediacy of technology
- Respond to clear and consistent expectations
- View money as an immediate consumable
- Will give respect only after they experience it
- Tend to question everything

The best approach to developing a blended learning pedagogy is to evaluate the materials and practices that have already been used with learners, to see how programs can be improved or enhanced with technology (Oblinger, 2003). The right solution for each program, 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 program 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.

1.4. Role of Affect in Blended Learning

There are varieties of reasons why learners dislike enrolling in an online course, but major amongst them Is the impersonal nature of interacting with the computer. Another major reason for their reluctance is the "impersonal approach" versus interactivity in a live classroom experience. Unfortunately, the mass of online learning programs are designed with no attention to learners' affective needs. While computers bring strengths and opportunities to the learning experience, it must be noted that they also remove some of the critical components of face to face learning.

Most educational systems measure students' performances by their mastery of cognitive objectives instead of the affective goals. This is a neglected area because affective characteristics are 'hidden', not easily expressed, subjective, imprecise, developed slowly, personal, private and difficult to observe and measure (Ornstein & Lasley, 2000; Woolfolk, 1998). Educational programs in distance education tend to emphasize teaching in the cognitive and psychomotor domains. Since emotions and feelings play a significant role in learning and making meaning, professional values must instilled by teaching methodologies that focus on the affective domain (Mezirow, 1990; Mezirow, 1991; Hastings, 1977) .

Many factors are essential for students to achieve a higher level of self- understanding and greater self-direction. Affective behavior develops when appropriate learning experiences are provided for students (Baker, 2002) . Believing that cognitive and affective domains are interrelated and overlapped is one way of looking at how educators learn. Learning domains are closely related in two ways. First, single major objectives can involve learning in two or even all three domains. Second, attitudinal development may even precede successful learning in the other domain. Therefore, it is of most important for educators in the distance education to emphasize in designing the content in the affective domain. Stimulating the affective dimension of learning is vital for the

practitioners in this field. In fact, affective domain helps them to draw many out of life experiences, and the professionalism can only be taught within the affective domain. In the design of e-learning materials, affective domain remains neglected since most e-designers have no exposure to instructional design. They are perhaps only content experts. This indicates that e-design that addresses just one aspect of learning process is bound to fail. In order to have a sound learning program it is necessary to incorporate a blended learning that reinforces e-learning with classroom based activities. Blended learning environment must be structured to meet the individual needs of the learners.

1.5. How to Design a Blend

What is new in the blended learning is the range of possible blend. The designer must decide how these components should be blend to produce fruitful blends. There are no rules in place to prescribe what the ideal design for blended learning is. Blending is only a revelation for those who have been trying to do everything with just one tool-usually the computer-and ending up with less than ideal results. Understanding that using the right tool, in the right situation, for the right purpose should be a guiding design principle (Danchak & Huguet, 2004) .

'Differentiated Instruction', or simply, "custom-designing instruction based on student needs", is one of the overwhelming advantages of Blended Learning as an educational approach (Derntl & Mangler, 2004) . The critical focus of each teacher is on the individual abilities, interests and learning styles of each of their students. Upon determining these essential factors, educators are then able to better tailor the educational environment for each learner-supporting activities, tools, and specific content within the curriculum become much more suited to the needs of each individual student, and their potential for success increases exponentially. It is clear that by adhering to a Blended Learning design, educators are not only affecting the capacity for learning within classroom exchanges, they are also significantly shaping the online learning environment of collaborative, discussant student communities. Following this model, teachers are free to complement traditional lessons with creative digital resources that present the same curriculum content in a language more relevant to this age. The tangible tools and activities usually applied in in-class learning can be easily replaced with the modern technologies integral to Blended Learning.

To design blended training, the instructional designers start by analyzing the training or course objectives and braking them down into the smallest possible pedagogically (for children) or andragogically (for adults) appropriate chunks (learning object). After the course or training has been chunked, the best approach to deliver each segment of instruction (learning object) is identified. In some cases the best approach might be using online learning but in others it might be live instruction, for example.

The course is then aggregated by grouping the instruction logically while taking into account the medium of delivery. In this way, one may require a few lessons online and some others live. What medium can be used in Blended Learning? The medium is not limited to technology and can include:

- Stand-alone, Asynchronous, or Synchronous online learning/training
- Performance support tools (knowledge management tools)
- Traditional classroom, Labs, or other "hands-on" experiences
- Reading assignments, CD-ROM or other self-paced learning
- Tele-training/Tele-learning, or Other media

The following design model presumes a performance analysis has indicated the need for training. Design steps are:

1. Gather standard background information on the training need, just as you would if designing a course for classroom delivery.

2. What exactly do we want our audience to know, do and feel as a result of the training?
3. Outline the topics and subtopics that must be addressed by the training.
4. Note the type of learning activity
5. Develop a transfer of learning strategy
6. Develop an evaluation strategy
7. Identify and catalogue any existing documentation
8. Organize all outputs of the process
9. Identify elements within the "Content/Learning activities Outline"
10. Brief all internal people involved in the project on your design, elicit their feedback and gain approval to process.
11. Meet with blended learning providers with an eye toward: increasing learning efficiency
12. Present the blended learning design to all in-house stakeholders elicit their feedback

Instructional design skills or knowledge of the latest learning technologies needed to effectively orchestrate and lead the planning effort (Troha, 2002).

2. Conclusion

While learning technologies and delivery media continue to evolve and progress, one thing is certain: Organizations (corporate, government, and academic) favor blended learning models over single delivery mode programs. Having woken up to the fact that e-learning on its own is not the answer, we now are presented with a similar sounding-Blended learning. Blended learning however, whilst sounding similar is completely different, and it works. It is a way of getting the best from a number of worlds. It addresses not only the preferences of different learners but also seeks to maximize off-site time to improving skills, leaving knowledge acquisition to a more economical method of delivery.

Blended learning incorporates face-to-face delivery with online study; skills workshops; assignments; assessments, and workplace coaching. There is no need to spend a lot of money on trying to replace traditional learning methods with an e-learning platform. Treat e-learning as just an addition delivery channel which gives you more flexibility. Well designed blended learning program will usually deliver study tasks in small bites. It provides the option to more effectively use the training budget whilst keeping a tight control on who is studying what; when; to what level; whether the manager is involved or not; and ultimately how the learning is being applied. Far from being dead, e-learning has emerged as an important element in the successful blended learning approach to people development.

E-learning today appears to be mostly about delivering assessments and designs, testing, personalization, scenarios, and tutorials. All these are familiar, and they all have deep roots in the training and development community. So not only has blended learning been around for as long as learning has been around but its future is assured. It's important to understand that placing a higher value on the effectiveness or desirability of face to face learning over the effectiveness or desirability of the increasing number of distance learning channels is wrong thinking. There will be situations where face to face learning has a strategic value but as every aspect of our lives become permeated by media, face to face will become proportionately less significant. It's already happened outside learning.

Today, the reality of blended learning is often learning delivered through three channels: the classroom, the virtual classroom, and self-paced online courses-and already learning managers and designers are struggling with channel selection. What is needed for the future is a strategic approach not a set of rules. E-learning is a valuable tool to have at our disposal when building and delivering our educational program and we should be using it wherever appropriate to enhance our provision and offer tailored learning to meet the needs of our learners.

When the e-learning is introduced to enhance the classroom learning, it is possible to get several resistances from both teachers and students. Some of resistances are due to lack of knowledge about potential capabilities and others and others are due to visibility of activities. These social resistances from the environment can be controlled by assisting and training teachers and students. In order to be successful on blended learning, it is very important to use virtual learning environment to extend classroom activities rather than supplementary solutions. Therefore, classroom activities must be properly mapped to a blended design. Creating high-quality blended instruction can present considerable challenges. Foremost is the need for resources to create the online materials to be used in the courses. Materials development is a time and labor intensive process, just as it is in any instructional medium. In addition, blended instruction is likely to be a new concept to many students and faculty. Blended Learning is here to stay. It is the natural evolution of e-learning. As educationalists and corporate trainers focus on understanding the processes of blending media, they will find that e-learning is more powerful than they ever taught.

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