

PROPOSING A FRAMEWORK FOR BLENDED AND FLEXIBLE COURSE DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a Framework for Blended and Flexible Curriculum Delivery. Following a brief introduction about how this project came together, a literature review is undertaken where various terms related with learning and teaching through technology are explained and distinguished. The proposed Blended Learning Framework is explained, discussed, analyzed and mapped to educational practices and their underpinning learning theories. The paper is then summarized and concluded.

KEYWORDS

Blended Learning, Flexible Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

The proposed Framework for Blended and Flexible Learning has been the result of a team project supported by the UK Higher Education Academy. The project was titled: 'Working with e-champions to Enhance Flexible Learning' and it brought together three lecturers from the Business School, a Learning Technologist and an Academic Quality Officer; a research assistant also joined the team at a later stage. Project participants had a wide range of prior experiences in the area of blended and flexible learning; from delivering-facilitating a blended learning course - in the case of the three lecturers - to providing advice and support on ways that various educational technologies can be used to enhance the teaching and learning process in the case of the learning technologist; the quality officer's input was also significant as she would stress any administrative and validation-related issues associated with blended and flexibly delivered courses and would share her own experiences as a student in a postgraduate blended learning course. The project team had two main areas of focus:

- a) How can they redesign their existing blended learning courses in order to enhance further the students' learning experience and
- b) How can they then share their knowledge and acquired expertise from the project within their own subject area (Business, Management, Accounting and Finance)

The literature review that follows aims to clarify the different terms around the area used to be described as 'e-learning' and more recently as 'Technology Enhanced Learning' in order to put the proposed Framework in the right context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON TERMINOLOGY

Despite the fact that the terms 'technology enhanced learning' and 'e-learning' - are similar, the former focuses on learning - which can be enhanced by the use of technology - whereas in the latter the focus is on the learning medium - which is electronic. Following this distinction, HEFCE - the Higher Education Funding Council for England - have revised their 'Strategy for e-learning' (2005) with a report called 'Enhancing learning and teaching through the use of technology: a revised approach to HEFCE's strategy for

e-learning' (2009). The following quoted text is taken from the latter report (2009, p.1): *'The first edition of our strategy talked about e-learning, but in the past three years, terminology, practice and contexts have developed. The term 'e-learning' can now sometimes be too narrowly defined to describe fully the widespread use of learning technology in institutions. We think it is more appropriate to consider how institutions can enhance learning, teaching and assessment using appropriate technology'*.

It becomes apparent from the above definition that HEFCE's focus has been to encapsulate good practice in the area of learning, teaching and assessment supported and enhanced through the use of technology. As a result of that, Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) is an inclusive term that encompasses blended learning practices, distance learning and even classroom-based activities assisted by technology - for instance, using an interactive whiteboard or personal response system in the classroom to engage students in their learning.

Blended learning sits within the wider area of Technology Enhanced Learning. It is best defined as the carefully weighed integration of onsite and online learning: *'Blended Learning is the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences...most important, blended learning is a fundamental redesign that transforms the structure of, and approach to, teaching and learning'*, according to Garrison and Vaughan (2008, p.5). MacDonald (2008) also emphasises that Blended Learning is about both online and face-to-face learning: *'The term is commonly associated with the introduction of online media into a course or programme, while at the same time recognising that there is merit in retaining face-to-face contact and other traditional approaches to supporting students'* (MacDonald 2008, p.2).

Flexible learning and blended learning are terms often used interchangeably; for many people flexible learning is learning that integrates technology in the curriculum in a way that enables learners to study for parts of their course while away from the Institution. Although ICT is of crucial importance in delivering courses flexibly, flexible learning is much wider than blended learning as it can include more variable factors. HEFCE's flexible learning provision for instance, is focused mainly on variation in pace and intensity of study and the delivery methods (face-to-face, blended learning, distance learning) allocating funds to pilot projects on a range of models to support the development of flexible learning (HEFCE, 2009).

Flexible learning delivery can mean different things to different people (Errington, 2004). A definition of the term offered by Van den Brande is focusing on flexibility in three dimensions, time, mode and learning route: *'Flexible learning is enabling learners to learn when they want (frequency, timing, duration), how they want (modes of learning) and what they want (learners can define what constitutes learning to them)'*. (Van den Brande, 1993, as cited in Nikolova & Collis, 1998, p.60)

Collis and Moonen (2001), have identified 19 flexibility dimensions, which can be grouped in five main categories:

- 1 Time
- 2 Content
- 3 Entry requirements
- 4 Instructional approaches and learning materials
- 5 Course delivery methods

It becomes apparent from the above definitions that flexibility in course delivery can include many more factors than web-based delivery alone. As a result of the wide range of choice, Institutions need to decide on which flexibility factors they are willing to focus on.

For blended and flexible learning courses to be effectively designed, one should start with designing or redesigning the Curriculum; as in all course design, aligning course objectives with activities and assessment is the key here as well (Biggs, 2003). However, in blended/flexible courses some more consideration needs to take place in advance on which activities are more conducive to the online environment and which are better suited for the classroom and how they can be best integrated in order to provide a cohesive learning experience for the students. Four approaches to blended and flexible course design are proposed and discussed in the next section, as part of the Blended and Flexible learning Framework.

3. THE BLENDED AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING FRAMEWORK

The proposed Blended/Flexible Learning Framework maps current teaching practices with educational technologies; underpinning learning theories are also brought to the foreground, as the use of technology

needs to be pedagogically driven. The BL/FL Framework aims to enable tutors to draw links between their teaching scenarios and the most effective ways of achieving them in an online environment.

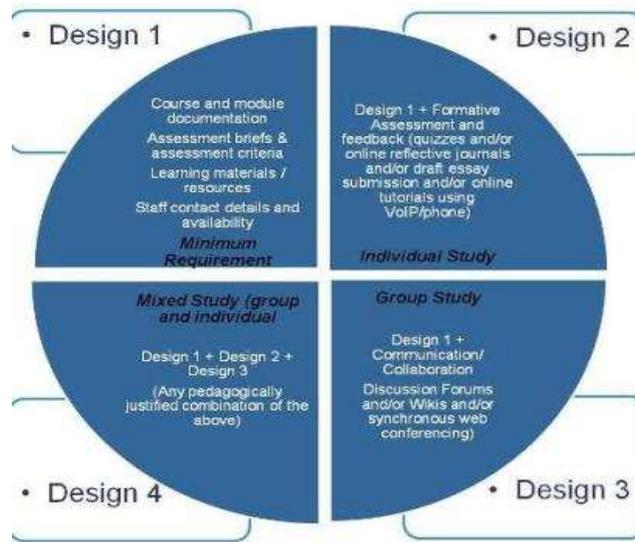


Figure 1. The blended and flexible learning framework

The above Framework recognises the fact that “one size does not fit all” and proposes four (4) learning designs; each one of them can be fit for purpose for some courses and not the best choice for others. The Framework covers everything that takes place in the online part of the blend recognising at the same time that what takes place in the classroom is as important in order to provide a really integrated, considered, blended learning experience. The learning objectives, learning outcomes and the ways that those will be assessed will have to be the starting point for blended/flexible course design and technology should not be used because it is available.

Design 1 describes the ‘minimum requirements’ for courses delivered in a blended/flexible mode; those include all related documentation, such as the handbook/unit descriptor, assessment briefs and criteria and staff contact details and availability. Furthermore, design 1 makes provision for all learning resources to be available online; learning resources could include links to readily available material such as e-journals, e-books, links to audiovisual material, websites etc.; it could also include learning materials created specifically for a particular course, such as web pages, audio and video files. Learning resources should be structured in such a way that guide the reader through the core material while at the same time making provision for additional reading; as the online environment can break the linearity of the traditional book for instance, this is achievable.

This design works well for independent, self-paced, self-directed study and can be really flexible as It allows for different entry points, duration and completion times. It aligns with the instructivist, didactic learning approach. However, if this is to be part of a credit-bearing, blended learning course, it needs to be coupled with substantial face-to-face contact; the face-to-face part can be delivered outside office hours to allow for working professionals to attend; face-to-face contact time could take place on weekday evenings and/or weekends. Any seminar work, workshops, laboratory sessions and any other interactive activity is left to take place in the classroom; traditional lectures can be omitted or kept to a minimum in the classroom as the main point for content delivery in various formats (text, audio, video) could be the online environment.

Design 2 also makes provision for individual study; It is comprised of design 1, but in design 2 learning is also reinforced by formative assessment and feedback provided to students throughout the duration of the course. Formative assessment could take the form of quizzes with automated feedback, and/or could include draft coursework submission, and/or the writing of an online reflective journal. This approach is still quite flexible and can be self-paced as well. However, if draft submission is adopted, the tutor-moderator of the course will have to give his/her constructive feedback to the students within a reasonable timeframe. Tutorials can be offered via the phone or using a VoIP system such as Skype. However, any seminar work,

workshops, laboratory sessions would take place in the classroom. This design approach aligns with both the behaviourist approach to learning and the cognitive theories of learning, where the focus is on the individual (Hergenbahn and Olson, 2001). According to Hergenbahn and Olson (2001, p.428):

'Both Piaget (a representative of the cognitive paradigm) and most of the behaviorists have reached the same conclusion about education; namely, that it must be individualised'.

Design 3 is comprised of design 1 but is also making provision for online communication and collaboration. Asynchronous online tools such as discussion forums and/or wikis for collaborative editing are utilised for students to work in groups. Synchronous tools for online communication and collaboration such as web conferencing software may also be used, if needed. The tutor-facilitator is visible online, initiates, facilitates, weaves and manages the groups. This approach requires a tutor who is familiar with online moderating techniques; a big advantage of this design approach is that students are learning not only from the content and their tutor but also from each other as well, as they form part of a network. This design aligns well with social constructionism, according to which: *'it is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated'* (Burr 2003, p.4). For social constructionism, discourse, dialogue and language is central for learning. According to Holland (2005, p.92): *'Social constructionism in information studies is taken to mean the focus on dialogue and discourse as the essential elements in people describing and producing their experiences. Dialogue and discourse stress the role of language in the building of social reality, which encompasses information practices as seeking, accessing, creating, using and sharing information'.*

Design 4 comprises from design 1 plus a combination of some aspects of both design 2 and 3; the selection needs to be justified and aligned with the learning outcomes and learning objectives of the course. It combines all aforementioned learning theories; however, it is not seen as higher or better; no design is better than the others in the proposed Framework; one might be more suitable for some courses and another would be less, depending on the type of the course, the type of the blend between the onsite and online activities and the level of flexibility each of the courses aims to provide.

4. CONCLUSION

Online learning has many enthusiasts and offers so many possibilities that sometimes can be overwhelming; many lecturers feel that they have to constantly catch up with new developments and some of them can be put off by that fact. The proposed Framework for Blended and Flexible courses aims to simplify the 'selection process' by matching core learning technologies with established teaching practices which are informed by some of the most dominant learning theories of the last century. The framework has been utilized in the redesign of two Business courses, one at Foundation level and the other at Masters level, both delivered in blended learning, and will be tested with the new cohorts of students. The authors hope that the BL/FL Framework might be of use to anyone involved in the design and delivery of a blended or flexibly delivered course.

The Framework is not exhaustive; while the most common educational practices are represented in the Framework, there might be other practices missing such as laboratory experiments for instance; as this Framework is for Blended and Flexible learning and not for exclusively online learning, it takes the stance that practices such as laboratory experiments could still be delivered on campus, as they are more conducive to face-to-face delivery.

Designs 1 & 2 are more suitable for flexible learning; they allow for self-paced, self-directed learning and they can be coupled with flexible hours attendance on campus in regular or less regular times; one weekday evening per week, or one weekend per month, for instance. These designs can support the instructivist, didactic approach; they can also be aligned with behaviourist and cognitive learning theories.

Designs 3 & 4 aim to make the most of the online environment; they require a tutor-moderator to be visible in the online environment. Their online part of the blend is less flexible as it makes provision for group work; however, they can be more flexible in terms of the face-to-face attendance; as they rely more heavily on what takes place in the online environment, classroom based activities can be kept to a minimum. These designs can be aligned with a wide range a learning theories such as behaviourism, cognitivism and social constructionism.

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