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Looking to Create a Blended

Learning Community of Practice for all?

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to analyse how the development of a blended learning community can be brought together using the experience of all involved. The first part of the paper draws out ideas from literature on this subject and then moves on to consider ways in which targeted support can be built into develop the community further. It is a reasonable assumption that there are stages a faculty/university goes through in moving to transform the curriculum, to one in which technology actively enhances the student learning experience. The process also subtly changes the roles and relationships between academic and support staff to form a community that is informed by and integrates the practice of others. This can be developed through small groups that run teaching projects, to larger projects, and onto the development of research clusters and a post-graduate course for staff development in that area. Part of the process is to ensure that the members of the learning technology unit, library and other parts of learning support, become part of this community, with academics, so that the concept of blended learning or enhanced technology learning can be realised as a key strategic tool.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Enhanced Technology Learning, Learning Community, Shared Practice

Looking to Create a Blended Learning Community of Practice for all?

Introduction

Most definitions of blended learning accept the importance of the face to face contact and the two definitions below set the scene for what is trying to be achieved when introducing technology within a course structure, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) page 5 then MacDonald (2006) page 2,

> 'Blended learning is the thoughtful fusion of face-to face and online learning experiences. The basic principle is that face to face oral communication and online written communication are optimally integrated'

> 'The term [Blended learning] is commonly associated with the introduction of online media into a course programme, while at the same time recognising there is merit in retaining face to face contact and other traditional approaches to supporting students.'

Some universities use the term blended learning to describe part time attendance at university, balanced with the use of technology learning. The same technology could be considered with full time under-graduate programmes i.e. the provision is to enhance the learning through the use of technology and to support the face to face contact. This applies especially where full-time students are entering university as experienced IT users and from Further Education establishments that may well have already adopted such technology. The challenge for Higher Education is to be able to meet these needs with academics and support staff familiar with the tools that will become available. There does need, however, to be a line drawn between teaching the technology and delivering the relevant course material using a particular delivery channel, Biggs (2007) page 146,

> 'Blended approaches to learning are not just more trendy technology-driven ideas and gadgets that will fade as fast they come.'

Although students may well be more advanced with technology the reason for choosing a course is to study that subject. If the technology is relevant for that discipline then there is a good argument for the student to become familiar with this. There also still appears to be a distinction for the younger generation of IT that is wanted for their social life and what may be seen as needed for academic studies (Beaumont, 2009). The same article commented upon that students spend an average £703 on term-time technology and more than two thirds said they would rather give up library access rather than live without the internet. This provides some argument that students prefer ensuring technology used is maximised rather than relying on the old methods of reading a book. Very often on-line is the first source of reference and paper versions come second.

Constructive Alignment

Biggs refers to the 1949 work of R.W. Tyler (1969) as being the Grand Old Man of American education and in particular his quote, Biggs (2007) page 25,

> 'Learning takes place through the active behaviour of the student: it is what he does that he learns, not what the teacher does.'

The guide for constructive alignment is that teaching should be directed at what the teaching is aiming at with learning assessed according to those aims. Tyler looked to address four questions. What educational purposes should the faculty or school seek to attain; what educational experiences can be provided to attain these purposes; and finally how can they be effectively organised and how can you determine whether the purposes are being attained.

In a similar way Biggs refers to the 3P model (Biggs, 2007: 26) in trying to describe a balanced teaching system. As well as students and lecturers the '*critical components*' listed include, the curriculum being taught, teaching methods, assessment procedures and climate created. If these are not aligned then the risk is poor teaching and students that are undertaking surface learning (Ramsden, 2003: 47; Biggs, 2007: 14; Moon, 2004: 59). This surface versus deep learning is perhaps one of the most fundamental issues when introducing enhanced technology to assist learning. As new gadgets are found and experimented with it will take time to find out which or what may or may not in the long term prove to be successful.

There may, however, be instances where what you want to do is to install some surface knowledge. For example, for early level undergraduates where the understanding of key accounting ratios may be fundamental for later units. This may lend itself to a multiple choice type assessment that is arguably limited when testing higher learning skills (Bloxham, 2007; Biggs, 2007) and may be seen as appropriate for seeking out declarative knowledge. In Blooms Taxonomy this is knowledge and understanding but does not reach the higher levels (Anonymous, 2009). Nevertheless IT can be used effectively for these types of assessment and most writers would accept that when they are supporting other assessment, that they do have a role. What is more, such tests or assessments once installed are easy to mark (if not automatic) and provide the student with freedom to undertake these via internet, on or off campus. This is technology replacing existing teaching and learning practice and is likely to accelerate over the next decade but may not be significantly enhancing the learning process.

Reasons for blended learning:

There are usually four identified reasons for pushing blended learning, cost, quality, widening participation and matching student expectations (Littlejohn and Pegler, 2007). If we start with cost then this needs to be looked at from two view points. There are the students where cost is also in attending both in terms of travel and subsistence. The employer's point of view is this may also be by way of lost revenue when that employee is away on study leave. Part time students and in particular day release is not as common as what it used to be. Indeed a lot of the new universities that used to provide the day release courses for professional studies have struggled to find these viable. As the numbers attending reduced education providers from the private sector, like BPP and Kaplan (BPP, 2010; Kaplan, 2010), produce study packs and more intensive revision packs. This can now be updated with on-line material. Likewise banks and other services businesses have started to buy-in software created by the likes of Omega Performance who had a well know bank credit training brand in North America.

Even Omega refers to the term blended learning, which can sometimes have a broader meaning in industry, within their web sales pitch (Omega Performance, 2010). They see the merits of the savings of lost time by staff attending courses which is something covered by Donald Clark in 2001 when he was CEO of Epic Group plc based in Brighton (Littlejohn and Pegler, 2007). Clark referred to delivery being provided for Royal Bank of Scotland and the comment that lost revenue or time away from the office often far exceeds the actual cost of travel and overnight accommodation.

The one institution that appears to benefit very little from cost savings is the actual provider. At present there is very little evidence to show that blended learning will reduce delivery costs. Indeed studies appear to have provided the opposite such as that referred to by the Observatory of Borderless Higher

Education by Litttlejohn and Pegler (2007: 18). The only way that perhaps costs savings may come in time is if courses are able to scale-up or if the technology can stand still long enough to allow for the volume of students to pass through the delivery process. This is no different to any other business model. What remains the same when compared with traditional delivery is that writing the course for the first time is more time consuming than repeat years.

If we therefore turn to the second reason of quality. There is no doubt that the amount of information available on the internet is increasing the knowledge available. Using a term from Freakonomics, Levitt (2006),

'Information is the currency of the internet'

Thus the supplementing of lecture notes or merely providing the on-line forum in itself could be viewed as blended learning. It can also be seen as a way to go against good teaching practice by providing a substantial amount of material to digest such that quantity is overwhelming and the potential for quality learning is lost. Nevertheless e-learning does make possible a number of aspects that were not there previously. IT enables usage to be monitored and can also allow for aspects to be tailored towards individuals or individual groups. The cancelled lecture can be replaced quickly with study material, answers can be released over a period of time and some personalisation may be seen.

The third reason is widening participation and given the current tabloid comments on cuts in higher education (Conway, 2009; The Rt. Hon Lord Mandelson, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2009) it is little surprise that those less research intensive universities need to be aware of new income streams. This links in with the comments on part-time students mentioned above. Also, where universities are looking to provide small

professional units for continuing professional developments this may well lead to a blended or e-learning touch. There is the availability of IT to assist where disabilities or other factors would mean that but for these gadgets access would be denied. It must, however, be added to the debate that any blended learning or e-learning delivery needs to be inclusive. For example, whilst most students entering higher education now appear to have their own laptop (Beaumont, 2009) this cannot always be assumed. Whatever gadgets are being introduced then these need to be available to the whole cohort otherwise there is the risk of one student having an unfair advantage over another.

The final reason is student expectations and this was partially covered with the introduction.   A personal view here is the social IT and IT for education purposes, at present, still has boundaries. Overtime the guess is that this would become less clear. Students that have wireless laptops at lectures and seminars are increasing. The use of i-phones likewise. Asking a question for groups to discuss no longer seems to mean students opening text books. Switching on the i-phone and reverting to the internet is more likely. Unfortunately the likes of Wikipedia still appear to be the first source of reference and whilst arguably can be a good place to direct you to a more reliable source this is not always what happens. What we are seeing is a new generation that wish to use gadgets but as mentioned above you cannot assume all will know how. In time, it would appear the majority are going to have a strong expectation that a leading Higher Education provider delivers its course using such technology.

Cost, quality and widening participation are reasonable arguments but all have counter arguments. Student expectations, especially in the long term, are more difficult to contest and at this stage are acknowledged rather than providing the research and evidence to prove this.

Community of Inquiry

If we can assume the battle has been won and that blended learning or enhanced technology learning is here to stay then it needs to be joined with the constructive alignment arguments, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) page 14,

> 'A community of inquiry is inevitably described as the ideal and heart of a higher education experience. A community of inquiry is shaped by purposeful, open, and disciplined critical discourse and reflection.'

It is worth using the above quote from Garrison and Vaughan to develop the argument for what is meant by the community of inquiry and how this then fits in to the equation of developing a community that goes beyond that of just academics for blended learning. Garrison and Vaughan draw on the words purposeful, open and disciplined. Purposeful has a focus back to constructive alignment in that the educational community is said to focus on intended goals and learning outcomes. The community relies upon communication and collaboration and part of the educational process is for students to question and reflect on the subject matter. The issue with purposeful is that members of the community have a purpose. In terms of being open this allows members to be able to experiment freely and not be afraid that an idea may come under harsh criticism. This links in to the last aspect of being disciplined and the suggestion here is that all parties act with academic integrity and in a respectful manner. The discipline requires critical thinkers and is what is normally required for deep learners. The community of inquiry described could be what is seen from the students' perception but the inference here is to build what Garrison and Vaughan describe as 'An Educational Community' and relate this to how academics and support staff interact with the students community, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) page 17,

> 'An educational community is a formally constituted group of individuals whose connection is that of academic purpose and interest who work collaboratively toward intended learning goals and outcomes.'

This community of inquiry usually works on a framework of Social, Cognitive and Teaching presence all of which have interdependence (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008). This can be used to provide the framework towards understanding the blended learning community of practice being referred to and the development of a community of practice within a university. It also supports the original words of purposeful, open and disciplined. 'Social' has similar implications to 'Open', essentially risk free expression. Cognitive is the inquiry process and includes interaction and reflection. The teaching presence is the part that brings all the aspects together and it has to be appreciated that for a blended learning or for enhanced technology learning then there is reliance upon learning technologist, library support and other support activities. It would be wrong to assume that the lecturer today has all the IT knowledge and tools available. There is also the dangers highlighted above that new gadgets or concepts could be introduced that will not necessarily provide the right learning outcomes. Likewise with support staff the focus may be more on the technology (the gadget) and a wish to see it tried and tested than actually aligning this with what is trying to be achieved.

What is quite clear is as programmes are revalidated or new ones come to fruition then the use of blended learning as a delivery mode is usually a key part of the validation process. With most programmes requiring a revalidation within a five year period then it would be fair to assume all universities and faculties are currently in a long term plan to integrate such delivery within their institutions. Going back to 2003, Garrison and Vaughan refer to a paper by Arabasz & Baker (2003, accessed on-line but no longer available) where in the US over 80% of graduate higher education and 93% of doctoral institutions were offering hybrid or blended learning courses. There is no reason to dispute these figures or to believe the UK is far behind and with the passage of years this would seem to authenticate such an assumption. To remain competitive it

is a fair argument that UK universities are going to have to adopt this approach.

Community of Practice for all

The second part of the paper is a practical look at how a community of practice may evolve within a university of higher education. There is no set model to suggest what works or what does not. It is probable that the development of blended learning first started as a concept to meet a type of delivery. For example a part-time course that becomes supported by learning technology. It is also perhaps more clear now that any initial view that this provided cost cutting solution have evaporated at least until volume can be achieved and the demand for such courses increases. In the interim the process of blended learning communities of practice are left to evolve.

If you start with the concept of target courses and assume this was the early runner for an institution looking to do more. There is perhaps nothing wrong with the start position and in itself will have provided early pioneers within an institution. As with any incentive, management buy-in and support is critical and some prestige needs to be associated with the running and involvement of such courses.

The danger with the early courses is the technology learning became a way of posting information, sometimes in vast quantity, without obtaining any kind of student participation in return. Academics may well have been faced with a situation they had not faced before with the extremes previously being either distance learning or full-time. Also web 2.0 tools are not always common knowledge. As well as keeping up to date with subject matter a lecturer now needed to understand the new technology that was available and how this could be used to support the blended learning delivery. At some institutions,

for example, University of Hertfordshire, they include a section within new academic staff induction of 'getting blended learning right from the start'. (Taylor and Martin, 2009). This came out a of CABLE2 research project and now has the objective of getting academics able to hit the ground running for their blended learning courses. Furthermore such projects like ATLAS at University of Lancashire (Pilkington, 2009) also address the front-end issue of new staff by ensuring the induction for all new staff is an on-line experience. This in itself builds familiarity and comfort with the virtual learning environment and can be used to introduce new technologies.

What this approach does not do is address the learning and development needs of existing academics within the university. There is always an argument that those that need to know will eventually find out but this is not the suggested preferred route. Unfortunately too much of this knowledge is required to be obtained voluntarily and it is a case of lecturers finding the time to achieve this. The spiral often starts at the first missed opportunity such that by the time three or four new technologies have surfaced academics are already out of touch with current new trends. This only compounds the matter as regards deciding when particular technologies are and are not appropriate as a learning delivery method.

The second area to consider for the university is the support for such new technology and the role of learning technologists. When delivering e-leanring a staged approach is recommended (Beetham, 2007). There is no doubt that technology areas within higher and further education have grown substantially over the decade. The more technology develops the stronger the link needed between academics and technologists. In time some technologists will become lecturers in their own right but what needs to be harnessed at the same time is the specialist knowledge of academics within their own field. What appears to be written at present is that not all academics wish to subscribe to the new technology or some may do with reluctance but this is perhaps limited to

providing lecture notes on a virtual learning environment. This may be all that is required as there is an argument that trying to do more may not lead to any further student engagement (Humble, 2009).

There is a strong need to bring in the technologist to be part of the induction process. Perhaps there is also an opportunity to bring some form of continuing professional development for existing academics on a formalised basis to ensure there is an annual update in new technology.   There is a strong difference here between learning the technology and then secondly finding the opportunity to apply this within pedagogic practice. This is just the start as part of the technology based learning also includes library services and thereafter other administrative support facilities. What is being created is a fully integrated IT learning environment and why the need to bring all parties to the community is required.

Post Graduate Certificate in Blended Learning

If the first part of learning is to understand the technologies as they become available, then the second is to bring together these with the pedagogic principles towards a recognised qualification.   Southampton Solent University looked for a route to do this and came up with a Post Graduate Certificate that also has dual currency in that the two units can be used towards a Masters qualification (M/Prof). The intention of the course, in the first instance, was to be attractive internally and to develop the community of practice. This therefore had to be attractive to not just academics but also support staff involved with the student learning process. Secondly there was a wish that the course could be of appeal externally and whilst the link to the M/Prof qualification was seen as desirable a second carrot was found.   This is hopefully to be achieved by accreditation of the course through SEDA (Staff and Education Development Association) against their Embedding Learning

Technologies Award (Staff and Education Development Association "SEDA", 2010).

The development of this course drew in academics with blended learning experience but from the start it also had a link to the learning technologists. The validation process, in the second phase, took on a format that mapped the eventual two units being closely aligned towards the SEDA, values, aims and outcomes for the Embedding Learning Technologies award. The course commenced at the end of January 2010 so the success of the mapping and outcomes is still to be gauged. What is pleasing is that it has drawn a response from full-time and associate academics from all faculties, learning technologists, including one from a local further education establishment. What it has done is to bring together a collection of people with an interest of blended learning delivery that can hopefully form a community of knowledge on good practice.

Projects and Clusters

In addition to the post graduate certificate a research cluster was formed. This has the potential to be spread over the university. Again this provides likeminded thinking and there is the potential for such academics to move from research cluster to the PGC and vice versa. There is also an argument that the learning technologists and support staff should be encouraged to be part of the research cluster although the practicality of how this is brought within the hours of such individuals is perhaps an administrative challenge.

There have been a number of projects using technology, from pod casts, electronic submission and marking. All these little projects have had individual identities and it is not an unusual way for research and communities of practice

to evolve. Nevertheless there must come a time when a university wishes or needs to bring together these areas for advocating best practice.

Mention has already been made above of projects at University of Hertfordshire and University of Lancashire. Southampton Solent University has internally funded TQEF (teaching quality enhancement funds) projects and there is scope within these to develop the university community in blended learning. In particular a current project looking to develop a MyCourse induction provides an opportunity and a vehicle to bring blended learning to all new lecturers. There is no reason to stop this aspect being rolled out to the non-academic community.

Southampton Solent University also has a team comprising of academic and non-academics, supporting a Higher Education Academy (HEA) project on Learning Technology. This looks at best practice from the Universities blended learning courses at FDA and Master's level. Solent has been singled out as the representative for HEA's Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance group (BMAF).

Momentum is also gathering for workshops on technology enhanced learning like through the likes of Solent Learning Community groups. These attract those interested but as mentioned above, what this does not do is address the current lecturer that needs to be updated on technology.

Conclusion

As with perhaps all universities the community of practice is continually evolving. What is clear is that it does need to go beyond just the dimension of lecturers and this community needs to bring in other university employees to work with and alongside academics. In terms of further work and research for Southampton Solent University, what is needed is to review the outcome from the post graduate certificate and current research projects. There also appear to be pockets of the larger community in most universities that still need to be addressed as regards updating their technological needs. This has to be addressed in a voluntarily manner to secure continuing professional development whilst recognising the current contributions of an academic.

As with all areas where there is an interest the field appears to grow arms and legs and starts to spread. This has the advantage of assisting development and creativity but it also reaches a stage where it needs to be harnessed in order to maximise the potential. The danger is it may create splinter groups going their way. It may well be that technology enhanced learning across the faculties is already starting to do this. This is also an aspect that requires further research.

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