BLENDED LANGUAGE LEARNING: DESIGN AND PRACTICES FOR TEACHERS

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Abstract: This paper proposes a design of blended course and challenges associated with the understanding of blended learning models and their implementation in an educational institution. And also, this paper discusses benefits and effectiveness of the model. The objective of the paper is to design a perfect course with framed syllabus, planned activities, tools and technologies to support blended language learning, to discuss effective blended teaching strategies for the teachers of English. Therefore, this course can be used along with the traditional of teaching a student, evaluating how the student is performing and also how the staff are performing as teachers. This paper focuses on the development of this model for students of higher education.

Index Terms – **Blended Learning, OER, LMS, Flipped learning**

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning is a new teaching method combining face-to-face learning environment with online learning elements, where the online methods of teaching students do not completely substitute the ways in which the conventional teachers used to interact with and teach the students. Some of the teachers like to say hybrid learning, they mean the same thing. But flipped learning and blended learning are not the same. Just by adding a number of online activities to a face-to-face course, one cannot create a blended course, they might have created a flipped course, but it's not the same thing. One defining element of blended learning is that replacing some of the face-to-face meetings with online tasks and activities. So for example, let's say that you teach language course that meets five times a week. If you want to turn this language course into a blended course, then you would only see your students maybe three times a week, and then they would be doing online work and activities the rest of the time, that would be a blended course. Now you may wonder whether blended learning works. Is it as effective as face-to-face learning? It's an important question because building a blended course is time-consuming and we have to make sure that our time and effort in a project that is going to benefit our students. So there are a couple ways to answer this question. One way is to look at the research. In 2010, the US Department of Education published a large study in which the researchers looked and compared over 1,000 studies that compared face-to-face learning with blended learning, with online learning. The findings were definitely in favor of blended learning. So that's one way to look at the question of how it works. Another way to answer this question is to look at this question in terms of modality. It means that a well-built face-to-face course or a well-built blended course is probably going to be successful, and a poorly designed course, regardless of whether it's offered face-to-face, online, or in the blended format, is probably not going to work.

Origin of blended learning

Prior to the web, the entire teaching and learning transaction or experience had to happen face-to-face in the classroom. This situation changed quite a bit in the early 2000s when many American campuses started to adopt a Learning Management System or LMS. A learning management system is a web-based platform that supports to teaching and learning experience. Teachers can upload their course material. There is usually a password, they can communicate with students, and students can communicate together using, for example, a discussion board or a chatroom. Students can check their grades online, they can submit their assignments using a digital Dropbox. Different learning management systems have different features but these are the primary ones. So for example at the college level tools such as Blackboard or Desire2Learn, and then at the high school level tools such as Schoology or Edmodo are used. Now, what matters is that the learning management system is essential to the blended learning experience because it is the tool, it's the technology that connects the face-to-face aspects of the course to the virtual aspects of the course.

Choosing blended format

As we start planning our blended course we will need to think about what this significant percentage is going to be. Whether we are turning an existing face-to-face course into a blended course or building a blended course from scratch, the process is essentially the same. We will need to decide on the overall structure for the course and in the process, we will need to make the following decisions. How many times a week will we meet our students face-to-face? When during the week will we meet our students face to face? Are we going to meet them every other day, two days in a row, and three days in a row? Are we going to meet them during the day or in the evening and for how long? Is our blended course going to be evenly divided between face-to-face and online work? The Online Learning Consortium actually makes a distinction between a blended classroom course, where most of the workload is face to face, and an online blended course, where most of the workload is online. Of course we could also have an even division between the two. So selecting a blended format is very crucial. There are four main factors to consider: Student's needs institution requirements, the reasons for going blended in the first place, and finally the type of course that we are blending. Finally, we will also need to gather information about technology access. Do our students have access to a Wi-Fi connection at home? Do they own a personal device? If they don't we will need to make arrangements with the college computer lab.

An important aspect of designing a blended course is to make well-informed decisions regarding what will happen face to face and what will happen online? Delivering content online, presents some opportunities for differentiation. Students can watch an online module or read an online lesson multiple times. If it's a video, they can take advantage of the user-controlled buttons to pause, rewind, or fast-forward the lesson. Sometimes we don't necessarily have to design our online lessons from scratch. There is an option of using OER. OER stands for Open Educational Resource. Open Educational Resources are teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others. OER include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge. We can actually find them in many places. The first place that comes to mind is YouTube. YouTube does have OER. However, we need to check the licensing because not all YouTube clips are OER. For a clip or as a matter of fact, any other resource to be considered an OER, it must be designated as public domain and be licensed under a Creative Commons License. Another place where we find valuable language OER is Merlot. Merlot stands for Multimedia, Educational, Resources, for Learning, and Online, Teaching, and many of their resources are peer-reviewed. Another useful site is the Flipped Learning Network for flipped lessons. We may also visit the OER Commons website. The language resources are under arts and humanities. Another really good source is the COERLL website. COERLL is a Federally-funded language centre dedicated to creating free and high-quality educational resources for language educators.

Using OER will save us a lot of time, but it's not a perfect solution. One issue is that there is a lot less. Another issue is that the content of an OER is not always perfectly aligned with our curriculum. Finally, we have no control over how long they're going to be available and that might be taken down at anytime. When we can't find a good existing lesson that we're covering; we need to create our own. The benefit is that it will cover exactly what we want to cover; it will be perfectly aligned with our curriculum. It is the most time-consuming option at first, but we'll get better, and we'll get faster over time. Finally, consider sharing our lessons with other teachers by licensing them under a Creative Common License.

So what are the options to present content online? The first option is called a personal address; it's we in front of the webcam. We have to be somewhat comfortable in front of the camera. It can be just we behind our desk or we in front of a whiteboard. Another option is we in front of a green screen. The benefit of the green screen is that we can extract to a background and replace it with some text. We can also use those slide with voice-over option with or without a video of the teacher. We also have the option to audio record our lesson or creative series of podcasts or we can simply write our lessons. All these formats are fine. We need to choose the ones that we're most comfortable with and that works best for the content that we're trying to teach. There are many tools that we can use to design our online lessons.

Delivering a lesson spontaneously in front of our students is actually quite different task. Preparation of the script in advance will always save us a lot of time. For a good quality audio and video, we need to purchase or borrow an external webcam or a microphone. Make sure we need to record in smaller clips less than 10 minutes and even less than eight minutes. If we want to make sure that our students actually watch, listen or read the lessons and understand it, we need to design a brief follow-up activity. There are several options. We can design a shortfall lab quiz in our LMS. If we created a video lesson, we can embed questions using a tool like Edpuzzle. If VoiceThread is used to design lessons, we can actually designate a slide where students have to record something to show that they understand the lesson, or we could simply ask them to take some notes and bring them to class. The follow up could also happen in class, always offer to answer questions, but do not reteach the lesson in class if students did not watch it at home because if we do so, it will really discourage those who did the online work to do it in the future.

Preparing Students for Blended Learning

Blended learning is not necessarily a good fit for all students; it requires that students have good time management skills, good organization strategies. It is a model that some of our students might have absolutely no prior experience with and so it's important that we set the expectations early on preferably on the first day of class and I'm going to give you a few ideas of things that you can do to support your students and help them be successful with this model. On the first day of class, make sure to spend some time explaining what blended learning is to your students and what the benefits of this model are for them. You don't want them to think that you are going to cover in three days what you used to cover in five. Then explain that the online work both prepares and follows up on what was done in class. So if you assign the lesson, you will assume that they have watched it, that they've read it, that they have studied it. Tell them that you will answer any questions they have in class, but that you will not repeat the lesson. Let them know that in this format, they need to take responsibility for their own learning and if they don't do the online work, the face-to-face time will be a waste of time not only them, but for all the other students in the class. So really emphasize that students who don't complete the online work will not succeed in the class. This might be new to them because there are many classes where students can get a passing grade without doing most of the homework. Show them your assessment plan and of course make sure that your grading scheme places enough weight on the online work. At the beginning of your course, consider sharing blended learning strategies with your students. Remind your students to read the instructions very carefully; careful reading is key to success especially in blended or fully online courses. Teach your students to interact with online content. They are used to watching one-minute YouTube videos once, but interacting with educational videos is different. So encourage them to use the user controls that allow them to watch a lesson multiple times, encourage them to pause the recording and to take notes. Let them know that you may start a face-to-face session with a simple quiz to check that they did their part. You may recommend that your students take a look at their schedule and reserve blocks of time to do the blended work and finally suggest that students work on the online activities in groups because it may help build a sense of community. Discuss the role of technology at the beginning of your course. Provide a thorough orientation to the learning management system. Go over your course structure, your expectations, maybe go over a simple week with them, and show them where everything is in the learning management system. Then if there is an app for your LMS, tell your students to download it and show your students how to customize your notifications so that they get reminders on the various assignments. List all the technology you are going to use in your course and provide some links to some tutorials and let your students know if they're going to need any kind of special equipment such as a webcam or a microfilm. Finally, discuss technology access. You may consider giving an anonymous survey to your students to find out what kind of access they have at home, and make sure to provide alternatives for students who don't have a personal device or an internet connection at home; you may need to make prior arrangements with the college computer lab.

Academic Honesty

So let's talk about academic honesty in blended language courses. It is an important issue because students complete a lot of online activities, and a lot of online assignments, and they count for a good portion of their final grade. We also know that when students are not under direct supervision, they might be tempted to use resources that we would prefer they don't use. So there is no foolproof solution. We haven't found ways to prevent cheating in our face-to-face courses, and in blended courses, it's even more difficult. An effective way to discourage students from cheating is to design good blended assignments. A good assignment is engaging, it captures our students' attention, and it gets them to talk about themselves and things that they care about. In addition, if our assessment takes place both online and face-to-face, students will have fewer opportunities to use resources that are not allowed. For example, if we ask them to prepare a presentational assignment online and give the presentation in class, we will have a chance to ask them questions. Provide clear examples of what is acceptable and what is not. Let's talk about proctoring solutions. We have a number of options. The cheapest and most effective one remains in-class proctoring. We can develop a grading system that places a lot of emphasis on the tests that are taken in class but we have to be careful that this doesn't come at the expenses of the online activities because we still want students to take them seriously. We need to keep in mind that face-to-face time is precious in blended courses. So we will only want to have a portion of the test take place in the classroom. Most learning management systems allow us to place a time limit on quizzes. We can also decide to only allow students to take the test once. However, one important matter to be kept in mind that this is not a good approach for students with learning differences and especially students who don't do well under a time limited conditions. We have tools such as Lockdown browsers, they prevent students from opening other browser windows while taking an online test.

Conclusion

No single methodology of teaching and learning can help in promoting all objectives of higher education. Organizations favour blended learning models over single delivery mode programmes. Although blended learning courses are associated with improved student learning outcomes and cost savings, realizing these learning designs across the institution come with significant challenges. An institution must create the necessary policy, planning, resources, scheduling and support systems to ensure that blended learning initiatives are successful. Blended learning is likely to remain an important concept in language teaching since its overall focus is concerned with the search for best practice i.e. the attempt to identify the optimum mix of course delivery in order to provide the most effective language learning experience.

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