



BLENDED LEARNING

Why blended learning? In a review of the UK literature 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. Nowadays the term is rather ill-defined and can mean different things to different people. The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTa) describe it as a "combination of face-to-face and on-line delivery." Such a blend of e-learning and class-based learning offers some of the best of both worlds, combining the any time/pace/place advantages of online facilities and materials, often through a mix of media, with opportunities for tutor and peer contact and support.

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. 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 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 (for more, see Simon Ball's article on page 7).

Blended learning can improve the quality of the learning experience through:

- Individualised learning experiences for all learners, including those who are disadvantaged, disabled, exceptionally gifted, have special curriculum or learning needs, or who are away from home/work;
- Personalised learning support – information, advice, and guidance services help learners find a suitable course, with seamless transition to the next stage of their learning, which may include online enrolment as well as a portable e-portfolio;

- 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 others;
- Flexible study, with learning on demand, anytime or anywhere, to meet learners' needs; and
- Wide access to digital resources, shared tools and information.

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 right solution for each programme, and indeed each learner, depends on the balance of learning provided within the blended learning mix. The desired level of learner autonomy must be considered; if you require learners to take responsibility for their own learning: to select how, when and where to learn, they must have the responsibility, skills and motivation to make those decisions.

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 in the development of every blended learning programme. 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 be viewed together, as one solution. Meaningful connections between teaching, tutoring/mentoring and e-learning content, will lead to a more robust programme which supports and maintains motivation.

Learning programmes that effectively blend multiple learning strategies and styles represent the very best of traditional teaching methods and exemplars for the future. The 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. If you would like to learn more about blended learning you may wish to review the work of the Blended Learning Unit (BLU) CETL at the University of Hertfordshire (<http://www.herts.ac.uk/blu>).

REFERENCES

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