BLENDED LEARNING AND SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

Blended learning is the phrase used to indicate the combination of face-to-face and online components in face-to-face education (Allen & Seaman, 2004; Horton & Osborne, 2002; Martyn, 2003; Seener, 2002) This incorporation of online learning in classroom education, - also known as web-enhancement (Boettcher & Conrad, 1999), mixed modes, computer mediated communication (CMC), or hybrid learning- poses the biggest challenges to educators. Identifying the situations that will allow for a right blend of face-to-face contact and uses of online technologies, is something that defies the traditional ways of teaching, classroom management, organization and curriculum planning. Traditional instructional design models need to be changed to create online learning environments (Benson, Johnson, & Kuchinke, 2002), and that transformation has to be a perfect blend of what is best achieved in both formats. As Bates and Poole (2003) point out,

> Mixed mode courses are perhaps the most interesting and certainly the least
> studied and understood aspect of the rapid development of Internet-based teaching
> in higher education. Mixed mode courses reflect a convergence of traditional
> distance education and face-to-face teaching. The mixed mode model is
> interesting because it raises questions not only about the role and design of the
> online parts of a course but also about the use of class time. (p.121)

Of all the terms used to refer to the integration of online and classroom education, I prefer the term 'blended learning' because the word "blend" implies things that when

blended become a totally new thing, and that reflects the outcome of the integration of online learning and classroom education: a new thing, a transformation, a new learning paradigm.

Blended learning includes a combination of classroom activities and web based applications such as e-mail, discussion forums, chat, online learning management systems (LMSs), and other web-base components (Allen, & Seaman, 2004; Horton & Osborne, 2002; Martyn, 2003; Paloff & Pratt, 1999)

Background of the study

This paper presents the results of a research study that focused on approaches to blended learning strategies in graduate courses, and the faculty and students' perceptions of the innovation. The presentation focuses on what blended learning means to teaching English as a second language at the college level. The information presented is based on a qualitative analysis of ten graduate courses that have used blended learning for two or more full semesters. The data collection for the study was done by means of observation of the instructional design of ten courses, interviews to the faculty and to a sample of students of those courses.

Blended learning: an instructional challenge

Despite the role that technology plays in the new modes of classroom teaching, the main challenge that faculty faces when moving to blended learning is not technological but pedagogical (Bates & Poole, 2003; Watts, 2003).

A call for transformation

The integration of online learning in classroom education requires important

changes in teaching and learning practices, in the faculty and students role, and also in the course schedule and meeting times. Teachers will have to make new decisions especially in the areas of course design and development, course management and evaluation and assessment.

a) The design and development of courses using blended learning strategies have to include a balanced mix of what can be achieved in the face-to-face classroom and what can be achieved online. The most important challenges are to find ways to develop opportunities for students' interactions and how to engage students in the new environment (Bates & Poole, 2003; Bonk et al., 2000; Fulton, 2002; Kosak et al., 2004; Levy, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 1999)

b) The challenge in course management involves a change in the faculty role, move from "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side" and allow students to explore and develop new skills in gathering information, selecting, presenting, interacting and collaborating in the blended environments.

c) Evaluation and assessment constitutes the third instructional challenge. New methods for teaching and learning call for new strategies for evaluation and assessment. How to measure success in blended learning demands the creation of new assessment tools and strategies or the selection or adaptation of previous systems. These decisions have to be guided by a reflection on how to best measure achievements in the new blended environment.

Approaches to blended learning

Faculty uses different strategies to approach blended learning, in some cases the web is used as 1) storage space, in other cases the web 2) adds new components to the

unchanged face-to-face classroom, and finally there are cases where 3) the web and the

classroom complement each other in the teaching and learning process.

1- *Cyber storage or shoveling:*

Courses that move all materials used in the face-to-face classroom to the web for

the sake of 24/7 access, or for (N.O.R.) no obvious reasons. Techniques used to achieve

this move to the web include scanning of documents, and uploading existing digital

documents in different formats.

Planning for this class does not differ greatly from traditional classroom teaching,

planning is sequential and linear, top down, systematic, the objectives guide the

development, there is careful sequencing by the instructor, the goal is the delivery of pre-

selected knowledge (Lee et al, 2002).

The advantages of this approach include: a) access 24/7 to class materials; b)

ability to print on demand and save on massive photocopying or printing; c) reduces the

need to take notes in class, allowing "undivided" attention to lectures or presentations; d)

enables easy recycling or re-usage of materials, (learning objects); e) class materials use

less physical space, the whole class may fit in a CD or two. One student said about a class

using this approach "it (the use of the web) saves time and money because resources can

be accessed online instead of having to acquire them from copying services or going to

the library".

The main weakness of this approach is that the lack of integration of web-enabled

tools for exploration and collaboration makes the use of the web somewhat unnecessary.

Moving the class materials to the web may also create unrealistic expectations, thinking

that the use of the Internet will solve all educational problems. One faculty member that

moved his materials to the web, responded to the interview indicating his frustration, "the web helps in terms of students getting access to information, but does not help to critically analyze what they read".

The class is teacher centered, and face-to-face meetings constitute the most important part of the class, where interaction and collaboration takes place. The Internet is used for access to materials, delivery and reception of assignments. In few cases there are suggested or optional web resources in the list of class reading materials and some also include instructor-lead threaded discussion that follow up on class lectures, class discussions, or comments on topics from the textbook.

2- Web as add-on:

These are courses that include new materials taken from web resources and use web-enabled tools and applications to enhance classroom learning. Techniques used to complement classroom teaching with web materials include exploration and selection of existing web resources that match the course objectives, exploration and selection of web tools and applications that can be used to enhance classroom activities.

Course planning is also sequential and guided by the objectives and content of the course. Web resources, tools and applications are integrated to enrich what is done in the classroom. Especial attention needs to be paid to this addition of resources to avoid information overload, and to reach a balance of activities that will fit within the time devoted to the course.

Main advantages of this approach are access to new information, faculty said "the use of the web has facilitated access to great federal, state and local educational resources"; constant update of information given the dynamic nature of web resources;

opportunities for teacher and students collaboration in the exploration, selection and addition of resources; organization of resources in a central place, a teacher said about this approach: "I organize resources there (on the web) and keep things supportive of my instruction in a central place".

Disadvantages include time needed for constant exploration and evaluation of web resources; need for continuous checking of links and stability of web sites; dependency on others' web publications and web services; skills in the use of web applications; careful attention paid to the time demanded to take the course. One student said that "class time is disrupted when the server is down, or when the professor encounters a technology problem".

3- the "perfect blend": classroom and web complement each other

Courses that combine activities and materials used in face-to-face meetings with materials taken from the web, and make use web-enabled tools and applications to replace or enhance classroom activities. Techniques used to develop a blended course include reflecting on teaching practices, re-thinking the course objectives and considering a curriculum design that will include what is better done face-to-face and what is better achieved online. This will include exploration and selection of web resources that will replace some of the materials used in the classroom, exploration and selection of web applications that can take the place of classroom activities and interaction. In the design of these courses, classroom activities are adapted or replaced by activities that can be done online.

Planning involves a full redesign of the course, the use of the Internet takes a more dominant role than in previous approaches, and face-to-face meeting schedule is

influenced by the use of the web. There is a mix of teacher centered and student centered activities. Careful attention is paid to the balance of individual and group activities that occur online and face-to-face to avoid course overload.

The main advantages of this approach include a) re-thinking teaching and learning; b) finding creative ways to combine new tools and known practices for the sake of improving teaching and learning; c) exposing students to the use of web-technology; d) learning is no longer limited to what happens inside the physical space of the classroom, the classroom is extended to the interaction that happens beyond and all interaction is considered part of learning and assessed as such; e) allows for flexibility in schedules; f) faculty are given the opportunity to revisit old curriculums and re-design old courses for a new (more technology savvy) audience. A student indicated that "classes are more vivid", a faculty member said that he feels that using the web "has created new connections between his class and the rest of the world"

The disadvantages of this approach involve the constant need for training for both, faculty and students; the possibility of frustrating students who come to campus without the necessary technological skills to keep up or participate in such practices; it is more time consuming at the beginning for both faculty and students, because of the learning curve needed to deal with new technologies. A faculty member agreed on how the use of the web has facilitated learning in some aspects, but he also complained saying, "sometimes I have to spend too much time on teaching or troubleshooting the technical side and I have less time for class topics".

Blended learning: a learning opportunity

The integration of the Internet in classroom teaching is encouraging faculty to

play the role of learners as they discover the new possibilities that the use of the web

brings about. Using the Internet in the classroom is a totally new thing for most

educators, in most cases they have never experienced the online environment as learners,

so using it for teaching involves familiarizing with the technology and also understanding

the possibilities that the new environment brings to education. "Faculty needs to view

themselves as learners, along with their students, using technologies together in an

exploration and analysis of the world and its meaning" (Watts, 2003, p.3).

When blended learning is not about learning

The integration of the web in classroom education sometimes has more to do with

classroom management than with teaching and learning. Access to class materials is not

an issue in campus-based education as it is in distance education therefore having the

traditional class materials on the web just for the sake of access is not a sound

pedagogical reason and will not motivate faculty to consider blended learning.

Organization of class materials in a central space as the web is not a sound pedagogical

reason either. The use of the Internet is not the "magic wand" that will improve

education. Higher education faculty members think in terms of delivering instruction as it

has always been done, and their hope is that the web will make it be better and easier. But

incorporating technology is not about the technology, solid pedagogy and educational

philosophy has to guide the development of blended learning. To have a real

transformation, technology must be subordinated to issues of overall instructional design

(Gandolfo, 1998; Watts, 1998).

"What is blended learning about?

Blended learning has to be about learning, about improving and enhancing learning, about helping students learn how to build up new knowledge combining the use of new and traditional tools to explore, select, and evaluate sources; it is about learning to present, share and collaborate with others in real and virtual spaces. Because we are preparing them for the world outside the classroom, and that world is already using web technologies for information, communication, collaboration, and also for learning.

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