Blended Learning – Splendid Joy

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Abstract

The dynamic, highly technological and quickly changing world around us is strongly affecting the ways in which we live our lives, learn and teach. It clearly also has an effect on what is considered to be good teaching, motivational strategies, methods and students’ learning styles. Just as their students, the teaching staff is expected to be more tech-savvy. Just as for students, the multitasking and multi-medium focusing skills come in handy. In this article we analyse the effects of blended learning on student motivation and capacity for growing into independent and self-sufficient learners. We also take a look at the challenges and benefits it holds for teachers. The empirical part of our text is based on our personal experience of applying blended learning (and different other types of e-learning environment backup) in university teaching for teaching language courses at different levels and in different languages.

By way of introduction we shall quickly review some relevant aspects of motivation and individualisation theories. We move on to analyse how individualisation and increased responsibility affects students’ capacity to become successful and independent life-long learners. A brief review will be given of some past and current courses where the web-based environment has been used as a support for in-class teaching. The focus will be on a) different ways of motivating students and engaging students in the learning process; b) the experience of blended learning: its pros and cons; c) student feedback to the process (based on oral interviews; questionnaires and self-analysis reports) as well as the results of our participant observation of the process. We approach the topic through the prism of examining the possibilities for supporting and encouraging student-centred learning and increasing student responsibility in their learning process.

Keywords: e-learning, blended learning, language learning/teaching, student centred learning, student responsibility, motivation

1. Introduction

E-learning is an important area of modern education. In the era of interactive blackboards, e-books, video games and the like, it clearly has become a *sine qua non*. Blended learning is defined as education that combines face-to-face classroom methods with computer mediated activities. In the current article, when we speak about blended learning, we bear in mind learning in classroom accompanied by a period of study period on-line.
Clearly, efficient e-learning means more than transporting paper-based texts and tasks into the e-medium. A modern e-learning tool has to be attractive, offer fun, diversity, challenge and motivate.

Many universities offer the teaching staff fabulous courses on e-design and e-learning. But in addition to the technical skills, one needs a solid background in recent learning theories and best practice. Observation, feedback collection and analyses are essential. Our experience of using blended learning and other forms of e-learning courses has proved to be positive and stimulating. The experience, set-up and student involvement vary from year to year. Thus, it is a privilege to be able to follow these trends shaping from inside the process. In the article below, we will share some of these experiences.

2. Student Motivation and Modern e-learning

2.1. Motivation

Web-based learning necessarily implies a great amount of student responsibility and focusing. It also applies motivation, which is essential for a learning process to take place. What is motivation?

In general, definitions of motivation in education emphasise the eagerness, willingness and readiness of people to try, achieve or acquire something. As Rob Dean (2010) points out, for motivation to occur, for the students there needs to be:

- An interest in the topic
- The will to understand and do more
- The feeling that one can understand and can do more

In theories of motivation, motivation is often divided into extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Theobald (2006) points out that for some students it is essential to resort to extrinsic tools to increase their motivation. This tends to be the factor behind most of the justification behind teacher-centred teaching. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, has been seen as “the ultimate goal of educators for their students” (ibid.). When we speak about student-centred teaching, we in fact imply that students should have the wish and skills to be independent learners and to take responsibility of their learning process. How can we make students reach this? Intrinsic motivation is often attributed to finding a value in what students do. Theobald (2006) holds:

“Helping students find value in learning through the implementation of various instructional strategies and multiple alternative and authentic forms of assessments, while maintaining high standards of student performance in an environment which encourages students to do their best work by effective, nurturing teachers, will help increase the motivational levels of all students.”
Dörnyei and Otto (1998) give us a definition of L2 (second/foreign language) motivation:

“In a general sense, motivation can be defined as the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritised, operationalised and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out.”

In her inspiring lecture, Judy Copage (2013) stresses the importance of motivation through learner autonomy. Some of the main criteria, according to her, are the conditions in which our students can choose, be independent and sense and develop responsibility.

Katrin Sachs (2012) stresses the importance of “unconscious learners” becoming “conscious learners.” She concludes:

“/.../ developing students’ self-directing learning skills is not the easiest task, and the teacher’s personal experience may not always be enough. However, going through the procedure with students step-by-step, starting with asking questions about the learner’s goals and needs, proceeding with choosing suitable tools and methods and ending with looking at best ways of evaluating the process and reflecting on its progress will lead to a more conscious awareness of the learning process. Furthermore, having a central role in the decision-making process increases the learners’ sense of responsibility and their willingness to take control over their learning process.”

Hasanbegovic (2005) has reviewed a study on the impact of intrinsic motivation on e-learning in authentic computer tasks by Martens et al. 2004. The study allows her to conclude:

“In line with the motivation theory of Ryan and Deci it is predicted and evidenced that intrinsically motivated students do more in a fixed time period as a result of their higher effort and persistence and will do different things in computer environments that allow for this liberty of choice (Hasanbegovic 2005).”

A well-balanced e-learning environment enables students to feel intrinsic motivation and to stay motivated throughout the learning process. E-learning can be harnessed in the interest of developing modern principles of learning and language acquisition concerning motivation. The criteria mentioned above can be met in e-tasks that are programmed to automatically increase the level of difficulty, to adapt to the student’s language level or to repeat areas where the student has made mistakes during previous visits to the electronic environment. In the description above, also the needs for individualisation are met. And obviously, a high-quality e-learning environment meets the needs for a certain amount of playfulness and interaction.
Thus, some of the most important aspects of learning – individualisation, interaction and student motivation, often considered paramount in modern education theories, are necessarily a part of the process in e-learning. Motivation, individualisation, learning in context and the activation of the learner – all buzzwords in modern education – are often a part and a parcel of a successful e-learning support.

2.2. Modern discourse in professional roles: Increasing Learner Responsibility and Changing Teachers’ Roles

An equally important aspect is learner responsibility – the students’ capacity to envision and pursue their goals. A modern student, especially at the university level, must know why and what s/he needs to study, and to be able to design and stick to their personal study plan. Wilson (1981) points out that student development through the university years can be seen as follows:

“One view is that student growth occurs through an invariant sequence of stages or levels in which progress from stage to stage implies a restructuring and reorganisation of what went before. ‘Higher’ stages are qualitatively different from ‘lower’ stages in terms of the way the individual thinks, feels or acts. Another influential view is that student development is to be seen in terms of mastery of a series of developmental ‘tasks’ which involve the individual’s maturation in the different aspects of intellect, emotions and social relationships.”

Today, the role of the teacher is that of an advisor, an expert in the field whose task is to support the students’ development (cf. Mullamaa 2009). This is much more creative and much more challenging than the more traditional “design and control the study process” concepts. Dörnyei (2001) points out:

“/../ teachers are powerful motivational socialisers. Being the officially designated leaders within the classroom, they embody group conscience, symbolise the group’s unity and identity, and serve as a model or a reference/standard. They also function as an ‘emotional amplifier’ of the group whose appeals and examples are critical for mobilising the group /…/. Simply speaking, to lead means to direct and energise, that is, to motivate.”

In education, as elsewhere, increased cooperation and neglecting the earlier rigid borderlines, is becoming more and more common practice. Day and Sachs (2004) indicate: “The core democratic professionalism is an emphasis on collaborative, cooperative action between teachers and other educational stakeholders.”

Karm and Remmik (2010) stress the importance of university teacher’s routes of development. They (ibid.) note that only if a teacher has understood the underlying importance of her teaching viz-a-viz the teaching skills, the development of one’s field of specialisation, and personal development of students, does the need for further education occur. And we believe,
it is often in the course of further education and mentoring that further processes of self-monitoring, improving one’s teaching and conceptualising one’s role occur.

Kiggins and Cambourne (2007) emphasise the importance of a “triadic partnership” (ibid.) from the very beginning of training of young teachers. Kiggins and Cambourne (ibid.) stress:

“/…/ trust becomes a required element in the knowledge building process, and if friendship and trust are not present among the student cohort, this process is unlikely to occur.”

Modern education theories also emphasise the importance of neglecting the former rigid models of seeing the students’ minds as “an empty space” to be filled with information. Rather, students’ interest for learning, and their creativity should be developed with the help of encouraging and creative teachers. Thus, the challenges teachers are facing today are significantly more serious and demanding. The amount of responsibilities that today go along with the teaching profession per se has increased significantly. As Day and Sachs (2004) point out:

“It suggests that the teacher has a wider responsibility than the single classroom and includes contributing to the school, the system, other students, the wider community and collective responsibilities of teachers themselves as a group and the broader profession /…/.”

In many countries, the codes of ethics for teachers have been developed (in 2004 in Estonia). Further education training programmes are carried out. However, traditional, teacher-centred teaching styles are regrettably still favoured by some representatives of the teaching staff as well as parents. The formulation of the code of ethics for university teachers is currently in progress. Discussions in the media on the issue are strongly encouraged. Further education programmes for university teachers are in progress and they are attended by an increasing staff numbers. There are also different mentoring projects taking place. In all these endeavours the issues of ethics, the role boundaries, as well as the contribution to society, are clearly present. On the positive side, we see an active discussion on the core issues in the media, and an active appeal for modern and child- and student-centred approaches in training and teachers’ learning communities.

2.3. The Possibilities for e-learning: Individualisation, Activating the Students, and Learning Concepts in Situated Meanings

As Normak (2010) points out, the environment in which learners develop is crucial for success. Normak (ibid.) analyses sources of research on early child development and the development of logical thinking, reaching the conclusion that a safe learning environment from the very early years on, and a certain playfulness are essential for developing thinking and becoming successful learners and members of society. E-learning has plentiful possibilities for
catering for such needs also in the later stages of learning. As pointed out above, the possibilities for e-learning include individualisation, activating the students and learning concepts in situated meanings.

The importance of learning of concepts in situated meanings is stressed by Gee (2009). Gee (ibid.) points out that students need to acquire and try out the contents of concepts in situations that teach and test their real meaning. Only then true learning takes place. Without that, students may be able to complete seemingly perfect “pen and paper” tests. However, at closer testing, they prove not to be able to solve real problems (cf. Gardner 1991, in Gee 2009).

We suggest that web-based learning solutions offer the learners the possibilities for making the learning process more interesting and challenging. Some of the capacities here are attractive and enthu...

A SRI International for the Department of Education in Estonia (http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf) demonstrates that the learning results that have been reached by using ICT solutions are more profound than the learning results achieved through using traditional learning methods:

“On average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction. Over the 12-year span, the report found 99 studies in which there were quantitative comparisons of online and classroom performance for the same courses. The analysis for the Department of Education found that, on average, students doing some or all of the course online would rank in the 59th percentile in tested performance, compared with the average classroom student scoring in the 50th percentile.”

As pointed out above, research has also shown that the focus in training future capable members of society should be on not only forwarding information and accumulating knowledge, but also on training working in groups, adaptation to changes, and applying technological change.

Blended learning offers splendid ways of encouraging students, offering them skills for independent self-directed learning and at the same time building up trust. In our particular case the e-learning part follows the “live” classroom learning period, which gives all participants a
fair chance to get used to the principles, values and expectations – as well as their friends and future on-line discussion mates in good time.

An important assumption is that can take responsibility for their study process, if provided with necessary know-how and support. Dörnyei (2001a) points out:

“Sharing responsibility with students, offering them options and choices, letting them have a say in establishing priorities, and involving them in the decision-making process enhance student self-determination and intrinsic motivation /.../.”

It definitely takes some courage from the teacher to give free rein to a group of teenagers. You have to accept a certain amount of insecurity, as there is no way to predict how each group of students approaches their course and the e-learning environment. However, in our experience, supporting student autonomy shows that there is a trust for the teacher, and an increased responsibility for the learning process. Students are innovative and creative, and accepting, and making them explicitly share responsibility for the process and outcome motivates them to come forward with fascinating and useful ideas.

In education, as elsewhere, increased cooperation and neglecting of the earlier rigid borderlines, is becoming more and more of a common practice. Such an approach also helps students to retain their motivation. Cocea and Weibelzahl (2006) point to the connection between e-learning and the Social Cognitive Learning Theory (SCT). In their view, personalization, adaptivity, affective tutoring and collaborative learning, as well as motivation – all aspects also we have emphasized above – all help to increase student satisfaction and learning quality:

“Personalization aims to make learning more effective and satisfying by adapting to the learner’s needs and preferences. Among the benefits of adapting to the learner’s motivation are: enhanced motivation and involvement, empowered learners – making them more responsible and active, increased satisfaction, better quality of learning etc.”

Motivation is related to affective computing /.../, because self-concepts are always charged with emotions. Thus, affective agents could be used for both assessing motivation and intervention.

SCT also fits with collaborative learning, given the social framework taken in consideration by this theory and the way learning is influenced by the social context.”

Rather contrary to what is sometimes supposed of a web-based environment, the experience shows that it often joins the students in the group. Offering them the possibility to communicate in an environment “natural” for them, the web-based course, if built up in a way that enables the students to participate and open up. Below, let us take a look at how this can be done, using ICT using our practical experience with language teaching as an illustration for this.
3. The Experience of Using Blended Learning in Language Teaching

In our experience, e-learning has proved to be a fruitful environment for teaching general language courses, as well as for teaching/learning terminology and ESP (English for Specific Purposes). E-courses or courses with e-support can be organised differently. For example, they can be conducted as a complementary to ordinary classroom teaching, i.e. the web-based courses run parallel to the face-to-face seminars. Their primary goal is to support what has been learned in the classroom and thus they mainly include exercises on texts/grammar covered in the classroom.

Blended learning can also be organised as consisting of different “live” and on-line modules. This experience has recently proved to be most fertile, as students often need to combine their work and academic life. Also, the on-line module fosters their need and capacity for independent goal-setting, time-planning and achieving.

In addition to learning and acquiring new vocabulary in a new language, the courses aim at helping students to form their personal opinion and being able to express it on issues topical in one’s field of specialisation, as well as topics of general interest (links to topical articles & hot debates both in Estonia & abroad, web-links, multimedia resources).

Exercises designed as an extension to activities carried out in the classroom support the acquisition of vocabulary, forming one’s personal opinion, and being able to express it on topical issues. It enables students to understand their area of specialisation and many other important issues in a wider context and to put it into a perspective that stretches beyond their university, country, and continent.

As students actively load up materials themselves, the e-course environment becomes a shared resource for the group and teacher, where both on-line activity and classroom face-to-face sessions complement the learning process. Allowing students to be co-creators of the learning materials is, as we know, an important factor in student-centred teaching.

To sum up, e-learning as a support for ordinary class-room teaching, as a part of it, or as a separate module has the obvious benefits of easy access whenever and wherever you wish it, dematerialisation (less paper – more trees), enabling us to use modern methodologies, individualisation, possibilities to develop contacts beyond our university, state, continent (“broadening the horizons”; “real English”, or other foreign language).

Students have an overview of topical issues, their context and background, easy access for quickly finding inspiration for (continuing) the conversation, developing the skills for finding the right information, analyse, present and discuss it, developing the skills for using the e-environment and new technologies, developing responsibility for the learning process, forming one’s own opinion and learning to (dare to!) express it.
4. Blended learning: on-line part

4.1. Increasing the share of on-line learning

Despite the positive experience in blended learning, planning one part of the course to take place only on-line poses a different challenge. To safeguard against any possible problems we decided to give students an option of discussing the course eye-to-eye with the teacher at designated times. Also, the on-line section of the course (which included an additional independent study task) was followed by yet another classroom section, thus forming the pattern:

- Classroom-learning (with a blended learning element of e-learning support)
- On-line learning
- Classroom-learning

This kind of a set-up enabled us to ensure that the majority of students were already familiar with our e-learning environment, and thus there were no major problems relating to the ability to use this environment during the course.

The classroom part also served as a good “ice-breaker” – as students already knew their group-mates, had found some friends, and felt also fully confident with the procedures and expectations of the course before heading towards the on-line session.

This enabled us to ensure that the on-line discussions were most lively and adequate – thus showing that live meetings prove to be an efficient quick-start.

The main goals of the course were to enable students to increase their vocabulary, to enable them to read articles and texts on a variety of topics and to enable them to discuss the topics. It was pointed out that they would also be able to write a short summary of the discussions (to practise using formal English), to make a report through using video- or voice recordings.

To make sure that students follow their learning programme respecting the dates, we established very clear rules. To make the course easy to navigate and follow, also the course structure was very simple.

For each module there was a separate week, and we also enabled students a full week for taking the tests. A separate week was devoted to the introduction to the course. After all Modules were covered, a separate week was devoted to student self-analyses and feedback.

In evaluating student progress we used the following means:

- Modules – self-tests (automatic control)
- Tests – students get a mark (automatic control)
• Discussions, summary of discussions, presentations – group-mates feedback + teacher evaluation

Below, let us take a closer look at the course and analyse it in terms of student-centred learning, the possibilities and possible pit-falls e-learning and an on-line course holds.

4.2. The Outcome of the Course

In retrospect we can say that the course went very well, even much better than anticipated. Most Modules were covered on time, the self-tests taken within the allowed time limits. Participation in discussions on each Module was somewhat more modest in the beginning of the course, but grew more active as the course proceeded.

Problems included the evergreen problematics of automatic tests (can read the answer wrong e.g. when a hyphen is entered differently etc.). At the same time, the strict “no negotiation” style of computer-based corrections also made students learn harder, they later explained – there is only one answer which is correct, and this is the new expression learned for this Module, not the alternative synonym they may know from their earlier studies.

As for all the other applications, these worked perfectly. It appeared that students found the texts and tasks on them very well, navigating the course skilfully. Thus, the general conclusions on the course are:

• The course worked well, the time framework planned and materials to be covered seemed to be justified
• Participation in discussions was active and fruitful
• Most of the participants passed the course with flying colours

4.3. Students’ Self-Analysis and Feedback to the Course

We encouraged as much student feedback as possible. The goal was to improve the course, but also to help them analyse their progress and input.

Below we give a brief summary of their self-analyses and the results of their anonymous feedback questionnaires. We present both the question and some student answers to illustrate the tonality. In case numbers are given, this indicates the percentage answering “yes” to a particular question. To give our readers some flavour of how students felt about using the on-line course environment, we have chosen to quote them verbatim:

1. Before registering on the course, I read through the information in the Study Information System (ÖIS): 100% of students answered “yes” to this question

2. As stated in ÖIS, this is a blended course. It means: a part of the course takes place in the classroom, and part of the course takes place on-line. I chose this arrangement because:
50% of students chose the answer “This enables me to work flexibly”
50% of students chose the answer “The e-learning part enables me to focus also on other subjects as these demand a lot of attention towards the end of the term”

3. Before joining my course, I checked that it is appropriate for me concerning the language level on the Common European Language Skills framework and chose the right level concerning my language skills (this course was B2-C1):

100% of students answered “yes” to this question

4. What I liked the most about the “live” classes was: (if applicable, name three things, please!)

Answers included:
“speaking, foreign students”
“There was many different things to do, talking and exercises and listening part. It was very good to practice talking with so different people. I liked most these texts, they were interesting and you had to think about them, it was very good and useful.”

5. What I did not like/what could be changed in the “live” classes was ...

Answers included:
“Sometimes the exercises were too slow (home tasks checkup)”
“Only thing I remember is that people should do more exercises at home too, but it’s difficult for teacher to arrange that. It was a little hard, if I did my homework, but my neighbor didn’t and we had to discuss about it, it was just time for him/her to do it then. But like I said, teacher can do little about that.”

6. What I liked about the on-line learning part of the course was ...

Answers included:
“I could manage my own learning”
“I was a little afraid about that part, but it was okey actually. It took quite much time to write this discussion part, but it was useful and good to practice writing also. Then texts, very interesting again. And I liked that I could manage myself time, time I was available to do it.”

7. What I didn’t like/what could be changed in the on-line part of the course was ...

Answers included:
“Not so challenging as it might be, give students more work! :)
“Well, maybe length of texts. It took more time to read too long text, and then to say something briefly, also too short texts. But actually it was good that we had longer text at the beginning and simpler and shorter text at the end when I was many other things to do also.”
8. What did you like most about the course as a whole (e.g. study visit(s), on-line discussions, classroom discussions, the opportunity to make reports, self-tests, home-reading: the chance to pick your reading material and develop your vocabulary, etc.)?

Answers included:
“The classroom discussions, specially with foreign students. ERM was great too! It was lovely to learn about other people through their reports (I still remember XXX’s boat change).”
“Hard to say the most things... I liked I did get to improve my English, that’s the most important for me. I hadn’t deal with it since highschool about 8-9 years ago, so it was just very useful and good for me to remember and impove it.”

9. On the scale A-F (A being the best mark), 1. What mark would you give yourself concerning participation in the course (preparation time, devotion, acquiring of new words, active participation in the discussions, etc.) 2. What mark would you give the teacher/course 3. Your final remarks..... Many thanks for your kind cooperation!

Answers included:
“1. I will give this course an A+ 2. the teacher A+++ (not too harsh, not too gentle) 3. Final remarks – I want to take this kind of a course again in the spring ... this is the best remark I can give!”
“1. B, because I spent lot of time with homework, but I hadn’t always time to learn new words on time. 2. A of course :) 3. It was so friendly course and so consideraitioning, there was much work to do, but it is language, so you have to learn it, it’s the only way. I have only good words to say. Thank you!”

As we can see from the above illustration of the responses, students were in general well-prepared for the course. They checked their language level prior to the course, they decided on why they wish to take a blended learning course, and they were also satisfied with their choices.

Typically, the work load seemed to be enough and even bordering on too much for a number of students. And as always, there were some, who said that they would have wished to go through even more materials.

This should show that the course was approximately well paced – experience shows that too big overload of obligatory tasks causes drop-outs and increased stress for students. At the same time, there were numerous additional tasks available – so the student craving for “more work” in fact had an opportunity for this. The question is why s/he didn’t take it, and we suspect the answer may lie in that the inner motivation was unfortunately not big enough in this case. Indeed, many students still expect the classroom to be very teacher regulated, and perform tasks only if there is a mark given for it.
We see room for improvement here in future courses in encouraging students even more to nurture their inner motivation and “learning for oneself” guidance and attitude. The supportive experience in “real life” encourages students to share more information digitally. And also vice versa – the information presented in the virtual world makes a good foundation for developing good relations in the classroom. Such processes of merging the virtual with real life, relying for technologies to find a feeling of belonging, and rejoicing over the friends’ real life presence happens all the time in many modern lives today. Allowing our students to pursue this way we allow them to communicate and develop in modes and context familiar to and inspiring for them. Blended learning has an enormous role to play here.

5. Conclusion

As demonstrated in the article above, values and ethics may guide teachers through choosing their medium, procedures and communication patterns with communicating with their students. Behind many of the seemingly practical choices there is a worldview based on active research and recent theoretical approaches. Many years of teaching practice and – as a teacher in different learning groups – participant observation also helps to analyse and shape the processes. E-learning in language learning is possible and can be stimulating. Hopefully, anchorage in deeper theories, principles and ethics can support students in making meaningful choices.

With the development of e-learning and blended learning endless opportunities for novelties, development and change are created. Students are becoming more and more engaged, the communication and learning are less and less teacher-centred. In these developments the role of teachers, students, and learning itself are continuously changing to offer exiting possibilities for further development. Many of these developments are to be discovered in the work process together with the students and colleagues from all over the world. Hopefully, a student-centred approach based on individualisation, increasing the student motivation, and responsibility, can be of support on this way. Blended learning can successfully be one of the possible paths to take in order to pursue these goals.

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