

USING THE BLENDED LEARNING METHOD IN A LITERATURE CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY ON TEACHING SONNETS

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ABSTRACT

This case study looks at the effectiveness of using the blended learning method in a literature class. Prior to the study, the researcher mainly maintained a teacher-centred approach in teaching literature. Learning problems were only discovered in assessment. Blended learning balanced the responsibility of the learning process to both the teacher and student. In teaching sonnets, the researcher found that the students were more engaged and resourceful in deciphering the content. Errors and misunderstanding were addressed in class during face-to-face sessions, thus allowing immediate feedback to be given to the students.

Keywords: Blended learning, student-centred class, literature, sonnets

INTRODUCTION

What is Blended Learning?

Staker and Horn define blended learning as ‘a formal education programme in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path and/ or pace and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home.’ (Heather Staker, Michael B. Horn, 2012). The phrase ‘formal education programme’ by definition excludes any informal online education such as self-learning games. Also noteworthy is the phrase ‘content and instruction.’ This distinguishes the simple use of internet tools for education. There should be, as will be discussed below, actual instructions woven into content that should be delivered to learners by an instructor. The term ‘blended’ is used to signify the merger between traditional style face-to-face school teaching, referred to as the brick-and-mortar, and online delivery of content. Crucial in this concept is the fact that the learners participate in both methods of delivery at their own time, place and pace. While independent learning is encouraged, the presence of an instructor is paramount.

Blended learning can be practised by adhering to a few models. Four prominent ones are the Rotation Model, Flex Model, Self-Blend Model and the Enriched-Virtual Model (Friesen, 2012). These models describe combinations of usual classroom situations and online learning including how and when students participate in activities designed based on them.

Why is Blended Learning Used?

In this technological era, the advancement in ICT related devices and personal gadgets is almost overwhelming. Students are no longer interested in getting information from books or being

dictated by a teacher in a classroom. The freedom of access is in their hands. Therefore, they can be more engaged in learning when these devices are used. According to Dimitris Kaplanis, by using blended learning, the learner is more engaged in using a variety of content types. (Kaplanis, 2013) The variety of methods can present students with endless sources of learning.

Learners also learn in different ways. In catering for individuals in a diverse classroom, the teacher needs to allocate the limited time given to accomplish effective teaching that would reach the maximum number of students. Blended learning is a way that time can be utilised better. Kaplanis recommends that a lot of time can be saved when materials, quizzes or tests are delivered online. The time saved can be put to better use in teaching.

Spencer speaks of the huge amount of applications that can be found online and mobile devices. (Spencer, 2010). While he speaks on Apple mobile products, it cannot be denied that the variety existing from other mobile gadget companies are uncountable. Students have access to these applications and these can be used in digital learning.

Student learning activity could also be improved with the use of blended learning. The Centre of Teaching Excellence of the University of Waterloo outlines the benefits of blended learning, saying that it increases the amount and quality of students' interaction. It gives them the opportunity to be active and collaborative in their learning. Assessment before, during and after lectures are also possible. With blended learning, the focus of the teacher during class can be more on active learning activities, while background and foundational content can be provided online. These, the students can access at their own pace, on their own time. (University of Waterloo)

Under what conditions are Blended Learning used?

Field, in a paper discussing favourable conditions for effective teaching and learning in blended face-to-face and online method, lists several conditions that should be considered to achieve the objectives of such a blended course. (Field, 2005)

The first pertains to the *commitment of the practitioner to the best practice in blended learning* which involves the use of online teaching and that traditional methods are no longer appropriate. They need to take into consideration that learners are active and active participation that requires reflection is crucial in blended teaching. Online instruction should also be a medium that engages students and creates communication and interaction among them rather than just as an additional or supplementary teaching aid.

The second condition detailed by Field is the need to *reflect on the decision to use a blended model*. It must be understood that not everyone in every classroom situation would be able to optimise from blended learning. In an earlier paper, Wells and Field provided four key characteristics that would determine the suitability of using blended learning. They are the nature of the student body, the level of study, the nature of unit material and the nature of assessment. (Ian Wells and Rachael Field, 2003)

In acknowledging the nature of the student body, one needs to take into account the students' demographic profile. The physical location of the student, career, family, linguistic ability and

culture have to be considered before structuring a blended learning programme. Some students may live in a remote area. This could pose two problems. The first could be the inability of the student to attend the face-to-face portion of the class. The other could be the lack of internet access that would deprive the student of the online component. Students who attend classes on a part-time basis might have work commitment that might hinder regular attendance for the face-to-face sessions. The linguistic ability of students is an important element in the decision as well. Students with a lower mastery of the English language may benefit from being given time to absorb online content as compared to having to cope with the surge of input during a face-to-face lecture.

The level of study is important as it could greatly affect the effectiveness of a blended learning programme. Wells and Field gave the example of first-year students who have just left the secondary school system which is often built upon the traditional face-to-face, teacher centred classroom method. They might find it overwhelming being given the seemingly ‘unchecked’ student-centred way of learning. On the other hand senior students or adult learners might find it useful and convenient to study online. They could easily adapt to study in their own time.

The content of the course or the nature of the unit material also determines the suitability of online delivery. Courses requiring an ample amount of research would be better if taught online with the teacher guiding students to online references. But in a more communicative course, where it would be better if students gave immediate responses, the traditional face-to-face form of delivery should be emphasised. This is linked to the last criterion to be considered, that is, the nature of assessment. If the assessment requires a more physical action, too much emphasis on online material might not be beneficial to students. On the practical side of achieving the objectives of a course, a teacher should consider tipping the scales appropriately.

The third condition listed by Field (2005) is the need for *explicit communication and collaboration with students*. Knowing that students come from diverse backgrounds and require different needs, having different learning styles, it is important that the objectives, methods and assessment design is made clear to them before implementing blended learning. Such communication can be made during the first face-to-face meeting or through the use of emails or other communication tools.

Perhaps the most important condition outlined next, is *the presence and interactive role of the lecturer/ teacher*. Without the teacher, the online model becomes simply that – an online instructional model. Field, based on other researches says that effective learning happens when a teacher is present with the key roles of communicating effectively with students, modelling effective approaches to learning, facilitating and encouraging motivation, personalising the learning experience and giving timely and appropriate feedback. Above all these is the need of the teacher to focus attention to the student, and the encouragement and stimulation of their active learning in both the face-to-face classes and the online environment. In a research conducted by Slack, Beer, Armit and Green (2003) came to the conclusion that online discussions can facilitate deep learning, but only when supported by instructors. (Frances Slack, Martin Beer, Gillian Armit and Sharon Green, 2003).

The final condition is on the matter of *assessment on online discussions*. Field emphasises the importance of this component as it is important that the students know that the assessment develops their learning. It is not a means to see the capability of the student at the end of the course, but rather the effectiveness and efficiency of students' learning during the course. Assessment also takes the form of feedback and responses from the lecturer. Students value these as mark that they are on the right track. Therefore, it is crucial that blended learning takes into consideration the portions that would be evaluated and assessed online and how they affect the learning of the students.

When the conditions described above are fulfilled, blended learning would indeed be a better option to be carried out.

How can a teacher create Blended Learning?

Blended learning is a merger between face-to-face teaching and online instruction. Creating such a teaching programme requires careful consideration from both the teaching aspects. One of the ways is to look at what are the best practices in both methods.

Joseph R. Codde (2006) outlines the 7 Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, which he adapted from Arthur W. Chickering's and Zelda F. Gamson's book entitled, "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" published in 1987 (Codde, 2006). While the original purpose of the study and the principles developed were for the teaching for traditional face-to-face environment, The Centre for Teaching Excellence of Virginia Commonwealth University in turn has adopted the principles for online teaching (Excellence, 2013). The principles are listed below and perspectives are given for both the face-to-face and the online mediums.

1. Good Practice Encourages Student-Faculty Contact

It is important that the faculty and students communicate with each other. This can be the first step in creating or designing a blended learning course. Notifications from the learning institution itself can appear in the physical sense or provided online. With the existence of various online management systems, information could reach students this way as well. The faculty also could assist students in technical matters like establishing an account in the learning management system of the institution. Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS), for instance has a learning management system called myLMS where lecturers and students can interact and participate in the process of teaching and learning. This link leads to the front page of the site: <http://lms.kuis.edu.my/login.php>

2. Good Practice Encourages Cooperation among Students

Codde emphasises that learning is most effective when it happens as a result of team effort. Groups should be assigned to work on projects that would require each team member to contribute to the completion and success of the project as a whole.

In the online environment, this can be achieved with the use of learning management systems. Online forums may act as the platform for the exchange of ideas and course materials.

3. Good Practice Encourages Active Learning

A step away from traditional teaching methods is the practice of encouraging students to be active participants in the teaching and learning process. This should occur in both the face-to-face and the online components of the programme.

During the face-to-face session, students should not just listen passively and receive information delivered by the lecturer. The lesson should be designed in such a way, that they should be able to present their ideas in presentations, ask questions, offer opinions and interact with others in the class.

The same method can be applied in the online portion. Students should be able to do similar activities, where they interact with each other. In an active manner, they should be able to contribute to the learning process of the whole class.

An example of a blended course would be students learning a Shakespearean play. During the face-to-face, the lecturer provides the outline of the play, describing the various characters. The students are made aware of the acts and scenes. Tasks could then be assigned to students online, where they are to read each scene and write a summary of it. The way to avoid the 'google-cut-and-paste' syndrome is by ensuring that the students use their own words based on their understanding of the play. By use of Google Share, they would be able to improve on each other's work.

4. Good Practice Gives Prompt Feedback

Codde says that students need appropriate feedback on performance to benefit from courses. In the face-to-face session, this can be done immediately. Response and feedback from the lecturer would guide students to correct mistakes, especially fossilised errors. Nozadze, citing Wang Cui-lian (2003) in an article on dealing with fossilised errors lists 22 methods that can be used to overcome the problem. 14 of them has to do with the response and feedback from the teacher. (Nozadze, 2012).

Immediate response in online discussions is also possible with tools such as online forums and emails. Designing a blended course should consider methods in which responses and feedback from the lecturer could be given to the students for improvement.

5. Good Practice Emphasizes Time on Task

Given the nature of blended learning where students supposedly have more time on their hands to complete tasks given, one needs to consider the allocation of enough time for them. Students may have a problem with time management and this needs to be noticed by the person designing a blended learning course. Even for the online segment, deadlines need to be established to ensure that work is done on time.

6. Good Practice Communicates High Expectations

The lecturer should expect the best from the students. Codde calls this a self-fulfilling prophecy. For the online part where students do not meet instructors often, rubrics on what standards to be expected could be established as a guide for students. An archive of model answers or projects would also benefit students.

7. Good Practice Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning

A needs analysis at the beginning of the course could help the lecturer to know the students including their strengths and weaknesses, learning styles and other significant idiosyncrasies which could be taken into consideration in designing a blended learning course.

These are a few considerations that should be thought out before a lecturer decides to create a blended learning programme.

What medium or resources can be used in Blended Learning?

In Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS), lecturers have the option of using the learning management system (LMS) of the college. It is a virtual space where all students can access for general information on studies and college administration as well as specific instructions on courses taken. It is relatively new and so far students have been using it for the administrative side of their courses such as registration of courses, adding and dropping courses and getting information on examinations.

A workshop was held on how to use the LMS in the teaching and learning process. Lecturers were introduced to the system and how lecture notes, assignments and quizzes could be uploaded onto the system to be retrieved by students. The Faculty of Management and Muamalah has made it compulsory for lecturers to use the system beginning the November 2013/ 2014 semester.

Besides the LMS, lecturers there are many online resources that can be used based on the nature and content of courses.

This link: <http://www.teachthought.com/teaching/37-blended-learning-resources-you-can-use-tomorrow/> provides 37 blended learning resources that can be explored based on the needs of the students and suitability of the course.

What are the challenges of using Blended Learning in teaching and learning?

Jane Kenney and Ellen Newcombe summarise the challenges of using blended learning after conducting such a class in a pilot study. They state that time was a major factor that affected the final results of the class. Time was needed in training, re-designing and administrating the course unit. This was true for both the face-to-face and the online portion of the course, especially when it came to timely feedback and assessment. Another challenge was getting the students on board

with the new format. Some students were sceptical about the new approach and not used to taking responsibility for their own learning. Others had issues with time management and using technology for learning. The instructor felt the need to continuously remind students about due dates and where to find materials and assignments on the website. Several students would wait until the last minute to post discussions and submit assignments and would sometimes run into technical difficulties. The author was surprised at some of the students' lack of proficiency when using technology tools for instructional instead of social purposes. (Jane Kenney and Ellen Newcombe, 2012)

On a personal level, I foresee the implementation of blended learning at my college having unique problems of its own. Firstly I worry on the readiness of my ever-complacent students to take on the challenge of online instructions. Online learning, blended or not, would be something new to them. They are well equipped with the ability to search, download, copy and paste, blatantly plagiarise from internet sources. But to commit themselves to self-study and meeting deadlines would be a wonder if they were actualised.

What are the advantages of Blended Learning in teaching and learning?

Besides theoretical reasons and obvious methodological superiority of blended learning, one clear advantage of it is that it is a positive move away from strict teacher-centred way of traditional methods. Blended learning allows students to be more active in the learning process, using tools contemporary to them and break away from their shell of passiveness.

In summarising the advantages of blended learning, the Centre for Teaching Excellence of the University of Waterloo states that blended learning has the ability to increase the amount and quality of faculty-to-student and student-to-student interaction; increase opportunities for active and collaborative learning and assessment before, during and after lectures; help students prepare for class discussions or lab work; facilitate more varied and engaging media for presenting course content; address learning bottlenecks via new types of interactive and independent learning activities; allow class time to be spent on active learning activities by shifting background or foundational content to the online environment; help to create a sense of community in large classes; and allow students to access course materials when and where they want, at their own pace. (University of Waterloo)

The Teaching of Sonnets using the Blended Learning Method

The component selected to be taught using blended learning is the introduction to sonnets. It is a part of the course DLEH 5013 Literature II for senior students of Diploma in English Language Studies (DELS) at Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS). The course is heavy since it contains both drama and poetry parts. It is the continuation of DLEH 4003 Literature I taken by the students in the previous semester, dealing with novels and short stories.

Since sonnets are a more difficult form of poems and students might need more time to digest the materials and ideas on their own time, a blended learning effort is thought to be more suitable. And as the students also have a Shakespearean play to study during the second half of the

semester, blended learning seems to be the best way to accomplish more in a short duration of time.

This component is taught somewhere around the fifth or sixth week of the semester. Students at this point have already read or learnt a number of other poems. They are also familiar with some literary devices such as symbols and metaphors.

As a pre-learning activity, the students are given a set of questions as a study guide in the myLMS portal under the subject code, DLEH 5013. All the students have access to this portal.

The questions are as follows:

1. What is a sonnet?
 2. How is a sonnet different from other forms of poetry?
 3. What is an iambic pentameter?
 4. What is the rhyming scheme of a sonnet?
 5. Compare the rhyming schemes of a Shakespearean and a Petrarchan sonnet.
- Discussion of the above will be done in the next class.

The next class is a face-to-face tutorial. Lectures and tutorials are treated similarly for this course as currently there are only 22 students in the class. The format is more of a tutorial as the students sit in small groups in a classroom.

A YouTube video of a song is played. It is a beautiful piece based on Sonnet 18 sung by David Gilmour. The link to the song is: <http://youtu.be/S8Osse7w9fs>

It is expected that some students might recognise and raise comments on the song as they could be familiar with Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 which was in the secondary school English Literature syllabus some time ago. A short lecture is then given as an introduction to sonnets. This is followed by a discussion in groups on the meaning of Sonnet 18. At the end of the class, students are reminded to visit their myLMS before the following class.

During the weekend in between the two face-to-face classes, the students are given the following questions as preparation.

Read up and answer the following questions:

1. What is the theme of a poem?
2. How is theme different from the subject of a poem?
3. What is the theme of Sonnet 18 by Shakespeare?
4. Is the theme explicitly or implicitly given?

During the face-to-face session, after a short discussion on the online questions, the class is divided into groups and each group is given two sonnets. They are asked to discuss the similarity of the sonnets, which in this case is the theme.

The sonnets are paired in this way:

Group	Sonnets	Themes (not provided)
Athene	2 and 3	Procreation
Boreas	18 and 55	Immortality in verse
Cassandra	73 and 104	Time and old age
Dionysus	57 and 61	jealousy
Eurydice	129 and 144	Danger of lust and wrong love

The groups are given time to prepare PowerPoint presentations and they take turns explaining their discovery to the class.

Finally, a sonnet is given online. It is given bare without any indication of the title or where it appears in the literary world. Also, it is a non-Shakespearean sonnet. Students are given the following rubrics:

Analyse the following poem and present it to the class based on the following points:

- Background/ historical context
- Structure/ form
- Meaning
- Source

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
 With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
 "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

This research is to be done in your existing groups and you will present it during your next class.

The sonnet is a Petrarchan sonnet entitled *The New Colossus*, written by Emma Lazarus (Poetry Foundation, 2014). It is found **in** the Statue of Liberty. The poem is chosen to make the students discover the superiority of the sonnet form and how it is significant even in the modern world.

CONCLUSION

Blended learning is relatively new for some educators. However it is something worth looking into as it offers many advantages to both the teacher and the learners. The limited time one has to

teach in a semester, for example, can be expanded beyond imagination with the use of blended elements. A teacher can focus more on better materials – the ones that need more guidance – to be presented in the class, while the more learner-friendly information could be provided online. Students too will benefit from blended learning as time is given for learning at their own pace. Above all these reasons, blended learning is or can be interesting. It is a method far more challenging, different, and unbound compared to strict traditional methods. It is definitely a positive approach in teaching and learning in this technologically rich era.

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