

“Blended” Education And The Transformation Of Teachers: A Long-Term Case Study In Postgraduate UK Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This case study looks at the role of blended learning in language teacher education and focuses on the student experience of studying an element of a regular face-to-face class online. It shows how the experience is particularly relevant to in-service teachers who are following a master's programme that equips them for implementing the use of educational technologies in their regular classroom.

The paper explores a range of issues in the current adult education literature including deep and surface learning (Biggs, 1999), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and the importance of educational dialogue (Laurillard, 2002) and shows via the analysis of the data how important the blended nature of this course unit is for the teachers to get a balanced programme that upgrades skills and knowledge, but which also enables them to reflect on past and future practice. It shows how the five stage model of online communication (Salmon, 2000) can be a useful tool and that teachers can be transformed (Motteram and Teague, 2000).

Keywords

Blended learning, adult education, language teacher education

INTRODUCTION

The onsite Master's in Educational Technology and English Language Teaching that Manchester has run since 1996 includes a module that makes use of various online technologies to support the learning process and as an illustration and examples of sound online pedagogical practice. This paper explores the experiences of a number of students who have followed the module in this particular mode.

This paper will consider a number of questions: How has practice changed over time? How have different groups appreciated the experience? Why was it that for one particular group the online interaction seemed less successful? What do these experiences tell us about the best way of conducting such activity? Is such activity relevant for onsite learners?

TRAINING TEACHERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Teaching/ learning should be a process in which the participants engage deeply with ideas (Biggs, 1999) in order to make meaning (Wenger, 1998) and that good tasks are those that are effective in brokering learning outcomes (Laurillard, 2002, Biggs, 1999, Wenger, 1998). There are clearly a number of ways of achieving this, more traditional approaches like lectures and seminars and more recent solutions like enquiry, or problem-based learning. Increasingly, solutions that are proposed involve a range of learning technologies, however, as Laurillard argues (2002) "... a university is defined by the quality of its academic conversations, not by the technologies that service them." and as Lave and Wenger put it (1991) "Invisibility of mediating technologies is necessary for allowing focus on, and thus supporting visibility of the subject matter." In other words we are involved in looking for ways in which we can have meaningful and deep interactions about subject areas that interest the participants and ourselves, which make use of technologies that are invisible in the sense that they do not impede the value of the learning experience, but at the same time help to structure or scaffold learning to make it more accessible to a range of participants.

Wallace (1991) describes different models of language teacher education. He writes of the applied science model, the craft model and the reflective approach. These different approaches are to some extent historical, but may also be seen as representing different perspectives on the way that knowledge is formulated and presented. They are also representative of different research traditions at the same time. It is that balance

between the scientific “truths” (Nunan, 1992) that are presented in the applied science model, the reality of the practitioner experience in the craft model and the thought processes in the reflective approach that are applied by the teacher in trying to tease out the relationships between knowledge and skills that are so central to the teaching profession.

The teachers following the programme all have a number of years of experience, and as well as trying to develop knowledge and skills, we aim to encourage them to reflect on their experiences with other like minded colleagues. We want to :

... help students not just to perform the procedure, but also to stand back from it and see why it is necessary, where it fits and does not fit, distinguish situations where it is needed from those where it is not, i.e. carry out the authentic activities of the subject expert. Laurillard (2002: 15)

The interrelationship between knowledge and skills (applied science and craft) and its impact on what the participants bring to the classroom and then what is added to that and taken away is what lies at the root of higher education, particularly when you come to the continuing professional development of teachers. On our Master’s degrees we are hoping that our participants are becoming “subject expert[s]” (Laurillard: *ibid*). They may go back into a classroom with enhanced skills, but, in many cases our teachers will be moving away from regular classroom teaching into areas like curriculum, or materials design, teacher education or with running a self-access, or resource centre, for example.

A final element that may help us to describe and analyse the experiences and interactions of our learners is the concept of communities of practice.

Being alive as human beings means that we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the most lofty pleasures. As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words we learn.

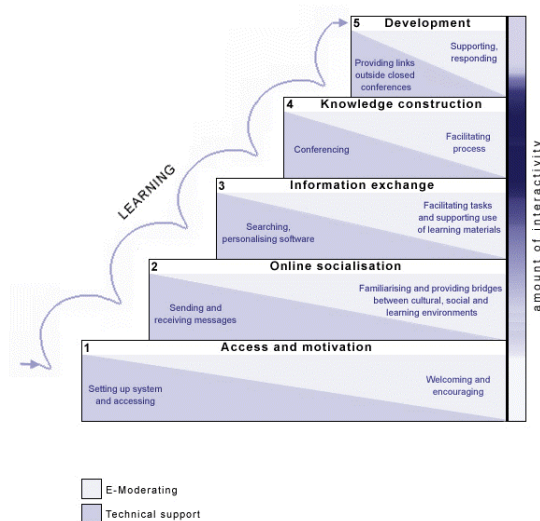
Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore to call these kinds of *communities of practice*. (Wenger 1998: 45)

For a short time, our students are part of a community of practice that is the online community that we create to give them an insight into this experience and as a result they learn collectively. Our module participants are also members of a range of other communities whilst they study physically at the University e.g. they attend other modules; they are members of a Master’s programme community; they belong to friendship groups that could include many of the participants who are part of the online community. The role of the F2F communities may well have in some cases a stronger pull than that of the virtual community and we will see below one possible example of this.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE MODULE

The module, *Computers, Language and Context*, makes use of two key Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in its delivery. The first is the Web, which it uses to present information about the topic of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) via specially written texts with links to a number of web sites . These pages are further linked to articles in the University of Manchester Library (JRULM) databases. The second ICT element is communication, mainly asynchronous. These two elements are brought together via tasks. The tasks follow the practice outlined in Salmon (2000), who proposes a five level model for the use of CMC. See Figure 1. They also take the participants through the process of engaging them in the deeper learning that can be achieved in online education (Motteram and Teague, 2000), illustrated in Table 1.

Figure 1: Salmon’s 5 level view of learning online



5	Transferring knowledge and skills to others	Innovate & inspire others to change ideas
4	Going it alone	Establish a personal view and become confident with new skills.
3	Gaining independence	Try out new ideas in own professional context. Discuss these ideas with work colleagues.
2	Supported knowledge and skills development	Try out new skills with support from tutors. Discuss ideas with peers and tutors on-line, reflect on new experiences & progress with further reading.
1	Getting an overview	Read input materials (new ideas), become acquainted with new ideas and new skills. Reflect on these in terms of own experiences

Table 1: A transformative education scale for distance learners.

The month that the onsite participants spend doing the topic of CMC and the accompanying tasks followed a fairly set pattern between 2000-2002. However, we did modify tasks quite significantly in 2003. Following Salmon, once online (Level 1), the first task is to exchange information about each other, looking at interests and background, expectations for this part of the module, experiences of online learning and so on (Level 2). This information was then converted into a web page and pictures were added. The next phase is to find a learning website that they find interesting, to try it out and then to review it. At this point they are supposed to begin to comment on each others’ contributions (Level 3). The final task is collaborative. The participants are put together in groups of three (3s) and are expected to exchange ideas about their views on different types of CMC. They were also collectively expected to pick 3 or 4 websites on the subject that they would recommend to others (Levels 4 & 5) and ultimately to use the knowledge gained with their own students. In 2003, we varied the tasks to promote greater discussion on the Forum, we reduced the number of tasks and focused on reading articles that reflected the current debate in the use of CMC particularly in language teaching.

There have been a number of minor differences in the computing tools that we have used over time, the main being the use of an electronic forum as the central focus for ideas generation, rather than just an e-list (distribution list). We still make use of the e-list as a way of chasing the participants as forums are what is termed a “pull” technology i.e. the messages that are posted have to be accessed by going to the web page that is the forum site this opposed to a “push” technology like a distribution list where the messages are delivered directly to the email box and are more likely to be picked up on a daily basis. It is in fact possible to configure the forum we use to send the participant who has posted a message an email when someone responds to a posting that has been made. The advantage of the forum for developing a community is that it is more easily managed as a permanent record, which is what you are ultimately looking for if you are trying to build knowledge from input. In addition, if the moderator allows, the inputted texts can be edited, so if you (either the participant or the tutor) are unhappy with a posting you can modify it, or even remove it (only possible for the tutor). Email messages are not retrievable in the same way, and are more difficult to order around topics.

They can be archived, but this is a hit and miss affair and assumes that people are disciplined enough to use exactly the same title for each message. This threading and weaving of messages (Salmon, 2000) is also easier with forums and in most systems messages can be moved into different topic areas. Topics can also be closed after a certain period of time and the participants can be informed of this in advance.

METHODOLOGY

This is a case study, however, it takes elements from other methodologies that help to inform the process. By case study is meant "...an exploration of a "bounded system" or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context." (Cresswell, 1998). It also makes use of the concept of cultural history (Cole, 1996) to describe the way that the activities have changed and developed over time.

In addition to looking at the development of the module over time and data from a number of F2F groups, it is necessary to review data collected with one of the distance learning groups. This is done in order to demonstrate that the tasks that the F2F participants follow are not affected by the change from a distribution list to a forum, examples are therefore given of how well these tasks were performed by our distance learning participants.

THE DATA

The data used in the following discussion come from several sources over a three year period (2000-2003).

August 2000 – Summer School Group	2 responses to the questionnaire (12 in the class). Given out in class and asking for voluntary responses
F2F 2001	Questionnaire given out in class with a request to return it by email – 8 responses (12 in the class). Asked to fill it in in-class.
DL 2001-2002	22 participants were part of this module. We got 11 contributions from the task.
F2F 2002	12 participants. They were asked to work in focus groups of 3. The focus groups interactions were transcribed and analysed.
F2F 2003	8 participants filled in a questionnaire in class and then formed 3 focus groups to discuss issues further. The focus groups interactions were transcribed and analysed.

Table 2: Data collected over the three year period

The data collection started with the Summer group in 2000 and the year-round 2001 who had been given an open questionnaire (See Appendix 1) to fill in, however, responses were patchy because I had not collected the data in during the F2F sessions. The questionnaire consists of a number of open-ended questions, similar to an interview schedule and the questions focus on the participants experiences of the discussion list; the role of the web-site in delivering information; whether the participants interacted on the topics outside of the electronic forum; the validity of the experience for onsite education; whether there was additional knowledge or skills developed as the result of the blended experience. With the F2F 2002 group, I decided to try small focus groups to gather relevant data, to try to discover why the forum had not been so interactive in that particular year. These discussions were recorded and transcribed. This was followed up in 2003 with a similar exercise, but both questionnaires and focus groups were used to collect data. Two additional questions concerning transferable skills and whether the participants would make use of what they had learned on the module with their own students were added on the recommendation of a colleague who had heard a presentation on an earlier version of the paper. (See Appendix 1).

The data were processed by focussing on the research questions and considering whether the comments of the participants could tell us anything about the issues. Data were transferred to separate coding sheets so that all the comments on a particular question could be reviewed together and trends and issues highlighted. For the purposes of this paper the questionnaires and focus group transcriptions were the main data used.

FINDINGS

The research questions will now be looked at in order: *How has practice changed over time?*

From 2000-2001, we made use of web pages and a distribution list, in 2002-2003, we added in the forum and changed the function of the distribution list. These changes were deliberate and reflect the changing availability of technologies, but also the students' greater familiarity with online tasks and activities. In 2003 some of the tasks were also changed. The new tasks for 2003 focused on discussions of specific articles online and proved successful in encouraging online group work.

One of the other interesting points that comes out of the discussion that several of the groups have, is their growing sophistication with the use of communications systems, so most of the overseas participants keep in touch with home through regular chat sessions (mostly using Windows Messenger), or through audio conferencing, for example: "I use voice chatting with my mother" (SL); "I chat with my friends not about assignments" (JL). This "leisure" use of the technology is related to the way that ours, along with many other universities in the UK now have wired (and increasingly radio) campuses that mean for a small monthly charge the programme participants can have broadband, always on access to the internet in their accommodation. This "leisure" use will inevitably have a backwash effect on to the academic uses of such technology, in the same way that in the past that television was more difficult to use in classrooms as learners associated such technologies with the leisure activity, rather than study.

How have different groups appreciated the experience?

Groups have generally expressed positive views about their experiences of the blended part of the module over the different groups under study. Negative views have tended to be in the minority and often contradict a stronger more positive perspective on the same issues.

There were specific comments about being able to deal with the topic in their own time and being able to organise themselves around the task. One participant from the 2003 group expressed the view that "writing is more profound than speaking", another from 2001 said "We could also make comments after reading and having some time to think of what we were going to say trying to be explicit as possible". Both points are reflected generally in the literature (see Motteram, 2001 for an overview) on online academic work. Another view that came out quite commonly was the way that the particular activities promoted learner autonomy to a greater extent, however, one student from 2001 made the explicit point that the more directed tasks helped to keep the activities going and were helpful in making sure the students did not get lost, which is a common problem with online learning.

The participants also expressed the view that they had learned new skills and had gained insights into online activity that they could not have got without the direct experience of the online tasks. The issue that there is a permanent record of discussion was raised as was that of getting a greater insight into what other participants knew. In many senses the participants learned to value each others' contributions more.

It also had an impact on participants' more generic study skills, e.g. "...I seldom write comments after reading an article. Using a forum I forced myself to write something about the article. I tried to get the gist of the articles to be able to write something on the forum." (EJ). These experiences appear to represent a deeper experience of learning, as well as maintaining a good balance of skills development.

Why was it that for one particular group the experience of the online interaction seemed less successful?

The F2F 2002 group did make postings, but they made almost no mention of each other's contributions and therefore the more integrated, deeper learning we are looking for did not appear to happen via this medium in this case. In previous years and in 2003, the F2F participants were as equally forthcoming as the OL 2001-2002 participants were and ideas that were presented by one participant were built upon by others.

In one of the F2F 2002 focus groups, the three participants (two UK teachers and one from overseas) talked about: anonymity, being part-time; having a genuine need to do the task; the management of the process; the differences between different forms of communication. Two of them felt that anonymity would have helped to stimulate interaction because as an onsite group they already met on a regular basis they felt that they had a tendency to ask each other questions about the tasks anyway.

In a second focus group which consisted of exclusively bilingual teachers, the concerns were rather different. One of the key issues that they focused on was the issue of "confidence": "I don't feel comfortable using it" (WY): "I'm not confident enough in my ideas and opinions on it. I'm not sure about what I've said maybe is good enough, or I feel not comfortable to argue with someone ..." (WY)

What do these experiences tell us about the best way of conducting such activity?

There are a number of different issues that can be explored here. Certainly, what is “best” will depend on a variety of factors. As Biggs (1999) points out, no two groups of learners are ever going to be the same, however, there are some general points that can be made about these experienced, in-service English language teachers.

The general way of conducting the activities, i.e. making use of e.g. the Salmon (2000) hierarchy from Figure 1 worked for us for a number of years. There was a lot of discussion in the focus groups about these particular activities and some very interesting insights into the whole issue of designing activities for online learning, which is one of the key themes of the module. One of the things that we have learned at Manchester over time working with distance learners is that it generally takes more time to do things when the same activities are conducted onsite.

There was a lot of discussion in the 2002 focus groups about being anonymous on the forums. They felt that this was particularly relevant for groups who had been working together onsite and would be likely to help some of the overseas students who were not so confident in their English and not keen to contribute because they felt that writing for them was an added pressure. This is an important point as distributed learning becomes more widespread and global and when you have mixed groupings in the way that we do. Whilst the majority of the research that has been undertaken so far in the use of online learning has been undertaken with monolingual groups, these groups were quite mixed and the idea of anonymity might help. Freeman and Capper (1999) explore this notion of anonymity in such asynchronous environments and in fact the participants in the 2002 F2F group had read this article in the early stages of their on-line activity.

Table 1 shows the way that participants will “transform” over the time that they are with us on the Master’s programme. There is good evidence to show from the activities the participants involved themselves in and that in all cases in 2003 the participants said that they would make use of the kinds of activities that they had experienced on their modules with their own students. We had suggestions on using the technology to get students to read material in advance before class and discuss some of the issues raised in the papers (CS); online contact outside of the classroom between Korean teachers and their students (EJ); providing students studying the EU with a set of FAQs (PG). This was true even with the participants who had not shown a very positive attitude to the experience on the module (e.g. PG), so on the Transformative Education Scale, these module participants were all engaging at level five. This would seem to imply that whatever its weaknesses, that this was a positive/ deep/ and transformative experience for all concerned.

Is such activity relevant for onsite learners?

The majority 89% (16 out of 18) of the students from the three years who answered the questionnaires felt that experience of blending the learning in this way was relevant for onsite learners. It enables us to “practise what we preach” (PG – 2003) in the sense that we are able to not only read and talk to the participants about how it works, but also to experience it directly and to gain independence (see Table 1). This enables us on a Master’s programme to balance knowledge and skills and then to reflect, as Laurillard (see above – 2002) encourages us to do.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems clear that F2F module participants on our degree are keen to try different kinds of experiences and clearly learn a range of skills from doing this. There is clear evidence that the participants have engaged with ideas and processes that have stimulated and motivated them and which they have been able to reflect on in ways that have been meaningful to them. What this study has hopefully shown is that blended learning can play a role in helping the process of transforming students, by providing them with the relevant and useful deep learning experience that was proposed earlier as being at the heart of higher education. As teachers they will take these ideas away and make use of them with their own learners, having gained both knowledge and experience as part of the programme that they have followed at Manchester. When blending learning, it is important to take into account the nature of the communities that the students are involved in on a day-to-day basis and make sure that the tasks that they are asked to do are feasible within the time that is available to them to study. It is also important to be aware that because activity is not occurring on the electronic forum that activity is not occurring. F2F students may well find other ways of doing what they have been asked to do.

Although this study is limited in that it focuses on small groups of F2F Master’s level teachers, it has been conducted over three years and for the most part the results have been consistent. It is also the case that much of the blended side of teaching and learning in non distance-learning higher education in the UK and elsewhere has been with postgraduate learners and so will have implications for the wider HE population.

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Appendix 1

Questions given to the 00 and 01 groups :-

1. In what ways was the discussion list useful/not useful?
2. In what ways was the website on CMC useful/not useful?
3. Did you find that the website and the list impeded your learning of the topic we used it for ie CMC?
4. Did you discuss issues that were on the list directly (ie not on the list) with your colleagues, or with tutors, if so, which topics? How much? What were your reasons for doing this?
5. Is using electronic discussion a valid things to do in on-site education, or do you feel that we should only do all of the topics in class?
6. Would you have rather had two F2F sessions about CMC instead of the work we did on the lists? Give your reasons.
7. Did you feel that you learned anything via the discussion list that you couldn't have picked up in a regular class?
8. Are there any transferable skills that you got from working in that way?

Additional question for 2003 group:-

9. Are there any transferable skills that you got from working in this way?
10. Would you use the forum