

Theory relating to blended learning

In the last CALL Review, I suggested that blended learning (BL) is lacking in theoretical underpinning, especially in its use outside of higher education. I also gave my definition of BL. To save finding the last issue, here it is again:

Blended learning is a term referring to the way in which training is delivered. Both face-to-face lessons and distance elements are involved, combined in a pedagogically and didactically meaningful way. The training is continuously supervised by a teacher.

This seems to imply that the pedagogy and general academic theory relating to BL are known, which I suggest is usually not the case. I would maintain that BL is sufficiently different from "traditional" face-to-face teaching to make it highly unlikely that knowledge of the latter can directly be transferred to the former. This article therefore attempts to give an overview of some of the relevant theory. It is of necessity brief and the choice of areas is open to discussion (see below). However, hopefully, it will at least give food for thought.

The broad areas I chose to investigate were as follows: autonomy, motivation, in-house/business training, learning styles, second-language acquisition and blended/e-learning. These divided into areas relating to the design of courses, and those relating to the students in a course.

Autonomy, motivation and learning styles are the areas relating directly to the course participants. It seems quite obvious that a course requiring participants to do important parts of the course away from the direct supervision of a teacher will require extra motivation and autonomous learning skills and strategies. This is confirmed by research. The question is how learners can be helped in this respect.

Researchers generally agree that adult learners are rarely ready, willing and able to be effective autonomous learners (for example, Little (2007: 23) and Nunan (1997: 201)). It is therefore vital that this is taken into consideration. This can be done by providing ample support in multiple ways, including documentation; forums; organised meetings, virtual and face-to-face; sufficient preparation for distance activities; etc. Nunan (1997: 195) provides a structured approach for guiding learners towards an improved capacity to operate in a more autonomous environment.

Motivation is generally considered an important influence on success in learning a language. I found nothing to suggest that this was different for a BL situation. It does, however, perhaps have a potentially greater effect on a BL course due to the reduced level of direct contact with the teacher. At the level of encouraging students to complete particular tasks, for example, it may be useful to schedule activities in such a way that other activities (such as a reading task) need to be completed first. Ensuring that distance activities relate in some way to contact activities should also encourage students to complete them. Simply ensuring that students understand the rationale behind an activity and how to do it is another way to motivate students. When activities are not taking place in front of the teacher, it is of particular importance that the students understand what is being asked of them. Tangible evidence of success at the activity level is also motivating (Coryell and Chlup, 2007: 270), while a lack of feedback tends to demotivate.

At a higher level, motivation is seen to increase where the activities can be made relevant to the students and applicable to their individual environment. Various authors have commented on different aspects of this, including Arnold (2008), Derntl and Motschnig-Pitrik (2004) and Alonso *et al.* (2005).

Learning styles/multiple intelligences enjoy a large following, and it is hard to question the concept that people learn in different ways and that these should be catered for. However, they are not without their critics (for example, Smith (2005) and Coffield *et al.* (2004)). The latter in particular point out the lack of any kind of research to support the

majority of the seventy instruments and theories on learning styles they found. However, whether you subscribe to a particular theory, or just feel that people learn in different ways, BL provides an opportunity to give students a range of activities that allow for these differences (see below concerning the provisions of different paths).

In-house/business training, second-language acquisition and blended/e-learning are areas that primarily relate to the course design rather than the individual students. The first is an area where there is simply almost no research available. What does exist tends to look at the way in which in-house training exhibits specific characteristics. These include a range of barriers within organisations that increase the difficulty of implementing BL. These generally include psychological and marketing aspects, such as incorrect perceptions of what is involved, technological barriers concerning IT infrastructure, and organisational issues such as the location for the training and attitude of superiors. Several of these issues will be familiar to experienced providers of in-house courses already.

Second-language acquisition theory covers a wide range of attitudes towards how learning takes place, from a Universal Grammar perspective, suggesting that we can actually do very little to promote learning, through behaviourism to connectionist and constructivist theories. It has been suggested that constructivist and social-constructivist approaches to learning have dominated teaching in recent years, and the literature relating to BL certainly seems to support this view. With their emphasis on interaction and individual construction of the new language, these approaches support blends involving distance activities incorporating interaction of various kinds, especially Web 2.0 resources such as blogs, wikis, etc.

Research specifically on blended and e-learning covers a very wide range of fields, from psychology to technology. As such, it is difficult to summarise. On the other hand, there are also large gaps in the research. For example, much of the literature relates to the technological aspects rather than the learning aspects. In fact, one paper suggests:

There is a serious dysfunction between the profusion of technological features that are put forward and the shortage or non-existence of teaching principles for e-learning. There are no guidelines for analysing, designing, developing, supplying, and managing e-learning materials pedagogically. (Alonso et al, 2005)

However, there is a degree of consistency in the recommendations made for some aspects of BL. These include ensuring that the characteristics of the delivery medium be taken account of when designing the activity, rather than simply transferring existing material from a face-to-face environment to a distance situation. Including students as reviewers, listeners and authors is seen as an effective way to use the opportunities offered by technology. BL is particularly suitable for providing multiple routes through the course: it would be extremely difficult to allow multiple options to course participants in a purely face-to-face course. This is considered valuable in terms of motivation and also learning styles. Providing personalisation options has a similar purpose – to provide flexibility, but this time giving the individual the possibility to adapt tasks to his or her personal circumstances. Finally, formative and summative assessment are viewed as important by learners. It is therefore important to build this into the design of a course.

It can be seen that the conclusions from research into BL, pleasingly, correspond well with the more specific areas looked at previously, suggesting that the range of theory under consideration is, at least, a good starting point.

As with the first article, this one is intended as much to provide food for thought as definitive answers or guidance. The small amount of research that this article is based on has given me some insights into the theoretical areas that relate to BL. It has also highlighted how little research has actually been done directly concerning BL outside of higher education. In my opinion, there is a great need for this situation to be rectified.

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