Blended learning

Pete Sharma

Background

'Blended learning' (BL) is a 'buzz' word in language teaching. However, it has been in use for almost 20 years and its meaning 'has been constantly changing during this period' (Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, and Francis 2006: 18).

It was first used in the corporate world to refer to a course designed to allow workers to both continue in the workplace and study. Rather than taking time out on a residential seminar, training was delivered via (for example) self-study manuals, videos, and the web. BL was in part adopted as a cost-saving measure (see Driscoll 2002).

Definitions

In the world of education, three definitions of BL are especially relevant.

Definition 1: a combination of face-to-face and online teaching

'The integrated combination of traditional learning with web based on-line approaches' (Oliver and Trigwell 2005: 17). This is, arguably, the classic definition of the term. 'Traditional learning' here is classroom teaching or 'face-to-face' language lessons. The delivery of the online part of the course is usually through learning technologies, typically involving a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) such as 'Blackboard' or 'Moodle' and comprising the use of synchronous and asynchronous electronic tools, such as, respectively, 'chat' and 'bulletin boards'.

Definition 2: a combination of technologies

'The combination of media and tools employed in an e-learning environment' (ibid.: 17). This definition could describe a purely distance learning course, where no face-to-face lessons occur. Communication between the learner and e-tutor may take place through any number of technologies, such as email and internet telephone.

Definition 3: a combination of methodologies

'The combination of a number of pedagogic approaches, irrespective of the learning technology used' (ibid.: 17). A course that combines 'transmission' and 'constructivist' approaches would fit into this category, such as one involving elements of a present-practice-produce methodology as well as task-based learning.

The term continues to develop. A further possible conceptualization of BL is as 'a combination of real world plus in-world', where a teacher delivers a face-to-face lesson and then arranges to meet his or her student for a follow-up class in a virtual world such as 'Second Life' (Claypole 2010: 36).

Furthermore, computer-assisted language learning in general has been described as 'context specific' (Levy and Stockwell 2006: 234), and a number of local uses of the term 'BL' also exist within various educational settings, both national and institutional. For example, as some governments switch from coursebooks to CD Rom or web-based material, the term has been applied to the blending (or combination) of print and digital materials.

There are also a number of 'dimensions' associated with definitions of BL, such as 'breadth' and 'connotation'.

Breadth

Claypole (2003: 169) has argued that BL is nothing new and is indeed the logical development of prior tendencies involving the mixing of methods of teaching. A similar 'broad' interpretation of the term states that BL is a combination of the face-to-face part of a course and an *appropriate* use of technology' (Sharma and Barrett 2007: 7, my italics). On the other hand, a 'narrow' definition—for example 'blending face-to-face plus web-based learning'—excludes the use of CD Rom and other technologies and therefore could be seen as excessively restrictive.

Connotation

The term BL is used both positively and disparagingly. Thus, a '1 + 1 is more than 2' argument assumes a positive connotation, i.e. combining the best of the teacher with the best of the technology will deliver improved learning outcomes. On the other hand, a negative connotation can be assumed where there may be no thought-through pedagogical relation between parts of the blend, so that the course may appear to lack coherence.

The practice of BL

One of the main factors involved in running a BL course is a consideration of the 'appropriateness' of each medium of course delivery and the related matching of the delivery type to the learning activity. Thus, the face-to-face part of the course might develop student fluency through in-class discussion, while the electronic bulletin board component might develop learners' critical thinking skills. However, in practice, of course, students may favour one of the delivery modes (face-to-face or online) to the detriment of the other.

Putting BL into practice can involve a variety of approaches, such as the following:

- Teachers can issue learners with a password to their class VLE or 'wiki' (an editable website that can be used for collaborative activities), allowing 24/7 access to digital materials that support classroom work: a 'dual track' approach.
- A teacher could set homework assignments based on a CD Rom that accompanies the coursebook. Students use technology to do specific tasks between the face-to-face classes, to prepare or consolidate: an 'integrated' approach.

How the use of the term BL might develop in the future is not clear. Westbrook (2008: 13) has argued that it may be becoming diluted because the large number of definitions it has attracted means that almost any approach can be defined as BL. The term may therefore become redundant. However, BL is likely to remain an important concept in language teaching since its overall focus is concerned with the search for 'best practice', i.e. the

attempt to identify the optimum mix of course delivery in order to provide the most effective language learning experience.

References

Claypole, M. 2003. 'Blended learning: new resources for teaching business English' in A. Pulverness (ed.). *IATEFL Brighton Conference Selections*. Whitstable, UK: IATEFL.

Claypole, M. 2010. *Controversies in ELT. What You Always Wanted to Know about Teaching English but Were Afraid to Ask*. Norderstedt: LinguaBooks/BoD.

Driscoll, M. 2002. *Blended Learning: Let's Get Beyond the Hype.* Available at http://www-07.ibm.com/services/pdf/blended_learning.pdf (accessed on 5 July 2010).

Levy, M. and **G. Stockwell.** 2006. *CALL Dimensions: Options and Issues in Computer-Assisted Language Learning*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Oliver, M. and **K. Trigwell.** 2005. 'Can ''Blended Learning'' be redeemed?'. *E-learning* 2/1: 17–26.

Sharma, P. and **B. Barrett.** 2007. *Blended Learning: Using Technology in and Beyond the Language Classroom*. Oxford: Macmillan.

Sharpe, R., G. Benfield, G. Roberts, and **R. Francis.** 2006. *The Undergraduate Experience of Blended E-learning: A Review of UK Literature and Practice.* Available at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/literature_reviews/blended_elearning_exec_summary_1.pdf (accessed on 5 July 2009).

Westbrook, K. 2008. 'The beginning of the end for blended learning?'. *IATEFL CALL Review* Summer 2008: 12–15.

The author

Pete Sharma is currently working as a Lecturer in EAP. He is a Director of Pete Sharma Associates, a training organization. He is the co-author of *Blended Learning* (Macmillan 2007). See also http://www.psa.eu.com/
Email: pete.sharma@btopenworld.com