Blended learning: where are we?

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There is nothing fundamentally new or revolutionary about blended learning. Human beings have been learning through a blend of classroom lessons with a teacher, and classroom and personal study materials, for a very long time.

But the media we use today are no longer stone tablets, sheets of papyrus, printed documents, or cassette tapes. They are increasingly virtual, interactive, and their contents are accessible in hitherto unimaginable quantities anytime, anywhere, thanks to the ubiquity of the World Wide Web.

More importantly, learners today can communicate in real time with 'live' trainers and with other learners all over the world, using the same network.

Everything is dematerializing and migrating online: the written word, voice, video, telephone, multimedia applications, etc. The boundaries between resources, trainers, delivery modes, contents and media are blurring.

It is this development that is spurring a gigantic shake-up of the language training and publishing industries and that has facilitated the rise of what we call today blended learning.

But what is blended learning exactly?

In language training, 'blended learning' generally means a course that combines 'live' lessons with a face-to-face or distance trainer and e-learning resources (podcasts, videos, presentations, interactive exercises, articles, games, apps, etc.) available on different online or offline platforms. Compared to tutored e-learning, the teacher has a far more central role in the program.

The changing shape of the market

Technological progress and the dematerialisation of media are blurring the frontiers between the four main language teaching businesses: **face-to-face training, distance training, publishing, and e-learning**. Today, these four businesses are converging and, under pressure from their corporate clients, language training providers are adapting in different ways, depending on their size and specialty.

Three emerging trends can be identified in the current corporate blended offer:

1. In order to respond to their multinational client's requirements, the largest language training providers are going global and vertically integrating three and sometimes all four of the language training businesses. They are setting up 'online schools' with a global reach: blended learning platforms that provide a wide range of resources and modalities, including telephone and video coaching, virtual classes, e-learning modules, translation and speech tools, subtitled news documents, etc. Some are even offering face-to-face training as part of the blend, through their own networks or through partnerships with local schools. The key development is that they are bringing the 'live' teacher back into the e-learning mix.

Increasingly, these companies are becoming the lead partners of major international corporations, relegating the bricks-and-mortar schools to the role of sub-contractors. Examples which illustrate this are *Pearson's* recent acquisition of *Wall Street Institute* and *Global English* along with their partnership with *Busuu*. *Berliz International* recently acquired *Telelangue* while *Rosetta Stone* took over *LiveMocha* and *Tell Me More*.

2. The smaller distance and e-learning providers, whose businesses are also converging, are reinforcing their partnerships with traditional face-to-face schools. They are opening up their platforms to trainers and allowing them to customise their programs and thus provide better integrated blended learning courses.

3. The democratization of Web 2.0 tools and platforms is allowing medium-sized training organisations and even independent trainers to create their own specialised blended offers. The principal platform used today is English360, which offers schools learning management tools with student tracking and billing, together with customisable interactive content from Cambridge University Press materials (but not exclusively). The major publishers are also providing online homework resources and follow up systems, often for free, to back up and reinforce their classroom materials.

Why has blended learning become so popular and why is it replacing e-learning today?

In the early 2000s, many people were convinced that thanks to the development of internet-based educational technologies combined with the self-access approach to learning, teachers could be dispensed with altogether. Such e-illusions were quickly shattered: usage rates for online programs were around 10%.

As a result of the failure of mechanistic self-access e-learning, tutored e-learning, in which a tutor 'accompanies' the learner's e-learning program, became the norm. And when that too proved unsatisfactory, because learners weren't getting sufficient 'live' personalised practice and guidance, blended learning, with the 'live' teacher back in the picture, became the new norm.

In the field of language training, Edutech 'revolutions' announcing the imminent demise of language teachers have come and gone for over 40 years, leaving mountains of obsolete hardware and kilometers of unused code in their wake. Time and time again, human interaction with a 'live' trainer (face-to-face or at distance) has bounced back. There are several reasons for this:

1. People learn languages in order to communicate with other people, not with computer programs, whose interactive capacity is extremely limited (and is likely to be so for many years to come). For most learners, regular 'live' communication practice with real people is thus essential in the learning process.

2. To make progress, learners need constant interactive feedback, particularly when dealing with the 'grey' or ambiguous areas of language, which only an experienced teacher can provide.

3. Language learning is a long process and most learners need the guidance an experienced teacher can provide. No one's grandmother can replace a skilled trainer despite recent claims. In fact the greater the technology

mix, the more expertise is required from teachers.

4. For young learners in particular, the motivational role of the trainer is essential. We can all remember which teachers inspired us to learn at school and why we were more interested in certain subjects than in others. In my experience, the highest of satisfaction in every student survey I have seen has been consistently with the teachers.

Teething troubles

But the early years of blended learning have not lived up to initial expectations. The technology (learning management systems, broadband, interactive web ware) is not yet up to the mark. Users have found it hard to master the complexity of the approach. They don't have the tools or the expertise required to design and manage it, or to properly evaluate the results. Face-to-face courses have been bundled together with self-access e-learning programs and telephone modules, often purely for financial reasons. The different providers involved rarely communicate with each other.

The complexity of implementation and the discouraging results of the early versions of blended learning are orienting the market towards simpler and better integrated solutions: blended learning is gradually giving way to integrated learning.

Blended learning's advantages

When it is integrated and organised professionally, **blended language learning corresponds to the current needs of corporate customers**, because it offers greater flexibility for learners than do traditional approaches, it reduces training costs, and can be customised by selecting appropriate modalities and resources for a given profile. The wealth and variety of a blended language learning course is more suited to the way people learn languages naturally than traditional training. In addition, the interactivity of the resources available is more motivating for learners and can enhance learning effectiveness.

How to build an integrated corporate learning project that works

The definition of the verb 'to blend' in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is 'to combine into an integrated whole'. The essential quality of a blend is thus seamless integration between the different components or modalities of a course.

Interlocking and associated resources

When a learner only has occasional exposure to a language, effective learning requires a more structured approach. Such an approach, which combines classroom modules with self-study, identifies the most frequent linguistic structures, which vary according to the context, and then helps the learner to assimilate them through repetition and recycling, using progressive sequences of exercises and a cycle of controlled and free practice activities. In a multimodal blended learning course, the modalities, the resources, the contents, and the trainer's activities that are linked to the core program need to be tightly **interlocked** in order to guarantee optimal pedagogic coherence and simplify the learner's task.

However, learning cannot be limited to this controlled activity only, because learners need to appropriate the language for themselves in order to become autonomous. It is thus equally important that they read texts, listen to recordings, watch videos, and have spontaneous conversations, or that they research vocabulary and grammar resources that interest them: in other words, that they explore the language freely and are exposed to immersive sequences. That's why an effective blended learning course should include **associated** resources that are less tightly linked to the core program.

The success of a blended learning program will depend in part on how well-integrated these two approaches are within the learning path.

Initial diagnostic and project management

A corporate blended language learning project requires a prior in-depth

diagnostic of needs, objectives, and constraints. It also requires a project management approach with a carefully planned roll-out schedule. In addition, training managers need to have a clear vision of the overall project goals and communicate them clearly to the different stakeholders so as to ensure line managers, trainers, and learners understand the potential benefits of the system, what is expected from them, and collaborate effectively to reach targets.

Effective evaluation systems

Effective language training requires evaluation systems that measure not just the progress in the overall level of a learner, but also the specific skills, oral and written, and the context-specific language learners need to master in order to do their job effectively. Results of training need to be measured against initial performance, on the basis of the learner's objectives and of the programme followed. With multimodal blended learning, the difficulty is compounded by the need for specific evaluation systems for each modality, and for a method to aggregate these results to produce a coherent, reliable picture of a learner's progress. No currently available off-the-shelf evaluation tools can do this, so special attention to this aspect is essential when implementing a blended learning project.

Implementation and management

When rolling out a large training project, the complexity of blended learning, with its multiple interactions and diversity of actors, requires expert pedagogical engineering, an efficient and reliable Web-based Learning Management System (LMS) to manage scheduling, piloting, communication and monitoring, supported by fully qualified human and technological resources. Without these elements, the project can easily fall apart.

The model: trainer-led, learner-centered blended learning

As we have seen, the role of trainers in blended learning is crucial to the project's success. In addition to face-to-face training, their job is to tailor the programs and resources to individual learner's needs, to respond to the learner's questions and problems,

to motivate them and monitor their progress in the classroom and online. Whenever necessary, trainers need to apply micro-adjustments which ensure that the coherence of the program is preserved. It is vital to ensure trainers master the tools and resources and are allocated the time they need to monitor their learners.

Integration, integration, integration

Optimal integration between modalities, resources, planning systems, and partners is required to avoid fragmentation or dissolution of the programs, lack of accountability, and loss of learner motivation. The right balance between simplicity and complexity needs to be found. Overemphasis on simplicity can have a negative impact on the wealth and diversity of content that is one of the essential benefits of blended learning, while over-complexity can defeat the purpose of the training by expanding administrative time to the detriment of pedagogic objectives and by causing stakeholders to lose sight of the overall goals.

Flexible, customised programs

Considering the growing trend towards individualisation and increasingly intensive work schedules, programs need to be flexible and customised in order to train learners 'just in time, just enough'. One size-fits-all programs that are too linear or standardised are not always well-adapted to the learner's needs and expectations.

Learner training

Before beginning a blended learning course, it is advisable to make sure learners understand and are comfortable with the approach, are able to master the tools, modalities and resources, and have a clear understanding of the learning path they will follow. Many learners will need to follow a structured procedure and be guided step by step by a trainer, particularly in the early stages. A simple, visual online/offline document should be provided, as well as a 'learning to learn' module, to encourage students to develop their autonomous learning skills.

The future of blended learning

We hope to see in the coming years a number of major developments. Learning management platforms will progressively evolve towards full web end-to-end systems capable of managing every aspect of the training offer and integrating learning content and authoring tools over multiple platforms. Enhanced evaluation systems will emerge that can effectively measure operational results of learners following multimodal courses. And both trainers and learners will rapidly become more familiar with the pedagogy and the tools of blended language learning.

Two other areas to watch in the coming years are social learning and serious games. The growing interactivity of Web 2.0 has led to the development of collaborative self-access platforms that have created a lot of buzz, but which haven't yet proved the effectiveness of their model. These sites are now targeting the corporate market. As for serious games, there is a vast potential in this area, because language learning is more motivating and more effective when the learner's objective is not just to memorise language but to accomplish tasks using the target language (as in C.L.I.L.).

However, we need to be aware of the dangers of excessive 'gadgetisation' that have often plagued the language training industry in the past. The real challenge for providers and clients today is to harness the potential of these new technologies to create integrated, sustainable training systems in which technology enhances, rather than depreciates, the key role of the trainer and the effectiveness of language learning.

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Excerpts from a white paper on blended learning written by the author and published by GoFluent in 2013. http://www.gofluent.com/web/us/white-papers