

Teaching English studies through blended learning



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Contents

Section	Page
About the authors	3
Introduction	3
Blended learning in context	4
Definitions of blended learning	4
Blended learning: past and present	4
Tools and technologies	5
Blended learning in practice	5
The workshop: twelve issues	6
Recommendations	7
Assessment	7
Sharing good practice	8
Staff development	8
New challenges	8
Bibliography	9
Appendix	11

About the authors

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Introduction

Educational research generally uses the term 'blended learning' to refer to a combination of traditional face-to-face classroom methods with more modern computer-mediated activities. It is transforming learning and teaching in higher education. However, although virtual learning environments (VLEs) and new teaching technologies are ubiquitous in UK universities, they are often under-used by academics and students. Sometimes technology is seen as a distraction from the real business of learning and teaching. This report will consider some of the challenges and opportunities that arise from using blended learning in the context of English studies and reflect on future possibilities.

The report arises from a workshop held in the School of English, University of Leeds, on 8 May 2012, funded by the Higher Education Academy (HEA). We discussed how the learning opportunities created by technology could be successfully blended with more traditional forms of interaction. We also critically investigated the idea of blended learning, considered its value in terms of student attainment and employability, and learnt from diverse case studies. Feedback on the workshop was generally good, but a couple of delegates with particular expertise in the area questioned whether the discussion was at a high enough level. There is, we suggest, a problem of audience when dealing with this topic. Some academics working in English studies are engaged with blended learning in a systematic and cutting-edge fashion. Some are not using it at all. The majority of academics work between those two poles, often in a way that is piecemeal and *ad hoc*. This report draws on recent research and scholarship, but is not particularly aimed at blended learning experts; rather, it is directed towards the majority of university teachers of English.

We provide a brief survey of blended learning in general; we showcase debates from the workshop; and we highlight key issues facing staff and students who are interested in developing and delivering blended learning in English studies. We hope that this report is fit for purpose for the English academic community, and that it will encourage colleagues to consider blended learning as an integral aspect of student education.

Blended learning in context

Definitions of blended learning

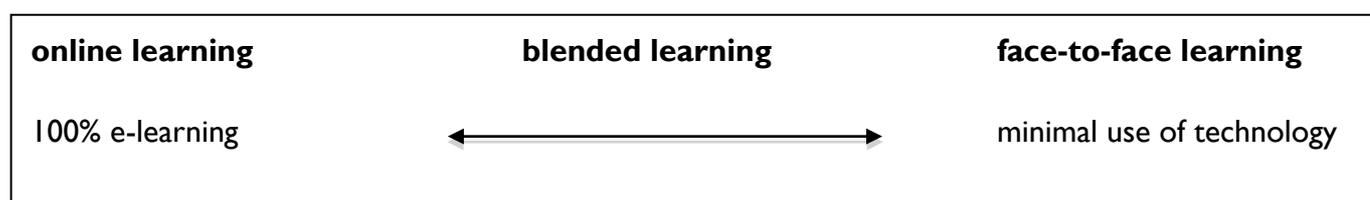
Attempts to define blended learning generally focus on the combination of familiar modes of learning (such as lectures, seminars, and tutorials) with the more mediated modes made possible by new technologies:

It is challenging to find a widely accepted definition of *blended learning*, and even more difficult to find a core set of literature on blended learning methodologies. In general, training approaches can be located on a continuum that runs from traditional, face-to-face class meetings to totally online courses that have no direct interpersonal contact. [...] Blended learning [...] is generally acknowledged as falling somewhere between these two extremes, incorporating elements of each. (Hanson and Clem, 2006:137)

[Blended Learning] is the combination of instruction from two historically separate models of teaching and learning: traditional face-to-face learning systems and distributed learning systems. (Graham 2006:5)

Those who use blended approaches base their pedagogy on the assumption that there are inherent benefits in face-to-face interaction (both among learners and instructor) as well as the understanding that there are some inherent advantages to using online methods in their teaching. Thus the aim of those using blended learning approaches is to find a harmonious balance between online access to knowledge and face-to-face human interaction. (Osguthorpe and Graham, 2003:228)

The idea of blended learning is summarised in this figure (taken from Allan, 2007:5):



Blended learning: past and present

Bonk and his colleagues concluded in a survey of higher education that respondents expected a dramatic rise in the use of blended learning approaches (Bonk *et al.*, 2006c:553). In an earlier survey, Arabasz and Baker (2003) revealed that 80% of all higher education institutions offered blended learning courses. One would imagine that figure to be near to 100% in 2012. According to Garrison and Vaughan (2008:3), “underlying this data is the increasing awareness that blended learning approaches and designs can significantly enhance the learning experience”. Albrecht (2006) reports high student satisfaction with blended learning, and others have reported faculty satisfaction (Vaughan and Garrison, 2006). This is also consistent with a study by Bourne and Seaman (2005), who found that the primary interest in blended learning is to benefit the educational process. They report that blended learning is seen as a way of combining the best of face-to-face and online learning.

Garrison and Vaughan (2008:4) suggest that “the need to provide more engaged learning experiences is at the core of the interest in blended learning” and it is no longer a matter of choosing between “conventional face-to-face and online learning”. The use of blended learning clearly relates to changes in higher education from tutor-centred approaches to a focus on learners. Typical examples of tutor-centred learning and teaching activities include didactic lectures and also traditional computer-aided learning packages. There are a range of reasons why academics develop programmes incorporating blended learning, but a crucial one is to encourage interactivity and the active participation of learners. In comparison to many other disciplines, English studies has always encouraged such participation through the use of the seminar as a key mode of delivery. This may explain why academic teachers of English have not always seen blended learning as a priority. However, the

point of blended learning is not to replace the seminar, but to provide other forms of interaction that can work alongside and enhance work done in the classroom. This is perhaps particularly important at a time when higher tuition fees are changing the way in which we see student education. Blended learning also offers an opportunity to address questions from students and parents about key issues such as group sizes and contact time, while allowing us to reflect on and develop our own practice as academic teachers.

Tools and technologies

We can identify a range of tools and technologies that can be used in constructing effective learning environments for blended learning, namely: (a) technologies in the classroom that are commonly used in face-to-face learning situations, such as PowerPoint, interactive whiteboards and audience response systems; (b) virtual communication tools that enable users to engage in discussions and activities over the internet, including audio files, discussion boards, e-lists, discussion groups, chat or conferencing, email, news groups, polling, questionnaires, web forms and videoconferencing; (c) social-networking software, now extensively used by students and staff in their personal life, and becoming more prevalent in the context of learning and teaching, such as instant messaging and phone calls, podcasts, social-networking sites, video clips, virtual worlds, weblogs and wikis; (d) e-learning systems, that is, online environments that bring together a range of tools to support e-learning, such as VLEs, conferencing systems, group collaboration software and group sites; (e) mobile learning using mobile phones, laptops and tablet PCs. (See Allan, 2007:15-45 for a more detailed account.)

Blended learning in practice

Nowadays, most teachers and students use blended learning methodologies. However, many are unaware that they are using them. In our opinion, the starting point for devising any efficient teaching technique or methodology must be by considering learners' perspectives. Students often express the desire for more direct contact with academic staff, and this may not always easily be fulfilled by electronic means. As Alexander and Boud (2001:14) argue, "learning does not occur in isolation. [...] The extent to which we are motivated to learn depends as much on the context of learning as it does on intrinsic interest in the object of study. [...] An [online] experience without feedback and reflection is a somewhat empty experience". An example of blended learning methodology would be an integrated combination of technology-based materials and face-to-face sessions to present content to students. The tutor might teach an introductory seminar, and then proceed with follow-up materials online, making use of blogs, virtual learning environments, or social networking services such as Facebook and Twitter. The JISC (2012) study *In Their Words* describes what uses and expectations learners have for learning and teaching with technology.

Many academics teaching English studies already use online discussion in various forms. This was a significant component of a simple blended learning 'redesign' of a core module on Romantic-period literature at the University of Leeds. The team-taught module was delivered by two weekly lectures to a large cohort of students and a 50-minute weekly seminar to groups of around ten students. The tutor was responsible for five seminar groups and decided to build in more time for reflection and discussion using blended learning. For example, in advance of a seminar covering some sonnets by Charlotte Smith, he set up a discussion board on the VLE with a 'thread' for each sonnet. In addition to their normal reading, students prepared for the seminar by writing an analysis of at least one sonnet and posting it online. Other students, and in some cases the tutor, responded to the analyses. This meant that all the sonnets were discussed, which would have been impossible within the seminar, and also that ideas were shared across different seminar groups. Other activities used include blogging on topics related to the module, and the construction over the semester, by around 50 students, of a wiki that provided a glossary of key terms and allusions. These activities entailed a little extra work for the tutor and students, but it seems to have enhanced their experience of the module. Questionnaire scores were noticeably higher than on previous occasions when he had taught the module, and a number of students commented positively on the online component. The tutor is keen to build on this experiment, but believes that in order to ensure full student participation in the activities, and so that they take the time to respond to each other, it may be necessary to assess the online component in some way. This is not necessarily easy to do, especially as the module is taught by a number of seminar tutors with

different ways of teaching. (Assessment of online activity is discussed in section 3, below; for other case studies of using online discussion in English studies, see Lucas (ed.) 2010; general examples of blended learning designs can be found in Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: 71-83.)

The workshop: twelve issues

In this section, we pick out some key issues that emerged from the workshop. Details of the programme can be found in the appendix to this report and the plenary speaker, Dr Rosie Miles, gives a useful account of the day on her 'Ms E-Mentor' blog (<http://www.msementor.co.uk/>).

- 1 The limitations of VLEs:** university VLEs are not always very user friendly. Students are often better able to use social networking sites: most obviously Facebook. There might be a benefit to using widely available tools such as Wordpress for blogs, rather than clunkier VLE resources. For some broader points about the limitations of VLEs, see: <http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/resources/enhancing-learning-through-technology/vles-faq/four/>
- 2 Viability and sustainability of resources:** often funding is available to set up online resources, but it is not always easy to keep them updated and/or viable once the funding runs out. (A broader, related issue concerns the extent to which institutions have the infrastructures to support blended learning activities.) One possibility is to find ways of working with students to update online resources: a form of crowdsourcing, perhaps.
- 3 Assessing online activities:** as suggested in section 2.4, students usually associate their participation directly to assessment. Therefore, a way to ensure that they fully engage in online activities would be to give more credit to students for participation. There is, of course, an intrinsic value in participating in online learning, but students are more likely to understand this if it connected to the final mark for the module. Some considerations for assessing online participation would be to: (a) ensure the percentage awarded reflects the effort required; (b) make clear to students at the beginning of the course what criteria will be used to assess their participation (e.g. regularity of contribution, quality of ideas, quality of feedback to others' ideas); (c) monitor and track participation throughout the duration of the course; (d) consider the use of peer assessment.
- 4 Twitter:** our plenary speaker described how she asked students to role-play fictional characters using a sort of 'virtual' Twitter on the VLE. This was a very successful activity, with the students posting about 500 tweets in a week. There was considerable discussion about the benefits of using 'real' Twitter for this process (see below).
- 5 The walled garden:** should academia be a 'walled garden' or should we be helping our students to learn to handle social media and the blogosphere? This was a key debate of the day. Some delegates strongly promoted the idea that many VLE activities could take place in more public forums; others were concerned about the need to give students a protected space to experiment and debate. Clearly this relates to much broader debates about the relationship between universities and the public sphere. Student learning through social media could be a valuable form of public engagement. But if the boundaries between university learning and other activities become too porous, then something important might be lost.
- 6 The opportunities of technology:** some areas in English studies with which students (and tutors) traditionally struggle, such as scansion, can be addressed using technology in a way that wouldn't be possible in the classroom (for scansion, see <http://www.poetiks.com/>). Technology allows for crowdsourcing through discussion boards, wikis, and so on. For more on the opportunities of technology in English studies, see Inman and Hewett (2006).

- 7 **Peer review and assessment:** this is an area of increasing interest to academics seeking to help students learn from each other. This is now possible online using PeerMark, giving students the opportunity to review other students' work. Peer evaluation also emulates the real-world work environment and is valuable in terms of transferable skills.
- 8 **Podcasts and lectures:** given that podcasts allow students to access content, what is the point of timetabled lectures? One answer would be to think about lectures as theatre, and podcasts as television or film. If a lecture simply consists of reading directly from a prepared script, it's hard to see why it should not be replaced by a podcast.
- 9 **Learning from failure:** as with many aspects of teaching, a certain amount of trial and error is sometimes needed in order, eventually, to enhance practice and delivery. It is important that students and tutors understand this.
- 10 **Group sizes:** the examples of blended learning in practice discussed at the workshop often involved relatively small groups of students (e.g. 20-30 students), and this is also true of many published case studies. But what about modules with cohorts in the hundreds? What sort of challenges do they entail? The case study discussed in 2.4 involved a large team-taught module in which the tutor had decided to do certain activities with his seminar groups. He shared these plans with other tutors on the module, but they may well have undertaken different blended learning activities with their students, or none at all. Such diversity is not necessarily a problem, but may raise issues in terms of student parity. A potential positive of large modules, however, is the opportunity for crowdsourcing through activities such as online wikis or interactive devices in lectures. (For an interesting case study of blended learning with a large group, see Gunawardena and Hewagamage, 2007.)
- 11 **Motivation and gamification:** blended learning needs enthusiasm, energy and commitment from both the tutor and students. A way of ensuring motivation would be to turn traditional tasks such as reading, research, or assessment assignments into game-like activities. For example, the discussion of a novel can be supported with online quizzes or games.
- 12 **Skills:** to what extent do students and tutors working in English studies have the right skills fully to take advantage of blended learning? Or, to think of it in another way, do the VLE activities often presented to students necessarily develop the skills that they may already have in online activities involving (for example) Facebook and Twitter? There was particular interest in using Twitter with students and helping them to navigate social media.

Recommendations

Although it is impossible to see entirely what the future holds, we can be pretty certain that the trend toward blended learning systems will increase. It may even become so ubiquitous that we will eventually drop the word blended and just call it learning. (Graham, 2006:7)

Assessment

As Miles (2010:26) states, "let's not be afraid to innovate in terms of assessment in English Studies. If we are open to creating new kinds of learning activities within the subject using the possibilities that online technologies afford then appropriate assessment has to follow". Assessing online activities requires more flexible criteria than those focused on the essays and public examinations that still tend to dominate in English studies.

Sharing good practice

Academics using blended learning often do so in partial isolation. Even colleagues teaching in the same department may not be aware of innovative work that is going on. Departments and institutions need to have mechanisms in place to ensure that good practice is shared and that successful examples of blended learning are identified. This is also true at a national level, and is more of a challenge now that the English Subject Centre (ESC) has been closed. Some useful online resources include:

The 'E-learning' page on the ESC website:

<http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/technology/index.php>

HumBox [a website for sharing teaching resources]: <http://humbox.ac.uk/>

The Higher Education Academy: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/disciplines/english>

Staff development

Given the time pressures faced by academics, strong incentives are needed to encourage them to develop blended learning activities and methodologies. If institutions are serious about enhancing student education, then they need to ensure that academics are given the time and space to learn how to use new technologies and to experiment with blended learning. They also need to ensure that achievements in this area can be factored into promotion. Academics are often under considerable pressure to hit research targets in terms of grant applications, Research Excellence Framework (REF) outputs, and so on. This can lead to an understandable tendency to 'coast' when it comes to teaching: a situation that may have to change with the new fees regime.

New challenges

Bonk *et al.* (2006c:560-564) predict ten trends linked to the future expansion of blended learning, namely: (1) mobile blended learning; (2) greater visualisation, individualisation, and hands-on learning; (3) self-determined blended learning; (4) increased connectedness, community, and collaboration; (5) increased authenticity and on-demand learning; (6) linking work and learning; (7) changed calendaring; (8) blended learning course designations; (9) changed instructor roles; (10) the emergence of blended learning specialists. It is often difficult for individuals and institutions to keep pace with these sorts of changes, and with new landscapes of learning and teaching. The workload of academics in the UK continues to be a problem, and therefore it is important that undue pressure is not placed on individuals to 'keep up' when it comes to blended learning. Tutors and students should have the freedom to find their own ways of blending, so that it enhances learning and teaching, and even potentially saves time, rather than becoming a source of stress. Universities often emphasise teaching innovation, as if it is an intrinsic good, but this innovation should emerge organically as a response to pedagogical problems and not occlude traditional forms of good practice. And what constitutes innovative blended learning may be very different between tutors and teaching areas. Many academics in English studies, of course, are already integrating technology into their teaching in exciting and productive ways, even if they are not experts in blended learning. The text-based nature of English studies, and the increasing accessibility of primary and secondary material, means that there are many exciting opportunities for online student engagement that will enhance, rather than replace, the face-to-face contact that should remain central to university experience.

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Appendix

Teaching English studies through blended learning

University of Leeds, 8 May 2012

Programme

Plenary: Dr Rosie Miles (Wolverhampton), “@likeabatoutofhell @ClosetCase @MsDisillusion @TheBlooferLady: Tweeting the Victorians -- New Adventures in #OnlineEnglishTeaching”.

Discussion: What is the value of blended learning?

Dr Fiona Douglas (Leeds), “Developing engaging study skills resources for English studies: an impossible task?”.

Dr Greg Garrard (Bath Spa), “Teaching Poetry using poetiks”.

Workshop: putting ideas into practice.

Dr Alison Johnson, Alberto Gomez, and David Wright (all Leeds), “Learning to research English Language studies: student and tutor perspectives”.

Dr Laurence Publicover (Leeds), “A VLE blog for *Literature and the Sea*”.

Dr Paul Maddern (Leeds), “The Seamus Heaney Centre Digital Archive: metadata, context, and application”.

Closing remarks.

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