Introduction

Learning becomes more flexible when options are offered to learners, not only about the time and place and pace of learning, but also relating to types and origins of study materials, to forms and quantity of learning activities and assignments, to ways of interacting with others within the course, and to forms of assessment. De Boer (2004) has analyzed flexible course delivery within universities and found that the most flexibility is found in logistic aspects of the course such as flexibility in dates by which assignments must be submitted or flexibility in the location of course meetings, whereas pedagogical flexibility in which the learner can tailor aspects of the learning process itself is still relatively little seen. Within companies, flexible learning is often described as e-learning or blended learning. In an analysis of literature about flexible learning in companies, Margaryan and Bianco (2002) found that e-learning typically involves logistic flexibility
at the price of pedagogy: little or no options are available for social interaction, a direct relationship with an instructor, or for choice in types of learning activities and ways of carrying out those activities.

Because of the pedagogical weaknesses of such an approach to flexibility, blended learning involving ways to bring the social interaction of personal encounters into the learning mix rather than e-learning alone is becoming common in corporate education (Rossett, Dougis, & Frazee, 2003). However, just as in universities, the major choice in blends in corporate learning tends to relate to logistic flexibility rather than pedagogical renewal, with a typical model in the corporate setting being independent-study e-learning combined with a shorter but still traditionally run classroom session (Margaryan & Bianco, 2002). One way to enrich this type of blend pedagogically is to change the nature of the non-classroom component of a blended course, away from self-study e-learning to a pedagogically richer blend of higher-level activities such as problem solving around real workplace problems with different mixes of social interaction and collaborative learning. The instructor monitors these workplace activities via use of a Web-based course environment into which participants upload reports or examples of their work, give each other peer feedback, and have opportunities to discuss and learn from each other in a variety of ways. Such a mixture is both logistically and pedagogically flexible.

As the pedagogical aspects become dominant in this type of workplace-oriented course, the question arises whether the logistic limitation of requiring a same-time, same-place classroom component remains necessary. Thus a consideration relating to logistical flexibility in course design for the corporate sector is whether a blended course should include a blend of participation from the workplace and classroom events, or if the course can run without the classroom events as long as it still includes forms of social interaction. As has been the case with the introduction of logistic flexibility via distance education in universities, there is a concern in the corporate sector that course quality will diminish without a classroom component to the course, in that participants may lack the chance to appropriately interact with each other and the instructor via only a Web environment, even if the environment is used to support pedagogically rich interaction. This concern is even stronger if the non-classroom component of a blended course lacks pedagogically rich interaction.

In order to assess if this concern about the value of a classroom component of a course is justified when blended learning involving work-based activities is being carried out in practice, a first step is to define criteria for course quality, a second step is to assess a company’s blended learning courses against these criteria, and a third step is to compare the quality ratings of blended courses with and without classroom components.

However, in order to stimulate pedagogical flexibility as well as logistic flexibility, the criteria for course quality and their application in the evaluation process should also reflect the desirability of aspects of pedagogical flexibility, not only location flexibility. Thus the questions we have been studying for a number of years is: How can the quality of flexible learning be operationalized so that both logistic and pedagogic components are valued and measured? What are the results when the measurement process takes place? While we have studied these questions over a four-year period in the university context (De Boer, 2004), this chapter focuses on our current work in the corporate sector.
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