

Chapter 1.4

Blended Learning Revisited: How it Brought Engagement and Interaction into and Beyond the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The universe of blended learning started uncertainly, as all new ventures, amid overt resistance of traditionalist teachers, but boosted by the drive of a few enthusiasts that wanted to bring novel perspectives into education. Everyday practice, together with the growing services it is rendering, has turned blended learning into the mainstay of education. The authors review some of the projects they have been carrying out in later years, all of them involving the use of Learning Management Systems for different target groups. They provide details about students' response, teachers' attitudes, and parents' opinions. They also show how their model has grown richer and richer thanks to the feedback obtained from all parts. Finally, future lines of development are suggested, among which mobile learning stands out. A recently launched mobile learning project is summarized.

INTRODUCTION

Although blended learning has already become a widespread practice in many primary and secondary schools, this chapter must necessarily begin by parsing, however clear it may look at first sight, what this phrase means and its many implications.

Let's first scrutinize the phrase head, *learning*: we may agree that it refers to the process of acquiring knowledge and applying it in particular contexts in order to achieve certain results. As it is understood now, learning leads to the acquisition of competencies and must be continued beyond school years, because the constant updating of one's skills seems to be a requisite for keeping one's job.

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Traditionally, learning has been carried out in a classroom where students followed their teacher's explanations and instructions. But not any more: the teacher-centered approach just depicted has given way to more dialogical approaches where students take a leading role in the process and teachers tend to act more as facilitators or coaches than as didactic instructors (Adler, 1984; Wiggins & McTighe, 2007, 2008). Now it is in this new learning environment that we must look for the origin and motivation of the modifying element in the phase, the *blended*, which makes reference to the introduction of a new ICT component in teaching to supplement and enrich the in-person lessons. This computer-mediated component is carried out through a Learning Management System (henceforth LMS) that intends to multiply the students' learning opportunities and make the experience more efficient and dynamic.

If we now stop for a moment to consider the contrast between previous classrooms, in which silence and order were demanded, and nowadays classrooms, in which teamwork and controversies are encouraged, we will discover that it somehow resembles the tension between order and disorder, often described in sociology. According to Shotter (1997, p. 165), "many social theorists in the past have suggested that the provenance of order is to be found in disorder, on the edge of chaos, in spontaneity and playfulness". There is a powerful resonance in this quote, as if suggesting that unstructured activity may be the source of creativity. How these different variables interplay is not relevant here, although the interplay of different spheres is mentioned somewhere else by Shotter (p. 121), when he says that the "human world in which we live is best thought of as a whole 'multiverse' or 'social ecology', of unique but dynamically interdependent regions and moments of human communicative activity".

This is a very suggestive idea to us because it somehow captures our conception of learning not as a single channel conveying information from one end to the other, but—using the analogy—a

multiverse of interaction and opportunities. The informed reader has probably realized that, in the first instance, teaching is represented as a simplification of Jakobson's diagram of language as communication (1960), where an addresser (the teacher) sends a message (the lesson) to an addressee (the student) in a context (the classroom) using a shared code. In striking contrast to that linear, quasi-univocal scheme, the learning multiverse we envision is built around blended learning and it offers:

- New learning environments: the classroom is no longer the sole "floor" for learning. The LMS lets students learn at their own home, at their peers' home, at the library, in a hotel room if they are on holiday, in a hospital room if they are ill, etc. Any given space can become a learning environment provided you have a laptop.
- More windows of opportunity for learning: traditionally, the 9 to 5 school time has set the limits of learning opportunities for most students. However, blended learning provides students with access to learning 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.
- Less dependence on teachers: once the LMS is functioning, students can learn on their own with little recourse to teachers, as activities usually enclose the necessary explanations, hint buttons and answer buttons.
- A multiplicity of relations: once the teacher recedes into the background and becomes a facilitator of content, a multiplicity of relations naturally appears among students. Cooperation is fostered; alliances are forged and shifted according to current needs; relevant information is shared using the forum or the chat... These are dynamics that greatly encourage teamwork.
- Students take responsibility over their own assessment: the LMS promotes self and co-assessment through self-checked

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