

Blended Learning: the practicalities of implementation in a UK University.

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This paper aims to explore the practicalities of integrating Blended Learning into faculties where more traditional style delivery methods have been the norm. Beginning with a brief look at the various definitions of 'Blended Learning' the authors identify key themes from already existing literature about the nature of implementation, before defining the key processes that need to be in place to enable successful implementation and delivery in HEIs. They will draw on the experiences of implementing Blended Learning across five faculties at Anglia Ruskin University.

Keywords: blended learning, implementation in HEIs

1. Background

Many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are increasingly incorporating blended learning and not just e-learning into their faculties and departments, not least because of the increased opportunities it affords for potential learning [1]. However, in a time of rapid technological innovation and change, the implementation of a variety of approaches which could be considered as Blended Learning is considerable [2] and as such institutions need to think about the processes involved in securing effective and successful implementation.

In spite of this recent growth in Blended Learning, most of it has taken place in the corporate sector, [3] driven by the requirements dictated by the need to be a world leader in a knowledge economy, rather than by the pedagogical benefits of such an approach and there has been little exploration of how if at all, it is being carried out in HEIs. This paper was written as a result of a one year research project concerning the planning of five different blended delivery pathways into five different faculties at Anglia Ruskin University. The process took place internally to the university, with ULTRALAB, a learning, technology and research unit sitting outside all the faculties but within Anglia Ruskin University, acting as consultant / mentor to those five faculties. The planning phase of the project ran from November 2005 to July 2006. Towards the end of July an evaluative meeting was held over a three week period – incorporating an initial sharing of reflections online, followed by a half day face to face meeting, followed by two weeks online for follow up tasks. All those who had a stake in the project were invited from all the faculties and from support services outside of the faculties, to comment on the projects successes and failures. This paper looks at the issues that arose during this planning phase of the project and draws on some of the issues raised in the afore mentioned meeting.

2. Blended Learning

On March 20, 1728, the Boston Gazette ran an advertisement, stating that any "Persons in the Country desirous to Learn this Art [of shorthand], may by having the several Lessons sent weekly to them, be as

perfectly instructed as those that live in Boston." [4] Throughout history, technological advances in communication have transformed the way education is delivered, however, it is in the last 35 years that we have seen the greatest advances in teaching and training globally. Rather than merely looking at correspondence learning, terms such as 'open' learning, 'distance' learning, 'flexible' learning, 'distributed' learning, 'e'-learning, 'resource' learning, 'web-based' learning, 'online community' learning and now 'blended' learning are bandied around within teaching and training environments with regularity, but not always common understanding.

Without going beyond the term 'Blended Learning' we find ourselves with a variety of definitions, ranging from, "*Blended learning is the combination of multiple approaches to teaching or to educational processes which involve the deployment of a diversity of methods and resources or to learning experiences which are derived from more than one kind of information source. Examples include combining technology-based materials and traditional print materials, group and individual study, structured pace study and self-paced study, tutorial and coaching.*" (Wikipedia, 2006) to "*Using ICT as appropriate alongside traditional methods such as discussion or face-to-face teaching.*" (ITSLIFE - Learning for Teaching, 2006)

What is implicit from all the various definitions, is that there is some sort of mix in the method of delivery and that usually technology is involved. Beyond that there is no consensus and moreover the emphasis of the definitions tends to be on the blend as opposed to the reason for the blend.

3. The Case Study

There are a number of university documents that cite eLearning as an area for future development. These include the overall Strategy Document for Anglia Ruskin University, the Learning and Teaching strategy for 2002-5 as well as the 2000 Vice Chancellor's annual conference, which took its theme as '*Making the most of the developing technologies to support Learning and Teaching*'.

Up until the academic year of 2004/5 there have been and continue to be pockets of Blended Learning in various faculties, however there has not been a university wide effort to integrate Blended Learning throughout the five faculties. So funding was sought to set up one Blended Learning Pathway of study in each of the five faculties, using ULTRALAB as a consultant. These Blended Learning Pathways would then act as seeds of experience from which other pathways within faculties might draw upon. In mid 2005, funding was secured from HEFCE to help carry out this strategy.

An initial meeting was held with the Director of ULTRALAB and a Pro Vice Chancellor in October 2005, to discuss and initiate the project. An email was then circulated by the Pro Vice Chancellor to the five Deans of Faculty to inform them of the process. During the first academic semester of the 2005/6 academic year, 10 people were selected by the Director of ULTRALAB to work in pairs with the five faculties. Pathways were selected through negotiation with faculty members. These were:

| Faculty | Pathway |
|---|--|
| Arts, Law and Social Sciences (ALSS) | Foundation Degree in Public Services |
| Institute of Health and Social Care (IHSC) | Foundation Degree in Health Studies (Associate Practitioner) |
| Faculty of Science and Technology (FST) | Foundation Degree Health Informatics |
| Ashcroft International Business School (AIBS) | Foundation Degree Management |
| Faculty of Education (FoE) | Post Compulsory PCE and PGCE |

Fortnightly meetings took place between the ULTRALAB team members to share experiences and issues as they arose. Two whole project meetings were held during the course of the planning phase and the

whole project team had access to a shared online learning community where they could discuss their progress and issues surrounding it. Using a Pro Forma, (please see appendix 1) monthly updates on each project were made available to the Pro Vice Chancellor.

4. The Nature of Implementation

During the project there were both a number of unexpected surprises as well as issues arising, the latter of which required action. In some cases, particular issues were unable to be successfully resolved for a variety of reasons, which will be explored below.

In the July meeting, we divided up the initial evaluation into Milestones (the highlights, surprises, turning points), Tractors (the issues that held us up) and Crossroads (the big decisions). We then further explored two recurring elements from this relating to University Procedures and Technical Support. A synthesis of these initial categories was then carried out by the authors. Brown (1997) groups various parameters associated with the implementation of flexible delivery within institutions into two sections – those which are group focused and those which are institution based [5]. The synthesis we conducted follows this categorization, the latter of which will be explored now, leaving the former for another paper. As mentioned above, we identified two sub categories within the Institutional Focus.

Institutional Focus

4.1 University Procedures

Whilst it is vital for the project to be agreed at the highest level [6] it is also vital that there is buy in from those at the most senior level within faculties. Based on our experiences, we honed in on the following as key considerations to the success of implementing Blended Learning into an university:

4.1.1 Vision - The overall vision and timeline needs to be clear, shared and owned by all those involved, from the most senior to the most junior. This also includes such roles as subject librarians and learning technologists, for example, not just academics and managers. In particular, a co-operative climate should be fostered between those that hold the power with the faculties and those who are charged with assisting in creating the Blended Learning pathways.

4.1.2 Validation – The validation of Blended Learning pathways can be a large hurdle to cross as there is often a lack of understanding within validation panels, combined with a fear of Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) processes not being adhered to. Universities need to find a balance between demonstrating standards, without asking for the impossible in support of validation applications (please see The Matrix in section 5.1).

4.1.3 Sharing amongst faculties – Blended Learning works more effectively where there is collaboration between the enthusiastic subset of eLearning practitioners. Although at Anglia Ruskin University, there were no actual barriers between faculties, in the sense that there was no resistance to cooperation, in the past people had not normally had the opportunity to cooperate. Nor had there been an established culture of sharing resources, even within faculties or sometimes within departments. Establishing such a culture from the start of Blended Learning implementation is key to both working smartly and to increasing the knowledge base of those involved.

4.2 Technical Reflections

A variety of issues arose in this area and all can be summarized in defining the understanding of what is purely a technical operation (e.g. creating usernames and passwords) and what is pedagogical/technical (e.g. the architectural design of an online community).

4.2.1 Service Agreements

There was debate around what is meant by technical support in the context of Blended Learning. There needed to be a separating out of technological issues from pedagogical issues that are technology dependant. Only in this way could clear and transparent agreements be made across the faculties with the Communications & Information Technology Services (CITS) within the university, regarding how technical support resources are allocated within the faculties.

4.2.2 Autonomy

There was also debate on the amount of autonomy that academics should have in the technical processes needed to run the courses online. For example, should the individual academics have more control over technical matters such as account creations, passwords, etc? Or should this remain within the preserve of CITS?

4.2.3 Support

Because this new method of delivery was new to most staff, there was a concern that there would be a lack of or even inadequate technical support for students from the staff or from those in CITS. To minimize this, a software help desk should operate and be ready for the fluctuations in demand as people come online and progress through the pathways. However, it is not as simple as to say that this could be run centrally by CITS, as some questions from students might be pedagogical/technical in nature. This left the question then – should CITS be skilled in the nature of these issues, should the faculty technologists deal with them, or should they remain with the academic tutors.

4.2.4 Online Access

With many different online access points, there should be a simplification of the login process with a single sign on for all students encompassing everything from the universities online library for example to the individual learning communities to which students belonged.

4.2.5 CPD (Continual Staff Development)

Staff development needs to focus on both technical and pedagogical concerns, however it is important to have a faculty learning technologist, who works alongside the academic team, who should also be up-skilled in pedagogical/technical skills.

5. Next Steps

Following on from the university procedural and technical support issues identified above, a small working party is now in the process of creating a number of tools and solutions.

5.1 The Matrix

The validation process for the Blended Learning pathways was further complicated by a concurrent event taking place at Anglia Ruskin University in the same academic year - that of a move from a 10 / 20 credit system to a 15 / 30 credit system. As such, the process became over complicated, however it did allow for an in depth look at the validation process for pathways of this nature and how they fell into the normal validation processes. A variety of key issues were highlighted in the evaluation meeting and as a result a working party of four assembled a Matrix that has a three-sided purpose. Firstly, it has been created to act as a guide to academics on considerations to bear in mind in creating pathways. Secondly, it serves to help define resource allocation and thirdly it aids the process of validation by guiding both the panel and academics on they type of evidence required to support an application. This Matrix is currently being refined and will be the basis of the next paper already mentioned at the beginning of section 4 – The Nature of Implementation.

5.2 Collaborative staff community launch

As well as appropriate staff receiving CPD in Blended Learning and online learning, it was agreed that there should be a system of mentorship for staff to develop their skills with an experienced university

facilitator guiding them. Where possible this facilitator should come from within the faculty. With this in mind, an online community of practice is in the process of being set up for all those in the university who deliver Blended Learning modules, where learning and experience can be shared not only amongst the individual staff/facilitator partnership, but amongst all the partnerships.

6. Further information

A further paper is planned which will discuss the successes of the pathways in the operational phase as well as look at the use of the Matrix and the support community in more detail. For further information and any correspondence regarding this paper, please contact: sarah@ultralab.net

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Appendix 1

| Focus | Response | Completed to date | Remaining or outstanding work | Timescale |
|--|-----------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------|
| Degree course title? | | | | |
| Modules to be offered? | | | | |
| Student situation – what are our market demands and needs? | | | | |
| Activities in order to study online and the materials that would support this. | | | | |
| Clarify the validation of all the modules on the courses | | | | |
| Pathway validation for the course | | | | |
| Status of the £5k that is going to be given each faculty for the course | | | | |
| Staff Log Ons for WebCT | | | | |
| Training and Support | | | | |