Blended Learning

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What follows is a brief introduction to Blended Learning, hopefully from a Swiss perspective (I mention 'tram' once). For those who want more, there is a wealth of information available on the internet – especially some whitepapers. The main challenge is it can take a little sifting through and jargon abounds (note to self: really have to use the word 'dichotomy' more). Strong coffee is really recommended for some of this reading. Another point of caution is that a lot of the information on Blended Learning is for business scenarios rather than ESL. So if you're interested, maybe start with a search on 'Blended Learning ESL' or something similar. Whitepapers and reports on actual case studies are also a lot more informative than some of the commercial pitches.

So, what is 'Blended Learning'?

Blended Learning is the combining of traditional teaching methods (e.g. face-to-face classroom lessons) with technology-based methods (aka 'eLearning') for delivering instruction to students.

Why would you want this?

Marketing message

Showing prospective clients that you're way out there on the edge of the cosmos with the 'latest' teaching methods may be enough of a marketing message by itself. Another possible reason is you need it because your competitors have it. Hopefully a bigger incentive for a school is that some customers, including companies in the Business English market, are specifically asking for Blended Learning solutions. And then sometimes the true value can be a little hidden. One example is that a lot of intensive language schools in the UK, US and Australia proudly display a picture of a nice computer lab on their brochures/homepages. Rather than promoting their Blended Learning pedagogy, they're simply telling prospective students, "Look, free e-mail!".

Greater time/study flexibility for students

Homework is homework, but one of the biggest advantages of Blended Learning is giving students access to their fellow students and teachers outside the classroom. This may be real-time access in the form of chats, conferences and collaborative activities. Or it could be 'delayed' communication using forums – for example, looking at a teacher's response to a question or assignment.

Students can study at their own pace

The time used for any assignment delivered in a classroom environment is always dictated by somebody or something (teacher, average/fastest/slowest student, last train…). There is just no easy way to deliver an assignment at the optimum pace for every student. With Blended Learning, assignments can be set for the student to complete – probably at home – at a pace they decide. In surveys of students on Blended Learning, this is often reported as one of its most popular aspects.

Time flexibility for teachers

With Blended Learning, teachers can do some work from home: managing forums, participating in chats, reviewing assignments, etc. This can really suit some teachers who are juggling some challenging family commitments or have a long commute from some beautiful alpine area prone to snow. Though, let's face it, which is better for 3 hours of teaching:

a. A dusty tram ride into town for an 11–12 class, followed by a long sit in a coffee shop having too many hot chocolates waiting for your 4–5 class, after which you head home for a rushed bite before ducking out to your 7–9 private class with those irritating Meier kids, or

b. Sitting down at 9 a.m. with your freshly blended vegetable juice drink in hand, to do an hour of replies to forum posts and assignment checking – for online work that has replaced that bothersome Wednesday 4–5 lesson. Then it's a wee jaunt into town for your 11–12, with the day then free until your evening class with those delightful Meier children.

Lowering costs in some areas

Some costs can be lowered with Blended Learning, but you have to be very careful here. You'll get all sorts of 'cost savings' justification from equipment and content providers, but a very thorough financial analysis of the costs (money and time) involved in a move to Blended Learning should be made before making the big step. This means considering not just equipment costs, but also those of teacher training, content preparation and technical support for the students.

That said, there are some areas of saving after you've made the investment to get things up and running. Some examples are:

a. Instructor-led lab session can be offered at a higher student-to-teacher ratio than a face-to-face conversation class.

b. Self-marking assignments.
c. Content re-use: an online placement test is a great example. It's always there and available for the next new student.
d. Updating and distribution of materials: for online content, a change or addition in a central location is immediately available to students. Books and manuals don't have to be reprinted then redistributed...
e. Greater flexibility for schools: with careful scheduling, you can reduce the amount of time your teachers are shooting all over the Canton on trains, trams and automobiles. This traveling time can then be replaced with teaching, and you can offer more teaching hours to both your clients and your teachers.

Good practice for real life
Especially for business people, e-mail and conference calls are quite likely the way they're going to use their English in real life. Mirroring those kinds of activities in the classroom is a very good thing.

Great way to stay in touch with ex-students
Repeat business is very important to any school or private teacher, so staying in touch with ex-students and customers has a very high value. With Blended Learning, this can be achieved using e-mail, forums or even by offering free content to ex-students.

What are the technology components of Blended Learning?

Offline content
It is actually possible to use offline content for your technical component of Blended Learning. Offline content doesn't need an internet connection to function.
Examples:
❏ content compiled by the school: DVDs and CDs with a lot of great (and big) media content.
❏ commercial products (like a good pronunciation package) designed for desktops. These run on a school's computers in the computer lab (if there is one).

Downside:
❏ No online collaborative activities possible.
❏ You can't give students your commercial packages to install on their home systems.

Upside:
❏ Not everyone has an internet connection.
❏ Can easily hand out assignments to students on DVDs and CDs.

Online platforms
However, it's pretty much accepted that Blended Learning uses online features, so let's look at that.

There is a real advantage to having all your activities (assignments, forums, chats, static content) centralized in one location. There are also some quite powerful e-mail-based platforms for collaborative learning, but the most popular way to do this is use a Learning Management System (LMS). The other great strength of LMSs is they are designed to deliver content to any location. You may have a really good pronunciation practice package installed on your computers in your lab, but it's even better if you have a pronunciation package for your LMS, and students can use it for practice at home. One downside of LMS is that a lot of the good commercial content is still designed just for desktop/offline use – but this is changing rapidly.

Instructor-led study
Now we get to the types of exercises and features that can be used. These are best classed by the type of study – the first of which is instructor-led study. The obvious location for instructor-led instruction is in a school laboratory, with the teacher available to answer student questions, or help set the pace of study.
Exercises and Assignments
❏ Technology:
  ○ LMSs have many exercise features built into them. It is reasonably easy to create original exercises – especially multi-choice quizzes – with these.
  ○ More companies are starting to sell content that can run on LMSs. These usually support an industry standard such as SCORM that allows them to run on different LMSs.

Self-study
This includes work in the computer lab or at home. This work is often Exercises and Assignments (see above for

details) with the major difference being they can now be performed at a pace that suits the student.

Collaborative study

Giving students the ability to meet and collaborate outside the classroom is possibly one of the most exciting features of eLearning. This study may be with or without a teacher present.

Forums:
- ❑ Technology:
  - ❍ these may be stand-alone – Yahoo e-mail groups is an example
  - ❍ built into an LMS

Online conferences:
- ❑ Technology:
  - ❍ Yahoo and other instant messenger programs have conference capability (including voice)
  - ❍ Online chats
- ❑ Technology:
  - ❍ many LMSs have built in chat features, or the students can use one of the many free Instant Messenger programs

Collaborative work on a document:
- ❑ Technology:
  - ❍ Wiki. Just in case you haven't heard of these, a great example is the Wiki Encyclopedia at *http://wikipedia.org/* and definition: *A wiki is a web application that allows users to add content, as on an internet forum, but also allows anyone to edit the content. Wiki also refers to the collaborative software used to create such a website.*

What are some of the key points to rolling out a Blended Learning solution?

First, identify your business purpose for moving to Blended Learning. If you don't have one, then are you really sure you want to do this?

Student technology skills

Students are going to have different levels of computer knowledge and expertise. This is something your course has to be designed for and your teachers trained for.

Student technology ownership

Also, all the students aren't going to have the same technology at home. If they don't have a computer, then you've really got some decisions to make. Also, keeping the system requirements for student computers as simple as possible (e.g. mail and internet browser) is key.

There's not much point offering an e-mail-based solution to your class if every student doesn't have an e-mail address and a computer at home.

Teacher technology skills

Then there are the teachers. Whatever their technical competence, there are three key words here: training, training and training.

Getting the right mix

What's the best mix for traditional/eLearning? This is a really difficult question. One way to find the answer to this is to start with a little eLearning, then slowly add more until you know you've got the right mix.

Content

Not only will you need to create or buy some content for the eLearning component of Blended Learning, but you may also need to modify some of the 'traditional' content. If the two don't blend very well, then the milkshake's going to be a bit lumpy and definitely not as tasty.

Financial – what's it going to cost?

The following list is not exhaustive, but covers some of the key areas you need to budget for:
- ❑ equipment (language laboratory? Computers)
- ❑ hosting?
- ❑ software
- ❑ content – 3rd party
- ❑ content – built in-house (including paying your teachers to create content)
- ❑ teacher training

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What's a sample way to roll out Blended Learning – for cautious types?

Even if you have a clear vision of your destination, there's no need to try and get there in one dash. Instead, break the process down into simple steps – with clear goals for each.

Step	Goals

1. Choose a platform that can easily be extended
   o email-based solution
   o Learning Management System
	❑ understand the components and capability of the delivery system
	❑ introduce teachers to the platform
	❑ have platform for adding future (including custom) content

2. Keep the first content very simple
Creating content, especially if you're trying to modify your existing content to fit a blended teaching solution, can be VERY time-consuming.
 	
One way to simplify this is to use some existing off-the-shelf content (this may mean a purchase) for your first step.
   o e.g. Pronunciation or News or Media packages
Then customize this by wrapping it with other features and original content
   o e.g. teacher-led forum
   o e.g. extra comprehension / discussion exercises ... these could be created by the teacher or even students
	❑ explore how students respond to different features of the platform
	❑ explore different types of eLearning
	   o e.g. collaborative features such as forums and chats

3. Add more custom content Create a set of exercises focusing on a particular topic. e.g. a set of tests on verb tense e.g. a placement test	❑ understand how much work is involved in creating custom content ❑ train teachers on creating content
4. Introduce a collaborative Learning Project e.g. try out an online conference with a practice business presentation by a student with questions from the other students e.g. try out a Wiki	❑ see how this works with students

Conclusion

Blended Learning has a lot to offer a school. Delivered correctly, it can add considerable value to your teaching solution. For teachers, it brings a new set of skills that can really add to your resume – potentially making you more employable. The only confusing thing is why it's not called 'blearning'.

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