



Stefano Ghazzali and David Snow explore the use of blended learning to improve student success at Manchester Business School

While traditional teaching methods have the advantage of continuous face-to-face interaction and support, they require physical infrastructure, academic availability, and structural curricula. Online learning, on the other hand, enables students to learn at their own pace, irrespective of locality and time. They can feel isolated and unmotivated, however, due to the lack of any face-to-face contact, or interaction with peers. A blended learning approach offers the best of both worlds with face-to-face tutoring support, and the ability to work with the content and to communicate with one's peers online.

The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) describe the term 'blended learning' as a 'combination of face-to-face and online delivery', which can suit the widest range of learning styles.

For a blended learning approach to work, it needs to cover the whole spectrum of methodologies and offer learning experiences that are appropriate for the student at that particular time. Blended learning is not a cheap option, as many people think, as there has to be substantial investment in educational technology and support, with time and effort applied to the pedagogical structure and design of the course. Simply taking a traditionally taught course and putting it online will not suffice.

The education-funded councils are urging that blended learning be implemented, with both the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) referencing blended learning in their e-learning strategies.

Using a blended learning approach benefits the students, as the course is run with a wide range of learning resources and methodologies, recognising different student abilities and preferences. No one size fits all – so the range of approaches and resources achieves the optimum result in student success and education.

Blended learning is not only about transferring the delivery medium, the programme also has to be reviewed and the course designer must decide what is expected from the students – whether the students takes more control over the path of their learning or whether the course designer enforces a strict path is another decision area.

Manchester Business School (MBS) uses certain applications for its e-delivery, such as the virtual learning environment WebCT, which is standard across the University of Manchester.

However, while we use WebCT for content delivery, for threaded discussion, and assessment at the module level, the student support site of MBS Worldwide (the global flexible learning arm of MBS) is used to provide other blended attributes to the students.

The student support site is the first port of call for all MBS Worldwide students and is based around the idea of a personal learning environment (PLE). The site provides a central area for communication and collaboration, and personalised information relevant to the student. It contains a variety of tools and information which allow the student to access a variety of learning objects. These include study guides, workbooks and the ability to upload assignments using our upload tool. The site also contains video module introductions. It focuses on a student-centric approach to learning, putting control back into the hands of the learner.

The site allows students to access and use tools of choice; for example, many students are familiar with blogs and wiki's and video on demand (VOD), and other Web 2.0 technologies. The site allows the students to use these facilities, and integrate them with MBS Worldwide tools. We provide a good blend of resources and support to our students. Some of the Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) tools we use include simulations, reflective blogs, podcasts, vodcasts, mentor reviews, interactive materials, self-testing, e-assessments, and collaborative wiki's.

Blending e-learning and traditional teaching methods allow a new relationship to develop between students themselves, and between the students and the teachers. It puts control back into the hands of students. They say it enhances their learning experience and takes collaboration beyond the classroom walls, bringing in new resources and opening new horizons to them as well as to the teachers.

But when designing a blended learning programme, it is vital to start at programme level and consider pedagogical as well as technology issues. Getting the programme design correct is the major part – technology is just a service used, and shouldn't dictate the programme design. Sound pedagogical requirements, and clear learning aims and outcomes will create success. ■

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