

Who Needs "Blended Learning"? Some Thoughts on a Political Concept.

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Abstract. The paper covers the topic from an e-learning provider's perspective on the basis of practical experience and discussions with corporate and SME partners. In this paper the author argues that blended learning is superfluous as a pedagogical concept. Its true context is company politics and the conflict between different factions involved in human resource development. Blended learning is a political term describing a non-explicit compromise between those responsible for the costs involved in the implementation of a particular type of e-learning and those interested in a ROI for the costs incurred and control over the learners activities.

1 How do People Learn?

People learn in a lot of different ways: by example, by trial and error, by listening, by reading, by writing, by talking, by experimenting. People learn visually, through their bodies, with their senses, while dreaming, driving and while on the job – in almost any thinkable combination. The longer you look at the concept of learning, the longer the list of possible learning methods, learning media and learning spaces gets. Nobody I have met or have heard about learns in only one way with only one method or only one type of media. (This does not mean that they may not feel more comfortable and accustomed to one or the other learning method, media or space.) As far I know learning has never been accomplished otherwise. I do not think that one needs to read a lot of academic material to come to this conclusion. But after spending some time reading well documented work on the subject, I find it hard to come to any other conclusion.

People are indiscriminate, as far as learning is concerned. They use almost anything they can get their hands on to figure out how to solve their problems or meet their learning needs – and they combine different methods constantly. If this is true, then all learning is "blended". Seen in this light, the concept "blended learning" is superfluous.

2 Learning or Teaching?

"Blended learning" is not really about learning, it is about teaching or instruction. One of the main dichotomies conjured up in the discussion is that between "e-learning" on the one hand and "classroom" or "traditional learning" or "face to face learning" on the other hand. That seems plausible. But when you take a harder closer look at each of the terms mentioned, they are so ambiguous that it is hard to find the dividing line.

E-learning for example is often viewed as "technology driven" or "self-paced learning" and is contrasted with classroom based, communicative, teacher driven learning. This is only true for a particular e-learning scenario and is not at all specific to e-learning. E-learning obviously does depend on technology, but it is not necessarily self-paced. E-learning (teaching and learning) can be done for example over the internet with an instructor commenting and motivating individuals or a group. This group can discuss things among themselves and/or with their teacher/instructor. They may use internet and other technologies, e.g. discussion forums, chats, voice over ip, e-mail, and the plain old telephone, just to mention some possibilities. There is nothing inherently self-paced about e-learning. And to be frank, having people placed in a classroom does not mean anything communicative is happening. Maybe they are doing self-paced work while sitting together. And sitting in a classroom with a teacher in it does not necessarily mean that the instructional scenario is teacher driven.

If indeed "blended teaching" is the combination of different *teaching/instructional* methods, media and spaces then that only makes sense if the terms one juggles delineate relevant points of reference. I do not think the points most often mentioned do this. And to be frank I do not really see the value of the effort. Good (and bad) teachers combine methods and media. Depending on their scope they use textbooks, newspapers, individual talks, group discussions, motivate self-paced work and many more. Good teachers lecture, converse, comment, coax and cry. A good teacher blends anything she can get her hands on to keep the learning process moving. From this point of view, "blended teaching" is not anything new or actually anything special.

3 E-Learning, ROI and Total Control

In my view the term "blended learning" or "hybrid learning" or whatever variation will soon certainly be coined only makes sense when viewed within the context of company training. Several years ago e-learning seemed to be the answer to human resource development's training problems: it promised to be flexible (time and place), re-usable (technical modules that could be combined and used again and again) and relatively inexpensive (when the costs saved for instructors, hotels and travel were considered). Please note: the e-learning scenario considered consisted of CBTs or WBTs (computer or web-based training). People were talking about technology based instruction or "training" (practice) programs without personal interaction or instructor intervention.

One of the most important arguments in inner-company discussions was that e-learning would be more "effective", i.e. more "pin-pointed" due to the fact that anything "irrelevant" was omitted. The learner (employee) could target the information needed and only review that exact particle of knowledge necessary for the skill building at hand. No time would be wasted on "browsing on the internet" for example and the company would be in complete control of the information placed at the employees' disposal. This knowledge could be tested, the "progress" of the employee could be monitored. This was considered the ultimate ROI (return on investment). I remember many of my discussions with the human resource departments in corporations bogging down at this point. The idea of online e-learning scenarios where the employees/students could browse the internet freely and discuss topics online with other students and the instructor were completely unacceptable. My discussion partners were aghast at the thought of their employees going anywhere on their own on the internet. The idea that employees from other companies might be in the same discussion forum lead to something akin to panic attacks.

Unfortunately much of the e-learning modules, programs and learning management systems developed and purchased by companies were notoriously ineffective. After some initial excitement due to the new media involved apathy set in. Nobody wanted to use the media. The human resource department had a problem: they had spent a lot of money and it was not working well. At the same time the "traditionalists" in the company were pawing the ground, waiting to prove that they had been right in being skeptical of the whole e-learning "fad". Nobody could afford to lose – a political compromise was necessary.

"Blended learning" has very little to do with academic or pedagogical concepts. It is about corporate politics and the context and economics of human resource development. In fact the concept of "blended learning" was the human resource department's answer to probing questions on the budgets spent indiscriminately on e-learning products that were ineffective and were not accepted by personnel. In order to justify these investments it was proposed that these products would be more effective and would bring a return on investment if they were combined with instructor based, "traditional" teaching scenarios. Academia seems naively to have taken these justification arguments at face value and has tried to incorporate these lines of "reasoning" in pedagogical concepts. One may argue that somewhere along the line someone has missed the boat.

The challenges of human resource development have not as yet really been met. Companies still have major problems finding the employees they need or finding ways to build the "new" skills (especially so-called soft skills) necessary for their business development. Neither e-learning, or blended learning, workplace learning or whatever can really help. The implicit dichotomy between private learning (at home and without constraint) and company learning (at the workplace and under control) must be overcome and a more holistic view of learning and its value within the business context become the basis for new educational projects.