BRIEFING NOTE

December 2013

Series briefing note 43

The City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD) is an independent, not for profit research and development body which is committed to improving the policy and practice of vocational education and training internationally. It is part of the City & Guilds Group.

This briefing note forms part of a series of notes produced by CSD on issues affecting the global vocational education and training sector. These notes aim to briefly summarise and compare existing research, policy and practice and develop general principles as a starting point for debate among education stakeholders. For more comprehensive information on specific issues please refer to the further reading sections of the notes, or contact CSD directly.

BLENDED LEARNING

1. Introduction: what is blended learning?
2. Blended learning in theory
3. Blended learning in practice
4. Recommendations
5. Recommended further reading

1. INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS BLENDED LEARNING?

In 2005, Oliver & Trigwell\(^1\) wrote that “almost anything can be seen as blended learning, and consequently the use of the term does not help us to understand what is being discussed.” (Ibid: p. 18). They cite Driscoll (2002), who outlines four different interpretations of blended learning:

I. Combining or mixing web-based technology to accomplish an educational goal;

II. Combining teaching approaches to produce an optimal learning outcome with or without instructional technology;

III. Combining any form of instructional technology with face-to-face instructor-led training; and

IV. Combining instructional technology with actual job tasks.

With such a range of interpretations, there is no single agreed definition of blended learning. However the most common ‘blend’ is a mixture of digital, online or e-learning, and “traditional” learning through face-to-face teaching (Ibid., 2005: p. 18). Over time the use of this approach has increased, and more precise definitions of blended learning have emerged, such as “the systematic integration of learning in face-to-face and online situations within the same course” (Bliuc, Casey, Bachfischer & Goodyear, 2012\(^2\): p. 238). Given the emphasis of online learning, this note focuses on a blend of face-to-face or on-the-job learning provision, with digital learning tools or materials.

For training in the workplace, there is often a different starting point. In this context, self-study and online modules have already become quite traditional, so the more innovative aspect of a blend might be to integrate face-to-face discussions and one-to-one support (eg. Margaryan, Collis & Cooke, 2004\(^3\)).

One of the expected benefits of blended learning is that it should offer more flexibility to learn using a range of media. A further expectation is that the quality of the learning itself should improve. From their research, Bliuc et al. raise a concern that teachers who introduce blended learning might focus mainly on the technical aspects of doing this, and might neglect the quality of learning overall.

---


Launer (2010) similarly emphasises quality as an important issue: “there is no lack of technical options to enrich learning processes, but there is a big challenge to find the right tool for a specific context,” (Ibid, p. 11).

2. **BLENDING LEARNING IN THEORY**

Ideals associated with blended learning tend to be based on constructivist learning principles. As summarised by Launer (2010): “The constructivist approach [assumes] that the learning process is highly individual and cannot be controlled but only enhanced from outside.” (Ibid: p. 12). Blended learning complements this, she says, by offering “almost unlimited options for learning and teaching.” (Ibid.)

Launer sets out a number of ways in which blended learning can reduce limitations for learners:

- **Blended provision is more flexible for learners:** “learners can study at their own pace, slow down in the learning process where they lack knowledge or speed up and skip exercises when they feel confident,” (Ibid., p. 10).
- **Blended learning encourages the role of teachers and learners to change,** so that the learner more actively manages their own learning. Launer finds that this shift in roles needs to be well-supported by teachers, adding that “many of our learners world-wide are still used to traditional and teacher-centred lessons. … for them, the self-study [in] a blended learning environment [is] very challenging.” (Ibid., p. 13).
- **Institutions or other providers invest in developing blended learning,** leading to a high quality experience. Launer advocates a high quality online learning environment, suited to new technical demands, integrated with well-resourced support and training from teachers.

There are many different models of how to provide blended learning to learners, and not all will be appropriate for all situations. To give some examples, Rossett and Frazee (2006) categorise three different types:

I. **“Anchor blend”:** Online instruction is provided after classroom instruction, so that learning is “anchored” in class-based practice. This is to help learners to understand the content and demands of the course, and meet their teachers and peers, before they complete the online aspects of the course.

II. **“Bookend blend”:** Pre-class online activities prepare learners for face-to-face sessions. This is similar to the “flipped classroom” model. Work is done before the class or workshop session, and the class then focuses on discussing what has been learned. There is also a post-discussion online activity to ease the “transfer of learning”, ie the application of what’s been learned outside the training environment.

III. **“Field blend”:** online resources are provided for learners to make use of whenever they wish. This is very flexible for the learner, but provision is unstructured, so it may not be well-integrated into face-to-face teaching.

From these assumptions and models it is clear that blended learning involves more than adopting new technology for learning. It’s also about creating a coherent programme. Launer argues that “the technique used in a blended learning setting is only as good as the teacher choosing it and tutoring the learning process,” and that it is important to find the right tool for a specific context. (Launer, 2010: p. 11)

---


In their research with employers, Kineo and the Oxford Group (2013) find that it is not only the employers’ in-house commitment to training that matters, but also the extent to which a blend is integrated to meet expectations: “Our respondents ... highlight the dangers of having a team of designers working in their silos on each different learning element, rather than there being a single vision for the blend to which each learning method contributes,” (ibid, p. 3). For more success with blended learning, they recommend:

- A structured design process,
- Rigorous analysis of employees’ training needs,
- Recruitment of designers with appropriate skills,
- Realism about the organisation’s constraints.

Moe and Rye (2011) have also aptly commented that “all forms of learning to some extent mix approaches, technologies, locations and so forth” (ibid: p. 166). They suggest that to obtain meaningful outcomes from blended learning in the workplace, a “community of practice” should develop, in which colleagues or peers mutually support each others’ learning.

3. BLENDED LEARNING IN PRACTICE

Blended learning in further education

Bliuc et al. (2012) explored vocational teachers’ approaches to blended learning, through a survey of around 60 practitioners working in a major Technical and Further Education (TAFE) provider in Australia. They found differences in teachers’ stated priorities for blended learning, and the insights they gave about their practice. While some teachers described a highly tailored approach (eg: “I work with each learner and work out a learning plan” and “I design activities, case studies so that they are relevant, current and adaptable to many contexts in the blended learning environment”), others said that they use more generic materials or whatever’s available (“with the large number of groups [that I run], ‘design’ has become a little random.”)

Teachers also offered different concepts of blended learning, including:

- “learning using a variety of concepts that often (but not always) utilise technology”,
- “incorporating many facets of delivery so that learning can occur [in] remote locations”,
- “the opportunity for students to have different modes of [teaching] delivery”, and,
- “the use of technology to enhance delivery”. (Ibid: pp. 242-244).

From these findings Bliuc et al. conclude that teachers may introduce blended learning to increase access to learning and to make courses more flexible. In comparison, they might neglect the quality of training across face-to-face and online methods. Launer (2010) similarly comments on the need for quality control. She finds that “there is no lack of technical options to enrich learning processes, but there is a big challenge to find the right tool for a specific context.” (Ibid: p. 11)

Blended learning in employment

In 2013, Kineo and the Oxford Group surveyed employers on their use of blended learning. Across a sample of over 100 employers, they found that 86% had combined “technological and traditional" learning methods frequently or sometimes. The report finds however that provision is “not necessarily well blended”. Lack of time to understand the needs of employees, lack of understanding of how the elements of each blend would be used, and lack of of communication between designers are all said to compromise the quality of a blend.

Shell International Exploration and Production (Shell EP) adopted blended learning for employees’ professional development more than ten years ago, as case studied by Margaryan, Collis & Cooke (2004). Shell EP’s “Open University” aimed to address a weakness in its e-learning programmes, namely that they “[retain] a focus on the delivery of existing content, albeit in flexible multimedia packaging.” They aimed to improve upon e-learning by linking it to work-related discussions, activities, and collaboration between colleagues. Work supervisors were actively involved in the programme, and a facilitator trained as a coach was also on hand to support learning.

Evaluating the programme, Margaryan et al. identify 299 types of learning activity. The most popular activities could be done in meetings and as sole study: these involved “collecting information, analysing, applying and presenting the results” (used 66 times), and “kick-off such as self-introduction, learning agreement with line manager” (used 36 times). Studying online content, such as instructors’ notes and e-learning modules, was the next most popular (used 33 times). The programme is said to have succeeded at integrating learning into day-to-day activities and tasks, but it seems that some online functions were under-used: participants tended not to study their colleagues’ submissions, or to work collaboratively using the e-learning platform.

From their work with employers, City & Guilds Kineo (2013) find that implementing blended learning involves much more than simply providing learning materials. They suggest that employers should think about the pathways learners can take through online and offline learning options, considering their different work-based knowledge and experience. Kineo also suggest that blended learning pathways should be tested with their intended audience before being used. Whether employers seek to build a specific online programme or use a mixture of free online tools, Kineo’s research highlights the importance of design and development.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS
This note has outlined some of the benefits that are expected from adopting a blended learning approach, as well as some of the challenges that practitioners encounter. Researchers recommend that:

- Blended learning should improve the quality of teaching and learning as a whole. Support from teachers or trainers is a key part of this to improve the quality of self-study that takes place.
- The design of blended courses is important. Blended learning may be seen simplistically as providing a wider range of learning resources for use as and when needed. However if the design of resources does not fit well with learners’ needs, then these resources are unlikely to be “well-blended” into other approaches to learning in college or in work.
- Blended learning required planning, engagement and investment. Investment is needed to introduce and update digital resources, and to cover the staff costs of supporting blended learning.

5. RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING


8 See footnote 4, p. 2