A Comparison of Two Rationales for E-learning

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Overview

The concept of e-learning can be regarded as "part of a teaching and learning continuum that begins with face-to-face teaching without the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) at one end and fully online distance learning at the other end" (Bullen, n.d.). This paper will compare two institutional strategies that can both be plotted on the e-learning continuum in slightly different locations - but with profoundly divergent learning experiences and outcomes for students.

The first strategy (identified as *.kr*) is geographically located in South Korea and the second one (identified as *.nz*) is situated in New Zealand. My knowledge of the .kr strategy is based on firsthand experience in my place of employment while the information on the .nz strategy comes primarily from an article in the journal *Research in Learning Technology* (Cochrane, 2010).

If we were to plot them on the e-learning continuum, Figure 1 shows the approximate locations of each of the strategies. According to *The 2014 Survey of Online Learning* conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group, both can be placed in the realm of hybrid or blended learning (BL) because the online portions of both courses comprise more than 30% of the overall content (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 7).

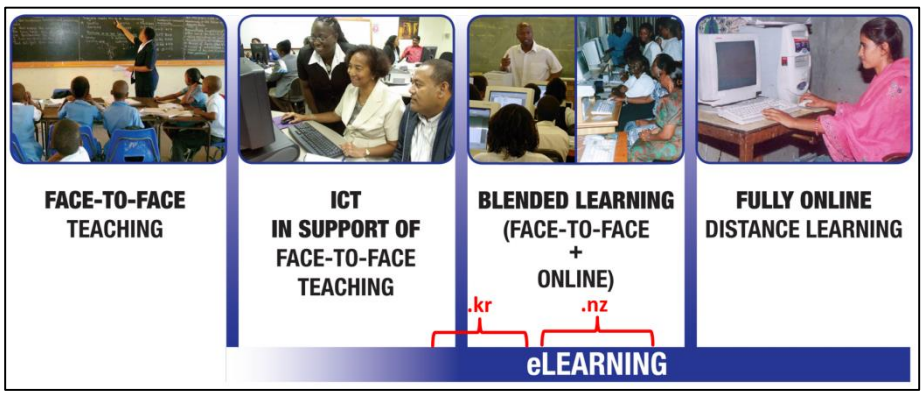

Figure 1: The E-Learning Continuum (adapted from Bullen, n.d.)

In addition to the positional differences depicted above, there are some other key dissimilarities between the two strategies: the Korean one was implemented for the hasty redesign of a basic EFL course, while the New Zealand strategy was part of a careful longitudinal study that integrated mobile Web 2.0 technology with social constructivist pedagogies and transformed a higher education institution's approach to e-learning (Cochrane, 2010).

Analyses of the Strategies

The Korean (.kr) Strategy

The Korean strategy involves my department and a course called Basic Academic English (BAE) in which first-year students learn basic English presentation and writing skills to prepare themselves for a more advanced core course, Professional Academic English (PAE), that all students are required to take before they graduate. In what our department coordinator once characterized as the university's drastic and hasty measures to cut costs, in-class instructional time (seat time) and credit hours in the existing BAE were suddenly reduced in late February 2014 and teachers in our department were advised of this change only a few days before the beginning of the spring semester in March. We were told that the new version of the course had now become a split course by replacing two hours per week of in-class instructional time with one hour of online TOEIC prep lessons. It was further explained that the online portion of the class would be administered by a separate department and that BAE teachers would have nothing to do with it. The only other adjustments we had to make were to amend our grading percentages so that the in-class portion of BAE would total only 70 percent, thus leaving 30% to be assessed according to students' performance in the online portion of the course. Because the online portion of this hastily split course was grossly inappropriate for the majority of the BAE students, there were a large number of student complaints that ultimately resulted in what our department coordinator announced as a "call for teachers to take part in the BAE Online Course Development Project."

I was on the team that was selected for this project and, soon after getting started on it, meetings and conversations revealed that the online portion of the course would primarily be used to deliver content that would include mini-lectures, tutorials, and a few role-plays developed by the online course development team. In other words, it would rely almost solely on Web 1.0 technology, not allow students to create any content or engage in any online interactivity. In essence, our team was mandated to design an online component that would use the *flipped classroom* approach, provide students with much of the content that had previously been taught in the classroom, and allow classroom teachers to focus on problem solving, assessment, and perhaps some collaborative group work, if time permitted.

The revision was completed in December and the course launched on March 2 for our Spring 2015 semester. Because the online content is closely integrated with and constitutes one-third of the overall course content, it can technically be called a *blended* course; however, that would not be entirely accurate. A more precise description would be to call the new BAE course a *web facilitated* course with some *blended/hybrid* attributes (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 7).

While this approach is a vast improvement over the hastily contrived split course, (in which, as mentioned, the online content was a TOEIC prep course that was far too advanced for BAE students and totally unrelated to the BAE curriculum), our flipped online content is much less effective than a more interactive and constructivist approach that would allow students to become content creators and learning community collaborators. During midterm, I interviewed 20 of my BAE students about the online video lessons and, with the exception of only one student, they all expressed either no opinion (likely because they didn't want to offend me) or a negative opinion about the one-way communication system. There is ample literature to substantiate the fact that online learning is better facilitated with Web 2.0 technologies that engage learners with such key affordances as synchronous and asynchronous multi-directional interactivity, user generated content, social learning, and

group collaboration (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Sinclair, McClaren, & Griffin, 2006). Therefore, as it stands now, however, the BAE course redesign (or BAE Online Project) should only be regarded as a foundational "web facilitated" step in the right direction.

The reason my department decided to compromise with the less pedagogically effective approach is important because it is a situation that exists in many higher education institutions: some of our most senior instructors, who have taught here for years, have always managed their courses without making use of even the most basic of technologies (such as spreadsheets, email, or learning management systems). Like most departments at most universities, ours is being pressured into cutting costs by developing more blended courses and, as a result, it took the position that, in order to meet budgetary requirements as quickly as possible, the online portion of the course must be implemented as soon as possible and must not force any teachers to learn any new technology. Consequently, as a result of the preceding two conditions, the current iteration of BAE is constrained to existing as little more than a Web 1.0 technology based content delivery system with unidirectional video lessons, no collaboration or social networking space, and only a hastily written student workbook (in the form of a downloadable PDF file) to provide a limited degree of what would appropriately be labelled as *pseudo-interactivity*. (I suggest the term *pseudo* because students will only be using their workbooks when they are prompted by the video lesson, which means that their interactions will not be with real people—but with a video lesson and a workbook.)

To sum up, our BAE Online Course was thrown together in a misguided attempt to cut costs and thereby increase profits (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005, pp. 484–486) and propagate the university's carefully cultivated (albeit grossly inaccurate) image of being on the cutting edge of educational technology innovation and globalization, which is little more than belatedly frantic hop on to the Wave 1 bandwagon of e-learning (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2006) while many universities--in other, more pedagogically advanced cultures in the world--have already

been testing the waters of Waves 2 and 3 in their e-learning initiatives. As some other educational thought leaders might put it, our BAE Online Course is based on an architecture of presentation rather than an architecture of participation and relies heavily on what they call Learning Environment 1.0 as opposed to Learning Environment 2.0 (Sinclair et al., 2006, p. 8) as shown in the checklist below:

Learning Environment 1.0	Learning Environment 2.0
✓Focus on Content Presentation	Focus on Learning Processes
✓Focus on Access & Download	Focus on Communication & Interactions
✓Fixed or Static Design	Co-developed with Learners & Instructors shaping Design
Individualized	Customized/Personalized
✓Teacher-Directed	Cooperatively Activated
✓Static	Evolving
✓Information/Content	Knowledge & Understanding
✓System-paced	Learning-paced
✓1:many	Collaborative & 1:1, many:many
Search and Retain	Contribute, Tag, and Share (Folksonomy)
Tests and Examinations	✓Demonstrations and Prototypes
✓Prescribed	Negotiated and Contracted
✓Feedback limited	Feedback rich

Figure 2: Learning Environment Checklist (adapted from Sinclair et al., 2006)

The New Zealand (.nz) Strategy

The e-learning initiative at Unitec in Auckland, New Zealand is described, in part, as a "transformational journey is based upon four years of research on appropriating the pedagogical benefits of Web 2.0 and pedagogy 2.0" (Cochrane, 2010). It involves, as mentioned in the overview, the integration of mobile Web 2.0 technology with social constructivist pedagogies, including such vital affordances as social networking and communities of practice. This is consistent with the big ideas advocated by Sinclair, McClaren, and Griffin (2006) as well as the earlier work of many other researchers, such as

Barab, Duffy, Palloff, and Pratt (2000; 2001). Because of this, I believe the rationales—both stated and unstated—are absolutely defensible and it would be fascinating to see how the authors of *Putting Learning Before Technology: A Commentary on the "E-Learning and Beyond" Think Piece* (Petter & Clift, 2006) would respond to it.

In one of the longitudinal case studies (running from 2007-2010), Wireless Mobile Device (WMD) and Web 2.0 apps provided the predominantly part-time Landscape Design students with much needed flexibility and afforded them opportunities to engage with one another—and their instructors—in situated and open learning environments. In the Bachelor of Product Design projects (2008-1010), the focus was on investigating the potential for using smartphones to bridge on-campus and off-campus learning contexts. Each year of the course involved developing the early establishment of learning communities of both students and instructors, then progressively expanding into participation in worldwide creative communities with the ability to work--via mobility--anywhere at any time. A third project involved Contemporary Music students with various music creation and delivery technologies, including podcasts, blogs, e-portfolios, and various other forms of social networking (Cochrane, 2010).

The overall success of these projects/studies resulted in a revised e-learning strategy for the entire institution:

> The strategy includes the following objectives:
>
> (1) To create authentic learning conversations that enable graduates to succeed in the twenty-first century.
>
> (2) To provide accessible environments and creative solutions for students' access to online tools via WMDs.
>
> (3) To enhance wireless computing infrastructure.
>
> The strategy focuses on three key areas: staff capability, student capability and access, and infrastructure changes. The community of practice emodel developed during the

> m-learning action research projects forms a core element of the new e-learning strategy. (Cochrane, 2010, p. 228).

This strategy is definitely consistent with three of the five key reasons for using e-learning, as proposed by Bates & Sangrà. It enhances the quality of teaching and learning, increases access to learning opportunities and increases flexibility for students, and develops the skill and competencies needed in the 21st Century (Bates & Sangrà, 2011, pp. 11–22). It may also fit the cost-effectiveness criterion; however, I would need to study further on that to be sure. So far as the "learning style of Millennials" is concerned, I must confess that as an aging baby boomer, I wholeheartedly agree with Dr. Bullen's contention that such a criterion does not warrant much consideration ("1.2 – Rationales for E-Learning | ETEC 520 Planning and Managing Technologies in Higher Education," n.d.).

Conclusion

In this comparison of the two e-learning strategies, we have looked at two examples of blended learning: the BAE Online Course (.kr strategy) at my place of employment in South Korea and the Mobile Web 2.0 Informing a New Institutional E-learning (.nz) Strategy at Unitec in New Zealand. Reporting the BAE Online Course strategy was not a pleasant task. After all, I was a key member of the redesign project team and it is my voice and image that will be played over and over again by countless young Korean students for years to come, as they begin their university careers. Although I provided as much UBC MET inspired insight as I could during the entire process of the redesign project, I was not able to break through the cultural barriers that still separate modern social constructivist pedagogy from Korea's very entrenched objectivist approach to education. Hopefully, the harsh culture and education system here will eventually catch up with more modern thinking and my team's iteration of the online course will be replaced soon.

The ideal replacement would be something more along the lines of the vastly superior, more pedagogically appropriate .nz strategy. Mobile learning is already a huge part of e-

learning and, as Daniels says at 4:50, mobile technology—along with a probable online enrolment shift from public post-secondary institutions to private for-profit institutions and increasing prominence of Open Educational Resources—is one of the three major trends to watch for in the future of e-learning (Sir John Daniels, n.d.).

To conclude on a positive note, I can only express that, although progress seems vastly too slow, the future for teaching and learning is very bright, thanks to the ongoing research that continues to enable us to re-think, re-design, re-organize and appropriately integrate technology in education. The final result will be the enablement of learners such as never before.

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