BOOK REVIEW

Guide to Blended Learning

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This compact yet complete *Guide to Blended Learning* is a welcome addition to the arsenal of useful resources published every year by the Commonwealth of Learning. Eight chapters, a reference list and two appendices (one is entitled Community of Inquiry Blended Learning Evaluation and the second one is COL's Blended Learning Design Template) open up the world of blended learning to both newcomers in the field, researchers and other private and public stakeholders such as teachers and lecturers who have already been implementing blended learning in their respective professional fields (first and foremost in the field of teaching and learning), but want to improve their skills.

Teamwork is at the basis of this blended learning resource: Sanjaya Mishra was in charge of concept development, planning and editing, while Martha Cleveland-Innes is the book's principal author. She received support from Dan Wilton in the writing of the resource. Two critical readers, D. Randy Garrison and Heather Kanuka, went through the work with a fine-tooth comb before it was published.

COL President, Professor Asha Kanwar, drafted the foreword. In it, she restates COL's mandate, namely that of promoting the development of ODL resources and technologies. Thus, in line with this mandate, the present publication looks at blended learning.

Why blended learning? One of the reasons is that blended learning environments have resulted in better learner performance, mainly because of improved support given to learners and increased interaction between the various role-players. This *Guide to Blended Learning* was designed based on feedback received from COL partner institutions. The main idea behind it was to make available a series of best practices regarding blended learning. The present *Guide* is, on its own, a kind of example of blended learning as all chapters are accompanied by a video introduction accessible through a QR code and direct link, used to attract readers' attention and help them to focus on specific activities.

This outstanding resource contains eight well-written chapters with a variety of activities and many examples that can be used when blending.

Chapter 1 is entitled Blended Learning. In this chapter readers are introduced to blended learning: how it is defined, how it emerged, how it is being used and what it has to offer, as well as challenges

they may encounter when implementing a blended learning approach. The following subsections develop the main ideas of the chapter: The Growth of Blended Learning; What is Blended Learning?; Blended Learning Uses; Benefits of Blended Learning, and Making Blended Learning Work. Blended learning refers to "the combination of face-to-face classroom instruction with online learning within a course or programme" (p. 6). Models of blended learning, such as the flipped classroom, the blended block model and fully online approaches are also introduced in this chapter. The advantages of blended learning for students, over and above the fact that it gives the learners an opportunity to become virtual citizens, include increased learning skills, greater access to information, improved satisfaction and learning outcomes, flexibility and opportunities both to learn with others and to teach others. A conclusion precedes the more practical sections of each chapter, namely a scenario, some reflection questions and resources for further reading. This format is found in almost every chapter; keeping a similar format in the different chapters is an example of a good practice in learning materials' development as it accustoms the reader/learner to a certain structure (the reader/learner knows what to expect).

In Chapter 2: Theories supporting Blended Learning, special attention is given to the following topics: Using Theory to Support Blended Learning Practice; The Complex Adaptive Blended Learning System (CABLS network); The Community of Inquiry (CoI) Theoretical Framework in Blended Learning; Creating a Community of Inquiry: What the Research Tells Us; Seven Blended Learning Structures in Education, and Blended Learning as Technology-Enabled Learning in the Classroom. On page 10 the authors refer to the detailed work done by Wang, Han and Yang (2015), who provide an important overview of all major, blended learning theoretical frameworks available. The diagram and table on pages 11 and 12 show the different elements of the CABLS framework (learners, teachers, content, technology, learner support and institution) and explain how they interact. Research indicates that the theoretical CoI framework, which is organized around concepts of teaching, social and cognitive presence, is especially useful when it comes to the development of higher order thinking skills, which are often the 'forgotten orphans' of educational programmes. The SARM (substitution, augmentation, modification and redefinition stages) model is explained towards the end of this chapter: the authors included Brubaker's 2013 visualisation of the model and the list of descriptors for the four stages of the model.

The starting point of Chapter 3: Successful Blended Learning, is the fact that "the most effective blended learning design offers a learner-centred approach that is personalisable and accessible (Baldwin-Evans, 2006), with the best designs integrating a range of learning opportunities that allow learners more control over their formal and informal learning actions" (p. 20). Especially noteworthy in this chapter are the sections related to ensuring that learners are ready and happy to actively participate in blended learning environments. Teachers need to design for open communication and trust, design for critical reflection and discourse, create and sustain a sense of community, support purposeful inquiry, ensure students sustain collaboration, ensure that inquiry moves to resolution, and ensure assessment is congruent with intended learning outcomes. This chapter highlights the fact that introducing technology for technology's sake is useless, and that there is need to orient teachers on how to use technology and how to create the right blend of meaningful learning activities. According to Beams (2017) teachers should use a design process which notes the importance of

defining a particular learning situation when selecting the appropriate blended model with its accompanying activities and technologies.

Chapter 4: Designing for Blended Learning, begins by analyzing the ways institutions have restructured to include blended learning, then goes on to present concrete instructional design examples for guidance when actually creating blended courses. The reflection questions at the end of this chapter are particularly useful when it comes to the conception and development of blended learning programmes. Indeed, answering questions such as the following assist any curriculum or instructional designer and/or teacher: When you consider your institution and blended learning activities, are you able to identify enticers for and barriers to blended learning?; How will you use learning objectives and learning outcomes when designing blended learning?, and, What learning assessment strategies do you currently use, and how will they change when you create a blended learning environment?

Chapter 5: Technologies for Blended Learning, includes an expanded definition of 'technology in education', and a section on technological change and obsolescence. Because technologies change rapidly and move through what Panetta (2017) calls a "hype cycle", the chapter looks at those technologies that have stood the test of time: learning management systems, web conferencing, digital textbooks, blog and wikis, in addition to social bookmarking, mashups and digital storytelling. Before proposing some concluding remarks, the authors explain what e-portfolios are and how they can be used when blending learning.

In the next chapter, Chapter 6: Development of Blended Learning, the role and common features of a Learning Management System (LMS) are described, building on the introduction given in the previous chapter, before the authors describe how to create learning activities based on blended learning best practices, how to customise as needed for context and learners, how to find, use and create Open Educational Resources (OER) and how to assess learning in blended learning. Of utmost importance when blending is the customisation (which includes a form of localisation) of blended learning environments, based on student needs, subject matter, the type of LMS and the blend of face-to-face and online activities.

Chapter 7: Synchronous and Asynchronous Activities and Examples, is all about activities, both synchronous (where participants are doing the same activity at the same time) and asynchronous (where the same activity is done at different times by the learners). This chapter has lots of practical examples of the use of a variety of technologies to provide synchronous interaction (such as videoconferencing, audioconferencing, live web-casting, online chat or instant messaging, proprietary applications such as Skype, Zoom, Blue Jeans or Adobe Connect, offer video, audio and chat, and BigBlueButton which is an open-source alternative designed for online learning that can be integrated directly into most learning management systems) and asynchronous activities (undertaken on asynchronous learning networks (ALNs)) with a common conference space (for example, a virtual blackboard, email, or a chat room) where all participants can post, read or respond to a message. In Chapter 7, the authors also indicate how to effectively design for learning through activities. As an institution or a teacher implementing blended learning, it is useful to keep the following questions in mind when designing (a)synchronous activities: "1. What are the costs to learners of being required to engage synchronously?; 2. Do the benefits of increased immediate support and dialogue outweigh the costs of being required to engage synchronously?, and 3. Are the costs of travel and time to be present

in person greater than the costs of having to ensure the necessary bandwidth and the skill development to participate synchronously online?" (p. 55). A list of possible advantages of both learning options (and how to design for them) is given on pages 56 and 57 of this OER.

Chapter 8: Evaluating Successful Blended Learning, the final chapter, deals with evaluation. How can we evaluate the design and delivery of blended learning? This chapters proposes models, checklists and indicators to assess various aspects of blended learning since it has been noted that "quality assessment rubrics for blended learning have yet to be well-researched and implemented, and a significant, widely accepted instrument to evaluate blended learning quality is still unavailable" (p. 61). Cleveland-Innes cites Smythe (2017, p. 854) who states that "the means to evaluate its effectiveness is frequently lacking since there are a relatively limited range of tools and methods that support staff in designing blended learning curricula".

In conclusion, this Open Educational Resource, while designed with teachers in mind, is extremely useful for a variety of stakeholders. All references are OER, too, which means that the whole package of content, activities and reflection questions can be shared and adapted freely. A high-quality resource providing text and images (diagrams, tables but also videos accessible by scanning the QR codes at the beginning of each chapter) which gives a concise and precise overview of all main aspects of blended learning, while keeping readers/users actively involved through questions and thought-provoking scenarios. The reflection question at the end of Chapter 8 brings everything together: in it, readers/users of this particular OER are asked to write a reflective essay in which they describe and examine what they have learnt. A full list of references is featured after Chapter 8; this combines all further reading and all in-text references of the whole *Guide*. The two previously published resources known as the Community of Inquiry Blended Learning Evaluation and COL's Blended Learning Design Template are included as appendices to the OER.

Note: All citations in the review are from the book reviewed.

Reviewed by:

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