The beginning of the end for blended learning?

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has existed since the early 1970's as a concept. Brumfit (2001:163), writes that the first example of the use of the term that he could discover was in 1971. It has gone through various phases since that time, but it is fair to say that it is generally considered an approach, a set of guidelines rather than prescriptive rules of application. CLT has almost reached the stage where few practising teachers of English as a foreign language are likely to suggest that they do not use it. How many of those that say they use it actually do, is a moot point, often due to a lack of understanding of what the concept actually means, and this has been commented on by several people (including Mangubhai et al (2005:32-34) and Harmer (2003:288)). In fact, Harmer suggests (p. 288) that CLT was already then a phenomenon that was no longer describable.

I suspect by now that most readers are wondering what the opening paragraph of this article has to do with blended learning (BL). When I was asked to write an article on BL, I decided it might be interesting to look at the fundamentals of what BL is, or might be. The more I considered this, the more I found parallels to some work I did on CLT during a Masters course. The opening paragraph is a paraphrase/adaptation of the first few paragraphs of an essay I wrote in 2006. On the basis of some definitions, BL has probably always existed, as imaginative and enthusiastic teachers tried to find different ways to make their teaching more effective. However, in the way that it is viewed today, BL is probably at least as old as CLT, with the first students enrolling in the Open University in England in 1971. According to some authors (e.g. Ausburn, 2004: 328; Haythornthwaite *et al*, 2007: 2), even e-learning goes back to 1990. Although it would be naïve to suggest that BL is as ubiquitous as CLT is (at least in theory), could it be in danger of becoming as diluted as the CLT concept has become? The danger for BL is all the greater as it still has to overcome multiple hurdles relating to its acceptance by learners and course providers, continuing technological barriers, and a lack of knowledge of many teachers of how to use and apply the technology available to implement BL.

As with CLT, BL is an approach rather than a method or theory. Unlike CLT, however, there is very little academic writing on what BL actually is, or should be. There is a multitude of definitions: I found around 35 before getting bored. These are then used as the basis of course development, training, government initiatives, etc, but there is little effort being shown in supporting the definitions with real, scientific research. Some may say that this is unnecessary, that as long as it works (echos of CLT again), that should be enough. I would disagree. In the world of EFL in general (including ESOL, ESP, etc), there is a real need to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of various approaches. We quite rightly want to be treated as serious professionals (and paid accordingly), but to do so without being able to provide some support for the way in which we do our work, and evidence that it does work, is asking a great deal of companies on tight budgets.

As evidenced by the consistently high number of presentations on subjects related to BL at BESIG in recent years, there is a great interest in BL by individual teachers, suggesting an imminent expansion of BL from large organisations to smaller organisations and individuals. It would be disastrous if this expansion led to BL being discredited, in a similar way to e-learning in the 1980's, from which it is only just recovering, by being based on false or incomplete knowledge. Alternatively, the concept of BL could be watered down so much that it becomes indistinguishable from any other approach, without actually providing the benefits that are available from a properly-designed BL course.

One of the first problems is the one of definition. Here are a few of the definitions I found:

a. Hofmann (2001) (in Oliver and Trigwell, 2005) "... proposes that 'the idea behind blended learning is that instructional designers review a learning program, chunk it into modules, and determine the best medium to deliver those modules to the learner." (This presumably allows the possibility of a purely classroom-based course.)

b. "Blended learning is used to describe learning that mixes various event-based activities: self-paced learning, live e-learning, and face-to-face classrooms". (Alonso *et al*: 2005)

c. "...computer-aided instruction coupled with face-to-face interaction" (Coryell and Chlup: 2007) (The implication being that only computer-aided activities can turn a "traditional" course into BL. Too restrictive in my opinion.)

d. "...learning environments that join Internet learning with face-to-face experiences" (Ausburn: 2004) (Ditto "c" above, but even more restrictive.)

e. "... the combination of various traditional and electronic training platforms" (Weaver: 2008) (Ditto "c".)

f. Kerres & De Witt (2003) (in Oliver and Trigwell, 2005) "... discuss blended learning as the mix of different didactic methods and delivery formats, arguing that these two are independent." (Thus allowing the possibility that a purely classroom-based course could be BL.)

Some of the definitions found were of little use in actually finding out what BL is. One definition could actually have described a face-to-face only course, while others varied in the degree to which they provided useful guidance. Many were too restrictive, in my opinion: I could imagine a BL course in parts of Africa involving nothing more technological than a clockwork-powered cassette player and paper. My definition of BL is as follows:

> Blended learning is a term referring to the way in which training is delivered. Both face-to-face lessons and distance elements are involved, combined in a pedagogically and didactically meaningful way. The training is continuously supervised by a teacher.

Most BL courses probably involve both face-to-face and distance elements, and are also supervised to a great extent by a teacher. They are also probably implemented in a pedagogically and didactically meaningful way in the mind of the person responsible. The question is what this means in practice. What are the pedagogical and didactic underpinnings for BL? Without this knowledge, the chances of a BL course being successful are reduced, and working out the reasons for a course not being successful is made much more difficult or impossible. The chances of learners and course providers becoming disenchanted along with the teachers are also increased.

In the course of my research, I have found that almost all academic work on the subject of BL has been done in the tertiary education sector. The conditions there are quite unique, including the degree to which the institution can compel students to use distance learning, the amount of resources available, and the motivations of the students. There is thus a huge deficit in terms of research on using BL by individuals or small language schools in the in-house and part-time fields. It is also extremely difficult for people working in those fields to access the material that is available on theories and research

that may be relevant to the implementation of BL. In the next article, I therefore propose to give an overview of what this material can tell us about the theoretical underpinning for BL. The hope is that this can be a small part of a more open consideration of what BL is, why we would want to use it, and how it can be implemented more successfully.

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Biodata.

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