Blended Learning and the Global South

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Digital Learning and the Global South

Digitalization has increasingly become an affordance of foreign language and discipline-specific learning worldwide. In this perspective, blended learning and Virtual Exchange play a pivotal role in today's pedagogical practices.

Blended Learning

Blended learning has become a buzzword in higher education settings in recent years. Proponents of the pedagogical style vaunt its effectiveness in dealing with higher education challenges that we, as 21st century educators, are facing. These include increased massification and connecting with a generation of so-called digital natives whose capacity for traditional literacy is proving an immense

stumbling block. However, proponents of blended learning often, it must be said, form part of the ranks of the bean counters of the neo-liberal university who see in the system a sure means to greater 'efficiency'. From their point of view efficiency equals maximising student numbers and minimising outlays in human resources (this too was once a neoliberal buzz word which we have begrudgingly had to accept as a reality in higher education). These matters were of grave concern long before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic but have taken on an ever greater urgency. As most of the world's campuses closed their doors to students a precipitous scramble to move courses online occurred often with disastrous consequences for the continuity and quality of curricula. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic runs the risk of further blurring the distinction between blended and online teaching and learning, the proper application of former having become impossible in most cases while some stakeholders without proper familiarity with blended learning continue to tout it as a solution.

From the point of view of educators and students, however, blended learning is far from a panacea to the pedagogical bottle-necks many of us are experiencing. Contrary to what the administrators, who are often woefully out of touch with the frontlines of pedagogy would have us believe, and as many of us will attest, blended learning is not time-saving and is certainly not simpler that traditional teaching. The area of blended learning is also complicated by its conflation, in the minds of many, with online teaching. Blended learning is a distinct pedagogy where the online components of the course are seamlessly integrated with face-to-face contact which affords opportunities to create flipped-classrooms where active learning can flourish. Indeed, conceptualising, designing and implementing a blended course requires a very specific skill set and a real commitment to teaching and learning on the part of the educator.

The simple equation of being a digital-native and therefore being 'tech-savvy' is another simplistic marketing myth. Our students were born and have grown up in a world of stable, reliable and plug-and-play technology. They are the app generation while those teaching belong to the software generation. A native speaker of a language is less likely to understand the underlying system of their own language than someone who has taken the effort to learn the language and this dynamic plays out in digital natives. Especially in developing countries, the experience of technology of many young people has been exclusively with smartphones. Many students can download and use single-purpose apps but have difficulty working with file management and word processing on a PC. This is especially a problem in the Global South where computers are well out of reach financially for most people and is increasingly a problem in the workplace where the Zoomer generation is being found to be wanting in terms of prac-

tical digital literacy necessary for office work. Distressing also in the context of universities in developing nations is the stark inequality in terms of access and competencies: the so-called digital divide.

Virtual Exchange[1]

In Virtual Exchange, groups of students or groups of students and pre-service teachers, attending institutions located in different cultural and geographical locations worldwide, engage online through technology-enhanced activities, including videoconferencing (Lewis, O'Dowd 2016a). Virtual Exchange, mostly implemented to enhance foreign language learning from an intercultural perspective, has gradually developed across disciplines.[2] Virtual Exchange is an example of virtual mobility, which has recently become an asset of post-pandemic education, and in particular a form of Internationalisation at Home (IaH); IaH uses strategies suited to engaging nonmobile students in campus-based activities targeted at enhancing their intercultural and global skills (Beelen, Jones 2015).

Research shows that Virtual Exchange is suitable for fostering foreign language competence and intercultural awareness.[3]

In transnational Virtual Exchange contexts, providing students with timely feedback is pivotal to promote foreign language learning (Carloni, Zuccala 2017; Kurek, Müller-Hartmann 2017). Since students are not usually able to scaffold other learners' foreign language development (Lewis, O'Dowd 2016b), pre-service foreign language teachers have gradually become part of Virtual Exchange; pre-service foreign language teachers are in fact trained both to scaffold students' language learning and engage in digital pedagogy skilfully thereby enhancing methodological innovation.[4]

[1] This section was written by Giovanni Carloni.

[2] Guth, Helm, O'Dowd 2012; Jin 2013; Liddicoat, Scarino 2013; O'Dowd 2016; Lewis, O'Dowd 2016b; Vinagre 2016; Carloni, Zuccala 2017; Porto 2017; Carloni, Zuccala 2018; Sykes 2018; Cunningham 2019; Carloni, Zuccala 2020; Koris, Vuylsteke 2020.

[3] Belz 2002; O'Dowd 2006; Belz, Vyatkina 2008; Ware, O'Dowd 2008; Helm, Guth 2010; Guth, Helm, O'Dowd 2012; O'Dowd 2012; Jin 2013; Liddicoat, Scarino 2013; Kern 2014; Bueno-Alastuey, Kleban 2016; Vinagre 2016; Porto 2017; O'Dowd, O'Rourke 2019; Helm, Van der Velden 2020.

[4] Guichon 2009; Develotte et al. 2010; Murphy et al. 2010; O'Dowd 2015; Guichon, Wigham 2016; Nissen, Kurek 2020.

Blended Learning from a Transnational Perspective

This volume contains interventions on subject of blended-learning from a transnational and Global South perspective. The project began as an initiative by the Teaching and Learning Committee of the School of Language, Literature, and Media at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg. While the project was initially conceived of as an internal symposium to focus on our own challenges as a school of languages and literature, we were struck by the notion that we could enact blended teaching and learning in the symposium itself.

The 2019 Blended Symposium on blended learning in the field of languages, literature, and media was held on 25 March 2019 as the inaugural event of the newly designed and launched South African Platform for Blended Learning: BLOSA (Blended Learning Online South Africa). Two keynote addresses from international guests were presented along with seven papers, the majority of which were given by delegates from four continents; the conference was further attended by roughly 30 non-presenting delegates. The objective of the conference was the exploration of both the theory and application of hybrid and blended learning for languages, literature, and media pedagogy in the context of developing economies.

With financial support from the deputy vice-chancellor of the university, the inaugural conference of BLOSA was organised for 25 March 2019. In designing the event itself, an innovative and blended conferencing model was followed. The model relied on online engagement as a support and a scaffold for the face-to-face event. Contributors were required to present a short videocast for uploading onto the BLOSA site, where it was made available to site members a week prior to the conference-in the hope that online engagement before the event would enrich the conversations at the face-to-face symposium. The streamlined and user friendly site (www.blosa.co.za), co-designed and built in collaboration with Teracore Digital Marketing (www.teracore.co.za), was structured along the lines of a social media platform allowing members to post comments and engage directly with contributors and one another. The videocasts remained on the site well past the date of the symposium as a digital, globally sharable resource for fellow practitioners and fellow scholars of blended learning. Where the contributions and the debates of a traditional time-and-place-bound conference are ephemeral and reserved for a closed community, the model of the BLOSA 2019 conference was one of open access and long duration.

The rationale for this format was twofold: the first objective was to enact the blended model within the very structure of our conferencing activity; the second, to engage the emerging practice of *unconferencing* as a catalyst for democratised accessibility and as a form of resistance to the traditional conference model which neces-

sitates, for example, the presence of international keynotes and an elitist bias toward physical attendance at great expense to individuals and institutions. This is a model that arguably isolates academics from developing contexts from currents and debates emerging in large Global North conferences. This volume represents the outcomes of that conference.

Blended Learning and Virtual Exchange: Case Studies

The volume begins with a chapter by Rahul Gairola (Murdoch University, Australia) in which he sets the scene for the remaining chapters in the volume by situating blended learning in the context of postcolonial nations. He uses Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed as a frame for considering how blended teaching and learning can and does operate in contexts characterised by challenges inconceivable in the metropolitan Global North where blended learning as a concept was developed and is being instituted. Also within the realm of the challenges of uptake and implementation of blended learning is Laura Dison and Kershree Padayachee's chapter on the causes and consequences of resistance on the part of lecturers in higher education to embrace blended learning as a pedagogy. Working within the theoretical horizons of the Epistemic Pedagogic Device (EPD) and Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) and their chapter responds to some of the challenges in harmonising the, sometimes at loggerheads, institutional and pedagogical imperatives discussed above by valorising the various stakeholders in the process of design and implementation of blended courses. These more theoretically dense chapters provide a useful framework within which to approach the remaining chapters which, by design, are far more grounded in the practical experience of pedagogues working both in the Global North and the Global South, as well as transnationally. In the spirit of the BLOSA conference, this volume is a truly global endeavour and one with practical applications for pedagogues working in diverse cultural and economic contexts. We are proud to be able to publish the chapters that emerged from our transnational blended symposium in this volume which contains voices from South Africa, Algeria, Mexico, Australia, Spain, the United States and Italy.

Naturally, given that the symposium was hosted by the School of Languages, Literature, and Media, many of the papers in this volume concern foreign language acquisition using online and blended methods. Most satisfying in this regard are the examples of transnational collaborations between students in different countries. Rachida Sadouni (University Blida in Algeria) describes an effective telecollaboration of this kind which brought together students of French from two developing contexts, Algeria and Moldova. The chapter presents the

nature of the project and student responses to the programme which were mostly positive. It is also quite candid about the challenges in terms of connectivity and digital literacy faced by Algerian students in particular. Sadouni describes how she found resorting to email as a mode of communication between the Moldovan and Algerian groups to be the most effective method. Her findings underline that in contexts with limited resources a back-to-basics approach may be more effective and that complicated and costly platforms can be more of a hindrance than a help. She even noticed that some students did not even have email addresses or know how to email before the project started making her course an invaluable first step for students suffering from 'digital poverty'. Student-centeredness and peer feedback as an adjunct to foreign language curricula is also discussed by Arturo Mendoza (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/University of the Witwatersrand) who describes an eTandem project between students of Spanish in South Africa and students of English in Mexico. Again, in this project simple and freely available software was used: in this case Zoom. Mendoza mentions that eTandem projects can work with Facebook, Skype, Whatsapp or Hangout, allowing easy and natural language learning exchanges across continents.

In tandem with Aguirre de Cárcer Girón (University of the Witwatersrand; Universidad Nebrija), Mendoza contributes a second piece to the collection, in which they discuss the affordances and limitations of e-portfolios as formative assessment in the language classroom and elaborate a set of theoretical guidelines.

Francesca Calamita (University of Virgina) and Roberta Trapè's (University of Melbourne) Intercultural Citizenship Project goes beyond language learning and cultural exchange and allows students in the USA and Italy to take part in a transnational conversation about social issues creating a virtual space in which the matter of gender equality and inclusive language could be discussed. These three projects are all excellent examples of blended pedagogy because they are student-driven and supported by technology and face-to-face classes. Interventions like these have enormous potential to provide immersive and communicative intercultural language learning spaces for the vast majority of students who live in contexts where a study-abroad programme is an inconceivable luxury. In "A Telecollaborative International Exchange for Foreign Language Learning and Reflective Teaching", Carloni and Franzè analyse a Virtual Exchange where students of Italian from Columbia University and pre-service teachers of Italian as second and foreign language from the University of Urbino engage in foreign language development tasks. The study investigates in particular students' and pre-service teachers' perceptions in order to assess the effectiveness of Virtual Exchange as a foreign language teaching and learning environment.

Sandra Paola Muñoz (ENES Léon) and David Ruiz Guzmàn, in their empirical comparative study of two groups of students, one exposed to blended-learning and the other to only traditional methods, share their design process and the impressive results of a custom-built platform for English language courses in Mexico. Simone Bregni (Saint Louis University) describes a fascinating course that he designed capitalising strongly on the specific interests of an "affinity group": in this case gamers. While playing the Italian language versions of immersive video games set in the historical context of Renaissance Italy, Bregni's game-loving students rapidly acquired target-language vocabulary and grammatical forms while actively engaged in an activity that engaged them utterly. The concepts and knowledge acquired during these structured gaming sessions, which could be completed at home or on campus, were ingeniously reinforced by Bregni using different pedagogical instruments in the classroom. Students self-reported continuing to play games in Italian to build on their successes long after completing the course. All the studies discussed above illustrate the immense flexibility of blended-learning in terms of catering for the instructors' and students' aptitudes and dispositions towards the digital environment as well as busting the myth that blended-learning can only take place in highly resourced settings.

Continuing with the theme of grounded and practical interventions in the teaching and learning environment but focussing on innovative course design for literary studies, we have Fiona Horne's (Wits) discussion of the "digital story" as a pedagogical instrument for the acquisition of the fundamental literary analysis skills but using an innovative, interactive and scaffolded methodology which circumvents some of the negative affect associations of many students with traditional close-reading. Similarly, Colette Gordon (Wits) writes about the limitations of traditional approaches to teaching literary analysis skills in English Literature courses owing to a serious shortfall of South African school leavers capacities in the area of deep literacy. She problematises the concept of the flipped-classroom and describes the development of a peer-centred feedback loop using blended reciprocal peer learning.

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