21st Century Learning: Blended Learning, an Integrated Approach at Windesheim!

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Abstract

The teacher education department of Windesheim University of Applied Sciences (Zwolle, The Netherlands) reacts to new opportunities provided by modern technology. The concept of blended learning has renewed our education. In this presentation we will introduce the outlines of our new approach.

Windesheim has a long tradition in regular and distance learning. Recently, we have transformed the regular teacher training and the traditional distance learning into a combined and more successful blended learning approach. We are moving away from the time and place independent learning concept. In our new approach we combine aspects of group work in the electronic learning environment. The lecturer monitors the learning process by peer review and by lecturer's specific role as a regular and as a digital teacher. Furthermore, we support students by a clear study schedule. As a result, students' engagement is much higher and students are more productive.

The educational design of the electronic learning environment is of vital importance in our new approach. It has to be didactical thoughtfully composed. The materials need to be well structured and easy accessible. The various learning styles of students have to be taken into account. Our aim is not to feed the students with loads of theory, but to involve them in their own learning process.

The blended learning concept is a mixture of power point like lessons, named 'silverpoints'. These lessons consist of short explanations referring to literature combined with examples, sound fragments, videos and documentaries. These additional materials are provided by links within the texts in these lessons; these are always only one click away. Furthermore, films of real lessons in a classroom setting are incorporated. Productive assignments are developed to challenge students to put theory into practice. The productive assignments enhance students' engagement and improve learning outcomes. The blended learning environment acts as a student support system; it implies multiple ways of getting access to the learning materials and learning is more diverse and more exciting.

To get lecturers ready for this new way of teaching we stimulate lecturers to participate in a course, named 'teach as you preach' to experience blended learning themselves. Besides, lecturers starting to create their lessons for our electronic learning environment are supported by experts; we have special rooms designated for this goal with help at hand. We know that by seeing good examples lecturers develop practical ideas how to design their own didactical learning environment. That is why we organize that early adapters present their materials to their own colleagues. All these measures are key factors to introduce successfully blended learning at Windesheim.

During our presentation we will explain the described blended learning concept, using the example of our Chinese language course design.

1. Introduction

The teacher education department of Windesheim University of Applied Sciences (Zwolle, The Netherlands) responds to new opportunities provided by modern technology. By means of the electronic learning environment and multimedia educators find infinite possibilities to train students in different ways than before. Times are changing, students are changing, as a consequence Windesheim is changing. As a university we aim to respond to these changes in an adequate way. In order to realize a 21st century programme Windesheim has researched how. The first step was to innovate our long distance learning concept [1]. This long distance learning model is the starting point for renovation and serves as a transition to blended learning. A good example in which the new concept of blended learning is used is within

Windesheim's Chinese language and culture studies. In this presentation we will introduce the outlines of our new approach departing from the change we made from our distance learning model towards a blended learning model. In the description we have our Chinese language and culture programme in mind. This programme that started as a single online course was our first pilot for long distance learning in the field of Chinese. As it became integrated in our minor programme 'Chinese language and Culture' it became naturally a blended learning approach. The minor programme serves as a pilot for a full four year bachelor teacher education programme. This is the way we scaffold our developments towards 21st century learning. As such, the renovation of the distance learning model became the initiator of our blended learning approach in which we learned from past experiences.

2. A new approach to distance learning

Windesheim has a long tradition in regular and distance learning. The distance learning concept consisted in a model in which students studied in individual routes at their own pace. For reasons of students' individual routes and students combining distance learning with jobs, studies were prolonged. Therefore there was no immediate study result, students lost motivation and consequently dropped out. Only a five percent succeeded in finalizing their studies. Lecturers supervised many students in various study paths and at the end it was very difficult for the lecturers to keep track of students' individual programmes. This was not a beneficial situation for all parties. A PhD research to investigate different ways of distance learning in order to develop a more successful approach was initiated [1].The findings of this research transformed Windesheim's regular teacher education courses and the traditional distance learning programme into a combined and more successful blended learning approach starting in the Chinese department. Since this is a brand new department at our university, we could start from scratch and we were able to implement the new approach from the very beginning.

In this new approach we are deliberately moving away from the time and place independent learning concept. Research shows that group engagement is an important factor for success, as does a study path constraint in time, which is needed to make group work possible. In this new approach we combine aspects of group work making use of the possibilities offered by the electronic learning environment to engage students. The electronic learning environment makes use of 'project space' and 'forums' in which students can work together and react on each other's work according to defined criteria. The lecturer monitors the learning process and has a twofold role as a regular and as a digital teacher. Specific assignments are developed to provoke cooperative learning between students in which peer review is an important tool for learning. Furthermore, we support students by a clear study schedule to continue studying at the same intensity and pace during the whole programme.

Studying a very new and complicated subject like Chinese means that students need to invest a lot of study hours to be successful and to end up with a clear result. Now, using the blended learning methodology students' engagement seems much higher and students appear to be more productive than students were in our former distance learning concept.

The educational design of the electronic learning environment is of vital importance in our new approach. It has to be didactical thoughtfully composed. The materials need to be well structured and easy accessible. For that reason we compose lessons on the electronic platform with short and to the point instructions. The various learning styles of students have to be taken into account. Our aim is not to feed the students with loads of theory, but to involve them in their own and each other's learning process. Therefore the blended learning concept is a mixture of Power Point like lessons, named 'Silverpoints', consisting of short explanations referring to literature combined with examples, sound fragments, videos and documentaries. These additional materials are provided by links within the texts in these lessons; these are always only one click away. Furthermore, films of real lessons in a classroom setting are incorporated. By this approach we are able to support the different learning styles of students, to appeal to students' ordinary way of handling multiple multimedia at the same time by combining and integrating the mentioned various ICT appliances. Instead of regarding smart phones, tablets, apps and laptops as a nuisance in classrooms, we aim at making use of them to stimulate students' learning.

3. Students study differently

Productive assignments are developed to challenge students to put theory into practice. The productive assignments are aimed at enhancing students' engagement and improving their learning outcomes. The blended learning environment acts as a student support system; it implies multiple ways of getting access to the learning materials, hence the learning activities are more diverse and hopefully more exciting. Furthermore, the assignments are designed to provide a more deductive way of learning, more in line with the 21st century skills students need to develop. The various learning activities composed for that aim correspond to the different levels of learning in the taxonomy of Bloom [2]. Productive and personalized learning is the result of our new approach with blended learning.

Students will be taught to make use of all kinds of sources to find knowledge, they need to be able to select the most appropriate source for their end, therefore they need to learn how to be critical and judge what is of their use. Besides, students must learn how to connect sources; learning is a matter of connecting sources of information. ICT enables the students and the lecturers to interact in various ways and to benefit from the new possibilities for constructing knowledge. Where assessing is also an important factor nowadays, the productive assignments on the electronic platform are used to serve as a means for formative assessment and the final exams, portfolios, presentations and oral exams as a means for summative assessment. In conclusion, to Windesheim the blended learning is a learning environment in which there is an interaction between technology and the more traditional learning methodologies. It is making use of the best of both worlds.

4. Lecturers change role

To get lecturers ready for this new way of teaching we stimulate lecturers to participate in a course named 'Teach as you Preach' to experience long distance learning new style themselves. Experiencing this model of distance learning serves as a way to get a feel for the challenges and opportunities of electronic learning. Lecturers will get to know the new approach at the same time as that they will experience what their students come across during electronic learning. The course starts with a face to face meeting in which the vision, outlines of the course, the technical implications and skills needed are explained. The course 'Teach as you Preach' is challenging in itself because colleagues are the course leaders. As such they have to give feedback to colleagues. The forum in which the participants have to react on questions as a means of joint learning seems to be a critical point. They have to underpin their answers with arguments taken from literature and responding to the arguments brought up by their colleagues. They feel that everyone can follow their reactions and their way of arguing and interacting. Sometimes this makes them feel uncertain, incapable and unsafe. This precarious situation is the same for students and as such good to perceive as a lecturer. Getting to know what electronic studying means in this new approach, makes lecturers aware of the implication of the way they communicate with students and formulate their instructions, the accuracy needed in their explanations on the platform and the specific design of their assignments. On spot meetings remain necessary to respond to personal needs and for the groups to feel connected.

The experiences with the distance learning course with face to face meetings throughout the programme provide the necessary knowledge to make the transition to blended learning. These experiences are needed to understand the implications of electronic learning, to know which adjustments have to be made towards the blended learning approach. In the end blended learning has to be a mixture of the distance learning and the regular face to face approach of teaching. When lecturers start to create their own lessons for our electronic learning environment they are supported by experts; we have special rooms designated for this goal with help at hand. We know that by seeing good examples lecturers develop practical ideas how to design their own didactical learning environment. That is why we organize that early adapters present their materials to their own colleagues. All these measures are key factors to introduce successfully blended learning at Windesheim.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the transformation of an educational concept is a challenging journey with many critical moments. It is not only about changing the education for the students in a way that it is more adapted to the

modern world, it is also a reform in teaching habits of lecturers. Lecturers didn't get acquainted with the modern world as naturally as the students, their clients, did. The students have grown up in this multitasking multimedia world. Often they are better prepared to use the new devices than their lecturers. There is a shift in who is the expert of what knowledge. Lecturers who for ages were looked upon as the owners of knowledge, now have to recognize that at this moment in history that is only partly true. In electronic learning more often students are more skilled than their lecturers. In classrooms students have to help the lecturers to get the media work. Lecturers mostly don't like that. Furthermore, lecturers have to invest a lot more time in designing their materials in a modern and well thought way. They cannot get away anymore with just lecturing in front of the classroom spreading the news. Their knowledge has to be organized in a modern world, accessible to the student, starting point for them to construct their own knowledge. Lecturers are not any longer the ones that only teach, but the ones that guide and supervise the learning process of their students, which means that they have to change their roles. In blended learning this role is visible in the way they monitor the learning of their students, helping them to acquire the 21ˢᵗ century skills. Lecturers and students develop themselves alongside the same route, from another perspective and role. It is a paradigm shift. Although it is not easily done and we have to invest a lot to get the lecturers ready, we are well under way departing from this joint vision. During our presentation we will explain the described blended learning concept, using the example of our Chinese language course design. With this example and the way we realize this transition, we argue that 21ˢᵗ century learning is blended learning and an integrated approach at Windesheim!

References

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