

## Blended language learning design. What is the place and role of collaboration in the process?

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### Abstract

*The design of a blended language learning curriculum, combining face-to-face and online learning, usually requires from the course designer a range of skills and knowledge wider than the necessary expertise in the subject area. In universities, educational designers, skilled in the technologies and pedagogies that support blended learning, provide some assistance to the teacher in the design of learning activities and the selection of appropriate technologies. This paper examines the relationship between the teacher/subject expert and the educational designer, as well as collaborative relationships between teachers.*

*Teaching is essentially a design-based activity (Mishra & Wallace, 2002; Brown & Edelson, 2003; Goodyear & Markauskaite, 2008). It is about creating opportunities for learning through the design of tasks and environments that promote productive learning. This is especially true for language learning and teaching where learning by doing and active engagement are essential to learning. Effective collaboration between curriculum designers and educational designers is therefore critical. However the relationship between subject expert and educational designer is still often based on a deficit perspective, and the subject expert is seen as 'lacking' the essential technical, and related pedagogical, skills for blended learning design and needing the specialised support of educational designers (Clayton, 2010, Stefani, 2010). This paper argues for a more integrated relationship, based on comprehensive collaboration and partnership rather than a mere support relationship.*

"The quality of e-learning is not something that can be delivered to the learner but is something that is co-developed by the learner and the provider during the teaching and learning processes" [7, p.445]. The design of teaching and learning interactions are critical to the quality of learning outcomes. This is especially true in the case of blended learning where multiple media and types of interactions are an integral part of the curriculum. A recent research study of learners' perception of e-learning quality found that the presence and quality of interaction was an important dimension in adult learners' evaluation of the quality of e-learning [7]. Moreover the study found that, for these adult learners (a total of 795 South Korean students in higher education institutions), course content was not considered to be an important factor in their evaluation of e-learning quality; the students placed more value on learning tasks and activities. In the European context, Ehlers found that students, in measuring e-learning quality, valued didactics and collaboration more than institutional infrastructure and support [2]. These studies suggest that educators need to focus more on the design of learning activities than on the design of content, or at least give them equal attention. Given the fact that the design of learning activities and interactive tasks requires both a set of diverse and interdisciplinary skills and knowledge and a capacity to effectively 'blend' the various learning environments, the design of quality learning interactions may be out of reach for many educators. In this context, the contribution of, and partnership with, educational designers therefore takes special importance.

Simply presenting new knowledge to students does not result in learning. Mostly students learn when the teacher is not present. Learning involves conceptual change, the reflection, re-evaluation and

reconstruction students engage in when reviewing their lecture notes, checking a point with their peers or preparing for their next tutorial. Teaching is therefore about the creation of learning environments and learning situations that provide opportunities for learning, and it is the educator's responsibility to design these opportunities. Goodyear argues that facilitating learning is not sufficient and the emphasis "on teaching as facilitation is misplaced, or at least tells the less important part of the story. If what students do is the most important determinant of what they learn, then they need to be set really good learning tasks. [...] Thinking up good tasks – ones that align with intended learning outcomes – is not easy" [4].

Historically the teaching of disciplinary content has been the almost single focal point of university lecturers who are teaching in their area of specialisation and have seldom been trained in pedagogy. The teaching model has principally been one of presentation of content within two traditional structured learning situations: large group teaching in lecture theatres and small group teaching in seminar rooms. Within the field of second language teaching however, pedagogy has always been more present in the teaching process. With the communicative approach and its need for authentic language and communicative situations, the functional-notional approach or the task-based syllabus, second language teachers have dedicated a great deal of their time to getting language learners to use the language appropriately and for 'real communication'. The careful design of classroom interactions is therefore fundamental to the language learning syllabus; role-play situations, gap exercises where learners have to fill in the gaps by communicating, series of complementary activities that each bring students closer to the resolution of a problem; all are practices of teaching-as-design, socially constructed learning and meaning-making. "Such activities are structured so that learners will talk, not for the sake of producing language as an end in itself but as a means of sharing ideas and opinions, collaborating towards a single goal, or competing to achieve individual goals" [11, p. 10]. It is no coincidence that language teachers have been early adopters of educational technology, from the early beginnings of simple multimedia devices to the integration of internet-enabled activities and social media. Some language teachers realised quickly the potential of educational technology to provide a rich cultural, linguistic and interactive context where learners not only communicate but also create and negotiate meaning with their peers and other speakers of the language. Modern language teachers are often very open to extensive use of educational technology in their curriculum.

This use can nonetheless still be seen as an add-on to the 'proper' syllabus and not fully integrated. In an online poll carried out in 2002 by Ruthven-Stuart, 95% of the 334 respondent language teachers, from 36 countries, "indicated that they intended to continue or start using computers in their teaching [...] 76% of respondents claimed to be actively using computers in their language teaching. [...] However, when asked whether or not they thought that computers had been well integrated into their institutions' language teaching curriculum, only 17% answered 'yes probably, and 9% 'yes, definitely'." [13, p. 167]. The wide variety of modern communication technologies and types of social media have created such a vast array of potential tools for language learning that it is difficult for a language teacher to make decisions and utilise these tools productively as integral parts of their learning activities in a seamlessly blended curriculum. This is why significant benefits, from a design-based approach to curriculum creation and delivery, are more likely to result from, and be sustained with, a multidisciplinary team. Modern online technologies, and their ability to create and support connections and communities represent a great potential enabler for the field of language study. They present real opportunities to downgrade the central role of the classroom and place the object of study back into the real world through the authenticity of both the language input and medium of communication between students. They are well suited to a pedagogy based on authentic tasks and participatory learning.

Universities have invested heavily in the acquisition of sophisticated learning management systems (such as Blackboard) and support staff for these systems. Educational designers work with teaching staff to develop their educational design capabilities with learning technologies. However the

relationship between the course designer and the educational designer are not that of a 'course team' in which the responsibility for, and ownership of, the curriculum and learning outcomes are shared. This responsibility very much sits with the course designer, and the educational designer's sole responsibility seems to be the provision of educational advice and especially training and support in the use of educational technology. Entrenched conceptions of teaching and curriculum design as a predominantly individual process have led to a 'deficit' view of academic course designers in the development of blended learning. They are considered to be lacking skills and knowledge in the technological area and associated pedagogies, and therefore in need of training and assistance from the educational designer. This 'deficit perspective' relies on an unhelpful dichotomy, based on the presence or absence of technology in the learning situation, and is very distant from the concept of a multidisciplinary team focused on the unifying objective of student learning. Blended learning is not a single approach, based on the complementarity of two different opposite types of interactions: physical and online. Classroom and online learning are not necessarily geographically distinct anymore, with classroom activities often done online. Online does not necessarily mean individual work away from other students either. The multiple ways online and 'face-to-face' activities can be blended reflect a continuum of learning environments and opportunities that is flexible and variable. This continuum is anchored on the relative merits of using a specific technology for a particular task, whether the learner is 'in class', on campus with fellow learners or online at home. The blending depends on the needs of students, the nature of the learning tasks and the expected learning outcomes. Hinkelman states that the aim of blended learning is "to span this continuum, defining or describing tasks that encompass a multitude of venues—classroom, home, laboratory, and field [6, p. 19-20]. Student activity is generated by the tasks set by the curriculum and it is this activity, socially and physically situated, that activates learning and determines the learning outcomes [5].

From a design perspective, the construction of a coherent continuum of blended learning activities mobilises a diversity of fields of expertise (Figure 1) that combine disciplinary content, pedagogy and technology, and their intersecting areas (Shulman, 1986; Mishra and Koehler, 2006).

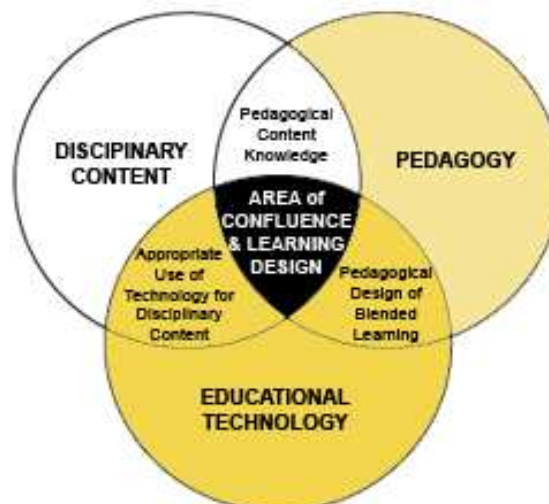


Fig. 1: Areas of expertise and their confluence (adapted from TPACK <http://tpack.org/>)

In Mishra's and Koehler's work, the central intersection between the three core components of blending learning design is 'Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge' (TPACK). TPACK "is the basis of good teaching with technology and requires an understanding of the representation of concepts using technologies; pedagogical techniques that use technologies in constructive ways to teach content; [...] knowledge of students' prior knowledge and theories of epistemology; and knowledge of how technologies can be used to build on existing knowledge and to develop new epistemologies or strengthen old ones." [10, p. 1029]. In other words, it represents the area of confluence where teachers develop a sensibility for, and understanding of, the transitional relationship

between the three primary fields of expertise: content, pedagogy and technology. TPACK, which has stemmed from the field of teacher education, emphasizes very usefully the complex interactions between the three fields and the fact that knowledge of technology does not necessarily lead to effective teaching with technology. Because the TPACK construct is mainly aimed at secondary education teachers, it is presented as being embodied by a single teacher; all capabilities are located within one individual. In the tertiary sector however, where universities often employ educational designers to support the development of blended learning and university lecturers have more specific areas of specialization, these capabilities are usually distributed and shared between the course designer and the educational designer. In such context, effective collaboration is vital. Often however, with the still prevalent individualistic concept of discipline-based teaching, collaboration will not be fully acknowledged, or allowed to take its full course. Course ownership still very much sits with the academic course designer, and often blended learning design results in the 'moulding' of a predominantly content-driven approach to language learning into collaborative and social online technologies. This is reflected in the type of assistance academic course designers request from the educational designers, which often centres around the use of a certain technology for a particular purpose (e.g. use of a blog for written production). The efforts of the educational designer to gently steer the course designer back one step and engage in some pedagogical analysis are sometimes felt by the academics as a loss of precious curriculum development time and as a challenge to their pedagogical decision. It is also evident in the timing of their requests, which are often very late in the design process, close to the start of teaching semester, leaving little time for reflection and careful design. Similarly student evaluation results are rarely shared with the educational designer after teaching has concluded, thus skipping the critical step of collaborative reflection and outcome analysis that is the basis of pedagogical redesign. The design and development cycle is therefore truncated and does not include the necessary loop of enquiry and assessment. The absence of continued collaboration and the lack of dialogue between the academic and the educational designer, once teaching has started, may reflect the fact that the educational designer is not considered a fully integrated part of the curriculum design process. Educational designers thus often seem to be kept at the periphery of the blended curriculum process, consulted too late in the process and not included in the whole cycle.

In an attempt to address some of these issues, a two-year long blended design project, at the University of Sydney, placed eight academics from the Humanities and Social Sciences and an educational designer in a collaborative blended curriculum design group [1]. The main aim of the project was to design learner-centred, task-based, assessment activities in the eight curricula (two of them being language curricula). The mix of disciplines aimed at cross-fertilisation of ideas and experiences and generally fostering pedagogical 'lateral thinking' beyond disciplinary boundaries. The whole group met fortnightly and although there inevitably were discussions focused on various technologies, the strong emphasis, led by the educational designer, was placed on the pedagogical choices faced by the eight course designers. The course designers also met the educational designer individually, when they requested it, to focus on specifics in their curriculum. The project outcomes showed clear evidence of improved understanding of blended learning design, including technology integration and the construction of task-based opportunities for active student learning. Another very positive result was the unanimously enthusiastic appraisal of the design community created by the project and the level of sharing and feedback generated. Course designers valued highly the 'different' curriculum ideas coming from other disciplines and pedagogical cultures. They also expressed high regard for the pedagogical input from the educational designer (who was a trained language teacher). However there seemed to be little change, for seven of the eight participants, in their perception of the nature of their collaborative relationship with the educational designer. The 8th participant however embraced the collaborative approach and is still working in close collaboration with the educational designer on other course design projects. This participant stated in post-project interviews that she considered critical the "development as part of a team, or group" for continuing and expanding the

development of her blended learning design. On the contrary the other participants, when asked what would be the most important component in their continuing with blended learning design, focused primarily on the provision of technical assistance:

- “technical support. It’s often difficult to find the time to learn advanced techniques [...] and not time-efficient for academic staff to learn these things individually. It would be better to have designers to whom we could explain what we want and how we want the site to look, then we could concentrate on adding material or tinkering with it”.
- “greater access to technical expertise in an on-going way. Setting up the site is fine but it needs continual updating and maintenance to remain relevant”.
- “I think I would need [...] some e-learning support such as an expert on online tools to help me work out how to put my ideas into effect”.
- “This is a positive move but the Faculty needs more technical support to enable academics to concentrate on what they want to do rather than the mechanics of how to frame this on WebCT”.

These comments and the fact that student evaluations were not communicated to the educational designer, or discussed with her, show that despite months of truly collaborative work and the building of community, the relationship between the course designers and the educational designer had not, in their minds, progressed to a fully functioning partnership focused on pedagogical development. The crucial reflective loop – design, teaching, evaluation, redesign – was broken in the same way as in the usual short-term, intermittent, collaboration between academics and educational designers. The participants’ focus on technology can be explained by the many demands on time-poor academics. It is also consistent with academics’ individual conception of teaching in universities, which may constrain their ability to consider the educational designer as a pedagogical co-creator.

This paper’s contention is that a true collaboration between academics and educational designers, across the full lifecycle of a course, is vital to the establishment of quality blended learning activities in universities, and especially in fields such as language teaching where interactivity and complexity of interaction is essential. According to Ertmer and Stepich (2005), educational design is the convergence of two main tasks: problem finding and problem solving [3]. It has to be seen as “ill-structured problem solving rather than as a procedure” [14, p. 13]. The process of educational design is inquiry-based, interactive, learning-centric rather than content-centric, and calls for a flexible, multi-skilled and pro-active team approach. A number of authors point to the inadequacy of the current relationship between academic curriculum designers and educational designers. Resnick argues for an “emphasis on ecological-style problem solving” in education [12, p. 45] and for “ecological strategies”. He advocates the development of “ecological thinkers”, “a sensitivity to the role of interactions in a system”, and the fact that effective solutions “arise indirectly from many interactions” [12, p. 58].

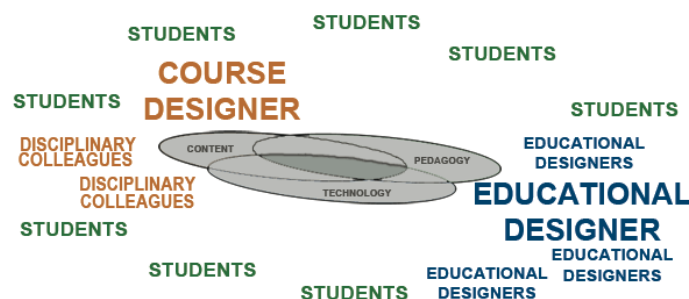


Fig. 2: Ecological Design Environment

We think such conception suits the current needs of educational design in higher education, and especially in disciplines such as second language learning where a high level of innovation and creativity is needed to design effective and engaging opportunities for learning. Educational design needs to move away from a focus on technology and embrace pedagogical partnerships, strategising

and complex problem solving. To do so, an efficient team approach is vital, one that is multi-skilled, based on a non-hierarchical partnership and constantly connected to the broader ecological context of the learning environment and network of disciplinary colleagues, students and fellow designers (Figure 2). Similar to Kramsch's "language ecology", such perspective of educational design is "a nonlinear, relational human activity, co-constructed between humans and their environment, contingent upon their position in space and history" [8, p.390]. A dialogic "third space" (what Kramsch has called "thirdness"), based on shared competence and understanding, needs to be developed within collaborative blended learning design teams to build the necessary relational, strategic and enquiry-focused environment [9].

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