Book Review

Blended Learning :*Tools for Teaching and Training*

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Barbara Allan's book *Blended Learning :Tools for Teaching and Training* aims to provide a practical guide to a wide range of Information and library Services (ILS) professionals , e.g. staff involved in end-user education, students of library and information management, staff developers , independent consultants and trainers, and information providers , e.g. database providers, workers involved in education and training and those who are interested in designing and delivering blended learning experience to their colleagues and customers.

The author believes that "blended learning" is a rapidly developing field which urged her to write this book to provide the underpinning theories behind good –quality blended learning and a range of practical examples. Therefore, the book seems to provide a useful resource for both experienced and practitioners and those who are relatively new to the design and delivery of blended learning. To make it so appealing to a wide range of end users, the author has based the book in information and knowledge gained from various sources and resources including her experience in the design and delivery of traditional training programs, e-learning programs, and also blended learning programs, discussions with colleagues working in Information and library Services (ILS), feedback from colleagues who have attended workshops and conferences on (ILS),visits(both real and virtual) to a wide range of ILS, and professional networks and conferences, and also the literature.

The book consists of nine chapters preceded by an acknowledgement and an introductory chapter and ends with an index. Each chapter opens with a one- three paragraph introduction that aims to introduce the themes and parts of the chapter and the expected results or outcomes of reading the chapter and ends with a one-paragraph summary that

summarizes the major theme of the chapter in addition to providing a list of references . The chapters in this book have been written so that they can be read in any order which contributes to its readability and its comprehensive coverage. The volume does not need to be read in a traditional way. In fact, one may eventually choose, for instance, to read all chapters on aspects of doing quantitative research first or only those which concern mixed methods. As the book is rich in cross-references, it is easy to find out to which page one should turn in order to read up on a topic. Moreover, some readers may find these abundant references to be rather tiresome.

The book opens with an introductory chapter, the first chapter, that aims at introducing blended learning in the context of information and library services and discussing two topics: ***Teaching and Training in the 21st Century*** and ***What is Blended Learning?***

With regard to the first topic, ***Teaching and Training in the 21st Century***, the author begins this section by saying that the landscapes of education and training have been transformed in the past decade as a result of drivers such as rapid developments in information and communication technologies which he calls "the move to 24/7 culture". As a result, education and training programs are constantly changing and developing, and in recent years the rising interest in e-learning has expanded and shifted its focus so that many practitioners are now concerned with blended learning programs. Barbara, then, gives the following reasons for developing blended learning programs:

-making learning more accessible, engaging and relevant

-providing more flexible learning opportunities

-reducing the amount of time spent on face to face learning activities

-integrating practitioner-based experiences with classroom-based learning

-developing programs that are relatively cheap to repeat or use with large groups of learners.

-exploiting ICT and training facilities

-demonstrating the use of leading-edge technologies

-exploring new approaches to learning and teaching.

Additionally, there were many other reasons for developing blended learning programs mentioned by the author of this book which need to be taken into account when planning for a blended course. Before the author moves to discuss the second topic in chapter one entitled ***What is Blended Learning?*** she maintains that her book has been written in response to the changing demands on library and information workers, and it will provide guidance on managing and delivering good-quality learning and teaching experiences.

The author begins the second topic of chapter one by citing a definition given via informal discussions with her colleagues in which the term "blended learning" was used to mean " a mixture of face-to-face and e-learning" and " the use of different internet-based tools including chat rooms, discussion groups, podcasts, and self-assessment tools to support a traditional course". These definitions may provide an impression that blended learning involves a rich mixture of technology-based approaches to teaching and learning, and sometimes a combination of technology-based and classroom-based learning. Moreover, Barbara stresses the importance of three aspects of learning and teaching: time, place and technology which may be blended together. Time in this context can be synchronous or asynchronous learning activities and communications. Place is related to where learning takes place, e.g. on campus, in workplace, at home. Technology aspect is concerned with different information and communication technologies (ICTs) e.g. CD/DVD, first –generation internet technologies, social-networking software or Web 2.0 , or developing technologies.

Barbara then gives another approach to thinking about blended learning which is based on a historical perspective suggested by Sharpe et .al. who offered three distinct models. The first of these is blended learning as a supplement to traditional programs, e.g. the provision of additional materials and guidance through a virtual learning environment, e-mailing PowerPoint slides to delegates, use of online communication tools such as chat rooms or discussion boards, online quizzes, use of social software such as wiki, blogs or additional resources provided via CD-ROMs or DVDs. The second model is a transformative approach where new or previously existing programmes are designed to integrate a wide range of approaches to learning and teaching relevant to the learners and context of learning. The third approach is the learner–led approach which is holistic and typified by the use of a wide range of technologies, including iPods, mobile phones. With this approach, the author calls for engaging students and others in learning through their preferred technologies such as e-mail, social networking software such as MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, weblogs, , and message systems. Based on her own experience with full-time undergraduates who used these technologies, she says that they are managing their own technologies and they are resourceful and Independent learners.

At the end of this section, Barbara anticipates that in a relatively short time, the use of the word "blended" will be dropped and will become unnecessary as it will be generally accepted that education and training programs integrate an appropriate blend of learning activities and experiences.

Following the introductory chapter, Chapter 2 presents an overview of the tools and technologies that may be involved in blended learning. This chapter begins by looking at technologies in the classroom and considers tools such as PowerPoint, interactive whiteboards, and audience response systems. This is followed by a section that examines some virtual communication tools including: audio files, bulletin boards, discussion lists or e-lists, chat or conferencing facilities, e-mail, instant messaging, news digests and news groups, polling and questionnaire software, or webforms, and videoconferencing. Next there is a section on social-networking software which covers instant messaging and phone calls; podcasts; social-networking sites; video clips; wikis; virtual tours; and virtual worlds. The next section of this chapter considers e-learning systems and focuses on subscription –based educational servises such as WebCT and Blackboard which are often called virtual learning environments (VLEs) , and freely available e-learning technologies such as Moodle, which is increasingly becoming popular as a means of providing a VLE; subscription-based generic services such as iCohere; group –collaboration software such as Lotus Notes; and freely available group facilities such as Google groups. This chapter is rich in tools and facilities that indicate the rapid increasing change in using technology for educational purposes which can be used within the blended learning paradigm. Some tools, e.g. standard virtual communication tools, are well established within learning and training activities, while others such as weblogs, wikis and social-networking software are slowly becoming adopted within mainstream education and training programs. Chapter 2 finally ends with a brief overview of mobile technologies used to support mobile or-m-learning.

Chapter 3 presents an overview of different approaches to teaching and learning, and it seems that this chapter is the most theoretical chapter in the book as the first section provides an overview of the physical, virtual and social environments in which learning and teaching take place. This section is followed by a section that considers individual approaches to learning by presenting two different approaches to individual learning styles. Next there is a brief discussion on tutor- centered and learner-centered approaches to teaching and learning. As many blended learning programs are currently based on learner-centered approaches, e.g. Distance and Open Education at QOU, this concept is well-explored in some depth including the idea that knowledge is socially structured and that learning is socially situated. Finally this chapter provides an overview of a range of specific approaches to teaching and learning including action learning, inquiry –based learning (such as problem –based learning, project-based learning, and work-based learning) and reflective practice.

Chapter 4, then aims to provide guidance on the factors that need to be taken into account when designing and developing blended learning programs. Therefore, it begins with an overview of design and development cycle which involves needs analysis, design, development, delivery, and evaluation. This is followed by sections that deal with a range of topics including: integrating face-to- face and e-learning activities, technical issues, copying and other intellectual property issues, and finally evaluation. At the beginning of this chapter, Barbara maintains that spending time on the design and development cycle enables the user to focus on developing a blended learning experience that is responsive to the learners and their needs. It also enables the user to explore and design a program that provides an appropriate combination of the features of blended learning programs such as : time, place, technology, context of learning, pedagogy , e.g. tutor-or student -centered, focus, e.g. aims of learning process, types of learner, relationship with others. Throughout this chapter, we find a useful guidance on words to use when writing indicative learning outcomes. These words include: analyze, apply, assess, describe, distinguish between, evaluate, explain, identify, list, outline, produce, state, suggest, and summarize. In this chapter, the reader finds an example program outline that brings together the ideas discussed about aims, learning outcomes and developing a program structure. Furthermore, the chapter stresses the importance of varying the pace and rhythm of the learning activities so that participants feel safe and comfortable. This helps to enhance their learning. The chapter, in this regards presents a number of slow-pace activities such as reading and writing, small group discussions, completing questionnaires, storytelling, watching a video, and practicing a new skill. Fast-pace activities may include high energy mini-presentations, jokes and humor, fast-paced question-and –answer sessions, activities carried out under a tight time schedule, e.g. an online or classroom- based quiz.

Chapter 5 then provides an introduction to the design and use of individual learning activities that can enhance students' learning and enjoyment when participating in a blended learning program, and this followed by an alphabetical list and discussion on different learning activities , ranging from action planning to visits that may be used both online and offline, in the workplace and in the training room, and by individuals or small groups . The aim of this chapter is to provide guidance on the design and use of different learning activities and technologies that enable the learners to explore new ideas and develop their knowledge and skills in a safe environment. This is because, according to the author, blended learning programs are likely to include a diverse mixture of activities that together enable individual learners to achieve their learning goals and outcomes.

Chapter 6 aims to provide guidance on facilitating group work and therefore it starts by exploring a number of specialist group learning activities, including team building and inquiry-based learning. This is followed by sections on group processes, including the group development process and also team roles; online group learning processes; working with diverse learning groups; working with large groups; and finally how to work with challenging learners and challenging situations which might appear at some stages and which, if not dealt with by the tutor, may lead to disruption of the whole learning process. This chapter seems to support the objectives of blended learning programs in general and QOU in particular as it involves discussing the importance of individuals meeting –face-to face and/or in a virtual environment where online group work can provide new opportunities for individuals to learn and work together as it means they can collaborate across traditional time and space boundaries. In this chapter, the author points to the idea that tutors who use information and library services are likely to work with groups of varying sizes, from four to 400 people, and they can work through mass lectures and managing large groups in an e-learning environment. Based on this idea, the book can enlarge its readership to include a large number of tutors and instructors who work in the field of open education , distance education, e-learning and blended learning in addition to library and information workers.

The purpose of Chapter 7 is to explore issues associated with working as a tutor in a blended learning program which will enable library and information workers who are involved in the design and delivery of blended learning programs to have an understanding of their role and responsibilities. the chapter considers the following topics : principles of tutoring, e-tutoring, presentations, working with a co-tutor, and student helpers. Barbara states that library and information staff may deliver or support teaching and learning in a blended learning program in a number of different ways such as : lead and facilitate all learning and teaching activities , including face-to-face and/or online provision, co-facilitate a variety of face-to-face and /or e-learning activities as part of a blended learning program delivered by a multi-professional team, provide face-to-face or online support to learners who are accessing online learning opportunities using ICT in the library or e-learning centre and finally providing additional support to a program facilitated by another tutor , e.g. face-to-face on a help desk, or via telephone, e-mail or virtual learning environment. Barbara, then maintains that there is a shift to a student-centered pedagogy which implies a need for the tutors to be able to facilitate learning in both face-to-face and e-learning environments. In such environments, e-tutoring involves working in new creative ways and this may bring new challenges and necessitates new presentation skills and the ability to answer and manage

questions. In this chapter we find a number of major characteristics of effective e-tutors (adapted from Hislop (2000).

Chapter 8 aims to introduce the concept of communities of practice, which are distinguished from communities of interest. Barbara begins this chapter by citing a definition of the phrase" communities of practice as given by (Wenger, 2003). According to Wenger (2003), communities of practice is defined as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis". This is followed by an outline of the characteristics of communities of practice, which are illustrated with a number of practical examples of library and information communities of practice. According to Barbara, this definition enables the reader to distinguish between communities of practice and communities of interest. Communities of interest, on the other hand, involve a large groups or networks, perhaps involving hundreds of people who support the dissemination and exchange of information but do not necessarily support collaborative learning processes. Examples include groups that cluster together around their interests in hobbies, technology, education, research fields and specialist work-related practices. Then an extensive five-phase case study exploring the long-term impact of a multi-professional blended learning community is presented in this section. This is followed by an outline of the processes involved in establishing a work-based community of practice. The final part of this chapter considers the theme of mentoring, as this process is often located within a community of practice. This theme is discussed in this chapter because it enables new or inexperienced members of a community of practice to become active members of their community or profession.

Chapter 9 which is the last chapter in this book aims to provide an outline and guidance on the project management process which are involved in managing a learning innovation or blended learning project. It summarizes the standard project management cycle: design, plan, implementation, completion and review. Thus, the chapter covers the following topics: principles of project management; the people side of project management; working in collaborative and multi-professional teams; obtaining financial support; and gaining accreditation for your program.

In addition to all of the interesting content, the book is supported by 37 figures and 23 which make the content more accessible, and this, no doubt, makes it an up-to-date treasure book that adds much to blended learning as a promising pedagogical approach in addition to its obvious contribution to the literature of blended learning which can help researchers in all Palestinian universities to investigate certain topics or within the field of blended learning. In

addition, the practical ideas, the concrete examples, the case studies, and the practical tips found in this book seem to enhance its readability and make it worthy of reading as it makes a link between theory and practice in the field of blended learning. The book also includes a lot of exemplary case studies that enrich the content and make it more accessible to the targeted readership.

In relation to the content, it would have been useful if the author had offered more research literature and more quantitative data from different countries and different disciplines , mainly TEFL.

A final word, although the book is aimed for library and information professionals, this book is highly recommended to both teachers and students who are involved in Distance and Open Education everywhere and at QOU in particular. This is because the book suggests a range of tools and technologies that can be effectively used in creating and delivering blended learning materials. Some of these tools and technologies suit the classroom situation, while others can be used as virtual communication tools especially social networking software, e-learning systems (including virtual learning environments) and mobile technologies.

Regarding the references used in this book, the reader notices that the author chose to provide a list of references at the end of each chapter instead of offering them at the end of the book. The number of the references in each chapter ranges between 4 , as in chapters 5 and 6, and 33 as in chapter 3. A quick review of the nature and types of the references indicate that the author used different types of sources including, professional books, journals, publications, documents, manuals, periodicals, literature reviews, educational websites ,electronic databases, summaries of workshops and conference proceedings. All of these types aim to provide detailed information of current research, theories and methodologies in addition to a general knowledge of what has been discussed in each chapter. Finally, the references used throughout this book go back to a period between 1978 -2007.