Blended learning, brick and click, tailored learning . . . we are surrounded by these terms today. However, do we know what they really mean? Can they benefit our students? Most importantly, do we really understand the pedagogy behind them?

The **brick** is the traditional classroom setting. The traditional setting promotes a social and cooperative learning environment. It motivates learners through peer interactions and immediate teacher feedback. It allows both teachers and students to address questions and confusions as they arise. The **click** is the autonomous learning environment available through the web. Web-based tools allow learners to practice and acquire new language skills without classroom distractions, as well as self-direct their learning. Merging these two worlds together creates an environment that meets a variety of learning styles and a variety of both student and teacher needs. This merge is referred to as blended learning. Blended learning combines the social nature of the classroom with the self-paced environment available in a web-based setting (Clark 2001).
Enriched Learning through Student Engagement

As ESL educators, we understand the importance of student engagement. Traditionally, the more students are engaged, the more learning occurs. Following a blended learning model can increase learning by over 11% compared to that in a traditional classroom (Sitzmann, Ely 2009). The reason is simple. Outside of the classroom, students are more engaged with a digital learning tool versus a traditional text. They can interact with content at their own pace, on their own schedule, receive reinforcement of course content and self-select exercises and activities. Students have access to their language success outside the walls of the traditional classroom. In my own classroom, I have seen this evidenced not only by the level of engagement but also by the frequency of student log-on and, most importantly, in data collected from my assessments.

Blended learning does not mean a reduction of face-to-face class time. On the contrary, it requires greater participation of learners, greater interaction with content and an overall greater level of engagement. Deliberately blending classroom instruction ensures a multi-modal model. This purposeful blending, as asserted by Dr. Anthony Picciano, is one that recognizes the need to reach a wide variety of learners, learning styles and learning experiences. By doing so, instructors can engage a wide spectrum of learners.

When I first employed a blended learning model nearly 10 years ago, I observed that students were engaged in the activities and exercises on the learning management system to a much greater extent than they had been engaged with their textbook assignments. Due to the mobility and accessibility of the content, they interacted at high frequency rates and for extended periods of time. I saw students repeating exercises again and again, even after they had scored well on them. Students commented on the ability to work at their own pace and explore the activities in greater depth than they might have with a text. Was it the sound? The motion? The animations? Or, perhaps the assessments that gave them instant feedback on their performance? I soon discovered it was all of that and more.

Informed Teaching: A Clear Picture of Progress

Using a blended learning approach allows teachers to be more informed about our students’ successes and failures and perhaps even our own. Teachers can choose the most appropriate activities and customize course content to meet curricular and programmatic demands.

I found it fascinating that students enjoyed this learning environment, but were they really learning more? Let’s face it, as educators, the bells and whistles are great but at the end of the day are they getting it? Are they mastering those student learning outcomes? I needed to find those answers. I wanted to see for myself if their interaction with content in this engaging, stimulating, at-their-own-pace, on-their-own-time environment really did impact their learning.

Over the years, I had made several attempts at finding those answers. I used such tools as WebCT and Blackboard. I had also discovered MyEnglishLab a few years back while I was using the NorthStar series. MyEnglishLab is a customized digital language management system that was already inclusive of content, correlating to the NorthStar text I was using. How perfect I thought! Now, I had all the powerful tools of a learning management system, but without the labor-intensive task of creating and adding content.

Using MyEnglishLab, I had the ability to hide content from my students. So, for our very first exam I hid all the vocabulary activities and content. We only did the traditional classroom vocabulary activities and text vocabulary activities. On the first test, 18 of my 20 students scored less than 80% on the vocabulary section of the test.
This section was not a matching or multiple choice; it was a vocabulary application activity (Sample A). On the second test, I assigned all the vocabulary content on MyEnglishLab. Test #2 contained the same style of vocabulary application activity. This time 16 of my 20 students scored an 80% or higher on this section. (Graph 1) That was an increase of 70%. I was beginning to think I might be on to something here, or was I? Not being a researcher, or one who formally analyzes statistics, I wondered about the methodology of my little study.

It occurred to me that perhaps the reason my students did so well the second time was not because of the blended learning environment, but because they now understood how I tested. Before jumping to conclusions about my students success being the result of blended learning, I decided to further test my theory. So, the next semester, I did the exact same thing, but in reverse. I first used MyEnglishLab and tested on vocabulary. The next test, I hid the vocabulary on MyEnglishLab. Again, the results were similar. Students overwhelming did better when they had the MyEnglishLab activities to reinforce course content. (Graph 2). Many researchers have since studied this dynamic and have found what I found: that blending classroom instruction with a digital tool leads to greater learning.

There are three key benefits when employing this model effectively. First, students will interact and engage in learning activities far beyond the traditional “homework” given in a text. Next, students develop a sense of their own learning path, are able to direct their learning and thus develop autonomy. Lastly, students achieve greater learning outcomes. This is a direct result of their ability to self-direct their learning where they feel their deficiencies may lie. The result is that they learn more. Blended learning can enrich our students’ learning experience through interactive activities and immediate feedback.

**Sample A: Vocabulary Application Activity**

Fill in the blanks with the missing vocabulary words or phrases.

Violates, factors, academic, illustrates, equal opportunity, assumption

Education in the United States reinforces the value of ________________. Americans believe everyone deserves an opportunity to learn. Denying someone an education _________ his/her constitutional right.

Parents can choose to send their children to public or private schools. Often, private schools have higher ___________ standards. That is, they require more from the students. The _________ is that students who come from households that can afford a private education will do better in school. We know this isn’t always the case. There are many ___________ that determine a person’s success in life.
Flexible Solutions through Customized Content

Blended learning tools come in all shapes and sizes. Some look like they may be interactive on the surface, but many are just web-based “drill and kill” exercises. A high-quality tool is an interactive, engaging learning management system that allows you to alter, add and delete content. You can delete activities or entire chapters that you don’t need or don’t meet your learning outcomes. You can also add handouts, assignments and PowerPoints, as well as video and audio files that you have already created. Tools that provide this type of flexibility provide tailored blended learning. Tailored blended learning refers to the concept that teachers can customize or tailor course content to better meet programmatic goals and student learning outcomes through a blended learning environment.

Choosing the right tools is critical because it allows for a level of customization that provides students with course content in an engaging and stimulating way. Students are not just passively reading or participating in “drill and kill” exercises. They are interacting with the specific course content delivered in a different way than the text, allowing them to take a more active role in their learning. They become directly involved with the course material. The combination of audio, video, animation, text and links immerse them deeper into the language. They are able to record their voices, hear their teachers’ recordings, interact with vocabulary in new and innovative ways, and use helpful revising and editing tools.

Teachers are provided with powerful tools that are easy to use. On an administrative level, teachers can easily run reports on student success. These reports can be customized to detail key information like question analysis. Teachers can also easily see the number of student attempts, as well as time on task. On a pedagogical level, teachers can add and modify course content.

How many times do we bring our own realia into the classroom? How many times do we skip sections or chapters because we simply don’t have enough time, or they don’t meet our course goals? Tailored blended learning tools give teachers the tools to do this in an effective, yet appealing way.

Finally, tailored blended learning provides teachers with a clear path to meet and measure student learning outcomes. Student assessments are built in; however, these assessments can be modified to meet specific programmatic goals. These assessments allow instructors and administrators to have a clear picture of student success that can be used in both accreditation and program review processes.

Through my experience using a blended learning approach, I have come to realize that students and teachers benefit equally. Students gain a richer learning experience through greater interaction, engagement, and autonomy while these digital tools empower teachers to provide a more customized learning experience that is responsive to the individual needs of students.

Citations


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