EADTU CONFERENCE
Rome
19-21 October 2016

Theme:

National and institutional policies in the changing pedagogical landscape

Blended Learning - What Blend? Flexible Learning - How Flexible?
by
Sir John Daniel & Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

John Daniel

The 17th ICDE World Conference

I start with a publicity flash. Next year the most important event in the ODL calendar will be the 2017 ICDE Conference in Toronto from October 17-19. Its title is the *World Conference on Online Learning - Teaching in a Digital Age: Re-thinking Teaching and Learning.* The host is Contact North | Contact Nord, where I am a Research Associate. Canada celebrates its 150th birthday next year so it's a great time to visit.

I invite you all to put the Conference in your diaries. Very soon the heads of Europe's open universities will receive a special invitation to a meeting of the heads of all the world's open universities that I have been asked to organise on the day before the conference.

Introduction

We now turn to our topic. Stamenka and I are going to attempt brief answers to two important questions.

First, what is the best blend for blended learning? Second, how flexible can you make flexible learning before the wheels fall off?

I will begin and Stamenka will take up the story when we get to unbundling higher education.

You know the background.

A media frenzy around the MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) offered by a few elite US institutions in 2012 alerted universities worldwide to the opportunities and threats of online learning. As they faced up to this new reality most universities decided not to offer MOOCs. Instead, for some years now, they have been including more online teaching in their regular programmes leading to credits and qualifications.

'Blended learning' and 'flexible learning' have become the most common terms for their

institutional strategies to do this. Both are conveniently vague words that can be applied any mixture of classroom activity and online instruction. But what is the best blend and what are the limits to flexibility?

Blended learning - what mix?

We begin with blended learning. Anyone writing about online learning today owes a huge debt to Professor Tony Bates for his splendid book *Teaching in a Digital Age: Guidelines for Designing Teaching and Learning* (Bates, 2015). It is an excellent guide to the past, present and likely future developments in online learning. ICDE has borrowed his title, *Teaching in a Digital Age,* for its 2017 conference.

First, we need some definitions. The Babson reports that have appeared annually since 2003 use the following definitions:

- Online: at least 80% of the course content is delivered online.

- Face-to-face: courses in which zero to 29% of the content is delivered online (this category includes both traditional and web-facilitated courses).

- Blended (or hybrid): between 30% and 80% of course content delivered online.

What does the research tell us about how blended learning might create a better future for higher education? Expressed succinctly, five key research findings are:

- We should aim for what Tony Bates calls hybrid learning, that is learning designed for optimum synergy between online learning and face-to-face teaching interventions.

- Face-to-face teaching is not more effective than online learning. Bates' *Principle of Equal Substitution* suggests that we should now reverse current practice and treat online learning rather than classroom teaching as the default mode

- Students engage more deeply with online learning and work harder than in classroom courses.

- The more independent study and work students do, the better they learn.

- The 21st century requires a blend of skills and knowledge. Interactive teaching is particularly important in helping students to develop certain skills in context and to grasp the academic knowledge underpinning their discipline.

Flexible learning - how flexible?

We turn now to flexible learning. Whereas we looked at blended learning through the lens of pedagogy we shall focus on administrative arrangements in discussing flexibility. Flexibility has many dimensions.

For students it means easier access to learning, greater convenience in choosing where to study, a wider variety of credentials to aim for and more autonomy in scheduling their lives. For instructors it expands the range of pedagogies available in course/programme

design, makes available new (often free) teaching resources, implies less 'stand-up teaching' and permits greater variety and creativity in assessing students' work.

Effective use of these options can improve learning outcomes by stimulating students to engage more fully with their courses.

Flexibility sounds like a wholly desirable attribute but it has limits. Buildings and earthquakes are a useful analogy. Both buildings constructed too flexibly and also those built too rigidly can collapse in a major earthquake. Some complain that current higher education systems are too rigid, but neither should they be too flexible. How far can we extend flexibility in postsecondary education and where are the limits?

Let's look at three areas of flexibility: timing, qualifications/outcomes and unbundling.

Flexibility of timing

First, timing. Most online learning is asynchronous. Students can choose when they study. But using this power to bridge time needs care. If students' convenience were the main criterion, then we should allow them to enrol in a course at any time and complete it at their own pace. Flexibility in start dates is fine but there is abundant evidence that removing completion dates leads to lower retention and completion rates. That's because all learners need motivating to give some priority to their studies. This usually takes the form of assignment deadlines and a fixed date for the end of the course. Another approach is to break the course into several shorter courses so that the student can complete each one more quickly.

Flexibility of Outcomes

Second, online learning has also created greater flexibility in the definition of learning outcomes. Where are the limits to that flexibility?

Students coming into higher education are seeking - and being offered - a wider range of learning outcomes than in the past. Shorter learning opportunities (like MOOCs) are blossoming under the stimulus of online learning. There is now a range of approaches to certifying learning outcomes. Online technologies have facilitated this diversification, open badges, nanodegrees and microdegrees being good examples.

Because they are in digital format, open badges can include more information about what and how the learners studied, how they were assessed, the time involved, etc. than a normal paper record. Crucially, however, value of the badge will depend on the credibility of the organisation or individual that issued it.

Students should be aware that new forms of certification take time to establish their credibility, although in this fast-moving field that time need not be very long.

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

How far can we 'unbundle' higher education?

We have described how online technology allows us to separate out the various elements in the teaching learning process and address them in different ways. This is a major change. Not very long ago individual teachers usually designed their courses, prepared any needed supporting materials, taught the course face-to-face to students and also, in some countries, set and marked the end of course examinations. This was called the 'cottage industry' approach to teaching, because one person handled every step of the process.

In the online world these steps can be separated. The components of the learning process can be split up, potentially separating course design, content development, delivery, support, assessment and credentialing so that they can, in principle, be done by different organisations. This is called the unbundling of higher education. Previously instructors and institutions assembled the complete learning experience and offered it to students as a 'bundle'.

Does this describe a happy world of extraordinary flexibility and rich choice for learners or something closer to anarchy? It sounds like a good idea for students to design learning journeys uniquely tailored to their personal wishes, but do many students want that? For several reasons we suspect that few students will choose the fully unbundled model.

First, most people are overwhelmed by too much choice and will not want to handle the transaction costs and complexities of dealing with different bodies for each step of their learning and certification processes. Most students like the security of dealing with an institution that they know and trust. This is why most students choose online providers that have a presence in their own country. Second, faculty members like to have some consistency and continuity in their student body. They like to get to know their students, both as a group and also as individuals. Third, institutions also like to be able to identify 'their' students. In many jurisdictions student numbers determine funding from governments.

For these reasons we expect that HEIs will react to unbundling by organising themselves to re-bundle the total learning experience for students - and that students will accept this gratefully.

The Irish scholar Desmond Keegan once pointed out that in classroom education the teacher teaches, whereas in distance education the institution teaches (Keegan, 1990). Distance and online courses have a life that is independent of the particular academics that first prepared them. This means that the institution has to take some responsibility for ensuring continuity in offering and supporting these courses.

As higher education institutions expand their online offerings they find it necessary to strengthen the central administrative function supporting these offerings. Open universities, which function exclusively through ODL (open and distance learning), build these central support systems before they start operations, whereas campus institutions

that add ODL offerings must put them in place as the programme expands. This is usually controversial because any involvement of the central administration in teaching functions tends to provoke resistance from the schools and faculties as well as from individual academics.

The solution, at least in theory, is subsidiarity: matters should to be handled by the smallest, lowest or least centralized competent authority. This could mean, for example, that central services operate a common Learning Management System for the whole institution, whereas, say, the School of Nursing organises support and practicums for its own ODL students.

However, as technology evolves and ODL offerings expand, the optimal expression of subsidiarity will change too. Institutions need to take responsibility for helping faculty members re-equip themselves, both materially and intellectually, to handle the options and outcomes that online technology makes possible. Human resources policies must also adapt to changing patterns of academic work. While the negotiations required may be painful, they are probably best conducted at the institutional level rather than unit-by-unit.

An effective approach to subsidiarity in organising an institution for a more flexible future will also help it to cope with the challenge of unbundling. Some institutions, both out of self-interest but also with the encouragement of students, may set up brokerage-style services to help students re-bundle the elements that they want. This will mean hiring increasing numbers of counsellors and specialists of various kinds, which carries its own risk.

Conclusion

We have examined the trends toward blended learning, more flexible study options and the potential for unbundling the components of the teaching-learning process to allow students to pick and choose providers.

Our overall goal should be hybrid learning in which the whole teaching-learning system is redesigned to create optimum synergy between the face-to-face teaching sessions and learning online.

We should follow Bates' *Principle of Equal Substitution* and treat online learning as the default mode whenever there is a choice between online and face-to-face instruction. Flexible study options are an important advance but learners should not be allowed excessive flexibility in the timing of their studies and should assess carefully the credibility of new qualifications on offer.

Finally, although there will be some unbundling of the elements of the higher education process we expect that most students will continue to look to their HEIs to re-bundle their chosen elements for them.