
Review Title: More than meets the blended eye

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Blended learning is of significant interest in education and particularly in distance education because it further enables flexible learning, which is the heart of distance education, and provides greater opportunities to move to modern distance education pedagogies. Blended learning remains a constantly evolving concept as rapid developments in technologies continue to generate different conceptualisations of how blended learning can look in different learning environments and how it can enable greater affordances in distance education. In the context of this book, however, blended learning is considered to be learning that is enhanced and facilitated by synchronous and asynchronous technologies including Web 2.0 applications, telephony, and other means of connecting learners and teachers remotely. While technology in education is not new in itself and some institutions have been practising “blended learning” for more than 15 years (Nicolson, Murphy, & Southgate, 2011), the advancement and proliferation of social technologies have created new platforms through which these blended learning environments can be implemented. Language Teaching in Blended Contexts attempts to bring a rationalised 21st century focus to blended learning while not being glamoured by the shiny new tools that are available online but instead remaining true to educational theory in that it looks behind the brand and identifies the underlying capacities and functions of the available technologies in order to provide a solid foundation to create blended learning environments. The primary focus of the book is not to be “all things to all people” (Nicolson, et al., 2011, p. xx) but rather a starting point from which educators can then delve more deeply into areas of blended learning that are of more specific interest. It also provides a clear view of how blended learning environments enable greater opportunities for distance education learners to access learning contexts in a more connected manner.

The primary content of the book focuses on broadly investigating different areas and methods of blended learning and teaching while providing considerations and examples from language teaching courses across various institutions and contexts. Thus, the book does achieve its aim: to provide a resource that collates different teaching ideas for blended contexts including methods of evaluating learning activities and tools for educational design, learning, and teaching. The book is divided into five sections beginning with the basics of educational design and working through a simple learning and teaching cycle with examples: understanding the learning context, designing teaching and assessment in blended contexts, building reflective practice, and cultivating professional development. While Language Teaching in Blended Contexts has been written to be read as a cohesive text, it also maintains flexibility because each chapter, and consequently section, is autonomous. Thus, the book offers opportunities to be creative and flexible in its consumption, which is a core message and theme that is propagated throughout the text.

The content of each of these sections is aimed at providing foundational knowledge, clear descriptions and explanations of blended learning concepts, and examples of blended learning in action. Each section also provides reflective analysis tools that can be used to assist in the design of learning and teaching environments. The primary content of each section provides a great explanation of basic blended learning and teaching concepts with examples of it in action in language teaching. Thus, this text can be beneficial not only to language teachers, but to educators in general. At times the text appears elementary, but it provides a solid foundation for educators and educational designers who are investigating blended learning contexts and concepts for the first time, or who are beginning to consider blended contexts for language
teaching. In this way, *Language Teaching in Blended Contexts* has positioned itself as a text that is foundational for blended learning, with a particular focus on language learning and teaching environments.

While the title and inherent intention of the book focuses on language teaching in blended contexts, the real value of the book lies in the solid foundation that it provides for blended learning environments in general. At times, it is easy to become lost in the concept of blended learning and to be immersed in the different approaches, tools, and technologies that are presented while forgetting that the focus is intended to be on the language teaching in these contexts. Thus, while this may not be optimal for the authors and editors as it was not their intention, it does allow the book to be more relevant to a wider audience, paving the way for it to become a staple text in blended learning in general, albeit with a language teaching focus.

A key strength of this book is its ability to focus on the use of different modes of teaching and different technologies to create blended learning environments. It provides ample templates and examples of blended learning activities, lessons, planning, assessment, and reflection for both educators and learners. An aspect that is consistently reiterated throughout the third section, which considers the planning, implementing, and reflecting on the blended learning environment, is the concept of core technologies. For example, in Chapter 8 when discussing teaching via telephone, the underlying concept of voice conversations and methods of managing learning via telephone are investigated; the ideas and guidelines presented are sufficiently broad that they can be extrapolated to other voice based communication methods such as online teleconferencing (e.g. Skype). While the authors consider online conferencing tools in a separate chapter, the fundamental concepts surrounding synchronous voice-based communication teaching methods are discussed in the one place and then in later sections they are cross-referenced and expanded on rather than repeating the same information.

A unique feature of *Language Teaching in Blended Contexts* is the section on learning and teaching community and indigenous languages, and how these are distinguished from learning second and foreign languages. While this section has a considerable focus on the differences in the learners and teaching methods between these two types of language teaching, it also presents some clear considerations for the creation of effective blended learning and teaching experiences when teaching indigenous and community languages. This section presents a different view of language teaching and it becomes quite specialised; however, it appears to be only a brief overview of a very complex issue that cannot be adequately addressed in two chapters. Nevertheless, the authors of these two chapters provide a sound foundation for community and indigenous language teaching in blended contexts and provide sufficient sources for further information, so it builds on the overall image of the book being an introductory guide to considerations of creating blended contexts for language teaching. An additional positive aspect of this section is that it provides a comprehensive overview of the various factors that are involved in planning for effective language teaching starting with a comprehensive contextualisation of the types of learners, learning styles, cultures, learning experiences, teaching methods, and other influencing factors that will affect the choices of blended learning tools and approaches. Thus, in many ways, these two chapters bring together the first three sections of the book into a cohesive design process framework that can be extrapolated to the learning and teaching of other languages, or other similarly niche areas.

The final section of the book again paints a broad view of teacher professional development to support blended learning and teaching environments. While there are some references to language teaching, the majority of this section revolves around general teacher development and methods to encourage teacher interactions in blended environments to reflect the environments that they wish to create in their own classes. Therefore, these final chapters and comments can be used well outside of language teaching
contexts and can provide a basic overview of reflective practice, professional development, and methods to encourage reflective practitioners who can then become leaders within their context. There is a strong emphasis on engaging teachers in their own professional development in terms of deciding directions, researching further avenues for development, and becoming mentors for others. As Gallardo, Heiser & Nicolson state (Gallardo, Heiser, & Nicolson, 2011, p. 245):

As the ... teaching world gets to grips with the age of diversity and increased digital literacy, where blends are likely to become more rather than less complex, it is certainly the case that teachers in blended contexts will be required to become resourceful professionals, with an increasing number of skills needed at their fingertips, both literally and metaphorically.

This closing statement in Chapter 16 clearly demonstrates the view that is held by the contributors and editors of the book: blended learning and teaching contexts are becoming imperative in modern education and learning systems, and it essential that teachers learn to become self sufficient. Hence, this book provides a first step into blended learning for language contexts, and covertly provides a solid accessible resource for teachers in general who are beginning their own forays into blended learning designs, which can be used extensively in distance education contexts.

A consistent feature of Language Teaching in Blended Contexts is the integration of both classroom anecdotes and empirical research to support the statements, theories, concepts, and practices that are presented for effective blended learning and teaching practices. While the references provide additional support and validity to the content, the anecdotes emphasise that these methods come from real blended learning contexts with real learners, real issues, and real teachers. A positive note about the use and integration of anecdotes and other sources is that it does not create a heavy theoretical book, but rather provides an accessible way for the practice to interact with the theory while allowing greater connections to real world scenarios. Furthermore, these anecdotes and references provide avenues for readers to continue to explore the concepts presented. The ease of which the anecdotes and references have been embedded within the text and structured around the topics presented affords readers the opportunity to connect on a more personal level with the practices and simultaneously bridging the practice to the theory.

While the book is not a theory-dense book, it does provide a substantial list of sources for the reader to investigate. There are numerous well-known researchers in educational technology and language acquisition cited, and the book itself adds to the literature on integrating technology in education, specifically language education. However, one notable deficiency on the list is the work of Mishra and Koehler who are considered eminent theorists in terms of embedding technology into education (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education - Committee on Technology and Innovation, 2008; Koehler & Mishra, 2009; Koehler, Mishra, Yahya, & Yadav, 2004; Mishra, Koehler, & Zhao, 2007; Schmidt et al., 2009). Furthermore, the noticeable omission of the Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) model (Harris, Mishra, & Koehler, 2009; Koehler & Mishra, 2009) or clear strategies founded in theoretical models for the effective integration of the pedagogy, content, and technology within learning environments is perhaps the weakest point of the book. The TPACK model provides a model for the integration of technology, pedagogy, and content knowledges that acknowledges and balances all three aspects within the learning and teaching design and processes; in modern education contexts, the integration of these three aspects of knowledge for learning and teaching is essential when considering blended situations and the effective use of technologies to enhance learning experiences. Thus, while the omission of these frameworks has lowered the theoretical density of the text, this lowering means that the book is more accessible to a broader audience and has not been limited to an academic audience.
The book is not overtly explicit about its readership, other than language teachers, but it is written in a manner and style that encourages language teachers and educators of all backgrounds to engage with the content; it is written for pre-service teachers and experienced teachers alike, as well as native and non-native speakers of English. Moreover, as a result of the foundational content of the book, it can be used as a first point of reference for blended learning by educational designers and those involved in higher levels of learning design as well as teachers in the classroom. The forethought to create such an accessible book will ensure its use across different contexts, countries, and situations.

Language Teaching in Blended Contexts can be a great core text for understanding blended learning and teaching environments; however, the veneer of language teaching might cause it to undersell itself to mainstream educators because it also has great value for investigating and developing more generic blended learning contexts as well. Thus, this book can be considered a great text for introducing the concept of blended learning with a specific emphasis on language teaching.

References


