A blended learning approach applied in the first year courses in the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies

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We are all faced with the reality that the majority of first year students attending our courses are ill-prepared to cope with the demands of university-learning. We therefore decided to actively design our courses to commence from the level where our students are, and to bring them to where we think they should be in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. In this journey that we travel with our students, we discover that a blended learning approach seems to meet both the needs of the students and our needs.

For us a blended learning approach involves repetition through various modes of teaching, whilst also enhancing the unique characteristic of each teaching mode to ensure quality learning. Others call this approach hybrid or mixed learning, when one purposefully uses a combination of instructional media in an integrated manner to achieve the desired learning outcomes. We integrate traditional learning (face-to-face meeting in a physical venue for lectures and tutorials), with online learning (using Edulink and social media, and hope to include mobile learning when the university’s infrastructure is set up to accommodate this). The use of multimodal technology-enhanced delivery of teaching and learning in both real and virtual spaces, and through a mixture of synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous learning, enables us to accommodate a diversity of learning styles.

Before anyone thinks that it is about technologies, we found that it is not per se the medium of delivery that is important, but rather the way in which learning is approached. Various mediums provide a multitude of learning possibilities and activities, and enable repetition and reinforcement. However, unless these mediums are purposefully selected and used in an integrated manner complementing one another, rather than just as add-ons, they are not effective tools for learning.
One key characteristic of a blended approach is to be student-centred and ensure active participation. Rather than being the ‘sage-on-stage’ who knows everything, we try to adopt more peer-to-peer learning, in which lecturers and tutors really are learning facilitators. In our large classes of between 600 and 1300 students this is a real challenge, but totally possible with a blended learning approach. Through group work, for example, there is increased interaction between students, and between students and content. By integrating Web2.0 technologies (such as wikis, Facebook and Twitter) into our courses, students also have increased interaction that stretches outside of our course, into open environments where they can learn from experts elsewhere in the world. Instead of barring cell phones in our classes, we try to use them to enhance learning. Rather than viewing the use of Facebook, Twitter, skype and Youtube by students as ‘wasting’ time and broadband, we go to where our students are in virtual space, and use those personalised environments as learning spaces.

And yes, not all our students have computers at home, own smartphones, and use social media. We have taken it up as part of our learning objectives – with basic reading, writing and thinking skills – to ensure that our students develop 21st century skills that include digital literacies, working collaboratively, communicating clearly and effectively, learning how to learn, finding and managing information, and critical and creative skills. This means that we purposefully integrate formative and summative assessments in a scaffolded manner that shifts from students simply memorising information, to students forming knowledge in the real world.

We find that a blended learning approach ensures much more active participation by students, and forces them to take responsibility for their own learning. Of course, first year students have to get used to this approach to learning, as they have mostly been trained to rely on the teacher / lecturer. Encouraging, both the quantitative and qualitative evaluations of our courses show that students enjoy, appreciate and learn from a blended learning approach.

Albert Einstein said that insanity is “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”. For us, our traditional teaching approach simply does not meet our needs
or those of our students. A blended learning approach has helped us to improve the learning experiences and learning outcomes of our students. Rather than teach, we help our students to learn through various mediums, blurring the boundaries between teachers and learners, content and activities, formal and informal learning, and real and virtual spaces. Blended learning not only holds transformational power for students, but also for lecturers. Our teaching has been turned upside down by our students. We have been challenged to be creative and work collaboratively, to improve our digital literacies, to expand our courses beyond the walls of the classroom, and to remain learners ourselves. And this whilst we are all having fun (mostly)!