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For a Smoother Blend: Lessons Learned from Blended Instruction

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This keynote address discusses the blending process at Michigan State University. First, a short historical perspective is provided, and theoretical, pedagogical, administrative, and evidence-based reasons for and against blended learning are summarized. Second, the blending process at MSU, from needs analyses to the planning of the second iterations, is encapsulated. The course design and research results from a second-year and a fourth-year language course as well as a fourth-year content course are revisited. Finally, lessons learned from the blending process are shared. Blended learning offers a great potential for language learning and other goals, but at the same time carries a danger of confusion and frustration with excessive homework. It is recommended to follow an iterative process that includes evaluation based on multiple sources and multiple analyses when blending a curriculum.

I just came out of a meeting where we talked quite a bit about converting our introductory face-to-face Spanish courses into online courses and the feasibility of implementing the model our dean wants to follow, meaning large classes (45-60) taught by grad students over the summer aimed at generating revenue. (Email from a colleague)

Emails, calls, and Facebook messages or status updates such as the one above are flashing across my computer screen at increasing frequency. It usually involves a top-down process, an administrator and budget-driven decision that seemingly forces language instructors into blended or online language teaching. Yet, that approach is problematic because administrators do not always understand the complexities of language teaching and learning. We at Michigan State University (MSU) have been more fortunate than others in that while there is an encouragement to move into online and blended formats, it is up to the units (i.e. programs or departments) to consider how best to approach this transition. Here, I will outline our process and the lessons we have learned from our iterations so far, so that it may help others who are forced into a rapid blending process by their administrators.

First, I will provide definitions and a short historical perspective; second I will briefly review reasons for and challenges in blending a curriculum; third I will share the blending experience at MSU in three different class types within the German program. As the title suggest our process was not smooth, and we are continuing to work on improving our blended courses to have smooth transitions between online and face-to-face portions, between blended and non-blended sections, and from the lower level to the upper level courses.

BACKGROUND

In this paper, I will adopt the definitions put forward by Allen and Seaman (2009) in contrasting face-to-face courses with various technology-enhanced courses. By that definition a face-to-face course uses technology minimally; a technology-enhanced or web-facilitated course which uses some technology and fewer than 30% of the classtime is replaced by online sessions; blended or hybrid courses moved 30% to 80 % of class-time online; and online courses are those courses that only minimally (less than 20% of the time) meet face-to-face.

In the realm of foreign language teaching, blended and online courses have developed out of two different traditions. Online courses come out of the tradition of distance courses, courses in which the students cannot be expected to attend classes (for an overview on distance learning see Blake, 2009; Kraemer, 2008a). The primary purpose of such courses was to provide more access to students who otherwise would not or could not take classes. For those two historical reasons, online courses were initially often developed by external units or private providers (Alosh, 2001; Goertler & Winke, 2008). Blended courses, on the other hand, were often developed from representatives from within the content unit (Allen, et al., 2007). Part of the motivation for such courses has traditionally been a need for more space and seats (e.g. Sanders, 2005). In a sense, these courses were an extension or expansion from fifth-hour arrangements or computer lab day (Goertler, 2011). At the same time, as will be illustrated in the following, blended instruction can also be used to utilize the online and the face-to-face delivery formats for more effective overall instruction. Allen et al. (2007) found that blended courses appear to stay stable, though they might be underreported, and online courses offerings continue to increase steadily. This report supports my own anecdotal evidence from my email inbox and Facebook mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

While the impetus for moving online is often administrative as was illustrated with the quote at the beginning of this paper, there are other reasons for and against blending the foreign language curriculum. Since I have already discussed these reasons elsewhere (Goertler, 2011), I will simply summarize the reasons in table 1 below.

Table 1. Reasons for and against blending the curriculum.

Type of Reason	For	Against
Administrative	Potential to save money in the long run Revenue increase Freed classroom space Temporal and geographic flexibility Managing the demand due to enrollment increases Peer pressure	Direct and indirect costs (development costs, increased time commitment, additional resources needed) Stakeholder preparedness (institutional resources and support structure, students' attitude and computer literacy, teachers' attitude and computer literacy) Technological problems

Type of Reason	For	Against
Theoretical	Socialization into online discourse communities Engaged learning Possibilities for individualized instructions Improved and automated feedback options Input enhancement options Increased access to materials and resources including native speakers Asynchronous and synchronous interaction (text-based and audio- and video-based)	People learned languages just fine without technology Limited or lack of face-to-face time
Pedagogical	Close the language-literature gap Improved articulation (horizontal, vertical and interdisciplinary) Achieve broader goals such as information literacy, transcultural and translingual competence, life-long learning	Danger of overloading the curriculum Danger of poor articulation between online and F2F components Depending on the model, the quality of the teaching staff may decrease At least on a perceptual level an increase in time commitment from students and teachers
Evidence-based	Meta analyses across fields show benefits of online and especially blended course offerings (Grugurovic, 2007; Grugurovic, Chapelle, and Shelley (as cited in Chapelle, 2010); Means, et al., 2009)	Unsuccessful cases typically not reported, which may make the data pool biased Great variation in the implementation and success rates

As can be seen in the summary, there are solid arguments for and against blending the curriculum to a large degree because the implementation of a blended course can take such varied shapes. But what we can say from research and experience so far is that blended learning does not appear to result in catastrophic results in comparison to face-to-face courses (as often feared by teachers, see Blake, 2001), but it also does not result in the administrative miracle that some hope for (i.e., better learning outcomes and higher satisfaction at a fraction of the costs).

THE MSU BLENDING STORY

One of the issues in the debate surrounding blended and online learning is the constant comparison of delivery formats. Using quasi-experimental comparative research designs is not doing justice to the difference in these delivery formats and what they can do (see also Blake, 2009). It is a good research approach to find the answers that administrators such as the one mentioned in the quote at the beginning are looking for: Can we teach a traditional face-to-face course in a blended or online format while increasing class sizes/increasing teaching load and thereby reducing the costs and generating additional revenue while also maintaining the same level of learning outcomes? Comparative research can find answers to those administrative questions, but cannot find the answers to the following essential questions when measuring the effectiveness of an online course should be: (a) What are our goals? (2) How can we achieve such goals with the technologies available? (3) What may be better taught and learned without technology? (4) In blended and online courses, what was learned how? To investigate these questions, we need multiple data sources and analyses; and take a mixed approach to evaluation and allow for several iterations. In the following section, I will present our process and lessons learned in German at MSU. This story is by no means complete as we continue to improve from one iteration to the next.

First I will present our process and the current state of our program. Next, I will discuss three different classes and the associated processes and summarize the findings for: (a) a second-year language course; (b) the advanced German language course; and (c) a fourth-year content course.

Our blending process started in 2007 when the new dean proposed investigating the potential of online and blended learning for foreign language classes. First, we familiarized ourselves with the current knowledge from the field (Goertler&Winke, 2008). Second, we conducted a survey with our peer institutions to better understand what they have done and what challenges they have encountered (Goertler&Winke, 2008). Third, we conducted a needs analysis in which we investigated our students' computer literacy and attitudes (Winke&Goertler, 2008). Based on this survey and our own knowledge of the programs, we decided which languages and language classes would be the best for pilots (Winke, Goertler, &Amuzie, 2010). Fourth, we conducted our first round of pilot classes. Next, we revised the materials based on our findings and conducted a second set of research studies, which are currently ongoing.

Based on our programs' constraints, our lessons learned, and the research we conducted, we have now structured our program to have a steady increase of technology and the use of similar kinds of technologies. Our first-year curriculum is offered in a technology-enhanced format with most of the homework assignments being completed online (typically these include online workbook, online simulated conversations). A reduction of face-to-face class-time at this level seemed dangerous for programmatic reasons. Many of the students in this level are first-year college students and many of the students at our university are first generation college students. Given this situation we considered it crucial to focus on being available for the students and having them engage in face-to-face time. In addition, this personal contact may also contribute to the students continuing with the language beyond their requirement. In our second-year curriculum we typically offer blended and technology-enhanced courses. In either delivery format, students complete a significant component of online homework (typically online workbook, online

simulated conversations, and online social media such as discussion forums or blogs). In addition, the students typically complete a technology-enhanced project presented in class or a technology-delivered presentation presented in a canned multimedia version. Our third-year language course only meets three times a week and therefore is only offered in a technology-enhanced format though in some cases it is approaching the 30% to be called blended. The students are engaged in even more technology-enhanced or technology-delivered projects and more online homework assignments. Our fourth-year language course is offered only in a blended format and will be discussed in more detail below. The content courses on the third- and fourth-year level are offered in technology-enhanced or blended format depending on the instructor's expertise and the topic's suitability for blended teaching.

SECOND-YEAR GERMAN¹

Our design goal for the first iteration of a blended second-year German class was to develop a course that offers more time and space flexibility and may eventually be able to result in cost savings due to a different TA teaching load. The secondary goal was eliminated later in the process as TA assignments had to be changed due to budgetary constraints regardless of delivery format. The pedagogical goals were to improve the language at the same level in both delivery formats and to improve computer literacy in and through the blended course. The blended course included half the sessions face-to-face (100 minutes) and half the sessions online (100 minutes). The online components included the online workbook, streamed videos, independent reading, independent grammar review, simulated conversations online, and computer-mediated communication (CMC) activities with peers (discussion forum, chat, blog, wiki). The face-to-face group also completed the online workbook and engaged in some CMC activities.

While I cannot describe each online activity, I will describe one sample activity to provide a better impression of the online components. In all of our language courses we use the Rich Internet Application tool Conversation developed by the Center for Language Education and Research (<http://clear.msu.edu>). With this tool one can create simulated audio- or video-based conversations by recording questions and having students respond to the questions in real-time (for a more detailed description of the tool see for example Goertler, 2009; Kraemer, 2008b). For example, in a chapter about student life in Germany students were asked to reflect on their own student life in comparison to that in Germany. They were asked five questions about their study habits. Once recorded students and teachers can replay the conversation. The teacher can listen to just the students' answers or the whole conversation. If the students gave predictable answers, then the flow can sound somewhat natural. Most importantly, each student has an opportunity to speak and receive feedback on his spoken German. Each student can have the illusion of having a personal conversation with the teacher.

In order to assess the effectiveness of the blended format in comparison to the traditional course, all sections completed a computer literacy survey (see Winke&Goertler, 2008) asking students about their computer skills, access to computers, and their attitude towards computers and a proficiency language test (adapted from the Goethe Institute's tests based on the Common

¹ Empirical results from this iteration were presented at the American Association of Applied Linguistics conference in Denver, CO in 2009. Angelika Kraemer was the co-presenter and shared the results from a content course, which will be discussed later.

European Framework of Reference) at the beginning and the end of the semester. No significant difference in computer literacy development or language gains was found between the groups. A qualitative analysis of the survey comments from the students and an interview with the teacher of the course showed low buy-in on part of the students and the instructor for blended or any technology-enhanced teaching. In response to these results several changes were completed: (a) more careful selection of blended instructors; (b) a changed distribution in online and face-to-face time to twice 75 minutes in class and 50 minutes online with the distribution slowly increasing to more online time as the semester progressed; and (c) improved marketing and explanation of course demands in a blended format prior to and during the semester.

ADVANCED GERMAN²

The advanced German course was blended to address the issue of diversity in language proficiency and students' goals. The goals for the redesign were: (a) creating greater efficiency and effectiveness with time and space; (b) helping most students reach a language proficiency of advanced low on the American Council of Foreign Language Teaching scale; (c) improving students' computer literacy; and (d) developing effective citizenship as defined in MSU's liberal learning goals (click [here](#) for more information). The class was made up of three delivery formats: (a) face-to-face sessions including field trips made up of 54% class sessions; (b) asynchronous online sessions made up 31%; and (c) mostly synchronous online class sessions made up 15% of the class. The online components of the course included multimedia online canned presentations, blogs, a student-created grammar wiki, simulated online conversations, self-evaluation forms, online peer feedback and grading, web 2.0 explorations (e.g., chat, Second Life, online games), and discussion forums.

Again, in order to illustrate the online component, I will describe one major online assignment. The students were asked to complete four of the following multimedia projects: a movie review, an advertisement, a music video, a short film, and a documentary. Students had to complete at least one project individually and at least one collaboratively. The multimedia presentations had to be canned, which means they had to be comprehensible and engaging without a person presenting the project and offering explanations. Each project needed to include spoken and written text as well as sound, animation, and images and students had the freedom to work with whatever technologies they felt comfortable. All multimedia presentations were posted online and given feedback from peers and teachers. Then students were able to improve their presentation and upload them again to receive grades anonymously from teachers, peers, and from themselves. One example (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8V_5vkHtYA) from the second iteration of the course is an advertisement for a fake product, the "Geh-weg-Spray" (Go-away spray).

Since only one section of this course is offered, there was no control group to the course and effectiveness of the course was measured in relation to the goals of the course. Students' products (assignments and reflective writings and drawings) as well as a survey and the students' course evaluation forms were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. From the data, we

² Empirical results from this iteration were presented at the Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium in Amherst, MA in 2010 together with Theresa Schenker, who was the co-teacher of the course.

concluded that time and space were used effectively in the sense that what was best done online was done online. Unfortunately, time and space were not used efficiently (i.e., there were no time or space savings), since the online sessions followed a non-regular schedule. As was mentioned earlier, sessions were moved online when topic or task necessitated it. This focus on effective use of time and space, did not allow for structuring the online sessions in a way that another class could regularly be held in our classroom, nor did it allow the students to consistently schedule another activity during part of the dedicated class-time. The language proficiency goals were reached by some, but not by others. The improvement was mostly based on initial proficiency. The group of students could roughly be divided into three initial proficiency levels: (a) students returning from long-term study abroad who already were at advanced low; (b) students who had made good progress in their programs and were working on the border between intermediate high and advanced low; and (c) students who were still struggling with many aspects of intermediate level language. The third group of students did not reach the course goal, which would likely have been the same in a different format. The students gained more confidence with computer technologies as exhibited in their self-reports and their course products. On the other hand both instructors and students perceived an increase in time commitment. Yet, the students' report on average hours worked for the course was what was intended. But there was great variation in time commitment and some students did engage with the materials much longer. For others the online format did not work and in one case resulted in failure. Some students were not able to work in an independent environment which required self-motivation, self-responsibility and self-reliance. Except for one student most students were able to work towards independent learning and better time management. In fact one of the biggest benefits that students reported on about this course was a bettered time management and also finding ways to continue their German learning beyond the course. Furthermore through the anonymous online self- and peer-evaluations students developed a better understanding of their own abilities, which was exhibited in a continuously improved alignment of their self-evaluation and their peers' and my evaluation of their work. There were still students who graded harsher or nicer, but they treated themselves in the same way as they did their peers.

Based on these observations and findings, we decided to have a shorter block of online class sessions in the next iteration. Polls, emails, and Facebook had not been enough to help students stay on task and to make them aware of the teacher's presence in online classes. Due to the instructor and student reporting an increased time commitment, assignments were cut from the syllabus. It was also decided to find more ways to work on language skills in particular and to develop individualized curricula. In the second iteration the course organization was changed from genre and topics to language skills necessary at the advanced low level. For the third iteration, the Tell Me More software will be utilized to allow for an accompanying individualized language learning program that helps all students progress from where they are at to where they can go.

FOURTH-YEAR CONTENT COURSE³

As mentioned earlier, the main motivation to working in a blended format in the lower level

³ This course was designed, implemented and the associated research was conducted by Angelika Kraemer (see Kraemer, 2008b; 2008c).

languages was to keep up with enrollment demand, in the upper level language class it was to address the multiple proficiency levels. The fourth-year content course also intended to address the diversity of language proficiency, but also wanted to work on closing the language-literature gap and teaching language until the end (i.e, the final courses in our German program). The goals thereby were to bridge the language-literature gap, to develop language individually, and to develop content knowledge.

This course was described and the research was presented in Angelika Kraemer's dissertation (Kraemer, 2008b). The content of the course was German fairy-tales and they met online for about 30% of the time. Delivery format was decided upon based on topic and task. The online portion included online simulated conversations, online presentations, wikis, blogs, and enhanced materials online such as mp3 files of the readings.

One example of online work, that I would like to highlight here, is the wiki (for more detailed information and screenshots see Kraemer, 2008b). In the course of the semester, students built a wiki on the topic of fairy-tales. Similar to the advanced language course they had to collaborate in teams and their output needed to include pictures, text, and ideally also spoken words and a video. Naturally, the proportions were different and students produced more written text than in the videos for the language course. Since the course was a content course, the topics were given and students had to compose academic texts which included citations and demonstrated knowledge of primary and secondary literature. The wiki then served all students as a resource and the revision history function of the wiki allowed the teacher to give grades to individuals as well as groups.

As Kraemer (2008b) summarized, the course did result in a positive impact on confidence, motivation, fluency, engagement, responsibility, and classroom atmosphere. Teachers and students liked the course although they reported an increased time commitment. The technology and online components helped bring language into the content class.

For the second iteration, Kraemer enhanced the online materials to focus even more on language development and excluded activities that were perceived as busy-work. In addition, she increased the functionality of the tasks, and improved communication about purpose, grading criteria and due dates for assignments. Communicating goals, expectations, and requirements more clearly and frequently was an adjustment made to all three courses.

PONDERINGS

In the previous section I described the three courses and summarized the research results. From implementing the courses and talking with each other and others who were blending courses, we pondered three additional issues: (a) smoothness, (b) interactional space, and (c) education.

In the literature two terms are used to describe a partially online course: (a) hybrid and (b) blended. Hybrid according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is "something heterogeneous in origin or composition." The focus of hybrid is that there are two things that come together, often carrying the connotation of increasing efficiency like a hybrid car or being usable for two different purposes such as a hybrid bike. What we want from a good hybrid course is a blend of online and face-to-face activities, a course in which the transitions between the two are smooth.

Too often students report not seeing a connection between the online and the face-to-face work and often they perceive the online component as additional homework or busy-work and not actually essential to the course. A blended smoothie no longer makes the ingredients visible, as it was made to achieve a flavor that can only be created by combining the ingredients and not by consuming them individually. This is what we want from our partially blended courses, a smooth blend.

A second issue that keeps presenting itself is interaction and the associated interactional space. While we have been able to decide based on task and topic, which activities should be completed online and which in a face-to-face environment, it was not always so easy to decide on the interactional format. Should the students work with each other synchronously via the computer, each student simply interacting with the computer, or the students working together asynchronously via the computer, or should students get together in a physical environment and then work together using a computer? When students work together to write a summary, is it more effective if they sit in front of one computer and talk? Or is it more effective if they each write their own portion and then bring it together? Or is it more effective if they work together on a google document or other collaborative writing tool? In which scenario can students produce the best summary, learn the most language, and collaborate the best? These are some of the questions that we would like to investigate more.

The third pondering is about the purpose or the goal of a language course. We know that state regulations encourage us to help at least our teacher candidates to reach advanced low. As language teachers, we understand what that means and have some ideas on how to measure such goals. But, as has been pointed out in the description of especially the fourth-year level courses, blended learning also came with other by-products that we have embraced as valuable goals of education: computer literacy development, strengthening a sense of community, developing awareness of one's own abilities, time management, lifelong learning habits, self-reliance, and self-responsibility. Where these positive developments come from and whether they are also achieved in the face-to-face courses has, to my knowledge, not been investigated. Yet, it would be interesting to have a better grasp on the non-language related course and university goals and how they are achieved.

CONCLUSION

To respond to people like my colleague who sent the email at the beginning of this paper, I can share the following lessons we have learned in the German program at Michigan State University: (a) multiple goals can be achieved in a blended course, possibly even better than in a face-to-face course; (b) blending is not a smooth process; (c) blending the curriculum is an iterative process that involves constant cycles of evaluation and revisions; and (d) implementing blended courses requires a lot of additional explanations of expectations and responsibilities to teachers and students. The key issue is continuous communication with all stakeholders throughout the process.

Obviously such communications also necessarily include communicating with the administrators to understand their goals and communicate the feasibility of implementing a plan to reach these goals. To go back to the quote at the beginning of this paper, it seems unrealistic to develop an

introductory language class online with double the regular class-size. What one could teach online and what we are preparing to teach online are grammar review courses or courses for reading knowledge, since those courses focus primarily on explanations, practice, and testable knowledge, rather than communication skills that need to be honed through actual communication. Additionally since lower level students are often new to the university and may not have a high level of motivation yet for the study of a language, it seems counter-intuitive to offer online courses on the lower levels to students on campus. As I mentioned earlier, we purposefully decided against blending the first-year curriculum.

While our experiences are not so different from what other institutions have learned, because we were given freedom by the administration to experiment when and how to use blended learning, we took a different approach than other institutions. Most language programs move into an online or blended format on the lower levels, while we have focused on the upper levels. A second advantage of the freedom and the time we were given is that we were able to look at our entire curriculum and not just the lower level language courses in isolation. Third, we were allowed to make errors and try again, which is the most important component of moving a curriculum to a blended or online format. It is an adjustment for all stakeholders and time for multiple iterations has to be included in the planning. We are currently analyzing the data from our second iterations and preparing for the third. Stay tuned for more lessons in the future!

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