

**Blending pedagogies: evaluative case study of a learning  
package for Learning and Development  
(CIPD Professional Standards module)**

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## **Abstract**

This working paper offers a case study of seven years' experience of delivering the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (CIPD) Professional Standards elective on Learning and Development within a part-time Masters Programme in a UK university.

The affordances of the technology support and foster a greater sharing of experience, reflection and resource in a retrievable mode than is often the case in traditional face-to-face workshops. The LMS technology available includes discussion boards and wikis, online surveys, variable release dates for materials and a searchable resource bank as well as simple weblinks. Some of these features are still regarded as new technologies for many of the learners, all of whom are non-traditional students in the sense that they will be working in the HR profession, of varying age groups and balancing part-time study with many other work and life pressures.

The subject domain of this module encourages experimentation by both teacher and students, as a range of learning theories and pedagogies are tried, debated and critiqued. Design of the module draws on Action Learning, Social Constructivism, cognitive behaviourist approaches and, to a certain extent, Communities of Practice. The paper aims to explore and critique the development of this module from the perspective of recommendations by Mehanna (2004) and Conole et al (2004) for e-pedagogy and offers the conference participant an opportunity to share in the critique of teaching practice in HRD.

## **Background**

*"The term 'blended learning' is ill-defined and inconsistently used. Whilst its popularity is increasing, its clarity is not."*

(Oliver, 2004 p7)

Oliver's philosophical criticisms of a widely used term introduce us to the dense jungle of ideas and confusions around learning and technology. Whether or not learning can be "blended" and whether a mix of online and face-to-face teaching might be a useful definition of the phrase, the fact remains that in Higher Education, as in HRD, we are struggling with ways in which computer-mediated communication, Web 2.0 technology and Learning Management Systems can add value, or decrease cost, in the pursuit of learning and development.

This paper aims to present a case study of seven years' experience (2000-2007) of delivering a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) module, Learning and Development, at the University of Brighton Business School. The purpose is to explore the relationship of pedagogies with learning in a technology-supported vocational postgraduate course. The module was delivered during this period in the third year of part-time study to small groups of students (ranging from 3 to 12) using a scheduled mix of face-to-face and online sessions. Initially online sessions were supported through a School intranet, in 2002 moving to a Learning Management System (LMS) based on Blackboard™ software (Greener, 2004).

Two particular models from recent literature were used to provide a reference point for the case study. The first is from Mehanna (2004), whose research into effective pedagogies for e-learning in Higher Education followed earlier recommendations by Marzano (2000) on appropriate pedagogic behaviours said to enhance student achievement. Mehanna's study reduced Marzano's recommended behaviours from nine to seven, which he found to correlate with student grades:

|  |
|--|
| Summarizing and note-taking  |
| Reinforcing effort and providing recognition (teacher-student and student-student) |
| Homework and practice (including reflection)                                       |
| Non-linguistic presentation (charts, diagrams etc)                                 |
| Co-operative learning (student-student plus teacher complement/moderation)         |
| Setting goals and providing feedback (largely teacher generated)                   |
| Generating and testing hypotheses (largely student generated)                      |

*Source: based on pp 285-6 (Mehanna, 2004)*

Figure 1 Mehanna's pedagogic behaviours for enhancing student e-learning

We can see that these "pedagogic behaviours" are all stimulated by the teacher but some are clearly to be carried out by the learner. Mehanna's context was e-learning, he was proposing that all these activities could be promoted through online media, although all can be facilitated in face-to-face teaching.

It is interesting to compare Mehanna's list with Chickering and Gamson's 7 principles for good practice in undergraduate education, which Chickering and Ehrmann later applied to learning with technology (Chickering and Gamson, 1987, Chickering and Ehrmann, 1996). Figure 2 below shows a number of fair to good matches.

| <b>Mehanna's achievement enhancing behaviours</b> | <b>Chickering and Gamson's 7 principles for good practice in undergraduate education</b> |
|---|--|
| Summarizing and note-taking                       |  |
| Reinforcing effort and providing recognition      | Maximising contact between student and faculty   |
| Homework and practice                             | Emphasizing time on task, good time management   |
| Non-linguistic presentation                       |  |
| Co-operative learning                             | Reciprocity and co-operation among students  |

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Setting goals and providing feedback | Prompt feedback   |
| Generating and testing hypotheses    | Active learning – relate to past experiences and apply to daily lives |
|                                      | High expectations from teacher  |
|                                      | Respect for diverse talents and ways of learning                      |

*Sources: pp285-6 (Mehanna, 2004) and p2 (Chickering and Gamson, 1987)*

Figure 2 Comparing Mehanna’s pedagogic behaviours with Chickering and Gamson’s 7 principles for good teachers.

A further, more theoretical, model is supplied by Conole et al (2004), which discusses pedagogies on a grander scale. Mehanna cites Mortimore with reference to what pedagogy means, the preferred definition proposed being “any conscious action by one person designed to enhance learning in another” (p3 Mortimore, 1999) but his writing suggests that his pedagogic definition is closer to teaching and learning activities. In contrast, Conole and fellow authors are clearly writing about learning theories when discussing pedagogy, rather than activities. Their article summarises learning theories in terms of potential e-learning applications and then constructs a model for learning, based on what they identify as the key components of these theories. They argue that this can form a basis for understanding the interrelationship of learning theories such as systems theory, constructivism, experiential learning, cognitive theories, activity-based theories and behaviourism, but further, that the model can assist with learning design.

The six elements of the model comprise three continua between:

- an individual and a social focus for learning
- the degree of conscious reflection involved in learning as opposed to conditioning, preconscious or skills learning and memorisation

- information (text, artefacts and bodies of knowledge) and direct experience, activity and practical application (Conole, 2004 pp22-23).

The authors point out that it would be a potential shortcoming of the model to rationalise a particular design post-hoc, rather than use it proactively in the design process. In this paper, the model is used as a benchmark rather than a rationalisation, to look at the individual elements, which are emphasised in the module under discussion, and how that then relates to learning theories associated with e-learning.

To apply such models to the Learning and Development module, it is first necessary to outline its key features, and then to draw on other sources of data to illustrate as much of the full context of the case study as possible (Yin, 2003).

### **Key features of the module design and delivery**

The module shows a gradual development of the features in an evolving LMS to support learning. At the beginning of the seven year period, the elements provided were alternate week face-to-face sessions (3 hour workshops), core text references, email support and access to an intranet affording a team room (asynchronous discussion board) and online document access. The documents were written specially for this mode of delivery, moving away from the traditional lecture notes to what were called “thought starters”. The name was important because this was a commentary on textbook reading, together with challenges, questions and activities, plus recommended weblinks, designed to stimulate activities and reflection for the student.

Over the seven year period, the thought starters were improved and updated but retained the same basic structure. They pulled together the key elements of the topic studied, asking for critical discussion and analysis online, as well as encouraging students to question existing practice in their own organisations. This innovation moved away from traditional lecture notes and became a text companion to the range of activities expected of students through the module. Unlike lecture notes printed and delivered on the day of

the session, thought starters were made available online at least two weeks before the session, giving students more freedom to access when appropriate and convenient to them and endeavouring to encourage pre-reading.

As the module was moved to the LMS, more learning support features became available for testing and evaluation by students. The asynchronous discussion board remained the main vehicle for interaction during online sessions but different ideas were tried out to encourage and stimulate purposive reflection. In year 2, rotas were introduced so that individual students had responsibility for starting discussion on particular topics in online weeks. Year 3 saw these rotas move to pairs of students, to accommodate logistical difficulties when individuals were absent, and by the fifth year of the study, the rotas were assigned to groups. Allocated in the first week, to a group of four or five students, each individual could agree within their group who would start and summarise discussion online for each topic, to introduce as much freedom as possible for learner self-organisation, while retaining a structure which made responsibilities clear.

In the third year, an additional asynchronous board was made available on this module as a “Learning Bank” to house messages relating to different learning theories, jargon and concepts. Because this was a collaborative development, students contributed and agreed to have their contributions remain in the Learning Bank to be added to by subsequent cohorts. Any messages about learning – personal or theoretical were welcomed. The Learning Bank was a growing resource, which was used in the classroom when a particular idea arose in discussion and needed clarification.

Remaining with the idea of collaborative contributions to the site, a wiki (called a Reflective Practitioner site) was introduced within the module area, when it became available in the LMS (year six of this study). Usage was patchy, with some students finding it a helpful storage area for academic references relating to the module, others using it to share HRD policies and learning styles. Occasionally the author would use it to develop discussion of issues arising in face-to-face sessions, for example, a discussion of the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (Myers, 1980), led to students exploring their own

results and building a wiki page for comparisons and questions about the value of self-assessment questionnaires for development purposes. Many students, however, remained reluctant to add to the wiki and anecdotal evaluation suggested they made time choices, which excluded the more exploratory activities on the site in favour of more directly assessment-related activities such as assignment preparation.

Other features of the module site by year seven included a changing Quote of the Week which related to the topic under study, sometimes contributed by students, the regular use of announcements to provide direct links to new materials posted and encourage wider navigation of the site, and guided weblinks to both useful sites and to full-text academic articles though the Emerald and Business Source Premier databases available in the Online Library. Such links and articles were grouped by topic, again for ease of navigation.

In face-to-face sessions, the LMS was always present in the classroom as a tool for supporting discussion, a reminder of what was already available on the site – for example showing students abstracts of key articles and discussing them together – and a handy encyclopaedic reference aid, stretching class discussions through student-directed questions and searches for wider information sources. This presence of the LMS in the classroom encouraged online activity outside class sessions through familiarity, but also to underline the need for self-direction by putting the teacher into a position of fellow searcher for understanding rather than all-knowing controller of curriculum. The discussion board often doubled as flip chart, with outcomes of activities typed in and retained for later reference by all users.

A further key feature of the face-to-face sessions was the use of an approach called “check-in” borrowed from action learning sets, which encouraged a shared and informal style of session, taking note of the current concerns and achievements of each member of the session. This was usually done in small groups at the start of each class and regularly received positive feedback as each class member felt enabled to contribute, also modelling a learning approach, which they could take into the workplace. From time to

time, the consultative feature of action learning sets (Bourner et al., 1996) was also used, where individuals could bring Learning and Development problems into class and use the questioning skills of others in the group to move towards a reviewed perspective of the problem, although this activity occurred as much online as in class.

A face-to-face session was devoted to students' delivery of mini-learning events, to review practical issues and compare different approaches to class-based learning. By the final year of the study, this session had moved from a free choice topic, to a learning event focussed around students' progress on literature review for their module assignment. The increasing relevance of this session to what students saw as important, namely assessment and academic skill, as well as a timely support to their assignment planning, increased the amount of effort students were prepared to put into this activity, as well as the quality and range of learning opportunities on offer.

### **Additional insights into the case from other evidence sources**

Various sources were used to enrich the case including annual module reports completed as part of the academic health process, transcripts from module discussion boards, and outcomes from an earlier research study, which had involved interviews with students, after graduation, about their experience of this module.

After the first two years of the module, a small phenomenographic study (Marton, 1981) was undertaken by the teacher, which explored student conceptions of blended learning in this context. Interview transcripts were exhaustively reviewed to generate an idea space containing the key conceptions (Greener, 2006). These conceptions (in the table below) were related to the stage of study rather than to an inherent hierarchy of student conceptions.

| <b>Conception</b> |  | <b>Relevant stage at which this was important to students</b>         |
|-------------------|--|---|
| 1                 | Blended learning involved surmounting barriers                                     | Early stage of module/mode  |
| 2                 | Blended learning involved developing competence                                    | Early stage of module/mode  |
| 3                 | Blended learning was improved with feelings of confidence, comfort and safety      | Early stage of module/mode  |
| 4                 | Blended learning required a particular teacher role and structure                  | Early stage of module/mode  |
| 5                 | Blending online and face-to-face was a positive experience                         | Throughout the module   |
| 6                 | Blended learning was particularly appropriate for certain subjects                 | Throughout the module   |
| 7                 | Blended learning required self-direction   | Throughout the module   |
| 8                 | Success in blended learning related to personal learning approaches and strategies | Throughout the module   |
| 9                 | Blended learning needed individuals to commit to a learning community              | Midway through the module and increasing in relevance towards the end |

*Source: Greener 2006*

Figure 3: Student conceptions of blended mode learning from this module and stage at which each conception was considered important.

Academic health module reports showed a developing experimentation with the online support features of the LMS and with the format of the module. The initial move to part-online teaching had been driven by logistical issues: a small group of students had wanted to study the Learning and Development elective – too small easily to timetable sufficient resources for a full module. The part-online approach enabled by the Business School intranet in 2000 was an experiment to meet the needs of a small minority of students, and the group size remained small as this elective was offered against two other popular modules, a free choice meaning an unusual time slot for Learning and Development. In

many ways, the small group size enabled experimentation and may have encouraged students to participate in the different delivery mode more enthusiastically.

The module reports documented technology and access issues, which were problematic in the early years of this module, but which, with the current LMS software, and increasing home access for students, were resolved in subsequent years. In the last 3 years of the study, all students had home and work internet access to the LMS, as well as access on campus. Assessment results were, throughout the seven years, very much in line with the range of results achieved on other modules by the relevant cohort and seemed to bear out work by Alexander which suggested that IT itself had little bearing on achievement compared with how such IT was used and the pedagogical approaches underpinning its use (Alexander, 2001, Trigwell, 1995). It is problematic to suggest the learning and teaching strategy here was better or worse than others concerning assessed outcomes, simply because there was no control group studying the same module in a traditional way and data were not available for comparison from earlier years.

Module reports also recommended moving towards an element of assessment for online work in discussion boards, supported by research which suggested that student focus and effective use of online boards may be associated with improved assessment outcomes (Hoskins and van Hooff, 2005). This proposed innovation was not accepted during the period of the case, due to concerns about assessing online discussion, a format dissimilar from traditional seen and unseen assessment.

An analysis of discussion board postings, made possible by the retrievable nature of such boards, was conducted against a group of “qualities of intervention” discussed by Janet Macdonald in her book on Blended Learning and Online Tutoring (2006p 29). The qualities identified were affective, dialogic, focusing, reflective and flexible, timely and relevant, reversionable between individual and group and accessible. These qualities were proposed as a diagnostic tool by Macdonald to allow teachers to reflect on the appropriateness of strategies used in online or blended learning, so the question was

asked – to what extent was there evidence of such intervention in the discussion board transcripts and did this change over time.

It was clear from the analysis that the dominance of technology access issues almost disappeared after the first three years. Students initially had difficulty identifying the purpose of discussion board postings and assumed that long essay-type postings were required, despite suggestions to the contrary. The teacher's postings in the early years were largely affective and dialogic interventions, relating more to individuals than to the group. Once the LMS and improved technology advice had begun to solve some of the access issues, students began to share more of their own experience online. This produced a more focusing intervention from the teacher through concern that students would find large amounts of personal experience less useful than responses directly related to studied topics and literature.

The discussion board was used as a kind of weblog approach to learning, where students, when they did post, were reflecting as they wrote and reaching new ideas through that process. This was great learning for the individual students who did most posting, failing often to become meaningful for those students who did the minimum amount of posting. It also encouraged little interaction among students in earlier years.

In later years the postings from the teacher became more varied, ranging from brief personal encouragements or challenges, to reflective pieces of the critical analysis of ideas cropping up on the board in relation to literature studied. The teacher's postings were more often "focusing", "timely" and "reversionable", the latter meaning that a response to an individual would be broadened out to a message relevant to the whole group, endeavouring to draw in everyone (lurkers and posters) to the development of meaning in the debate. While earlier years of the module had identified individual student responsibilities for introducing and summarising debates online, this responsibility was clearly arduous for some students, and a more relaxed approach, using small groups to take responsibility for introducing ideas and discussions on topics, but retaining the summary process with the teacher, seemed to help the flow and volume of messages. In

each year, the quantity of messages increased, although this is a crude measure and was affected when students chose to insert article summaries within posted messages, rather than attaching links to them.

The postings throughout the period of the case study remained targeted on the syllabus; this was not a place in which to find social chat or messages containing only personal communications. The tone of the messages remained consistently focussed but informal over the period of the case, reflecting the thought starter materials, which were written in an informal conversational style. Where there was formality, this was generally associated with students unsure of their writing purpose, who appeared to “go through the motions of posting” with brief descriptive rather than critical paragraphs, often with a standard closed group question at the end, such as “Does anyone else have an example of this?”. This kind of posting was, however, in the minority, as most, particularly in later years, were genuine attempts to support other students or find new academic materials, which shed light on their reading or assignments.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

To what extent did the case study show evidence of association with Mehanna’s model of sound pedagogic behaviours? Summarising and note-taking was less encouraged in this design than would have happened in a traditional lecture/seminar course, however the technology was taking the strain of note-taking by encouraging a learning diary or weblog approach for most students. Summarising was a requirement for each student on rota in the early years, but later was brought back to the teacher’s role, as the sheer volume and variety of information online made it difficult for all but the most able students to achieve. This could be an element for future improvement.

Non-linguistic presentation seems an ambivalent concept in this blend, since the online environment used a more text-based approach than the classroom. However, the technology supports non-linguistic representations well and this could prove a more important feature in future module designs. In the case study period, charts and visuals

tended to take place in class and get digitised into the online environment, but improving technology, eg Flash and other multimedia technologies, could provide a much more graphically enabled learning opportunity.

Reinforcing effort and providing recognition, similar to the Chickering and Gamson principle of maximising teacher/student contact, was evident in both discussion board and face-to-face sessions and identified by students as a relevant conception; they placed strong emphasis on the teacher role and the kind of structures and interactions which encouraged learning activities and this also relates to Mehanna's "setting goals and providing feedback" activity. Could this suggest that only engaged and encouraging teachers with time to respond to individual postings would be effective in the online part of this blend?

Homework and practice, related to good time management, did appear to be a strong element in this design, with students needing to learn good strategies before the mode worked for them. Inevitably the traditional mode of delivery did not require such computer time and the blended mode would connect students to a wider range and quality of information, which required time and effort to construct meaning and sense. To a large extent this was countered by the collaborative approach of the module, on and offline, where the group became a key "player" in learning. As students increasingly understood this, they were able to use the group as a consultant, information source, sounding board and stimulant to effort. This was the means through which hypotheses could be generated and tested. Through this active group, supported by action learning approaches, and the modelling legitimate peripheral participation from communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), most students were enabled to develop their concepts of learning as well as broaden their familiarity with practical problems and strategies.

The Conole et al model (2004) is helpful in reviewing the module's learning and teaching design. The role of the "group" can be effectively balanced with the role of the individual, and this is an idea, which could feature more explicitly in future designs, using the students' view that the group was an effective learning motivator and that the

online and face-to-face activities regularly produced outcomes which went beyond individual contributions. It would be important, however, to remain focussed on the differing needs of individual students, since there is evidence in the case that some students found it harder to access the learning opportunities afforded by the technology. Ways in which these students might be prepared for this more effectively are being developed in the author's current research (Greener, 2007). The other dimensions of the model relate to reflection/non-reflection and information/experience. There was much evidence in the case of reflective learning opportunities through online activity. While these reflections were deliberate or everyday, rather than systematic (see Hall's separation of these approaches to reflection (1997)), the mode did enable a widening and deepening of some students' learning through such activities. Again, some students were more descriptive than reflective in their online postings, which needs attention in future cohorts.

The blended mode facilitated information items in a guided and structured manner through the online learning environment, used both in class and online. Experience was harder to produce, apart from the practical session, and this is where the action learning approach was useful to stimulate the application of theory to practice. Arguably the inclusion of more case study material online, in addition to existing practices of guest speakers and case studies in class, could contribute to improved "experiences" in the module. Certainly, a clear problem focus for online posting through some thought starters produced higher quality responses online. However, it could be argued that online technology affordances (Conole and Dyke, 2004 p118) are better at supporting reflection than the generation of direct learning from experience.

This case has analysed some pedagogic design and some "technological opportunism" (Morgan et al., 2002) used in developing this module, encouraged some useful reflection on pedagogies associated with good teaching design, and has made some suggestions about where the module goes next. It is hoped that it will also stimulate some debate in conference around good practice in the development of HRD vocational expertise.

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