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Introducing Blended Learning and Course Design to Adult Learners Hard-to-Reach

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Abstract

Adult trainers often find themselves redesigning curriculum, exploring new pedagogical approaches, and seeking stimulating changes to their courses, especially when working with hard-to-reach groups. This paper introduces blended learning and course design to adult learners hard-to-reach. The article also highlights data on best practices when looking for training with heterogeneous audiences with difficulties in the basic knowledge of a foreign language. We begin with actual questionnaire data for refugee women regarding their educational needs and learning materials to propose the design and the teaching approach of a blended learning course. We succinctly explain online approaches, compares pedagogy styles and learning theories with a focus on women's knowledge, and compare traditional education to blend instruction. From this article, trainers can expect to learn: (i) the concept of blended learning; (ii) ideas for designing blended teaching experiences; and (iii) data-driven justification for blend teaching in an adult course.

Keywords: Blended learning, course design, adult education

Introduction

Whether it's teaching in a traditional face-to-face classroom or online, the educator's role is to cultivate quality learning in their students. As education progressed into an increasingly interactive experience, new online options emerged to facilitate this purpose. New technologies provide the opportunity for teachers to make learning interactive and collaborative through a constructivist approach to teaching and learning (Maor, 2003).

One emerging option with enormous potential is blended learning. As defined by Lencastre and Coutinho (2015, p. 1362) blended learning is "a style of education in which students learn via electronic and online media as well as traditional face-to-face teaching". With blended learning, it increases the potential for learners to participate, reflect, and collaborate with each other actively.

This article discusses the steps to create an online adult education course. The article explains how to develop or adapt the curriculum, design learning sequences, manage the online session, and facilitate the learners' learning experience.

The article is an output of an Erasmus+ project and considers the specificities of heterogeneous audiences with difficulties in the basic knowledge of a foreign language.

Background

Nowadays, most learning is blended learning, as almost learning situations include some face-to-face classroom situations and online education. Typically, a series of content blocks sequenced to create learning experiences supported by resources like videos, images, digital books, and Learning Management Systems (LMS). Besides, blended learning resources are accessible to learners at the time and place of their convenience, as well as accommodating hard-to-reach learners, being one of the most inclusive forms of education. But blended learning is more than a series of content blocks sequenced to create learning experiences both face-to-face and online. Blended learning is about aligning learning objectives with the most appropriate instructional strategies and technologies while meeting the needs of your learners (Hofmann, 2018).

A review of research on blended learning conducted by Lencastre and Coutinho (2015) identifies a variety of definite educational advantages: impact in students' academic performance (Owston, York, & Murtha, 2013; Filippidi, Tselios, & Komis, 2010; Garrison & Vaughan 2008; Riffell & Merrill, 2005) in particular regarding the reduction of dropout rates and improving in exam marks (Lopez-Perez, Perez-Lopez, & Rodriguez-Ariza, 2011); students' motivation and satisfaction (Ugur, Akkoyunlu, & Kurbanoglu, 2011; DeGeorge-Walker & Keeffe, 2010) due to collaborative learning (So & Brush, 2008) as well as cooperative learning (EL-Deghaidy & Nouby, 2008); easiness of access and flexibility (Jonas & Burns, 2010); cost-effectiveness (Herman & Banister, 2007); more active learning when compared to face-to-face courses (Smith, 2013; Cooner, 2010; Donnely, 2010), and when compared to distance learning courses (El-Deghaidy & Nouby, 2008).

When designed and implemented effectively, blended learning is compelling and educationally effective.

Method

Any course project begins with a need's assessment. This is no different in a blended learning course. As we use a student-centred design, we began our research by characterising the target audience that guided all our procedural options.

The method used was the self-administered questionnaire. Thirty responses were collected in Portugal, mainly from refugee women, but also from men, with the support of the Portuguese Council for Refugees (CPR – Centro Português para os Refugiados).

Data Collection Tool

The questionnaire was divided into two sections, namely Level A1 and Level A2. According to the Common European framework for languages A1 and A2 reflect the level of a basic user of the language. The questionnaire dealt with six (6) main concepts including: (i) Listening; (ii) Reading; (iii) Spoken Interaction; (iv) Spoken Production; (v) Strategies, and also (vi) Writing. These main sections were elaborated with statements reflecting the levels of congruity which best fit the respective respondent. Respondents were given total freedom of answer in order to better assess their relative position in language knowledge and use, but in some cases, there was a need to support their answer through the resource to professional supporting and translation services (at CPR).

Data Analysis

Data collected from the participants were evaluated and interpreted to produce a clear picture of the situation that is being tackled and also the common/shared characteristics. In the analysis of the data, the frequency technique was used for the production of quantitative data. On the other hand, a descriptive analysis method was used for the formation of qualitative data. Data obtained in this way were classified and thoroughly interpreted.

Results

This section covers the results inferred based on the findings obtained from the questionnaires, and the suggestions from these conclusions.

From the 30 respondents, 29 were clearly self-placed at the A1 level of language domain, not being able to progress further to level A2 where only 1 respondent was self-placed. In this last case, the respondent showed self-confidence in all given domains except in understanding “phrases, words and expressions related to areas of most immediate priority (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment)”.

From the 29 respondents of Level A1, only 1 respondent left all fields blank, meaning he/she is not able to domain any basic information about the Portuguese language (total absence of language skills).

The above indicates that the majority of respondents (28 out of 30, that is, more than 90%) are capable of using the Portuguese language as follows:

(i) **listening** • In the area of ‘listening’, the main areas of domain are “understand when someone speaks slowly” and “understand numbers, prices and times”, both gathering 86% of answers. Following, 79% “understand questions and instructions” and finally, 71% “understand simple directions”. It is possible to conclude that on which concerns listening, the biggest majority of respondents are placed in the basic A1 level of understanding but they are quite comfortable at that level, as almost all the percentages are high, being the area of most difficulty to understand simple directions.

(ii) **reading** • When it comes to ‘reading’, the biggest score, 100% are able to understand a questionnaire, while 89% can understand words and phrases on signs of everyday life; 82% can understand information about people in newspapers, 75% can locate information on posters, can understand orders in a computer and can follow short simple written directions; 71% can understand short simple messages on postcards and understand simple messages written by friends. In line with it, also concerning “reading”, all the respondents (with the above mentioned 2 exceptions, 1 above and 1 below this level) are quite well placed at the A1 level of knowledge as the percentages of replies range from 71% the minimum to 100%.

(iii) **spoken interaction** • When it comes to ‘spoken interaction’, 96% of respondents are fine to introduce somebody and to use basic greeting; 82% are able to ask and to answer simple questions, 78% are able to use time-related expressions and relative positions; 75% are able to make themselves understood in a simple way but depending on the interaction partner to support them, are able to make simple purchases and also to handle numbers and prices; finally 71% are able to ask and to answer about general subjects or to ask people questions about themselves or to provide answers under the same subject. Concerning spoken interaction, there is also a relative comfort at A1 level of language, with percentages of answers ranging from 71% to 96%, meaning that in those categories, at least 20 up to 27 respondents out of 29 deal with it just fine.

(iv) **spoken production** • Concerning ‘spoken production’, the biggest score is on giving personal information (naturally as this being an immediate area of need) with more than 96% as well as asking somebody to speak slowly, also reaching 96% of participants being able to do it. It is followed by the capacity of saying when they don’t understand what the interlocutor is saying (88%) and the capacity

to describe the place of living (81%); despite with the lowest score, also the capacity to ask somebody to repeat is under the domain of a majority of respondents (76%).

(v) **writing** • In the area of ‘writing’, 96% of participants are able to fill in a questionnaire with personal details, 64% can write sentences and simple phrases about themselves, 60% can write a note to tell somebody where they are or where to meet them; finally, only half of the participants (50%) say they can write a greeting card or a simple post card.

Discussion

Based on research conclusions, the following suggestions were developed with regards to the features that should be considered when designing an online course for this target group.

- To build up the solutions for language learning by including an assessment strategy in order to clearly place each participant in the correct starting level (A1 or A2).

- To strengthen the A1 domain as clearly the majority of participants (29 in 30) only have this level of language domain and, albeit they are generally quite comfortable on it, there are still some identified fragilities.

- In the area of (i) ‘**listening**’ to reinforce the domain of spatial identification and mobility (“going from point X to point Y, either by foot or public transport” was the category with less positive replies).

- When it comes to (ii) ‘**reading**’, the most fragile categories of language domain were understanding simple messages on postcards as well as simple messages of everyday life, an area where the project should also focus and provide for.

- In the area of (iii) ‘**spoken interaction**’, the most fragile category, where we focus on is “ask people for things and give people things” and also “ask people questions about themselves”, that is, two areas of undeniable importance on communication and interaction with other people.

- Concerning the (iv) ‘**spoken production**’, the most fragile category is to “ask somebody to repeat what they said”, which should be considered as rather simple and basic activity within the languages learning.

- when it comes to (v) ‘**writing**’, we should consider as the most fragile areas the redaction of a greeting card or simple postcards; however, it is also true that, given the condition of the estimated learners (refugees and, mostly, women), it is advised to identify the most priority areas of learning in order to guarantee effective added value to this specific target-group and to their life context.

Known the context and audience, we organise the proposal accordingly. Each topic is a progressive step in the curriculum development and implementation processes.

Designing and Teaching an Adult Education Course

The previous topic provided an overview of the target group, which will help to understand its potential and will help to design the curriculum.

Designing an Adult Education Course

This topic identifies the steps to follow in course design and presents the curriculum components that will be important to create the course.

Develop the curriculum in modules. Because the course is tailor-made for this audience, having the curriculum in modules makes the content adaptable if we want to use it with another audience. Each module will contain a brief presentation, an activity and a quizzing. Doing this integrates the course in a way adult learner prefer to learn.

Interweave exercises or quizzes within a video lecture sequence to permit short assessments (no more than five questions). This is very easy to do with the Edpuzzle or TedEd applications. These are digital and interactive tool that lets one to cut, customize and remix video content online by embedding quizzes for evaluation (or self-assessment) of knowledge. Taking advantage of the fact that they are online apps helps to enhance curriculum interactivity while making it as rigorous as a face-to-face course.

One should teach in the same student-centred as in face-to-face classes. Although online learning is unique, the andragogical principles and pedagogical approaches that are used in regular adult education still apply. Just because your course is online does not mean it should be less academically intense. For example:

- Creating a shift from individual to collaborative learning.
- Promoting reflection and creating reflective practicum among teacher and learners.
- Changing the role of the lecturer from an “expert” to that of a co-learner.
- Promoting and facilitating a student-centred approach to learning in which learners become responsible for their learning.

Participate in the user community, providing: (i) clear guidelines and course criteria for participating; (ii) criteria for learner assessment; constant support for learners and ensure that assistance is available if required. Intervene in discussions if dialogue between learners stalls or goes off track. Be flexible to accommodate unforeseen problems and issues.

a. Course Matrix

The first step to developing the online course is organising its curriculum. Whether we are creating a new course or converting an existing one, we need to identify each component of the course, how and where it will be accessible to learners.

An online course needs more than just a syllabus. Need to have engaging elements to be an interactive online course. Thus, it may be necessary to prepare everything in the online tool (such as Moodle) to link documents describing the course curriculum with links to resources or files.

b. Course Description

Similar to a catalogue of printed courses, the course description is one of the first things a learner sees about his classes. Thus, it is imperative to give an informative and engaging course description, but as explicit and detailed as possible. The simple way is beginning to describe the course using the syllabus.

To our target audience, it is essential to outline the topics and skills the course covers, and also how the knowledge gained from the course can be applied to the real world. Another important aspect is the learners' assignments and assessment. So, with this adult audience, one needs to have clear the answers to questions they might ask, such as these:

- What kind of assignments will there be?
- On what day of the week are assignments typically due?
- What types of assessments are there?
- What is the regularity of the tasks for assessment?
- How long should they spend on the course per week?
- In what ways the course is related to their needs?

- What is the preferred method, and under what specific circumstances, learners can contact the trainer?

Usually, adult learners prefer to use email to contact the trainer. Optionally, we prefer to use the online forum where the course will take place (for example in Moodle), since providing a direct contact, such as an email address, increases the workflow. On the other hand, a forum allows one to answer some questions and be visible to all the class, saving work to the trainer. And often the issues are similar.

c. Trainer Qualifications

In addition to academic and professional qualifications, a brief biography (up to 1000 characters with spaces) should be put online to provide information on the teaching philosophy and about the style of the course. Do not forget an individual photo (140 x 160 pixels) and also the contact email (for an emergency).

If in addition to the short bio we want to put an autoscropy, it is necessary to remember that in 2 or 3 minutes the video must:

- To introduce the trainer.
- To describe the learning objectives of the course.
- To give an idea of the style of the course.
- To describe why the course is important.
- To define what the learner must do to be successful in the course.

d. Prerequisites to Online Training

If the online course has prerequisites, they should be displayed on the first page. If there are no academic prerequisites, one can indicate technical requirements for the online course. Standard technical requirements in a blended learning course include any special system requirements and/or special software needed.

e. Preliminary Documents

Preliminary documents include the materials that the learner sees upon entering the online platform, such as these:

- **News** - This topic serves to write direct information to students, so they feel comfortable in their online class. The first message should be a welcome announcement. Likewise, one should create weekly notifications that detail what is happening in the course, when the assignments are due, and what is expected for that week.
- **Syllabus** - The syllabus presents the name of the course, name of the trainer, course topics, objectives of the course, grading rules, list of learning materials, textbooks, references, assignments and assessments standards.
- **Timetable** - The timetable defines the deadlines for the course assignments — the more detailed, the better.
- **Forums** - The rules for each forum should be clear before the course starts. The learners need to know how many posts are required in each forum, how often a student needs to respond to a classmate and more. It should also address etiquette and best practices. One could inform students when forum moderators will be available online.

f. Learning Sequences

The backbone of the online educational experience is the learning sequence. When developing the online course curriculum, we need to remember that the goal is to provide interactive learning experiences to our adult learners by having them participate in course content more often than they would in a face-to-face class.

As we are dealing with adult learners, our approach to instruction will be to use videos and interlacing with quizzes that allow short answers to keep students engaged in the content. In each video, we use only one to five quizzes. It's better to have a larger quantity of units that are shorter than fewer units crammed with more content.

g. Videos

When it comes to videos, learners expect them to work with a click, without having to choose between options. Nowadays, YouTube has videos that can enrich our sessions, both face-to-face and online, and we just need to search correctly.

To deal with our target audience, we want to have short but also engaging and informative videos. We have to limit the videos from 3 to 5 minutes in duration (Nielsen & Loranger, 2006). It should be remembered that the average time that students watch on an Internet video is less than 3 minutes. Therefore, smaller is better.

Note that it may be essential to have subtitles in the videos because they are a way of including a learner with some limitations.

h. Self-Assessment

Our course ends with a short self-assessment to determine whether or not the learners found the learning value, such as these:

- Have your expectations for this course been met?
- What would you like to learn that you didn't?
- What was the most useful thing you learned?
- Would you recommend this course?

The answer to these kinds of questions will help to improve your course in the future.

Teaching an Adult Education Course

For most adults' women refugees, a classroom can be intimidating. If they never attend a class online, it is understandable that they have some degree of apprehension about what it will be like and how well they'll do.

Your job as an instructor of adult learners includes being positive and encouraging. Give your learners time to respond when you ask a question. They may need a few moments to consider their answer. Recognise the contributions they make, even when small. Give them words of encouragement whenever the opportunity arises.

Being positive and encouraging is not the same as being condescending. Remember that your learners are adults. Talking to them as if they were a child is offensive, and the damage can be severe to overcome. Genuine encouragement from one person to another is a beautiful point of human interaction.

This is your challenge as an adult refugee educator. Beyond teaching your language to a foreigner, you have the opportunity to inspire confidence in another human being.

The first session is always face-to-face

Because learning in a blended environment is a new experience for many adult learners with the profile of the ones we are addressing, “you should start the course with a face-to-face session. This allows you to know the learners and get them to know each other before interacting online” (Lencastre, 2017, p. 217).

As with any other course it is good to start at the beginning and talk about who is there, what they hope to accomplish, and how they will achieve it.

Build the opening of your class to make presentations and review your goals and timetable:

- Introduce yourself and ask participants to do the same, giving their name and sharing what they expect to learn during the course.
- Indicate the objectives of the course, explaining how certain expectations will be met.
- Review the syllabus, and show that you care about the course and have tried to plan it carefully.
- Review the timetable.

If you are considering teaching according to your learners learning styles, a learning-style assessment would be a perfect opening. It is commonly accepted that visual learners can learn better when they see what they are trying to learn, and auditory learners do better when they can hear. Kinesthetic learners learn best by doing.

Listen to the expectations of your learners. Expectations are powerful, especially when you are teaching adults. Understanding your learners' expectations about the course you are teaching is critical to your success. Make sure you know what your students expect with this icebreaker of expectations. This is a good icebreaker that will relax the students and make them feel free to share. Remember that you are dealing with adult learners who are out of their natural environment. Adult learners learn better when they are comfortable with the other people in a classroom.

Keep your presentation to less than 20 minutes if possible. Remember that adults generally stop retaining information after about 20 minutes.

Design an activity that gives your adult learners an opportunity to practice what they just learned. Activities that involve breaking into small groups to complete a task or to discuss an issue are good ways to keep adults engaged.

Activities can be games, role plays or small group discussions. Choose your activity based on what you know about your learners and on the content of your class. If you are teaching a foreign language, like this proposal, hands-on practice is a great option. It is a perfect opportunity for them to share the life experience and wisdom they bring to the classroom.

After an activity, it's essential to bring the group back together and have a general discussion about what was learned during the activity. Ask for volunteers to share reactions. Ask for questions. This is your chance to make sure the material was understood.

Roles and responsibilities of an online trainer

Online training is an entirely new educational experience, requiring a re-examination of the trainer's role (Maor, 2003). As an online trainer, you're an innovative element of learning-teaching processes.

According to Maor (2003), the online trainer has four main duties, namely: (i) pedagogical, (ii) social, (iii) managerial, and (iv) technical.

Let us explain below these different duties and some recommendations, which although they are from the 90's they remain up-to-date.

- **Pedagogical Role** - Providing feedback and instruction; Probing / asking questions; Stimulating the discussion; Synthesizing learners' comments; Referring to outside resources or experts in the field.

Pedagogical Recommendations (Berge, 1995) - Have clear objectives; Maintain as much flexibility as you can; Encourage participation; Maintain a non-authoritarian style; Be objective; Promote private conversations as well as those in the course room; Find unifying threads; Use simple assignments; Make the material relevant; Required contributions; Present conflicting opinions; Invite visiting experts; Don't lecture; Request responses.

- **Social Role** - Affective support; Interpersonal communication; Setting a positive tone; Keeping the communication flowing.

Social Recommendations (Berge, 1995) - Guard against fear; Watch the use of humor or sarcasm; Use introductions; Facilitate interactivity; Praise and model the discussant behaviour you seek; Do not ignore bad discussant behaviour; Expect that flames may occur.

- **Managerial Role** - Coordinating the learning units; Overseeing / grading assignments; Overseeing course structure.

Managerial Recommendations (Berge, 1995) – Informality; Distribute a list of participants; Be responsive; Be patient; Request self-reflection; Be mindful of the proportion of instructor contribution; Use private email for prompting; Be clear; Don't overload; Handle tangents appropriately; Vary participants' amount of contribution; Preparation time; End the sessions.

- **Technical Role** - Guiding in the use of technology; Assisting learners in finding needed technical assistance; "make the technology transparent" (Berge, 1995)

Technical Recommendations (Berge, 1995) - Use technical support; Provide feedback; Develop a study guide; Provide time to learn; Promote peer-learning; Giving direction

Conclusion

Adult trainers often find themselves redesigning curriculum, exploring new pedagogical approaches, and seeking stimulating changes to their courses; especially when working with hard-to-reach groups. This paper introduces blended learning and course design to adult learners hard-to-reach.

Using data from questionnaires to women refugees regarding their educational needs and learning materials, we recollect basic suggestions on how to design and teach an adult education course. We succinctly explain some online approaches, compares pedagogy styles and learning theories with a focus on women's knowledge, and they compare traditional education to blend instruction. Our primary focus was writing an accessible manuscript to all teachers and trainers.

Although it is unlikely that just designing a course and drastically altering an adult motivation to learn, it is essential to recognise that learner motivation is dynamic. Through your course design and teaching practices, you can create class conditions that encourage the involvement and motivation to learn at multiple levels. By implementing some of the strategies presented in this article that fit your target group's learning style and class environment, you can significantly stimulate the involvement of adult learners in learning.

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