Blended & Online Learning - the French exception?

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that “the online lifestyle of young people going into higher education was inescapable” (Melville et al., 2009: 5) and that the transition to online teaching and learning has created new challenges, as the roles and expectations of both staff and students continue to evolve. With the introduction of Web 2.0, the social web, the traditional classroom of one speaker and many listeners is gradually being transformed to incorporate various online resources and new teaching practices. The paradigm shift to a more student-centred approach using digital technology is often referred to as blended and online learning (or BOL) to describe the combination of two different methods; face-to-face teaching in a classroom and learning where students interact with computers (Ellis, Steed and Applebee, 2006; Graham, 2006).

This paper presents and discusses research into BOL, taking inspiration from higher education institutions (HEIs) in Britain, thus supporting the view that the UK is a leader in e-learning in Europe (Patterson et al., 2009; Hamouda et al., 2010).

Literature provides abundant advice on how to make the transition to BOL, citing examples from large, public-funded institutions often located in English-speaking communities. Substantial investment enabled many British HEIs to establish a centrally supported e-learning service in the early 2000s; success stories encouraged HEIs to continue using online learning (Donnelly et al., 2006). Although research has been undertaken on “conventional universities going online” in France (Patel and Patel, 2006: 27), there is a lack of literature that addresses the issues facing small, privately-funded, non-English speaking institutions wishing to make the transition. To this end, this paper sets out to explore how BOL can be ‘marketed’ to the French, taking into account the very conservative consumer behaviour in this setting.

Aim

The aim of this study is two-fold; firstly, to critically review the literature available in the public domain in order to assess current trends in BOL in HEIs - and secondly, to develop an innovative approach for facilitating the transformation to a VLE at IDRAC Lyon, one of the seven business schools in the IDRAC network (France).

Existing Studies

Interactive media enable learners to co-construct knowledge through asynchronous discussion boards, chat rooms, web conferencing, online social networks, wikis, etc (Hwang and Francesco, 2010). The work of Vygotsky (1978) promotes the use of social constructivist learning theories, emphasizing that much learning is acquired via a collaborative nature when the individual is placed at the centre of the learning experience. Digital technology provides the potential for establishing communities of inquiry and as a result, McCombs and Vakili (2005) believe that online learning can empower students to become more independent and to take control of their learning. “E-learning also provides a relatively anonymous learning environment, so there is less pressure to perform well in front of colleagues as might sometimes be the case in classroom-style training” (Bell, 2007: 8). Garrison and Anderson (2003:106) state that this technology “has moved into the mainstream of higher education and is beginning
to be recognized as a strategic asset”. The emphasis is on delivering skills which will enable students to not only to be able to operate the technology, but also to be able to recognize and comprehend what it means to live in a web-based, networked society (Punie, 2007). European educational directives confirm this to be the case.

Today’s young business graduates are expected to possess numerous professional and technological competencies to handle the challenges created by web technology in the globalised workplace. Business schools face “serious criticism” on the grounds of ineffectiveness in responding to such change (Kaplan et al., 2010: 50). Many institutions sense that the world is passing through a technological revolution, but they lack convenient, reliable information to guide decisions (Halal, 2008). Institutions which fail to embrace technological change could find themselves losing students to those institutions which position themselves as providers of digital skills. Moreover, given the current trend towards ‘sustainable’ and ‘responsible’ organisations, BOL can be perceived as a tangible effort to reduce CO2 pollution caused by the daily commute, and to save resources (less paper and time spent in the classroom). However, studies show that while printing costs may decrease, institutions often have increased expenditure related to the design, development and delivery of online courses, plus the extra time it takes for staff to support students online (Bennett et al., 1999; Mutula et al., 2006). Certain institutions such as Harvard and the University of Minnesota charge more for online courses due to the amount of time that goes into providing online support (Krakovsky, 2010).

How applicable are these notions of technology-enhanced education to non Anglo-Saxon communities? Literature suggests that there may be a cultural gap in the perceptions of online collaborative learning. The way in which students engage in learning is thought to be influenced by personal experiences within particular cultural contexts (Zhu et al., 2008); student reactions to the social-constructivist learning environments differ depending on both the learners’ prior experiences and also the distinct communication norms across different cultures (Chang and Lim, 2002). It is likely that international students feel less inhibited when using technology-enhanced learning compared to face-to-face situations. Online support networks can help international students to overcome “various social or psychological stresses” (Ye, 2006: 5). BOL allows students to share and learn from each other's experiences in authentic tasks; it enables exposure to alternative viewpoints, constructive criticism and reflection within the student community (Lee and Lee, 2004; Zhu et al., 2009).

In the case of IDRAC Lyon, there is an urgency to encourage the use of BOL. Ideally, the potential users need to be informed about the technicalities of an e-learning platform and how it will be implemented (the ‘technology integration plan’), explaining how it differs from the current provision and the broad benefits of using the new technology. So far, information is scarce and uncertainty avoidance is high. Many users are still getting to grips with the existing technology; firstly, an e-campus open-source platform (http://ecampus.idraclyon.net) which is used mainly for posting information and course documents as it offers few collaborative tools; and secondly, Spiral, an e-learning platform developed by a local Lyon university which offers a significant range of useful collaborative tools but whose existence is ignored by the majority of teaching staff. As a first step towards technology-enhanced learning, BOL would appear to be more ‘culturally compatible’ with the current provision than pure e-learning. The work of Schweizer et al. (2003: 211) found that “learners in the
blended learning condition who worked together face-to-face led a much more coherent discourse than learners in the pure e-learning conditions”.

At the time of writing, there is no clear strategy in place to guide staff and students to work with either the e-campus or Spiral. This is an issue that needs to be addressed before launching a BOL plan. It may require a change of culture in the institution (ILT, 2009). A useful approach put forward by Inglis, Ling & Joosten (2002:119) would be to address the skills gap and “begin by making an assessment of the existing skills of staff against the range of new skills that you know will be needed”. This can be carried out by online survey to ascertain how many staff require basic training in using a VLE before approaching more diverse tools such as podcasts or wikis, etc. However the question still remains of how best to initiate the users to the new technology without alienating them. It is important that potential users have the inclination and capacity to use the technology (Inglis, Ling & Joosten, 2002). The choice of platform depends on the needs of the institution and the users (class size, features, budget, etc). It must to be relevant and realistic. Literature recommends using platforms that offer easy access to a wide range of communication and collaboration tools, as well as ease of use, i.e. single logins for accessing online courses and other institution-related information (Weller, 2002).

An additional issue to deal with is the change in modus operandi. People need to be given the opportunity to develop the necessary skills for using a VLE. They need to understand the difficulties and benefits of learning online (Mainka, 2007). Studies by Palloff & Pratt (2001: 23) found that “staff cannot be expected to know intuitively how to design and deliver an effective online course”. Equally, students cannot be expected to know how to use such technologies without first being shown how (Oliver and Dempster, 2003). Many of today’s tutors are unfamiliar with social constructivism, namely that “the most important features of humans as a species are that they have developed language…; that they fashion their own tools…; and that they can transmit the discoveries and inventions of one generation to the next” (Case, 1996: 80). The implication of this view is that tutors need to be willing to relinquish some of their control in the teaching process in order to allow for student empowerment as well as the creation of learning communities (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). This aspect mandates a change in culture and a willingness to learn new skills to develop innovative methods of learning. It can take time to set up and deliver; and it thus represents a considerable cost to the institution (Smyth et al., 2007). It may be necessary to offer extra (paid) time for staff to develop courses using BOL, to reduce teaching loads to make up for the time involved in providing online student support or even to give financial rewards for staff to be trailblazers - acting as mentors to encourage others to use BOL (Howard, 2004). This is especially true in the case of IDRAC where the majority of the teaching staff is part-time. It can be anticipated that part-timers will question this issue and demand compensation for their time.

Students need to be trained too; not only in how to use the software but also in how to learn in an online environment (Howard, 2004). Research by Kellogg and Smith (2009) suggests that some “students find these particular communication technologies to be undesirable” (p. 441). Even though today’s students belong to the cohort of so-called digital natives and are therefore familiar with the generic online interface of web browsers (Weller, 2002), it does not follow that they know how to learn online.
A further requirement is to ensure that the institution’s infrastructure is able to handle the widespread use of BOL. Inevitably, technical problems will arise and therefore users need the guarantee that problems will be addressed promptly - otherwise the BOL initiative cannot succeed. This is a further challenge for IDRAC since the current ICT support is technically dependent on outside providers and it is currently unclear who will be responsible for dealing with technical issues related to BOL.

Lastly, administrative services and library resources also play a key role in successfully delivering BOL and they need to be considered as an integral part of the transformation process (Mainka & Benzies, 2006). This underscores the importance of establishing a clear and comprehensive strategy before embarking on a BOL project. Auditing the current context in the British sample seems an ideal place to start, prior to embarking on the design of a technology integration plan for IDRAC.

Methodology

The methodology is structured in two phases, a secondary research phase and a field research phase. The secondary phase explores a number of macro-literature aspects; the higher education environment, technological considerations from a cross-cultural perspective, management teaching settings and so on. For the field research, face-to-face interviews were conducted between July and December 2010 with staff and tutors in HEIs. The institutional illustrations were not produced with the intention of generalising across different national contexts; they provide a modest snapshot of how different institutions integrated technology-enhanced learning. The sample was selected through networking. As the studies of Milroy and Milroy (1992) have shown, people respond more positively and in a natural manner when they are part of a social or professional network. Starting from the higher education networks of IDRAC Lyon, a list of professional contacts were approached to participate in the interviews; 5 in France and 5 in England. These people then nominated further contacts, generating 1 HEI in France and 3 in England. In view of the imbalance in national setting, the French HEI was used for the pilot test. Anonymity was requested.

Given the small sample size and the qualitative approach used in this exploratory study, caution needs to be exercised when interpreting the data and generalisations need to be avoided.

Findings and discussion

An analysis of the interview data from the British HEIs suggested that the implementation of technology-enhanced learning does not automatically produce a fully-functioning VLE. This is one of the key findings of the interviews. A second observation was that while the 3 institutions share a common approach to technology-enhanced learning, there was disparity too. The responses illustrate a range of experiences that yielded a broadly positive transition to blended and online learning. All 3 institutions set up their VLE internally (a decade ago) although funding came from different sources in each case. When the VLEs were launched there were mixed reactions from the staff ranging from enthusiasm (in the HEI delivering learning 100% online) to suspicion (in the 2 HEIs where learning is blended). As far as students were concerned, some perceived online course materials as an alternative to attending lectures. There were also some issues with setting the “tone” for
communicating online with tutors; it was necessary to clarify the distinction between social and academic information. Overwhelmingly, the respondents noted that introducing a VLE has improved the learning experience with greater flows of information between tutors and students, but there remain certain reservations - especially the importance for 24/7 technical support.

During the course of the interviews, three specific issues were raised by respondents; the use of the technology, the need to emphasize the acquisition of other (basic) skills, and prerequisites for making the transition to technology-enhanced learning (see appendix). Above all, it was felt that; firstly, the use of technology in HEIs should not undermine or be detrimental to the acquisition of basic skills - reading, writing, communication and analysis - secondly that the use of BOL must be kept in perspective, as a tool to enhance learning. Staff felt that the role of the HEI is to deliver more than academic facts; students need to develop their interpersonal skills. For this reason, tutors need to make every effort to ensure that the students are able to use the technology intelligently and critically in order to succeed in today’s workplace. Lastly, teaching staff maintain that BOL is not to be considered as a finite entity; it needs to be carefully integrated into the specific culture of each institution.

In other words, technology-enhanced learning needs to be approached with caution, in order to not lose sight of the basic fundamentals of higher education.

Discussing the limitations of using BOL, one tutor (who wished to remain nameless) commented that “everything is possible online but it is fast becoming a question of ‘the more facilities added, the more the likelihood of things going wrong’. With the best will in the world, problems cannot be anticipated. In a student group, there’s always a problem to solve ... PC access, logging-on, broadband issue, forgotten passwords and so on. The tutor becomes the focal point for all student questions (academic or technical) ... this is one of the biggest drawbacks for e-learning ... the online course has to be planned and delivered at the speed of the lowest-common denominator (many students are not as techno literate as they would like to appear), to reduce the risk of them getting left behind.” These comments highlight some of the obstacles experienced by the British HEIs. In the context of French higher education, there is also the factor of uncertainty avoidance to be taken into consideration.

Without first-mover advantage, IDRAC can take time to observe how other institutions have integrated BOL and then adapt a VLE that accommodates the specific local context in terms of management style, cultural issues and resource allocation, particularly the human factor. The biggest hurdle will be changing the culture and then building trust in a new approach to learning. Students need to learn how to take responsibility for learning and sharing information among peers. Teachers need to relinquish direct control. This is a new way of thinking in France.

Taken as a whole, this paper has a modest ambition to solicit views and feedback. In this small sample, the analysis of the interview data suggests that the adoption of online learning initiatives is a complex process, involving challenges at different levels. More research (involving student comments) is needed before BOL can be introduced to IDRAC. Hoping to use technology-led learning in response to a trend is not a good idea. Teachers and students will only adopt new tools if they perceive them as being useful and meaningful for the task at hand.
**Appendix**

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<th>HEI 1</th>
<th>HEI 2</th>
<th>HEI 3</th>
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<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>What was the main</td>
<td>A VLE was set up by 2 students as a placement project</td>
<td>To achieve one overall pedagogical approach across the university and</td>
<td>There was a government push to install a VLE (although it didn’t</td>
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<td>motivation for</td>
<td></td>
<td>to harmonise individual tutor styles. The VLE was designed by</td>
<td>address “why” it was needed), combined with increasing</td>
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<td>introducing blended &amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td>tutors internally (but migrated to a new platform in late 2010</td>
<td>competitiveness across British HEIs. The notion of e-university</td>
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<td>online learning?</td>
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<td>to reduce running costs and to enable each student to</td>
<td>and world-class learning was a flop so the university</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>configure the VLE to suit their own needs). NING is used front-</td>
<td>developed its own approach.</td>
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<td>end so students can meet online before the start of term</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(improves retention and “settling in” process). Interactivity in</td>
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<td>NING lasts about 2 months then the students set up groups on</td>
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<td>Facebook. Corporate emphasis is on “life long” learning.</td>
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<td>What year did you</td>
<td>Online learning was launched in 2000 (100% online, not blended)</td>
<td>VLE in 2002 and NING in 2008</td>
<td>About 2000 - but techie staff had been exploring the area of BOL for</td>
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<td>create your VLE?</td>
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<td>years</td>
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<td>Where did the funding</td>
<td>Originally an in-house project, now self-funded and very profitable,</td>
<td>VLE is an internal e-campus that grew</td>
<td>The British government provided £100, 000s over 4-5 years</td>
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<td>come from?</td>
<td>working in partnership with Laureat</td>
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<td>What initial</td>
<td>Being pioneers, the users were motivated, enthusiast and keen</td>
<td>Staff had the suspicious attitude of “what’s in it for me?”</td>
<td>Staff were very apprehensive and some staff still don’t like to</td>
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<td>feeling did staff &amp;</td>
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<td>use even use. Every</td>
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<td>students have</td>
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1. VLE = Virtual Learning Environment
2. NING = Ning Network
3. BOL = Blended Online Learning
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<th>about using blended &amp; online learning?</th>
<th>set in their ways; the longer they’ve been teaching, the more difficult it is to adopt BOL. Some won’t use it because of a bad experience (technology issue or lack of skills); so many tutors just pay lip-service but don’t engage. Mostly, younger staff use it; they are the trailblazers with the new skill set who can deliver course materials by podcast. There is encouragement to use BOL and (like email 10 years ago), it is slowly spreading. Some faculties insist on online submission and some don’t (like the business school). Current dilemma is whether to allow students to follow a course virtually or impose turning up to class. The university mandates attendance. The students want to keep online course materials and socialising online very separate; there has been progressively too much blurring of boundaries. It is time to draw the line and (try to) put an end to some students taking advantage of social media, for example, to undermine teaching staff.</th>
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<td></td>
<td>module must have a web CT presence (since 2004) but this is not enforced across the intuition. The biggest cost of moving online lies in the staff development time. Students were apprehensive but after trying it they asked for more of the same – but they still want F2F interactivity with the tutor.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
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<tr>
<td>In what way did staff &amp; students first use blended &amp; online learning?</td>
<td>Courses are all offline or 100% e-learning (no BOL yet)</td>
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<td>How has blended &amp; online learning changed the way you perform everyday tasks?</td>
<td>Much higher inclusion for non-native English speaking students (greater international intake; majority of students are non-UK residents), students appreciate the flexible learning patterns, compatible with today’s job skills. Different mix of students (compared with campus-based) ... so there is always the problem of different time zones for students doing group-work across the globe. E-learning enables students without much self-confidence to be more active in class discussions and to contribute more to</td>
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The course, and therefore to learn more. Bigger class size due to greater student enrolment (greater diversity and ability to manage). Of all the learning models (purely online, mixed with practitioners or mixed with outsourced partners), e-learning has created a new approach, more ethical because it is more inclusive (despite the isolated cases of bad business practice of Phoenix University).

The institution must avoid putting unnecessary pressure on staff and upset them by imposing more presence online, asking them to develop more online course materials.

learning materials (for academic awards and CPD or continual professional development in key skills) but they do not want e-learning to completely replace the tutor presence. Students want to maintain F2F sessions with tutors, especially for feedback. The new (younger) students place greater emphasis on ‘flashy’ web-looking screen.

| Are there any activities that you do not use (or prefer NOT to use) via blended & online learning? | No | Everything is possible but not always time-saving or cost-effective. Synchronous interaction (not as developed as asynchronous). | No, business programmes are the most compatible courses to deliver online |
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