Transitioning From Barely Blended Learning to

Fully Blended Knowledge Building

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Introduction

Many universities are redesigning traditional face-to-face courses into blended (also called hybrid) or fully online courses. However, it is a very slow process that, for extended periods of time, often deprives students of such courses' technologically enhanced opportunities to participate in interactive and social learning environments that would engage them and allow them to construct their own knowledge collaboratively and most effectively. While some faculty members may not see this as a pedagogical deficiency, there are others who do; furthermore, there are growing numbers of students who are fully capable of discerning such deficiencies and willing to voice their displeasure when they feel they are not getting up-to-date teaching methods and full value for their tuition. To maintain their reputations and continue attracting the best students, it is essential for top universities and colleges to ensure that their courses—and professors—are keeping up with the times and offering students the best possible learning experiences and outcomes. Although it is possible to make positive headway in that direction with a 100% online course, especially when geographical distance precludes the possibility of any face-to-face classroom interaction, blended learning (BL) environments have the potential to make even more positive headway. Currently, with today's existing technologies, an appropriately implemented BL approach can afford students opportunities to interact, collaborate, and socialize—both synchronously and asynchronously—as they build new knowledge together. In other words, a well-planned and coordinated BL approach can offer learners the best of two worlds—both in the classroom and online (Kampov-Polevoi, 2010, p. 9; Norberg, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2011, p. 5).

This qualitative study will attempt to identify some key reasons for what is often a very slow course redesign process at many top universities and then propose some possible strategies that may improve the situation. As a starting point, it will focus my own active participation and self-reflections since becoming involved on a course redesign team at a well-respected university in Korea. It will also elicit reflective peer feedback from three foreign professors about their attitudes and concerns in regard to significant changes in course delivery methods for a specific prerequisite course called Basic Academic English (BAE).

The Problem

In BAE, beginner level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students learn basic English presentation and writing skills to prepare themselves for the more advanced core course, Professional Academic English (PAE). In what our department coordinator has described as the university's drastic and hasty measures to cut costs, in-class instructional time (*seat time*) and credit hours in the existing BAE were suddenly reduced in late February 2014 and teachers in our department were advised of this change only a few days before the beginning of the spring semester. We were told that the new version of the course had now become a *split* course by replacing two hours per week of in-class instructional time with one hour of online TOEIC prep lessons. It was further explained that the online portion of the class would be administered by a separate department and that BAE teachers would have nothing to do with it. The only other adjustments we had to make were to amend our grading percentages so that the in-class portion of BAE would total only 70 percent, thus leaving 30% to be assessed according to students' performance in the online portion of the course. Because the online portion of this hastily split course was grossly inappropriate for the majority of the BAE students, there were a large number of student complaints that ultimately

resulted in what our department coordinator announced as a "call for teachers to take part in the BAE Online Course Development Project."

I am on the team that was selected for this project and, since getting started on it, meetings and conversations have revealed that the online portion of the course will primarily be used to deliver content that will include mini-lectures, tutorials, and a few role-plays developed by the online course development team. In other words, it will rely almost solely on Web 1.0 technology, not allow students to create any content or engage in any online interactivity. In essence, the online component will provide students with much of the content that was always taught in the classroom and allow classroom teachers to focus on problem solving, assessment, and perhaps some collaborative group work, if time permits.

Because the new online portion will now actually be integrated with and constitute one-third of the overall course content, it can be called a *blended* course; however, that would not be entirely accurate. As will be explained in the following paragraphs, it is more accurate at this point to describe the new BAE course as a *web facilitated* course with some *blended/hybrid* attributes (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007, p. 5).

While this blended approach will be a vast improvement over the hastily contrived split course, (in which, as mentioned, the online content was a TOEIC prep course that was far too advanced for BAE students and totally unrelated to the BAE curriculum), the new online portion of the course will be much less effective than a more interactive and constructivist approach that would allow students to become content creators and learning community collaborators. I have already interviewed a few of my students who have taken online video lesson classes and, without exception, they have all responded with robust negativity about the one-way communication system. There is ample literature to substantiate the fact that online learning is better facilitated with Web 2.0 technologies that

engage learners with such key affordances as synchronous and asynchronous multi-directional interactivity, user generated content, social learning, and group collaboration (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). As it stands now, however, the BAE course redesign (or BAE Online Project) should only be regarded as a foundational "web facilitated" step in the right direction.

The reason my department has decided to compromise with the less pedagogically effective approach is important because it is faced with a situation that exists in many schools: some of our most senior instructors, who have taught here for years, have always managed their courses without making use of even the most basic of technologies (such as spreadsheets, email, or learning management systems). Like most departments at most universities, ours is being pressured into cutting costs by developing more blended courses and, as a result, it has taken the position that, in order to meet budgetary requirements as quickly as possible, the online portion of the course must be implemented as soon as possible and must not force any teachers to learn any new technology. Consequently, as a result of the preceding two conditions, BAE will therefore be constrained to existing as little more than a Web 1.0 technology based content delivery system with unidirectional video lessons, no collaboration or social networking space, and only a hastily written student workbook (in the form of a downloadable PDF file) to provide a limited degree of what would appropriately be labelled as *pseudo-interactivity*. (I suggest the term *pseudo* because students will only be using their workbooks when they are prompted by the video lesson, which means that their interactions will not be with real people—but with a video lesson and a workbook.)

Of course, data will be collected during the development of the online lessons and used for revisions and improvements, but, for the reasons outlined above, that will not be the key purpose of this research. The more relevant and long-term purpose of this study will be to shape future strategies that would encourage the willingness and ability of senior foreign

faculty members to update their technological skills and teaching methods so that future course conversions can be based more on student-centered pedagogy than on teacher-centered technological illiteracy.

Therefore, based on all the above—as well as current literature that suggests a number of possible reasons for technology resistance—my primary question would be, *"How can our department's technologically resistant foreign instructors be persuaded to upgrade their technical skills and instructional methodologies in order to facilitate seamless and timely transitions from outdated content delivery modes to more pedagogically advanced constructivist approaches?"*

Data analysis is to be based on the redesign team's ongoing collaborations, my personal field notes (based on those collaborations and related observations that will be made throughout the redesign process), direct feedback from participating faculty members, and an ongoing process of self-reflection. I would then develop a hypothesis about the most acceptable and effective solution for this problem.

Literature Review

Defining Blended Learning

It is common knowledge that there is a plethora of technology being used in education all over the world. Because of this abundance and variety of technologies in the hands and minds of multitudinous users with diverse backgrounds, it is important to have a clear understanding of the terminology being used when describing a project such as this. What, for example, is meant by the term *blended learning*? The answer varies, depending on who one is asking. Ocak (2011) summarizes eleven different definitions in the first section of his literature review and then concludes that section by providing the definition that was used for

his study. He also states that BL is generally conceptualized "as combination of web-based learning and face-to-face learning" (2011, p. 690) in most of the literature. Oh and Park (2009) take a similar approach in their study, summarizing a comparable number of definitions, and outlining various *blended instruction* models that take very contrasting approaches to the topic. They also make the point that there are no definitive standards that are commonly implemented. As Delialioglu, & Yildirim point out, BL is implemented in different ways by different institutions (cited in Oh & Park, 2009).

For the purpose of the present study, the BAE Online Project is considered to be a BL course. It is comprised of a combination of the one-third online video lessons plus two-thirds face-to-face classroom activities and, as cited in Ocak (2011, p. 690), it would be considered to be blended by Niemiec, Rooney, Young, and Driscoll. Furthermore, the online portion comprises more than 30% of the overall content, so it also technically falls within Allen, Seaman, & Garrett's (2007) parameters for blended/hybrid courses.

It must be stressed, however, that until it includes online discussions, user generated content, collaboration space, and interactivity with real human beings, the BAE course should be regarded is a work in progress that will reach a fully blended state only after the questions raised by this study have been answered and acted upon.

Facilitating Timely Transition

In addition to clarifying this study's definition of *blended learning*, it is necessary to consider the research that has already been done in the area of facilitating a faster advancement towards the more effective constructivist and social learning pedagogies that are now so easy to implement, thanks to today's Web 2.0 technologies. In a recent case study by Graham, Woodfield, & Harrison (2013), they examined circumstances in which six universities were in the process of adopting and implementing their own BL initiatives and,

in addition to identifying some core issues related to six different stages of the

implementation process, the researchers recommend that future research take a close look at

transitions between those stages of the process:

> For example, many institutions of higher education that are in the
>
> awareness/exploration stage would like to transition to adoption/early implementation.
>
> Research related to this transition could investigate how an institution uses adoption
>
> of BL to build or strengthen its culture of high quality teaching and learning. Also the
>
> boundary between adoption/early implementation and mature implementation/growth
>
> is fuzzy. Research could investigate the specific processes and interventions that
>
> successful institutions use to institutionalize BL. (2013, p. 11).

While data collection for the Graham, Woodfield, & Harrison (2013) study relied

exclusively on interviews with university administrators and directors, an earlier study

specifically titled "Why are Faculty Members not Teaching Blended Courses? Insights from

Faculty Members" (Ocak, 2011) focused on data collected mainly from 117 faculty members

who were currently teaching or had recently taught a BL course at one of four state

universities in Turkey. As in the Graham, Woodfield, & Harrison (2013) report, a case study

approach was taken, using purposive sampling, and data collection was undertaken via semi-

structured interviews.

Ocak's research question was: "Why do faculty members prefer not to teach blended

courses?" (2011, p. 692) and, after interviewing the participants, developing a coding scheme,

and grouping the data into three inductive categories (instructional processes, community

concerns, and technical issues), the researchers determined eight themes that served as sub-

categories for the three aforementioned categories. Of all the coded responses, "24.93%

specifically indicated that the complexity of the instruction in blended courses is the primary cause of faculty unwillingness to teach blended courses" (2011, p. 694).

This is fully consistent with the BAE Online Project team's current experience as we have been overwhelmed by the complexity of putting together the first 5 of the 14 video lessons that will comprise the online portion of the BAE course. (That being said, in the interest of keeping things in perspective, I must also report that, with the five courses that I have personally converted to fully blended environments over the past four years, complexity has always been an issue—but it has never been overwhelming. This, I believe, is simply because I was never handicapped by being limited to an outdated delivery mode such as the one that is now being imposed on the BAE Online Project.)

The second highest percentage of the coded responses came under the "community concerns" category and, specifically, 17.26% of the respondents identified "lack of institutional support" as their main deterrent from teaching blended courses. (This is not surprising either, because, early on in the project, I dutifully advised my department and course redesign team that the unidirectional video lesson approach—with no interactivity, collaboration or social networking space—has been soundly debunked by both current literature and every student I have personally interviewed, but this information was shrugged off.)

In a Korean study conducted by Oh and Park (2009) with 30 randomly selected universities, there were similar results. It was found that, while many faculty members felt positive and cooperative about participating in blended instructional methods, most were not motivated because there was not enough incentive to compensate for the extra workload (2009, p. 340). Furthermore, the more senior *associate* and *full* professors tended to express

low confidence in their own technology competency, while more junior faculty member (between 31 and 40 years old) tended to express the highest confidence level (2009, p. 339).

Methodology

August 27 has been designated as the official *screening day* of Lesson 1. The production studio will present the video lesson to various department heads, the course redesign team, and four teachers who will be invited to view, assess, and provide feedback. Because of the financial constraints explained earlier, this, in essence, is our pilot for the entire course. If the production company prepares them in time, the storyboards for the next four video lessons may also be available and they may be included in this pilot.

Both action research and multiple case study research will be combined for data collecting and analyzing on this project. Because I am actively involved on the course redesign team, and all the participating instructors are BAE teachers, the former is both inevitable and desirable because this study needs to be "persuasive and authoritative, relevant, and accessible" (Mills, Airasian, & Gay, 2011, pp. 507–510). The latter methodology has been chosen because this study is being undertaken in real-life under unpredictable circumstances and, according to Yin (2002), "a case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially between phenomena and context that are not clearly evident" (p. 13).

Although four teachers are being invited as "pilot" teachers, one of them has already had significant influence on the redesign project because he is married to one of the redesign team members and occasionally provides helpful suggestions during our collaborative work sessions. Therefore, in the interest of objectivity, confirmability, trustworthiness, and overall validity, he will not be a case study participant.

Although the generalizability of this study's results will be limited (due to purposive sampling), the criteria by which the three case study participants were selected ensures that, collectively, they are a strong representation of the population with which this study is most concerned. Here are the criteria by which they were chosen:

- They have taught the BAE course for at least two full semesters and had some experience with the recent split BAE course fiasco.

- They have never (or rarely) used online technology while teaching this or any other course.

- They have expressed interest in learning how to use technology in their teaching, but have never been able to fulfill that desire.

- They are currently using interactive and student-centered methodology in their classroom. (This indicates that they may be open to constructivist pedagogy.)

- They have proven leadership skills and are well respected by the majority of their colleagues in the department.

In addition to meeting these criteria, one of the least tech-savvy participants (whose pseudonym is "Jack") also happens to be the most senior member of our faculty, with more than 13 years in the department. He has also served in leadership roles, is highly respected by his colleagues, and one of the most eloquent and persuasive speakers I have ever known. Another participant is a female ("Jill") who has worked here for 4.5 years. This is Jill's first ever teaching job in higher education: her previous teaching roles were in elementary education. Like Jack, her knowledge of technology is very limited. But she is extremely adept at expressing her opinions—even when they go against the prevailing currents. The third participant is "Jasmine" and, unlike Jack and Jill, Jasmine has an extensive background with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). She is relatively new to this university and, when not teaching or presenting, Jasmine is relatively shy and reserved. Because of

their diverse teaching backgrounds, ages, personalities, and technological abilities, I believe that these three participants are an excellent representation of our department's entire teaching staff.

The actual screening of Lesson 1 will take place on campus at the E-Learning Center. During the meeting--which will undoubtedly include a period of post-screening feedback and questions—I will take field notes on the discourse as much as possible and, with permission, make an audio recording of the proceedings so that the Korean comments can be transcribed into English for future analysis.

Immediately after the screening meeting, a brief *after-screening* meeting will be held in which the three teacher participants will be provided with all the information they need to complete the Screening Questionnaire online (see Appendix) and given a copy of all available storyboards (lesson plans) for future online lessons. They will be asked to complete the online questionnaire by September 10, which provides them with two weeks to reflect on the screening and peruse the lesson plans. It also allows the redesign team to make urgently needed last minute revisions on the lesson plans before video shooting begins on September 15 for Lessons 2 to 5. According to the production studio, all of the remaining lessons can be shot on the redesign team's non-teaching days during the last two weeks of September.

During midterm week in October (after shooting is complete), I will conduct semi-structured follow-up interviews with each of the three participants. The interview questions will largely depend on the Screening Questionnaire responses and they will be designed to seek further insight into teachers' attitudes about BL and how it should—or should not—be implemented in the BAE and other courses currently being taught in our department. Here are some sample questions:

- Was the Screening Questionnaire what you expected it to be?

- Were there any items on the questionnaire that seemed problematic or inappropriate?

- What kinds of questions did you expect on the questionnaire?

- Now that we have started developing the online part of the course, what does the term *blended learning* mean to you?

- What are some reasons that blended learning should—or should not—be implemented?

By being able to triangulate the data from the three participants, the data analysis should provide some major themes that can be generalized at least to the population of interest (our departmental instructors). Using those themes, I would then prepare for a second round of interviews that could be used during the midterm week of the Spring 2016 semester, which is the target semester for the newly blended BAE course to go live. During the second round of interviews, the participants will have benefited from seven weeks of teaching the course with actual students and they, I expect, will learn that, as the literature strongly predicts, that their students' are not fully engaged with the unidirectional (or "boring") online video lessons. They will also have had opportunity to reflect on their own initial responses to the Screening Questionnaire, which I expect will also have been generally negative. Between the two sources of negative responses (their own plus their students'), there is a possibility that the participants' attitudes about BL and technology may further evolve and my very hopeful hypothesis is that they will come to their own conclusions about the need for meaningful interactivity, collaboration, and social learning opportunities in the blended BAE course. Here are a couple of sample questions that might be asked in the second interview:

- How much time do you think it would take to learn all you need to know for successfully teaching blended learning courses that provide students with opportunities to interact, collaborate, and use social media to build knowledge?

- If I told you that it was possible to get enough training in less than half a day, would you be interested in participating?

Significance

Although there are a number of unfortunate pedagogical and support issues that, as already described, have a negative impact on the BAE Online Project, it should be noted that, unlike some of the institutions discussed in much of the related literature, my university is compensating the redesign team for the extra workload and time that we are expending on this project. Our colleagues are aware of this and I don't expect that the financial compensation issue will emerge as a major factor that deters our colleagues from getting involved with BL.

As stated earlier, the major stumbling blocks to an effective BL initiative in our department have more to do with resistance to technology and perhaps some genuine concern about the complexity of instruction—and the time that it would take to learn how to use the related technologies. If my methodology and hypothesis prove successful and our participant teachers begin to embrace some of the constructivist and social learning principles that should have been part of the BAE Online Project from its inception, their evolved attitudes will have a major impact on the entire department because, consistent with the sampling criteria, they are all very well respected for their teaching expertise and leadership abilities.

In conclusion, the findings of this study would pave the way for a progressive BL initiative that could improve learning outcomes for thousands of students who attend classes taught by our department. Admittedly, this study is limited in scope and generalizable only to our rather unique department. However, the educational value that it would bring to some of Korea's best students at one of the country's leading universities makes it well worth the effort.

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Appendix: Research Instruments

Part A - Questions from a Student's Perspective
For each of the following 6 statements, think about how you might have felt as a student working on the video lesson and indicate how much you agree or disagree with it:

1. *I learned a lot in the online lesson.*
　　__Strongly disagree
　　__Disagree
　　__Undecided
　　__Agree
　　__Strongly agree

2. *The teachers are very knowledgeable about the topics they are teaching.*
　　__Strongly disagree
　　__Disagree
　　__Undecided
　　__Agree
　　__Strongly agree

3. *I paid attention to every minute of the lesson.*
　　__Strongly disagree
　　__Disagree
　　__Undecided
　　__Agree
　　__Strongly agree

4. *During all 35 minutes of the lesson, I was never bored at any time.*
　　__Strongly disagree
　　__Disagree
　　__Undecided
　　__Agree
　　__Strongly agree

5. *I enjoyed interacting with the video and the workbook.*
　　__Strongly disagree
　　__Disagree
　　__Undecided
　　__Agree
　　__Strongly agree

6. *I feel enthusiastic about online learning that does not require me to interact or work together or socialize with any of my friends.*
    __Strongly disagree
    __Disagree
    __Undecided
    __Agree
    __Strongly agree

7a. *As a student at one of Korea's top rated universities, this online lesson meets my expectations.*
    __Strongly disagree
    __Disagree
    __Undecided
    __Agree
    __Strongly agree

7b. Use the space below to write any comments or explanations for the previous question:

8. Use the space below to write a brief self-reflection on how you think you might perceive and respond to the online video lesson if you were an EFL student in this BAE class.

Part B - Questions from a Teacher's Perspective

Please respond to the following questions according to your own perspective as an educator. For each multiple choice question, choose only one response.

1a. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

The content of the lesson fully met my expectations.

__Strongly disagree
__Disagree
__Undecided
__Agree
__Strongly agree

1b. Use the space below to write any comments or explanations for the previous question:

2a. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

The objectives of this lesson are appropriate and clearly explained.

__Strongly disagree
__Disagree
__Undecided
__Agree
__Strongly agree

2b. Use the space below to write any comments or explanations for the previous question:

3a. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

The expectations of the online course and how to use it were clearly explained.

__Strongly disagree
__Disagree
__Undecided
__Agree
__Strongly agree

3b. Use the space below to write any comments or explanations for the previous question:

4a. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

The workbook activities for this lesson are appropriate and clearly explained.

__Strongly disagree

__Disagree

__Undecided

__Agree

__Strongly agree

4b. Use the space below to write any comments or explanations for the previous question:

5a. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

The interactions between the two online teachers provide students with an effective model on how they might interact with each other in English.

__Strongly disagree

__Disagree

__Undecided

__Agree

__Strongly agree

5b. Use the space below to write any comments or explanations for the previous question:

6a. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

This online lesson provides students with good opportunities to interact with the video and workbook.

__Strongly disagree

__Disagree

__Undecided

__Agree

__Strongly agree

6b. Use the space below to write any comments or explanations for the previous question:

7a. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:
This online lesson provides students with good opportunities to interact with one another.
__Strongly disagree
__Disagree
__Undecided
__Agree
__Strongly agree

7b. Use the space below to write any comments or explanations for the previous question:

8a. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:
I think this lesson would be better if students had a way to interact with one another.
__Strongly disagree
__Disagree
__Undecided
__Agree
__Strongly agree

8b. Use the space below to write any comments or explanations for the previous question:

9a. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:
I think this lesson would be better if students had a way to work together in pairs or groups.
__Strongly disagree
__Disagree
__Undecided
__Agree
__Strongly agree

9b. Use the space below to write any comments or explanations for the previous question:

10a. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

I would be willing to learn some new technology if it gave students more opportunities to interact and work together in their online lessons.

__Strongly disagree

__Disagree

__Undecided

__Agree

__Strongly agree

10b. Use the space below to write any comments or explanations for the previous question:

11. Now that you have had opportunity to check over the storyboards (lesson plans) that you were given after the screening of Lesson 1, please use the following space for any feedback or constructive criticism that you feel may help improve the online portion of the BAE course.