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Blended online courses. Observations on technology integration, students engagement and instructors’ new roles in language courses.

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**Abstract**

This article has the scope to provide reflections and present good practices regarding the Blended format courses now widely spread in Universities and Colleges across the globe. I will report here my personal experience as an Italian Language Lecturer who adopted the Blended online model for remote teaching in my field of expertise. I will illustrate teaching strategies and issues related to the introduction of technology in the course structure and content, grounding my observations on scholarly researches conducted on the matters of distance online learning, students engagement, cognitive load, and instructors’ professional identity.

The time period in consideration goes from Spring 2021 to Spring 2022.

**Article**

There is still a big debate going on about teaching language online, its pedagogical validity, its downsides, its actual feasibility. Fact is that there is a market out there that has been thriving for decades, hundreds of students are currently enrolled in private online language courses, they use web applications to practice and learn new languages and meet native speakers for language exchange programs.

After spending the past year delivering Blended language courses, it is my opinion that Italian language programs, whose enrolment is in constant decline in North America (Looney, Lusin and Granacki) and any other language course that has been relegated to the “elective” category, could immensely benefit by a conversion to a more modern and agile form of delivery such as the Blended one, which can address a number of stakeholder needs. Blended courses can improve learning performance (Garrison), increase access, retention, and enrolment. Adopting the Blended format results in the cost decreasing for institutions and learners (Vaughan et al.) Furthermore, Blended courses foster tie and space flexibility and reduce completion time, very appealing characteristics for today’s learners.

Beside the proven benefits the Blended courses are able to provide to all the actors involved, there is an untold intellectual need among language instructors, to know that technology is at the present moment an unavoidable element in our teaching equation.

Computer technology, online interactions, virtual spaces of experiential online learning are components that both serve and stimulate intercultural understanding and curiosity. Teaching Languages is now, more than ever, teaching intercultural communication and the ability to engage with the world. How can Language teaching disregard the fact that communication technologies have transported intercultural education in a whole new dimension? The opportunity to connect with cultural otherness, to explore open source learning materials, to transcend the geographical boundaries of the classroom and the time schedule have given and are giving to our teaching and learning experience a unique shape and dynamic.

The wide use of technology through the adoption of Blended courses format can be a game changer
for Language courses. Given that "the essential function of blended learning is to extend thinking and discourse over time and space" (Vaughan et al. 9), this is the model to work with in this post pandemic era, where time and space in the learning and teaching environments are not the ones we used to know anymore, changed forever after 2 years of adaptation to distanced and asynchronous interactions.

Teaching at university level is of course different from delivering a crash course for tourists who want to visit Italy. Nonetheless we should not be dismissive or snub towards new learning media initially designed for a different level, less institutionalized kind of education. It is also important to consider that learners are now a very manyfold public compared to the one we used to deal with only ten years ago. Our students are more than digital natives, they grew up in a totally different learning environment that trained them to be particularly receptive towards certain formats of information and media channels.

The multitasking attitude the new generations have developed, together with their complete reliance on technology for any kind of information and entertainment, has shaped a totally diverse target audience for our language classes.1

The invention and application of the Blended model is certainly much older than March 2020. Someone could argue that the first Blended model of teaching and learning was born the moment books replaced the oral tradition of passing knowledge, back in the Middle Age. But the massive adoption of Blended courses today, looks like an unprecedented phenomenon that happened as a consequence of almost 2 years of living in an emergency situation during the Covid 19 pandemic.

After only a few months since the regular in-person going remote, keeping their original content, contact hours and schedule, it was evident that something had to change, organically and permanently in our teaching method.

It was clear we could no longer adapt our old syllabi in a constant emergency state. Instructors and students were going through rapid and cyclical burn-out and the cognitive load caused by in-person courses delivered online was unbearable for students, forced to spend 6 to 8 hours a day attending lectures.

A consistent and complete modification toward a new standard of teaching and learning was in high demand. The adoption of the Blended format was the answer that many university and colleges provided and, in spite of the fact that an important portion of faculty members were and still are skeptical about the Blended format, it is a fact that this hybrid form was key to solving a multitude of issues presented by remote instruction.

I started using the Blended format for my Italian language courses during the Spring session of 2021. My first attempt was more experimental than other solid pedagogical theories, although I had spent the previous months studying and researching new methodologies and teaching approaches capable of functioning in the remote environment.

I taught the first level of the Italian language courses for total beginners and I adopted for the occasion a European textbook compliant with the CEFT guidelines, abandoning the usual American publications and counting on a more interactive content, delivered completely in Italian, that could foster the deductive method and critical thinking. The textbook had an e-text version and a platform where various learning activities were provided, but it was mainly on my university web-based learning management system that the students and I could interact and work, in addition to the synchronous part of the course held via Zoom.

What is a Blended learning model

Blended learning is, according to Garrison and Vaughan (148) “the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches and technologies”\(^2\). It typically has an asynchronous portion (between the 20 and 50% of the entire course hours) and synchronous part.

This time redistribution is only the tip of the iceberg. Transforming a regular language course into a Blended one does not mean pouring the same content into different shaped containers, it requires a complete revolution. From the basis, such as the choosing of the learning material, to the top, such as the pedagogical approach used and the selection of learning outcomes.

To design an efficient Blended course, it is not sufficient to dismantle the content of a regular, classic in-person one and reassemble it considering a new Synch/A-synch structure, merely contemplate the addition of some technological elements to an existing course.

A total redesign of the course content and framework is necessary to create an integrated structure able to “utilize the best of what both face-to-face and online learning have to offer” (Cleveland 6).

The new product not only needs a different composition, especially regarding the activity section, but to function properly it often requires a revised pedagogical approach, because Blended courses base their efficacy on fostering and working with and for learning communities.

This axiom is based on the theory exposed by Lipman in 1991 who has argued that education is intrinsically inquiry. He suggested in fact that “the community of inquiry is perhaps the most promising methodology for the encouragement of that fusion of critical and creative cognitive processing known as higher-order thinking” (Lipman 204).

Communities of inquiry seem to be the perfect cornerstone of Blended courses as they are the only entities potentially able to fully take advantage of “the conditions for discussion, negotiation, and agreement in face-to-face and online environments with virtually limitless possibilities to connect to others and to information” (Garrison and Vaughan 10).

Adopting a Blended format requires a shift in professional perspective. It demands a reorganization of teaching priorities and techniques, it re-centers and reassigns roles and duties to every participant.

In this regard, I experienced firsthand how differently the classes moved toward our course objectives when I transferred the objective of the learning dynamic entirely on the students’ role, while I started acting as a facilitator, supporting their learning experience, helping but not conducting it. The response was consistently positive, and only a small number of students felt the loss of the traditional teacher-learners-material structure as an issue. Their reasons, mainly cultural, will be explained later in the article.

The introduction of a significant amount of technology based learning activities in the language learning process caused, as said, an inevitable redefinition of the student-teacher roles, alongside with a change in quality and quantity of the interactions between students and teacher, student-student, student-learning material and teacher-learning material.

As Reich and Daccord pointed out, the effective use of technology comes when “teachers are doing less of the teaching and students do more of the learning” (xvii).

Being able to rely on interaction and easily accessible learning material my students started acting with more agency and self-awareness when given the chance, during the asynchronous time especially. The opportunity to directly deal with the learning material and their peers, generated

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\(^2\) Please note that the face-to-face / synchronous part of Blended courses can be conducted either in person or online. The experience I report here concerns the second option.
personal accountability and students were able to more efficiently manage their everyday duties and to better understand the academic goals set. I also observed that in my new online Blended classes students were capable of self-assessing their individual performance much better than my former students who only worked with me in person only, using traditional learning material.

**Technology and cognitive load**

One of the major troubles for instructors working in Blended environments is definitely finding a balanced and correct integration of technology into a consistent course structure, specifically designed for reducing the extraneous cognitive load, increasing the germane cognitive load, affecting the long term memory schemata, and inducing and producing a successful learning process (Sweller).

Extraneous cognitive load is caused by an unnecessary increase in variety and the number of elements students have to process simultaneously in their working memory. The majority of research in cognitive load theory has traditionally concentrated on techniques to reduce extraneous cognitive load in instructional materials (Van Merriënboer and Ayres 2, Sweller, Sweller et al.).

While technology is wrongly believed to be an excellent tool to simplify and facilitate any action, its introduction into the learning process very often adds elements that disturb the balance of extraneous/germane cognitive load increasing the first one to the point that the second is not available anymore.

For example, using animations, audio visual presentations, and fast interactive activities has been proved counterproductive in my experience. Those apparently fun and engaging forms of interaction with students have the serious issue of transforming permanent information into transient information. Especially when too long, too complex, or not technologically intuitive, games and audio visual presentations increase enormously the extraneous cognitive load, reversing their pedagogical effectiveness and becoming inadequate compared to conventional alternatives.

In my experience, for both the synchronous and the asynchronous parts of the Blended courses, it is successful to present shorter segments of transient information such as video no longer than 3 minutes, and reducing interacting elements like web-based games (especially avoiding their usage in close sequence in the same module).

Reducing in quantity and limiting in variety those elements is important to decrease any unnecessary stress in both students and instructors, but we should not eliminate them because animations, for example, allow students to draw upon their innate ability to learn by observing (Ayres, Marcus, Chan and Qian, Wong et al.); while the audio parts foster and exploit their skill of learning by listening in a double process situation (Mousavi, Low and Sweller).

Containing the use of those kinds of technology components in well-defined timeframes, and confining them to specific purposes (relax/fun moments, review, reflection) will result in a smaller extraneous cognitive load and will allow these new instruments to unleash their educational potential.

Taking away all the unnecessary elements in online communication is key to reaching the efficacy we want when teaching.

**Technology and student engagement**

Technology is a crucial part of Blended courses. It has been found that using technology as a teaching tool promotes student participation and interaction (Absalom and Marden, Boles).

Moreover, computer mediated technology, virtual interactions, online spaces for discussion and learning are elements that foster intercultural understanding and curiosity, two elements that are the
foundation of student motivation when it comes to learning a new language. It is a matter of fact that existing and ever evolving technologies have changed intercultural education radically, and it would be beneficial to use them to drive change in our language courses, instead of being driven by this inevitable transformation. For our students, the increased opportunities to connect with cultural otherness, to access in real time any OER (Open Educational Resources) and to interact beyond the traditional classroom limits, are factors that are shaping in a unique way the dynamic of their learning experience. We, as instructors, should take advantage of the potential technology expresses in our new learning and teaching environment, in order to create appealing and operative courses, rooted in what is today in demand in the job market and attuned to our students learning style.

Technology based activities have also demonstrated, especially in these past two years, the ability to enhance the efficacy of the collaborative learning method (Eastman and Swift, Li), the foundation of the Community of inquiry pedagogical model, which itself has proven to be the promoter of “higher achievement as well as personal and social development” (Li 504).

Technology has the immense advantage of connecting beyond time and space all the participants in the teaching and learning arena, and it is undeniable that using technology as a teaching tool promotes students’ participation and interaction (Absalom and Marden, Boles). But the human element, especially when teaching second languages, is equally important. That’s also why for language courses I’d recommend never to exceed the 50% fraction of the course for the online part.

Students’ engagement is based on multiple factors (internal and external), among them the type and the quality of the interactions organized during the course are pivotal. Technology can help in supporting student engagement and retention but it is also powerful in demotivating them.

I strongly recommend to use only technology the instructors are familiar and comfortable with. It is crucial for the effective use of this double edge teaching tool. I strongly believe in the motto “less is more” and I could verify first hand how the students appreciated this approach. I did not use in my past courses any web application to interact with my students, beside our very rich Learning Management System, and the platform provided with the textbook. I avoided interactive games and any activity that involved having multiple devices involved simultaneously (cell phone + computer) or required the latest OSs (Operative Systems).

When instructors select technology they would like to use, it is important to take into consideration the following questions: 1) Is the tool user friendly enough for my students? 2) Does it require a specific or rare kind of device for support? 3) Can it run on any OS? 4) Can it cause any technical problem to those who do not have a stable wi-fi connection?

If the answer is yes to just one of these questions, it is strongly recommended not to adopt that tool or activity in your program.

Considering the students usually work under time pressure to complete assignments and tests, or to take part in various timed online activities, having to deal with technical issues due to the malfunction of the tools chosen by the instructor can be particularly frustrating and discouraging to them.

Technical difficulties, system-based problems, computer-based learning issues emerged in many studies as the main reasons for discontent and disengagement when not the very motive why students withdraw from a course (Bambara, Harbour, Davies and Athey, El Mansour and Mupinga, Hara and Kling, Mupinga, Nora and Yaw, Navarro and Shoemaker, Rivera, and Rice, Zavarella). When looking for a Blended course capable of keeping the students focused and interested, it is essential that you find the right technology to use and distribute it, keeping in mind its accessibility. Digital inequality, brought up by the usage of computer based media, is a powerful disengaging
element that can get in the way of your students’ academic achievements. Consider carefully the way the learning material you provide will be used by your students. This will allow you to overcome, as much as possible, the discriminations of the uneven distribution of resources that affects our society. Moreover, it will make your course accessible and inclusive.

In a modern country like Canada, approximately 8% of households do not have a home internet subscription. This problem affects especially low-income students who cannot access home computers and internet connectivity for schoolwork, (“63% of households in the lowest income quartile had less than one internet-connected device per household member) and that belong to that 13% households in Canada that live where internet service is unavailable at the CRTC’s national target of 50 megabits per second (Mbps) for downloads, 10 Mbps for uploads and unlimited data use.

Those numbers tell us we can not take for granted that our students are able to connect to every synchronous session or to take part in live interactions. This is why I preferred to provide my students with downloadable activities and learning material instead of timed, one-tentative and highly interactive exercises. Privileging static products instead of others, such as high-quality video that requires a certain powerful bandwidth, allows your students to interact with the material in a logged-off modality, which is definitely more manageable for those with less economic means.

Another factor to take into consideration when reflecting on technology and student engagement is the discrimination some students with disabilities may face because of the usage of certain forms of media that requires special audio video interactions.

In 2018, about one-fifth of people with disabilities did not use the internet, compared to only 10% overall, mainly because they were not able to access expensive technology that would mediate their access to the online content.

Engagement and positive learning outcomes are not merely affected by technology. Cultural identity has a significant impact on student participation and perception of Blended courses, because of their online component. Culture influences learning motivation, attitude toward communication, collaboration and interaction, students' recognition of what is useful, enjoyable, important and effective.

Edmundson claims that “e-learning courses are cultural artifacts, embedded with the cultural values, preferences, characteristics, and nuances of the culture that designed them, and inherently creating challenges for learners from other cultures” (Uzuner 42). It is important therefore that instructors are trained to create a Blended course culturally and pedagogically relevant not just to students in their local contexts but taking into account the various backgrounds of the student body as a whole. It is especially true that instructors working in Blended environments should be informed and aware of the needs of their learners refraining from simply relying on “best practices” native to dominant educational cultures.

In Canada the extremely culturally diverse student body poses a challenge to the Blended course design that is difficult to completely overcome. Online activities must be designed carefully considering that the cultural heritage of the students can result in different learning performances that need therefore to be assessed according to a diversity and inclusion informed approach.

Hannon and D’Netto's study drew attention to the fact that the skills and experiences students bring to the distance learning environment are highly influenced by their cultural backgrounds. Different cultures engage differently on the same topic, react differently to the same method, value differently the relations on which the Community of inquiry is built. Most of all, every culture communicates using different degrees of context (high and low), being aware of those variables is of the utmost importance for an instructor willing to create and teach an effective Blended course.

Being mindful about those many receptive discrepancies and cultural inconsistencies among the student body is the first step toward the organization and delivery of a Blended course whose
mechanisms, priorities, structures and outcomes need to be fully understood by participants. Not only our students come from different cultures and learning experiences, but many of them have never attended a Blended course so far.

In light of these considerations and based on my experience it is strongly recommended at the beginning of the course to illustrate carefully the content and the framework each unit presents. It is also suggested that each unit has the same structure/activity sequence in order to minimize any confusion.

Diversifying the kind of interactions available in each module is also a good strategy in order to avoid leaving out the students who are not comfortable engaging in certain ways. In addition, encourage the expression of the potential of all the learners involved by not proposing activities which would penalize those not familiar or culturally at ease with one particular form of interaction. Equally important is that instructors model the target behavior or learning outcome expected from the students. Do not assume your students are familiar with the learning activity prepared.

In a Blended environment, not explaining clearly the purpose of each learning activity, presenting a restricted type of activities/interactions, and not modelling the best way to perform activities can create unequal engagement among the students, as well as disaffection, confusion and unreliable assessment results.

As an example, in a Blended/online education environment such as the American one, critical reflection is greatly valued but, as Biesenbach-Lucas’s and Thompson and Ku’s have noted in their studies, “challenging and criticizing others’ ideas may not be considered culturally appropriate in some cultural groups”. Hence critical reflection, discussion, brainstorming activities and even group projects could prove stressful and frustrating for some students from particular cultures, leading to poor learning outcomes and unfair assessment results if not adequately explained and presented.

**Technology and instructors’ professional identity**

The downside of this exciting professional adventure which saw me adopting divergent teaching and learning practices, sometimes in strong contrast with what had previously been established as canonic and functioning, and introducing a substantial amount of online computer based activities, was that the Blended model brought significant disruption and chaos to my professional life and identity. This unsettling experience has been extremely common among colleagues and, again, technology was blamed for having forced instructors at a corner of the teaching and learning arena and questioned their role.

For instructors, any profound change in learning environments is meant to trigger misalignment with established pedagogical assumptions and disruption to professional personas. Our instructional repertoires (McNaughton and Billot, Ocak), entrenched values, methodologies and beliefs (Comas-Quinn, Gerbic, Jonker, März and Voogt) have been questioned since the introduction of hybrid delivery modalities to our course.

Being forced to adopt the remote instructional method was a collective traumatic experience that did not help in evaluating sanely the great opportunity we were about to experience. It is my personal opinion that the upsetting way in which instructors have been introduced to technology and the new course format plays a big part in fostering the prejudices that still affect the adoption of blended courses.

The truth is that all the improvements the Blended model is able to bring to our table came at a high cost for us, for the fact that the transition was too quick and forced on us in a top down process. The amount of time the teachers needed to both plan and deliver courses, the implied training and professional support required and the possible uneasiness with the emergent model (Vaughan) made faculty very suspicious about potential long-term benefits Blended courses could provide. It is also a fact, beyond anyone's personal perception, that Blended courses demand a richer, more flexible,
diverse, technologically compatible instructional repertoire; this means that faculty are confronted and challenged with disruptions to their professional routines.

The risks associated with the adoption of such a radical model concern many aspects of our profession; challenges to professional agency, reduced self-efficacy, under-utilized subject expertise, increased administrative roles, possible widening divisions between faculty and students (Howard). But in my experience, they seem to affect mainly our academic identities (Hanson). The perceived “loss of teacher presence” and the threat to our “ontological security” made us, instructors, feel displaced in our fast transition from a traditional and culturally embedded role of valued subject experts before the Covid 19 pandemic and to one of compliant facilitators of knowledge construction today.

A renegotiation of our role as educators and scholars is still on-going, and it appears to be a long and inevitable process.
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