

Blended learning for teaching Theology

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New tools are added to the educational toolbox in order to enhance and support learning. This descriptive study expands and explains the intricate nature of blended learning. Adding to the four basic components of time, space, media and activities are the three modes of formal, informal and non-formal delivery and the external components of prior learning and lived experience. Contrary to the narrow use of traditional, mostly Western-based learning options, blended learning opens up the opportunity to incorporate not only developing technology but also neglected, traditional means of knowledge acquisition into the process of learning. It opens new pathways for the teaching of Theology in an African context. It adjusts to individual needs and serves as a countermeasure against potential digital colonialism and digital serfdom on the one hand and provide opportunities that close the space and time gaps and filter out academic isolation on the other hand. Blended learning allows educators to use and combine pedagogical approaches and learning and teaching theories in creative ways.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article calls for a widening perspective on the concept of blended learning, resulting in unique opportunities for Africanisation, decoloniality and a fresh way of teaching Theology in higher education.

Introduction

The landscape of education and training has transformed in the past decades mainly as a result of developments in information and communications technology (ICT). We are currently experiencing the fourth major revolution in the development of human communication and all four of these revolutions have brought significant changes to how people were educated. The first and basic tools used for education and training were demonstration and repetition. This was supplemented, first by language (the first revolution) and later by writing (the second revolution). The third revolution brought printed material to education (Oliver 2014). Technology is currently being added to the educational toolbox as an instrument and aid for instruction to enhance teaching, learning and assessment. This new addition causes widespread upheaval and disruption, and it will take time before it will be accepted as standard and normal practice in education and training. Bates (2010:22) says that the means through which learning is accomplished is in need of change and development. Blended learning is one option for altering and expanding that means to the needs of a 21st-century technology-based, network society.

The concept of blended learning is not new, as the term was coined in the 1990s. For a description of the development of blended learning, see Friesen (2012) as well as Taylor et al. (2018). As Masie rightfully points out, all learning can actually be called 'blended' as there is normally more than one medium involved in the learning process. He defines blended learning as 'the use of two or more styles of content or context delivery or discovery' (Masie 2006:22).

Although blended learning is therefore an integrated part of the learning process, while technology is constantly expanding the possibilities of the use of blended learning, limiting views on the concept of blended learning are hampering its expansion in higher education. A few years ago, the term 'blended learning' was used when students were provided with a combination of study guides and textbooks (hard copies) and electronic or online resources, which is now called 'paper behind the glass' (Ncube, Dube & Ngulube 2014:360). Today, blended learning is normally described as the combination of face-to-face teaching with online education, also called 'bricks and clicks'. It often includes the notion of a flipped classroom, where the instruction mode is more focused on individuals and not so much on the group (Auster 2015; Bonk & Graham 2006; Daniel 2016; Garrison & Vaughan 2008; Vidergor & Sela 2017a:85,89). A number of scholars link this use of blended learning with student-centredness and advocate that this could enhance good practice in the higher education environment (Garrison & Kanuka 2004; Palloff & Pratt 2011). However, there are also educators who feel that technology-enhanced media is threatening the quality and standard of traditional, face-to-face teaching (Daniel 2016:1). Daniel points out that when the

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issue is viewed from this perspective, it is actually not learning but teaching that is the focal point of the discussion. In this context, the term 'blended learning' actually refers to the different and evolving institutional approaches to and modes for course delivery (Daniel 2016:1), which confirms that learning is a complex issue. Bates (2015:145) is correct when stating that the use of technology should be combined with understanding how students learn, how they develop skills and also how the different media are used to transfer knowledge.

This article, however, does not focus on how learning takes place but focuses more on describing the different aspects and concepts that must be taken into account when blended learning is offered as the mode of instruction in higher education. Developing blended learning programmes and courses is no longer optional but imperative and should involve careful planning to include the full range of tools and options available for effective education. The tools used must enhance the learning process and not become obstacles or restrictions to institutions, educators or students. The different aspects and components of blended learning described below can support and guide educators and institutions in setting guidelines or providing supportive information and structure for incorporating the full scope of blended learning options into higher education curricula.

The meaning of the term 'blended learning' must be expanded to open up the opportunity to incorporate not only developing technology but also neglected, traditional means of knowledge acquisition into the process of learning. It opens new pathways for the teaching of Theology in an African context. Both these expansions are important in the current quest for effective and relevant higher education. It is in line with the 2013 White Paper on higher education and training by the Department of Higher Education that encourages universities to 'expand online and blended learning as a way to offer niche programmes' (DHET 2013:51). Educators and students must note the intricacy of the concept of blended learning to utilise it to its full potential, both inside and outside of the formal educational structures. Theology students must not only be able to use and incorporate blended learning in their studies but also transfer the broad basis for learning to the (faith) communities that they serve.

This is a descriptive study that focuses on the complicated nature of blended learning. The meaning of the term is expanded and explained to encourage educators and students not to limit the learning process by either implementing a narrow definition of blended learning or by utilising only traditional, mostly Western-based, learning options. The goal is to identify and recommend opportunities and possibilities for the use of blended learning to enhance effective higher education in general and specifically for theological training in the African context. After a description of the different components of

blended learning follow reasons why blended learning is important for higher education and also for the teaching of Theology in the South African context.

What is blended learning?

Blended learning refers to a multifaceted concept consisting of several adjustable and overlapping components and modes. The blended learning process in general is influenced by external aspects such as the prior learning and life experiences of each student. Blended learning forms part of the personal learning environment or network of students and is uniquely structured according to the circumstances of each individual.

Blended learning forms the second main pillar of the triangle of effective education in the open distance educational environment (Oliver 2015:3–4). The triangle consists of student-centred teaching and blended learning as the two base pillars, with transformative assessment constructing the pinnacle. These three key pillars are equally important parts of the educational process. Linked with each other, this framework can provide effective education that produces self-directed, lifelong learning. Blended learning, as part of this framework, assists students to broaden their scope of learning and enables them to transfer and implement the knowledge and skills gained to their daily lives.

Littlejohn and Pegler (2007:75–76) state that blended learning consists of four adjustable aspects, namely time, space, media and activity. These components form the basic structure upon which blended learning in the network era of individual learning environments is built. Following a brief discussion of these elements, additional components that also form part of the blended learning concept are added.

Time

In the traditional (face-to-face) educational environment, where students study full-time, the size of the time component is much bigger than in the distance education environment, where most students have less time to study because of other (e.g. work and family related) responsibilities. However, technology enables both full-time and part-time students to study at times that suit them best. Study time and learning activities are no longer linked to class schedules or the office hours of academics. Technology-enhanced learning includes both real-time (synchronous – like Skype, synchronous conferencing and virtual learning environments) and delayed-time (asynchronous – like blogs, wikis and chat rooms) technology-mediated communication interactions between students and educators, students and institutions, students and study material and contact between students and other stakeholders. The biggest advantage of 'no time limits' is cutting out delays as far as possible and banking on the benefits of learning from immediate feedback and feed-forward opportunities (Brookhart 2017:15, 77, 124). 'Just in time' learning can take place whenever knowledge, skills, practice or advice are needed.

Space

In the past, the size of this aspect of the blend depended largely on the type of the delivery modes (face-to-face or distance education), but current developments in technology such as network connectivity opened up the space component to overlay all others. Students are able to effectively study and interact with study material, other students, educators and institutions despite their locations, through technology-mediated communication tools. It is no longer necessary to relocate from rural areas or even from one country to another to gain access to quality education. Teaching and learning are no longer space-bound; moreover, assessment can be done effectively from anywhere, cutting the need for venue-based assessments almost completely, which saves time and money for all involved.

Media

Mayer (2001:2) defines multimedia as the presentation of material using both words and/or pictures. He explains that 'words' include all material presented in verbal form (spoken or text), while pictures include all material presented in visual form, like videos, graphs, illustrations and 3D constructions. Again, the development of technology and access to it opened this aspect of learning far beyond the traditional printed and audiovisual materials. Technology-enhanced media provide institutions and educators with an almost limitless list of options on how to present content and subject-specific material for learning. The variety of available media is also rapidly expanding the educational opportunities for differently abled students. Advantages of the current media developments include the endless possibilities it provides for interaction and activities in the learning process. It provides limitless practice opportunities for students, while sufficient support structures and scaffolding can easily be added when and where needed without having to redesign curricula. Both educators and students have a large variety of options for teaching, learning and assessment through technology-enhanced media.

Activities

These include the teaching, learning and assessment activities incorporated into the study material, which should be in line with the projected outcomes and goals of the module, course or programme. The curriculum must be designed to include the minimum number and levels of activities needed for students to progress and prove that learning was successful. Activities must be linked to learning outcomes and must allow students to demonstrate competencies, showcase tasks and projects and prove the development of cognitive skills (linked to different levels, such as Bloom's revised taxonomy). Activities can act as proficiency builders to aid in development of social skills and emotional intelligence, expansion of students' world views and promotion of positive behavioural change. One of the advantages of using technology to enhance activities is that the activities can be structured with the needed support and scaffolding to assist students to be successful in academic stretching activities. This means that activities can be structured to support both struggling and advancing students, as it can be added to the full spectrum of the educational process (including teaching, learning and assessment). Most importantly, activities can be designed to function independently from time and space and through any preferred media.

Apart from these four basic aspects, blended learning also includes three different delivery modes. Learning can take place in formal, informal and non-formal settings. A full discussion and report on the differences between these kinds of education modes was done by Eaton in 2010. In summary, Table 1 provides a general comparison of these different types of education. Eaton stresses that each type of learning has its own value, that they are all interlinked and that all should form part of lifelong learning. The lines between the different kinds of learning are often blurred and the distinctions are basic and made to clarify and differentiate in general.

The four basic concepts of blended learning and the three modes in which learning takes place, however, still do not fully reflect all the aspects linked to blended learning.

TABLE 1: Modes of learning: Formal, informal and non-formal.

Variable	Formal education	Non-formal education	Informal education
Description	Intentional, organised, structured.	(Loosely) organised, sometimes intentional.	Normally not organised, sometimes intentional.
Provider	Institutions, normally accredited.	Institutions (not accredited), organisations, business.	Individuals, media, not accredited.
Content	Formal curriculum or programme.	Formal or informal curriculum or theme.	Experiential, spontaneous, often no formal curriculum or theme.
Outcome	Diploma, degree or certificate with credit value.	No formal credits; sometimes certificates of participation or attendance. Skill building and capacity building.	General knowledge, skills, capabilities, 'just in time' learning, etc.
Educational requirements	Educators are usually trained professionals.	Qualified or experienced trainer, instructor, organiser or leader.	Knowledgeable or experienced person or guru.
Funding structure	Usually partly subsidised by government.	Personally funded (membership fees), sometimes subsidised.	Usually not subsidised; usually at no cost.
Participation	Career driven.	Interest driven; often also career driven.	Individual and personal, interest or need driven.
Examples	Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Education degree.	Conferences or workshops, training courses, cultural organisations (e.g. Scouts or Voortrekkers).	Conversations, debates, passive learning, for example, from documentary film or actions (like playing catch) or observation.

Source: Adapted from Eaton, S.E., 2010, *Formal, non-formal and informal learning in the sciences formal, non-formal and informal learning: The case of literacy and language learning in Canada*, viewed 04 April 2016, from <https://drsaraheaton.wordpress.com/2010/12/31/formal-non-formal-and-informal-learning-what-are-the-differences/>

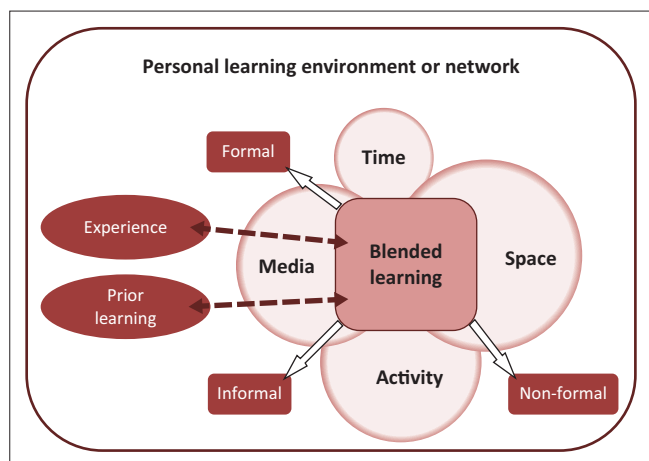


FIGURE 1: An example of how blended learning forms part of the personal learning environment of individuals.

Linked to, and interacting with, the notions described above are the experience and prior learning of each individual student. Both experience and prior learning can be accumulated over long periods of time, be of high quality and extensive, although it is normally not formally recognised. When mentioned in the higher education environment, experience and prior learning are usually work-related, but both these aspects also include a wide range of learning experiences that are not specifically linked to career development or subject knowledge – but that can nevertheless either enhance or restrict formal learning. Although some higher education institutions do recognise prior learning and experience to some extent, recognition and accreditation of learning through these concepts are not yet fully applied by most universities and accreditation bodies.

By increasing or decreasing the value, size and importance of each individual component, a course or module can be uniquely structured to address specific needs or problems and results in requiring outcomes through applicable assessment measures. The overlap and size of each of these components in the blend can be adjusted to serve individual stakeholders such as educators and students. The flexibility of these components can accommodate various institutions' modes of delivery as well as the interests of external stakeholders such as employers.

Figure 1 shows an example of how simplified, blended learning could look from a student's perspective.

Why is blended learning important for higher education?

Higher education institutions are able to incorporate the huge benefits (ranging from serving larger student numbers to using high-level open educational resources and reaching international students or those in rural areas) that technology and the network society provide through investing in expanding their blended learning options. The ability to adjust to individual needs is where the real value of blended learning lies, because we are long past the uniformity that

characterised education during the third revolution industrial and Gutenberg eras. Each one of the blended learning components should be implemented and used 'for what it does best' (Race 1999:15). Staff will benefit from specialised training and talent development opportunities. Both staff and students will benefit from extracurricular courses and evaluative and diagnostic support measures, as well as a greater variety of learning mode options.

In *How Do People Learn?* (Reynolds, Caley & Mason 2002:76–78), four distinct perspectives on learning are outlined. Each one of these require different compositions and structuring of the learning blend, as their individual sizes and overlaps must be determined by the design and delivery modes as well as in the selection of blended learning activities and outcomes (Vaughan 2010). Blended learning enables educators to provide students with choice and flexibility regarding learning styles, delivery modes of content and the time and space in which learning takes place.

Students can be supported, motivated and taught through a combination of various pedagogical approaches (Driscoll 2002:1) such as constructivism, behaviourism and cognitivism. Different learning and teaching theories such as pedagogy, andragogy, heutagogy and academagogy can be incorporated in combination with each other, linking to different parts of the course or different activities and in combination with a variety of media to produce the desired learning outcomes.

Dedicated and specialised support and scaffolding options can be added to curricula without having to reinvent content or make huge personnel expansions. Online and self-sustainable options to assist students as and when necessary can be implemented to support underprepared students, but also to help high-performing students excel without being limited and restrained by paced, structured and timed traditional learning processes. Educators can customise the learning design for each part of a module or course and construct it by incorporating all the appropriate media and activities to fit the learning outcomes and difficulty levels of the module or specific task.

Blended learning offers 'disciplined inquiry through reflective and collaborative activities, while providing unlimited access to information' (Garrison & Vaughan 2008:86). Allan (2007:2) lists more advantages of developing blended learning programmes: it makes learning resources more accessible; it is engaging and relevant while providing flexible learning opportunities – blended learning reduces the amount of time spent on face-to-face learning activities by shifting the balance to other blended learning activities; it integrates practitioner-based experiences with classroom-based learning that enables the development of programmes that are relatively cheap to repeat or use with larger groups of students; and, finally, blended learning also exploits ICT and training facilities, can demonstrate the use of leading-edge technologies and explore new or different approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

Although digital technology has become an integrated part of higher education today (Benson & Kolsaker 2015) and is changing the ways today's students interact with the course material, educators and each other (cf. Coccoli et al. 2014), it is not replacing the traditional tools used for education. Technology merely adds on a variety of new tools and supports structures through which opportunities for education are provided and expanded. Blended learning includes, amongst others, technology-enhanced learning structures, while it counters the misconception that technology, when added to the education toolbox, can automatically enhance teaching and learning. Technology must support teaching, learning and competency development, and it must be incorporated to fit in well with the desired outcomes and goals of the course or programme. The incorporation of technology into the curriculum and in education policies should be driven by sound pedagogical research and community-directed needs and not by technological determinism (Pariser 2011). Blended learning opens up a wide variety of choices, including but not exclusively focused on technology. Through using such a blended learning approach, the danger of sending higher education and all its stakeholders into digital colonialism and digital serfdom can be prevented. The golden rule is to use each tool for what it does best and what renders the best outcomes and results in line with the set of outcomes and objectives. This implies that technology is used as and when it benefits the situation. Education stays a human system and mechanics are only implemented as tools and aids to enhance education.

Institutions and educators focus mainly on formal learning experiences and to a lesser extent on non-formal learning opportunities. Both informal and non-formal aspects of blended learning should be recognised and, if applicable, formally accredited in higher education in order to provide gates and bridges towards formal studies and ultimately to formal qualifications. Together with accrediting experience and prior learning, the recognition of all aspects of learning should encourage, motivate and enable students to become independent, confident and motivated individuals who are able to successfully become self-directed lifelong learners.

The notion of blended learning, when described by an institution, looks different from when this same concept is described from a student's point of view. Institutions normally focus on describing and demarcating the four changeable aspects of time, space, media and activities through which learning should be done. From a student's point of view, however, all the aspects of the blended learning process as described above contribute to the person's personal learning experience.

Students are the main stakeholders in the education process. In South African society, the student pool is diverse and unequal (Shefer et al. 2018; Walker 2016) and most students are underprepared for higher education (Mungal & Cloete 2016:203). Their underpreparedness ranges from a lack of digital literacy skills (Leonard et al. 2016), inadequate language

competencies (Davie 2016; Pineteh 2014; PIRLS 2016) and a lack of critical thinking skills (Temel 2014) to practical issues such as financial problems, inadequate network connectivity and logistical issues (e.g. accommodation, nutrition and transport barriers; Subotzky & Prinsloo 2011:177; Whitehead 2015). Since the student protests started in 2015, the call for Africanisation and decolonisation is getting louder. Louw (2010:46) emphasises that there should be a 'renewed focus on indigenous knowledge as the rebirth of the African voice and identity in higher education'. The flexible components of blended learning provide almost unlimited opportunities for the development and acknowledgement of this wide variety of student needs.

Choice and flexibility are opening different paths and allow students to regulate the pace at which the learning takes place and goals are achieved. Students are free to study anywhere and anytime, while technology-supported communication enables them to constantly keep in touch with educators, tutors and fellow students. Students are encouraged to make full use of the choice and opportunities that the expanding media options are offering. Scaffolding and extracurricular courses and support material enable both struggling and excelling students to excel. Blended learning options provide educational opportunities for differently abled persons who were often excluded from traditional educational environments of text-bound material.

Why is blended learning an advantage for teaching Theology?

Adjacent to the academic focus, higher education is pressured to also take responsibility towards social, economic and environmental issues (Shek, Yuen-Tsang & Ng 2017) by focusing on behavioural change and moral formation in the curriculum (Lind 2016; Vidergor & Sela 2017b). South Africa needs responsible, positive and active citizens with sound morals and a clear vision for changing society for the better (cf. Olyer 2012:8, 70). Over the past two millennia Christianity actively changed society through uplifting outcasts and the marginalised, the invention of institutions such as healthcare centres and even influencing political and economic structures (Hill 2005; Schmidt 2004; Sunshine 2009). During the third communication revolution, Theology took the lead by implementing the printing press as a new educational tool (Oliver 2016). Through the use of blended learning, Theology can once again make a positive and huge impact both in formal education and by producing agents of positive change. Graduates can transfer positive behavioural change, skills and knowledge to the (faith) communities in which they work and live.

Theological training and study opportunities open up through blended learning. Digital and printed study and training materials are freely available, while the restrictions of time and space on learning are a thing of the past and learning activities and media are expanding daily. One example of the positive and expanding influence of blended learning on

Theology is the return of oral and aural instruction, through the use of new media (Jenkins 2018). Orality counterbalances the Western, third revolution emphasis on printed material and documentation (e.g. study guides, handbooks and written assessment tasks). Technology-based communication diminished the need for textual literacy as the primary means of learning and the main means of interaction with information (Jenkins 2018). The postliterate generation, according to Jenkins (2018), focuses on experience, interaction and relational values. All of these are important for teaching Theology, especially in the African context, as it provides opportunities to incorporate Africanisation and decolonisation into the academic sphere of Theology. The renewed focus on orality and acoustic means of learning brings a fresh perspective and multiple opportunities for incorporating music, song, dance, art, culture, storytelling, customs and tradition, speech (e.g. discussions, debates, sermons) and rituals in addition to text as primary tools for teaching, learning and assessment. Awarding space to interaction and dialogue in contrast to the passiveness of texts can open new pathways to bring Theology back to the public domain. Dynamic aspects of faith, such as spirituality, that are not easily captured in print will find an equally important space in theological training. I have no doubt that, in the African context, theologians will welcome these options that multimedia provides for learning.

Conclusion

Education and training, since the earliest times, have added new tools to its toolbox in order to enhance and support learning. Language, writing and printed material were added as they became available through the revolutions in communications technology and later supplemented with multimedia to expand the primitive tools of repetition and demonstration as basic educational aids. In the technology-driven 21st-century society, higher education is once again expanding its toolbox to include new developments that can assist and promote learning.

Blended learning opens up a wide variety of opportunities for the higher education sector to provide relevant and sufficient education and training options for students. The study expanded the limiting definitions linked to the concept of blended learning to showcase the full potential of utilising it as one of the centre pillars of effective education. The four basic components of blended learning are time, space, activities and media. Added to these are the modes of learning that include formal, informal and non-formal learning, while personal experience and prior learning are also recognised. Most of these aspects of blended learning are already successfully implemented by some higher education institutions, but the concept needs to be expanded to incorporate new and developing technology and the implications of using these to the full.

In the unique South African (and African) context with its diverse student pool and unstable and unequal access to technology, blended learning offers flexibility and choice in a

time-efficient manner, regardless of where the students are through almost unlimited media options. Blended learning caters for student diversity and inequality, provides individual support and scaffolding to support both struggling and excelling students, and can be helpful in the recognition and accreditation of experience and prior learning. It allows for educational opportunities for differently abled persons who were often excluded from traditional educational environments. In line with the current need, blended learning expands education and training from focusing only on academic development to promoting transformation in society.

Blended learning serves as a countermeasure against potential digital colonialism and digital serfdom, on the one hand, and provides opportunities that close the space and time gaps and filter out academic isolation, on the other hand. Blended learning allows educators to use and combine pedagogical approaches and learning and teaching theories in creative ways as and where needed in the different parts of the course.

Through expanding the content and definition of blended learning by focusing on the list of benefits, higher education in South Africa can provide effective education to the postliterate generation of students. Theology in the African context can once again claim its rightful place as a positive public transforming agent through exploring the options of blended learning.

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