BRIEFING PAPER

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The Flexible Learning Spectrum

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Introduction

There are many terms used to describe the diversity of learning modes we see today. Terms such as distance learning, blended learning, hybrid learning, flexible learning and e-learning are meaningful to some people, but confusing to many. To make matters worse, there is no absolute agreement on precise definitions for the terms used.

This paper offers a simple, consistent view that should help to clarify the situation. However, it is not the view of the educationalists that is most important, but the view of the end consumer – the student. If learning providers cannot agree on clear statements of their offerings, then the customers will inevitably be confused about how they should select the most appropriate learning mode from what is on offer.

It is therefore useful to start by trying to understand what customers (i.e. students) want and the diversity of their demands. In other words, our start point has to be 'learner requirements'.

A spectrum of learner requirements

Learners are increasingly seeking a **spectrum** of learning options. There is no absolute right or wrong way to study and the best option for a particular student could be anywhere on this spectrum. So, we need to understand the spectrum, the range of options it covers, and its structure.

The spectrum we are talking about here is a continuum between two extremes in learning approaches. The ends of the spectrum are well-defined:

1. Personal contact teaching (e.g. classroom teaching)

The main characteristics of this mode are:

a. **timetabled** - with cohorts of students starting at a small number of fixed time points, e.g. the October intake of university students;

b. **face-to-face or instructor-led** - with contact split between talks and tutorials;

c. **inflexible for the individual** - geared towards the administrative needs of the organisation, e.g. students sign-up for a whole degree programme of study and not specific courses of interest.

2. Pure distance learning (typified by correspondence courses, though now offered through a variety of media and channels)

The main characteristics of pure distance learning are:

a. **self-paced** – students study what they want and when they want, depending on circumstances;

b. **remote self-study** - with no requirements for face-to-face contact;

c. **highly flexible** - modular in structure and timed to suit the student

These are the extreme ends of our spectrum and, though both are very popular, they do not represent the only options. Many on-campus students for example, rely on learning modes that do not require face-to-face contact. Some students now work to pay their way through university or college, so need more flexible options to allow them to complete their studies. Greater flexibility may also be required for students learning in a foreign language or for students with a disability, who require additional and alternate forms of support - all of which moves on-campus learning away from the pure, traditional end of the spectrum.

Equally, pure distance learning has been augmented in many ways, particularly by the use of computer and communications technology, which can offer better dissemination of materials, on-line support and a richer learning experience. These changes coupled with the potential that new forms of electronic communications offer for easier tutor access, are beginning to shift traditional distance learning a small way towards the personal contact end of the spectrum.

What is emerging is a situation where there are no discreet staging points between on-campus teaching and distance learning. Instead there is a '**flexible learning**' spectrum spanning the two extremes. Any programme will sit somewhere along this spectrum - at a point dictated by the design goals, which are, in turn, dictated by the needs of the customer. What educationalists mean when they use the term '**blended or hybrid learning**' is some chosen point on this flexible learning spectrum.

On-campus   Blended   Distance
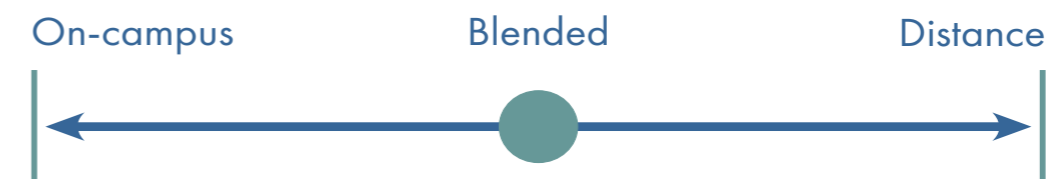
Figure 1: The flexible learning spectrum

A blended learning solution is therefore defined by the characteristics of a particular point on the flexible learning spectrum. For any particular solution there has to be a high degree of flexibility – of time, place, content, mode of learning and assessment – in order to meet the needs of individual students. So, particular blended learning approaches, or instances, should offer a range of choices across the flexible learning spectrum. Indeed many learning programmes now do just that, sometimes with a wide range of options, from a full on-campus programme to a full distance learning programme.

The important underlying point is that, whichever learning option the student chooses, the syllabus is the same, the core materials are the same, the assessments are the same and the qualification is the same. All that has changed is the mode of learning and the methods of delivery.

eLearning

So where does eLearning fit? This is a wide-ranging term brought about by advances in the use of information and computer technologies to support teaching and learning. There is no strict definition – though it can include multi-media based materials, interactive learning objects, on-line assessment and on-line support – and it can apply to all points on the flexible learning spectrum, though perhaps in different ways. While it is a commonly used term now, there is an expectation that eLearning will become a core part of any learning & teaching strategy in the near future, and hence cease to be used as a concept in its own right. eLearning should therefore be seen as a support mechanism for any or all points on the flexible learning spectrum - a status it shares with books, papers, tutorial groups, etc.
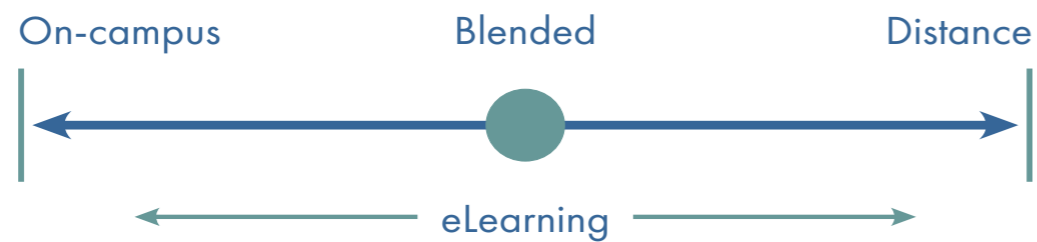
On-campus   Blended   Distance

eLearning

Figure 2: eLearning and the flexible learning spectrum

Related issues

The requirements for eLearning highlight the need to be more aware of related issues that merit further mention:

1. **Knowledge Management** has become a more explicit and more important process in the development and management of courses. This was always a key factor in the success of correspondence courses, which relied on good content (knowledge assets) to substitute for the lack of a tutor. But eLearning has opened up the range and variety of the content, the way it is intensively used (e.g. in self-assessment), and the complexity involved.

2. **Student Expectations** have been changed and enhanced by the use of computer support and the Internet. On-campus students expect more than lectures and tutorials and distance learning students expect more than dry text books and the occasional letter from an assessment agency. They expect materials to be interesting and, where possible, exciting. They expect to discuss issues with peer students and/or on-line tutors and they want lots of practice and self-assessment, ideally with some meaningful form of feedback. This is true across the spectrum.

3. **Key Technologies** are important to education providers – for both distance and on-campus learning – inspired by the potential for more eLearning in the future. Excluded from this are the learning environment tools. They are an "assumed" and will constantly change anyway. It is unwise to develop learning and teaching strategies on these transient technologies.

More important are the international information standards (typified by XML) and their related families, plus the standards for metadata management of learning materials such as Dublin Core and Learning Object Metadata. Of course, many good on-campus and distance programmes will be developed without regard for technology and standards but institutions with a strategic view of their assets and their full exploitation need to be aware of the important role of technology and standards, for the longer term.

Summary

There are many possible study modes, lying on a spectrum from face-to-face to distance learning. Where a particular programme lies will depend on the requirements of the customers (the students) and on the characteristics of the solution being offered to meet these requirements. It is important to pay attention to both the requirements and the design, as every decision carries a cost, some of which may be significant but unnecessary.

For example including a degree of tutor contact as an essential requirement for a distance learning programme increases the cost of operations significantly. Unless there is a proven need or demand for this then it should at least be an option. Students should only pay for and receive exactly what they want - not what might prove to be an unnecessary requirement.

Students want flexibility and options, along with quality. New technologies and changing learning modes are opening up many new opportunities for learning providers to meet these requirements and extend their education programmes to reach many more student customers. Students have always wanted a more flexible learning approach.

The education world is now in a position to meet these requirements.

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CAPDM Ltd.

22 Forth Street
Edinburgh
EH1 3LH
United Kingdom

capdm.com
enquiries@capdm.com
+44 (0)131 477 8630
@capdmltd

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