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A Paradigm Shift: Blended Learning Integration in Russian Higher Education

Tatiana Krasnova *

National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University, Tomsk, Russia

Abstract

The main objective of the article is to contribute to an understanding of the value of blended learning within the scope of new paradigm in Russian higher education. We consider blended learning as a unique approach that aims to solve a series of tasks connected with the necessity of raising education quality. Such competences as self-organization, knowledge management, the ways of getting and processing it are brought to the forefront. The article analyzes the didactic capacity of blended learning as the means to implement the effective transition from a traditional learning model to an integrated one where electronic environments and resources are widely used. The existing blended learning models are considered and the ways of their adaptation towards the requirements of the Russian higher education system are discussed with the focus on the course “foreign language”.

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1. Introduction

The modern conditions of the world development dictate the high educational level of an individual as it defines the development perspectives of the whole country. Therefore the building of new educational environment for training highly qualified specialists has become an urgent issue in Russia.

There are at least two approaches for defining the role of education in the society. According to the first one education is an instrument for fixation, reproduction and compiling of the existing system of relationships in the society. In this case education plays a subordinate role and follows the society development. It is just the condition of the society that defines the content of education and possibilities for future change. The second approach is based on the idea that education is not only the factor of knowledge reproduction but it is motive power of society development. It is a unique tool that allows reconsidering the existing system of relations in the society and transition

* Tatiana Krasnova. Tel.: +7-382-260-6135
E-mail address: krasnova@tpu.ru

to a new stage of development. This means completely different content of educational system and its organization. In our opinion the second approach should underlie in Russian education reforms.

The higher education institutions recognize the necessity of critically examining the current practices and the potential of information and communication technologies (ICT). The challenge now is to gain a deep understanding of the need, potential and strategies of such technology as blended learning to approach the ideals of higher education (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). It is obvious that only continuing the formation of new educational paradigm, Russian higher education will get a chance to acquire leading positions in the world.

2. Background

National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University (TPU) was one of the first Russian universities which introduced multilayer system of specialist training according to the demands of Bologna Declaration. At present TPU defines a more global goal, its development strategy is dedicated to the ambition of getting into Top 100 world university ranking, which is considered the characteristic of recognition in the academic world and indicates the conformity with the quality standards of specialist training. For the aims of forming a development strategy for next 7 years TPU worked out a programme of competitive growth. This programme fulfills the function of a roadmap timeline, which defines step-by-step evolution of all interconnected components of higher educational system such as scientific research, staff development and the development of educational technologies. Thereby as a global goal of further development TPU states the establishment and development of the university as a research university, the world leader in the field of resource efficient technologies, which can solve the global problems of humanity on the way to steady development.

The goal specified above forms a system of primary objectives and defines the first-priority directions of the development. They are the following:

- 1) world level research;
- 2) formation and implementation of global competitive engineer education programmes;
- 3) distribution of the best academic and engineering practices;
- 4) establishment of strategic partnership with academic and business communities;
- 5) qualitative student training;
- 6) involvement of academics and scientists with worldwide reputation for forming the academic society, scientific schools and as a consequence of this knowledge transfer;
- 7) university transition to master-postgraduate type;
- 8) formation of effective resource management mechanism.

The solution of each objective implies the implementation of the procedures which provide both fast victories and long-term university development. All these initiatives have one common point – the necessity of increasing language competence of the staff and students. Only high level of foreign language proficiency allows faster integration in the world academic environment at the expense of academic mobility expansion, publication activity increase in journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, increase of internalization level in scientific and educational activity of the university.

3. Blended Learning Approach

The new and complex tasks need a paradigm shift. Within the scope of the new paradigm students shouldn't be only given some extent of knowledge, they should be taught different ways of thinking, developing creativity, finding new solutions without assistance, performing well in standard and nonstandard situations. These changes in higher education, within the Bologna Process, represent the transition from centralization of transmittal teaching towards awareness of the added value of a learning process in which students have a more active role in building knowledge (Monteiro, Leite & Lima, 2013). Information technologies make this possible, they allow to organize the interaction between instructors and students in a different way. They transform ordinary transfer of knowledge into cooperative learning, help to bring together the positions of instructors and students, activate their creative potential.

The modern stage of language development in the university is characterized by domination of ICT which allows intensifying traditional teaching forms and methods and thereby influencing positively the process of foreign language acquisition in whole. Most Russian higher educational institutions as well as TPU put particular emphasis on the integration of such form of ICT as e-learning in the teaching process. The usage of e-learning technologies is able to promote the solution of different pedagogic problems, which couldn't be solved with the help of traditional methods. The most promising e-learning technology is blended learning which combines both online and face-to-face instruction. Electronic and traditional study materials supplement one another as parts of common educational environment.

For the needs of this article blended learning can be defined as a method of teaching that combines the most effective face-to-face teaching techniques and online interactive collaboration, both constituting a system that functions in constant correlation and forms a single whole. The system will work effectively only if its components are balanced and methodically adequate to program educational objectives. Blending of face-to-face and online learning environments should be planned precisely in order to benefit more from this approach (Guzer & Caner, 2013).

Among educators there is growing awareness of the potential of blended learning. Blended delivery system allows students to learn and access material in a variety of modes – an important feature since students often have very different learning styles (Kaur, 2013). Blended learning makes it possible to vary the pace of new material study and self-work. A great variety of tasks in the online component of the blended course contributes both to elimination of knowledge gaps and profound material study. For example, for the same text in foreign language students can be offered tasks of different difficulty level. Weak students have an opportunity to practice first some simple tasks, while strong students can immediately go to the tasks of high complexity. It is important that students have the possibility of choice which is substantially the basis of any creativity. This approach develops students' adequate self-esteem; they should define an appropriate level of difficulty and make the right choice. Situations of choice encourage students' inner motivation and responsibility for their academic success. Moreover people learn better when they have more than one media to use. The simple fact that there are two or three different types of training (reading a book, trying out a skill on an exercise, listening to a lecture, and interacting with a web-based course) has a significant impact on mastery and retention (Bersin, 2004).

The instructors are very optimistic about blended learning as it adds extra dimensions to learning because the blend of time, space and media offers new possibilities as to the sorts of activities students can carry out and the ways they can collaborate using available electronic tools (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007).

4. Focus on Practical Experience

In TPU e-learning development project is allocated in a separate innovative development programme and the main measures for providing uninterrupted functioning of e-learning environment are already mapped out. The percentage of academic disciplines adopting blended learning increases every year. Foreign language instructors take an active stand in the increase of teaching process quality. Many language courses are accompanied by students' self-work on Moodle platform.

At present learning management system Moodle has become the most accessible and effective tutorial; on the basis of this platform very engaging online tasks can be created. Moodle is designed and continue improved to provide educators, administrators and learners with a single robust, secure and integrated system to create personalized learning environments (Benta, Bologa & Dzitac, 2014).

For more than 3 years students and instructors of Foreign Languages Department in Institute of Cybernetics work with the course "English Grammar" which is integrated in the main course "General English" for the first year students and "Business English" for the second year students. This course was created for continuous mastering of grammatical skills. In a theoretical part of the course rules are given in attempt to explain the essence of one or another grammatical phenomenon, and show its place in the language system. Students learn to analyze grammatical structures, define regularities and become aware of exceptions. This part of the course provides student's autonomy

in learning and revising any material missed and badly acquired during guided lessons. A practical part of the course is devoted to working through and polishing grammar material of the theoretical part. Each test has several difficulty levels (Elementary, Pre-intermediate, Intermediate and Upper-intermediate) and it is student's decision which test to choose.

The course "Introduction to Professional Communication" is used as web-support for self-study, individual and additional work by second year students. The course corresponds thematically to the syllabus and supports the main course online. Each module consists of 4 parts: reading, vocabulary, listening and video. Glossary has special importance here as it contains a set of main terminology units of the professional thesaurus. This blended course was highly appreciated both by students and instructors.

Within the framework of the project "Modernization of approaches and content of professional language teaching in a technical university", supported by Federal special-purpose programme "Academic staff of innovative Russia" several elective courses were designed. These courses had online support for providing coordinated administration of students' self-study work. Among them there are:

- Effective communication;
- Effective Presentation;
- Academic Listening;
- Argumentative Writing;
- Debating;
- Technical Translation.

The online component of the course was called "Professional communication: elective courses". Adopting elective courses based on blended learning approach aims to provide flexibility and takes into account students' individual needs. These courses contain not only necessary study materials but supplementary sections with glossary, useful Internet links, audio-visual materials, project work manuals and references.

The results of the survey held for the second year students showed that the majority of students (97%) prefer blended learning and only 3% want to have traditional form of learning and nobody wanted to learn foreign languages only online. Students mentioned the participation in webinars and online discussions as the most amusing tasks. It turned out that the most difficult tasks were writing essays and progress tests. Students told about the factors that complicated the study of the course, they marked out: unstable Internet connection, large quantity of people taking part in discussions, lack of time for online tasks. But still most of students mentioned that it was convenient to have 24 hour access to the course materials. Moreover the majority of second year students consider virtual environment extremely useful for communication and collaboration both with other students and instructors. The survey showed that students support integration of blended learning in the process of teaching foreign languages.

Successful integration of blended learning depends on a well-structured and thoroughly planned syllabus. An instructor should consider the following aspects: even distribution of online and classroom activities, solution of didactic goals with regard to students' individual abilities, proper choice of teaching methods, controlling and self-assessment tools. When designing a blended course the main requirement is to keep an open mind and to focus on the learning experience. It is very easy to become excited about the potential of blended learning and to continually push the boundaries of learning further and further (Throne, 2003). This can be very dangerous and ruin students' motivation.

5. Conclusion

The paradigm shift in Russian higher education is influenced by global tendencies in education and in our case integration in the world academic environment. The significance of transition to blended learning in TPU doesn't need any additional argumentation. This is dictated not only by the development programme goals of the university but by the necessity of forming such important qualities as motivation to study and deliberateness while choosing a learning path. This transition from traditional form of learning to open education environment is not that easy and demands a lot of effort in finding optimal mechanisms for managing this process. At present we have positive

experience of integrating blended learning, when the study load is distributed evenly and didactically justified between face-to-face and online models of learning. Therefore we believe that the usage of blended learning method should lead to qualitative change of foreign language syllabus. The diversity of electronic component of the blended course opens new possibilities for new material presentation in an understandable form.

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