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Tutor-mediated Support in Blended Learning

Tatiana Krasnova *, Maria Demeshko

National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University, Tomsk, Russia

Abstract

Higher education in Russia is actively encouraged to use blended learning as a response to main trends of modern education oriented to a competency-based approach, paradigm shift to students' self-study training, transfer from the principle of "one education for a lifetime" to "lifelong learning throughout a lifetime", freedom of university choice, academic mobility, education computerization and usage of new information. The efficacy of blended learning however doesn't consist in simple integration of online component with traditional face-to-face classes. Tutor-mediated support is a key element of any blended course and it is able to provide the more effective use of technology. The article presents the idea of online tutoring that supports and enhances blended learning. We focus mainly on stresses and special duties placed on the tutor to cater effectively for all the needs of course participants.

1. Introduction

At present traditional classical education ceased to meet the requirements of modern information society. If in the past it was enough to get good education and use it for the rest of the life, now in most areas of society knowledge updates nearly every year. New tendencies in the society demand independent, initiative and creative thinking people, who are able to react immediately on new challenges, create innovative products and introduce them into an industry. Social order on training such new type specialists facilitated a paradigm shift from getting education once in a lifetime to lifelong learning throughout a lifetime. In the conditions of modern fast developing world the education, that a person once got, needs renovation every 2 or 3 years. In connection with these new demands the ability of building an individual learning path is emphasized. Willingness and ability to manage an overall learning process and the possession of personal learning autonomy allows acquiring new knowledge and developing new skills both during the study at university and after graduation.

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

Gradually the system of higher education in Russia changes organizational principles of the learning process, creating conditions for dynamic and flexible individualized instruction. Information and computer technologies (ICT) integration in the learning process of higher education institutions allows taking into account students' individual needs and aims at preparing the graduates for the conditions of life in information society. These technologies, created by no means for education needs, lead to a real revolution in the learning process in universities. At present e-learning technologies are widely used in most Russian universities, they are thought to be a powerful tool for intensification and individualization of learning. When individual peculiarities of students are taken into consideration, they allow creating optimal conditions for potential capabilities implementation of each student.

Foreign experience of using e-learning and its comparison with traditional forms of learning based on face-to-face communication of a teacher and students revealed clearly distinguishable strengths of each form. The advantages of e-learning are flexibility, individualization, interactivity and adaptability as a possibility to organize the learning process for the students with different abilities and needs. The strengths of traditional form of learning are characterized by emotional component of personal communication, spontaneity of building associative chains, creating new ideas and inventions. The combination of these advantages underlay blended learning approach which is used for more than 10 years in European and American institutions.

The implementation of blended learning approach is impossible without complex monitoring and analysis. The studies show that no matter how independent a person can be, there are the situations when an individual needs some support from a certain specialist: support in decision making, support in professional development, etc. One of the key moments of successful blended learning integration is the presence of a person who supports individual performance of students in e-learning environment – the tutor.

2. A Blended Learning Approach

The aim of blended learning is to make the learning process more effective by means of transferring some part of learning process in the electronic environment. This approach allows expanding the learning framework not only in terms of the quantity of students but time and space: learning will become available always and everywhere. In blended learning the transfer from book content to active one becomes the main advantage. Knowledge in electronic form can be easily transferred but it should be stored in one common repository assuming the presence of intellectual search system. But just simple storage in this repository doesn't make the content active: all knowledge objects should be interconnected with the system of metadata. Therefore to supplement face-to-face course educators use different learning management systems (LMS). According to the profile of LMS market in the higher education market as of autumn 2013, Blackboard is the leading provider with 41% market share, with Moodle (23%), Desire2Learn (11%) and Vclassrooming being the next three largest providers (Green, 2013). They are web-based and provide a variety of tools that can make a blended course more effective giving new possibilities for learners.

Russian universities often use Moodle as a supplement for a blended learning course. Moodle offers flexible and dynamic management of the learning process and satisfies new needs with regard to methodology and information technologies. Moodle makes it possible to create individualized process of learning where students can interact with each other and teachers, which encourages their close collaboration. Students can study outside classes at any convenient time thereby increasing education efficacy. Many teachers have found that they can save time and increase student learning by allowing students to engage in the material outside of class and this allows them to use face-to-face time for troubleshooting (Cole & Foster, 2008).

The analysis of recent publications about blended learning approach makes it possible to mark out a series of blended learning characteristics:

1. The change of emphasis in the relationship of teachers and students. The teacher fulfils a number of interconnected roles where the main ones are a tutor who supports students when they choose individual learning path and a consultant of study material. The teachers remain the key figures of the learning process but carry out a bit different activities: they pass from knowledge transmitters to learning process organizers.

2. Organization of student's cognitive self-study activities. The basis of blended learning process is purposeful, intensive and controlled self-study work. The students can study at any convenient location and any suitable time using special learning tools and ability to contact a teacher if they experience difficulties. Thus the learning process is focused on the student who is supported in his or her study. Blended learning stimulates self-study training skills and information search skills. The necessity of unassisted material study favours the development of responsible attitude to study, motivation and time management.
3. Organization of student's individual support by means of online communication, feedbacks, comments and face-to-face classes.
4. Organization of collaborative learning activity, including group work on projects, conducting discussions and seminars organized in forms of forums and video conferences.
5. Flexible approach to training. Blended learning assumes syllabus flexibility which allows choosing a module, tempo, speed and time for learning.
6. Ability of balance basic knowledge by means of distance material study.
7. Usage of learning content which is available online at any time, ability to check knowledge and get acquainted with additional sources and so on. Meanwhile the students can study traditionally face-to-face as they are used to.

Upgrading the methods and engaging blended learning technologies in the process of teaching changes the teacher's role as well. The teacher loses dominating position and becomes a leading participant; the teaching process looks like a dialogue between students and cognitive reality, like enrichment of their personal experience. In the past a departing point in learning process was the system of knowledge that should be acquired; now we can observe a student-centered approach when a student becomes this point with his or her previous experience, intellectual abilities and perception of the world. Moreover not only the teacher's role changes, the word 'teacher' transforms to 'tutor'.

3. Tutoring

In order not to feel isolated and have excessive freedom online students should have support provided by a tutor. Now we will try to consider the role and work conditions of the tutor, supporting students in blended learning. Four different functions of tutoring in virtual space can be established:

- pedagogical – attempts to sustain the content learning process;
- social - attempts to support inter-personal and social relationships by considering personal needs, requests, feelings and other expressions;
- managerial - attempts to keep a certain course / learning activity in line within the general aims;
- technical - interventions related to different technical problems (Ligorio, Talamo & Simons, 2002).

Tutors in a blended learning course perform a variety of tasks:

1. The tutor together with the students builds their individual learning paths both at face-to-face classes and in e-learning environment, organizes different activities using ICT including the Internet, coordinates class and electronic activities.
2. The tutor provides detailed instructions and introductory tutorials explaining the principles of work in LMS. This will help eliminate technical problems and overcome obstacles so that they achieve their learning objectives (Klimova & Poulova, 2011).
3. The tutor carries out continuously learning process monitoring and complex analysis of intermediate results of each student's activity. This usually involves time used on tasks on the web, quality of executed tests, number of attempts for fulfilling different tasks, address to additional educational resources with the learning platform, data about individual tutorials and data about work activity on forums.
4. The tutor selects electronic educational content, conformable to lesson objectives and creates own multimedia products including audio records and video lectures. This is important not only because it can become an additional element drawing together the tutor and the student but because ICTs simplify and simultaneously

intensify learning activity. Online educational resources can be downloaded to mobile devices, can be sent and shared with group mates, can be discussed on forums, etc.

5. The tutor provides face-to-face and distant individual support including emotional and encouraging one. It is important to create the "situation of presence" even in e-learning work mode. The comfort of this situation consists in students' confidence that they will always get timely help and that they are not alone in the virtual environment. The most effective way of tutor-mediated support in the form of distant interaction is to provide a feedback by commenting on students' progress, learning speed, success of tasks completion. The realization of this requirement is feasible owing to functional and services of learning platforms: forums, personal messages, videoconferences and webinars.

In order to help students fulfill their potential tutors should build a friendly e-learning environment. Working in this environment students feel that tutors guide rather than manage them, they share knowledge and experience, inspire to further personal and professional development. Students need to forget about being under control; this will push their boundaries beyond their ordinary learning experiences. Tutors should understand when students need their support and when they want to enjoy the process of self-discovery (Throne, 2003).

Researchers from Victoria University of Wellington gave very vital recommendations for tutors supporting a blended learning course. In order to attain a success tutors should:

- build strong and trusting relationships with participants by getting to know them well, offering them support and demonstrating empathy;
- help make connections between participants by encouraging them to share both personal and professional perspectives in both face-to-face and online interactions;
- provide a mirror to encourage participants' reflection. This involves helping them see what is happening in their own contexts;
- provide a map to show participants possible directions for their personal journeys (Thornton & Yoong, 2011).

4. Conclusion

Implementation of blended learning approach influences all the components of the learning process, the forms and organization methods, activation, intensification and efficacy of the learning process. Educational process based on blended learning is optimal for knowledge transfer and contributes to the increase of students' training quality. The blend of face-to-face classes and e-learning allows educators building an individualized learning process taking into account students' individual characteristics and using all the functions of LMS for interactive collaboration.

New tendencies in higher education system lead to reconsidering teacher's role and position; they assume special features in the conditions of blended learning. Blended learning demands transformation of a traditional teacher into a tutor, who becomes more a coordinator or mentor but not a direct source of knowledge and information. The tutor of the blended course stimulates student's ability to self-knowledge and self-perfection. The dynamics of face-to-face and online classes changes, and these changes relate first of all to the interaction of students and tutors as well as students with each other. Students become equal participants of the learning process and see it as experience exchange between them and the tutor.

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