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BLENDING LEARNING DESIGN – THE POTENTIALS AND PITFALLS DESIGNING BLENDED LEARNING COURSES IN A PROFESSIONAL BACHELOR CONTEXT

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Introduction

University College Lillebaelt (UCL) is one of seven university colleges in Denmark established in January 2008. UCL offers higher education programmes that contribute to the ongoing development of the welfare society. We train social educators, teachers, nurses, radiographers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, biomedical laboratory scientists, public administrators, and social workers.

UCL aims to train tomorrow’s professionals as highly respected key players in a strongly cohesive welfare state, in which generating, spreading, and utilising knowledge contributes to sustainable welfare development.

This year UCL has decided that 30 percent of all educational elements must be generated as blended learning by the end of the year 2015 as part of a modernization addressing following educational needs:

1. Blended learning can help match the expectations of the future students who have grown up in digitized homes and schools.
2. Blended learning helps **individualization** and **differentiation**. The students can organize their own learning paths – decide for themselves where and when to study, which paths to follow and in what tempo.
3. Blended learning helps **provide resources** for the individual subjects (for instance subjects with a high degree of complexity or difficulty) or groups of students (those in danger of dropping out for instance) without necessarily increasing face to face teaching, but by developing asynchronous study activities and learning resources for digital distance learning.
4. Blended learning can contribute to supporting and improving efficiency of educational efforts. This can for instance be done through programmes for several classes by using video conferencing, allocating traditional face to face teaching to synchronous and asynchronous study activities produce digital materials which can be employed didactically and reused by the teachers. This can also mean that the particular competencies which teaches have in Svendborg can be used at other locations in UCL and disseminated to a larger group of students without further costs.

Educational Innovation and Learning Resources (EILR) was asked to develop and support the blended learning implementation strategy. EILR is an inter-faculty unit in UCL, which develops and supports digitization and learning approaches in the professional bachelor programme.

Potentials and Pitfalls

This paper addresses the potentials and the pitfalls in the blended learning implementation strategy. The blended learning implementation strategy contains phases for preparation, development, implementation and evaluation.

Preparation

Arranging deliveries and coordinating collaboration happens in interaction between the designated project manager at the individual education and the manager for educational innovation and learning resources. These constitute a project team, which is efficient. That it is an external person who controls the process and informs the teachers what they must do minimizes resistance and resentment, since it is important to be polite towards guests. It is at the same time important with an insider who knows the everyday issues and conditions of labour. The process is initiated by a meeting between
the project team and the educators that must develop a blended learning programme. Typically a group is made up of 20 people from the same institution. One meeting lasts around three hours. Initially the participants are introduced to the blended learning implementation strategy and the fact that all educators must participate in the process and production of digital materials needed. Then they are introduced to the formal aims and methods as well as the idea behind the design process and analysis. Then they work in teams determining which modules will become the object of developmental labour and they initiate development efforts. Finally the delimitation of the subsequent process is determined and it is clarified how much help they can expect to receive. It is important with a structured approach at the meeting, where it becomes clear what the educators are to do. Knowing exactly what to do and when has a calming effect on many. It is also important for the success of the project that educators get started during the meeting. Using the information given immediately and feeling that some of the work has been done when they leave the meeting is important. It can have a demotivating effect and seem insurmountable if you don’t get started till later.

**Winnings**

The overall winnings of the blended learning strategy is

1. Professionalization of the programmes
2. Quality assurance of lessons
3. Improved efficiency of an new opportunities for prioritising the use of resources

The aim is to increase the use of Blended Learning in concrete programmes during 2015, as well as increase the competences of those who teach educational courses, such that they develop the overall programme in the direction of blended learning.

In addition, a combination of traditional classroom teaching combined with on-line activities will result in a reduction of teaching [på vidensniveau?], such that time will be released, which can be spent with the students when they practice their skills.

It is important that the educators design and develop their own approaches to blended learning, since it will progress their competencies. If they were merely sent on a course in blended learning design, which would not end with a finished product, then they would only attain a [mediocre] knowledge level and not be able to use the knowledge independently at a later stage. It is also important to clarify that this is a restructuring of lessons, from only teaching [på vidensniveau?] to also having time to spend with the students when they work on their skills.

Many teachers erroneously believe that the process is a budgeting effort and that by conducting blended learning they partake in a process, which will eventually make them superfluous.

**Purpose**

1. Goals for developing the selected educational elements: All modules are expected to be completed in the autumn of 2015 with an emphasis on Blended Learning contributing to an increase in quality and a reduction of face to face teaching. This may possibly lead to a new use of resources. Definitions and requirements to a blended learning process is written and reviewed by teachers, such that all expectations are made clear.
2. Goals for developing teacher competences: Participating teachers must have digital competence at three levels. A few will have minimal competences, more at an intermediate user-level and the majority at the expert level. A target scheme will be handed out and reviewed with the teachers. They will be asked to fill out the form in accordance with their current abilities, desired abilities, and an indication of how they will reach this skill level and with what resources. This form is important for the teachers feel noticed and taken seriously, and they get the help they need.
Developmental phase

The next step in the blended learning implementation strategy is the development phase. The method here is interaction design, which is a very applicable method.

By going through the stages of identifying needs, design, building a prototype, testing, adjustment and evaluation, the teachers attains the competencies needed all the while a blended learning design helps lift the quality of the programme.

Identify needs & design

Identifying needs and designing the blended learning course is an analytical process. The analysis is assisted by a blended learning design model.

The model focuses on how digital learning resources can support study activities. The model invites a dynamic and iterative planning process where you can move between themes and choose, design, revise, and redesign until you have your course.

The analysis is done to allow the lecturers time to reflect on how to change their traditional courses into blended learning courses. Often the aim to adjust our traditional courses into blended learning occurs when problems in the course design are recognized that leads to inactivity, absence or lack of time to speak to the students. Another issue could be to provide students with feedback on an assignment. Recognizing such a problem would be at nice way to start working with blended learning, because you are then motivated to ask: How can blended learning solve my problem? In that manner will digitization become potentializing and not an evil we must force into our traditional courses. This analysis is highly important, because of two typical pitfalls in learning design. First, we often spend the time we have with the students to teach knowledge instead of helping the professional bachelor Students practice skills. Secondly, when we decide to blend our learning design, we often focus on technology and forget about reflection and planning. The blended learning design model can help to avoid that.

In the process of analysis the teachers can draw on support from EILR, which will be distance support via telephone, mail or video conference.

When the teachers have concluded their analysis, they send it back to EILR along with the aims for their competency development. These data are important for EILR in planning the next stage of the development phase, which is for the teachers to develop the digital materials needed in their blended learning process. It is important that there is a deadline in the analysis, so that everybody does their part and they follow each other in the process. Without a deadline some teachers will not complete their task and will be left behind.

Build prototypes

The teachers produce their digital material on the basis of their design process. Here they also receive EILR support.

Two approaches to prototyping have been attempted. In one, the teachers have selected deadlines and developed a workshop together. The workshop gives the best result. Everybody produces digital materials and is mutually inspired by one another. There is an efficient work flow and responsibility is taken by the participants. When the teachers develop their work individually there is a tendency to leave responsibility with the consultants from EIRL and merely wait for them to develop ideas. This does not result in the desired development of competencies.

Implementation

The next step in the blended learning strategy is implementation. Here the teacher’s blended learning design is tested in the field. It has been decided that the materials must be tested in the concrete educational practice, such that the teachers get an exact impression of what works and what doesn’t. If the students are removed from their context to test the individual elements in the materials the results would not be exact and could thus not be employed for evaluation purposes.

Testing

The teachers test their blended learning materials on their students.
It turns out that teachers express a need for support when the EILR consultants are not there during testing. When the consultants are present the teachers don’t need support. There is, in other words, safety in knowing that there is somebody there if the technology fails somehow. EILR are therefore working to train a corps of student assistants that may extend support during testing, since it is an insurmountable task to be present at all testing merely to be present just in case. The hope is for this to be sufficient for the teachers to feel safe.

Adjustment
After testing the teachers adjust their blended learning designs. Sometimes they merely need small changes to some aspect of the digital materials. Other times there is a need for a new analysis in order to identify what failed and what needs redesign. Then the data is resent to EILR. This stage also required a deadline. There is a tendency for the teachers to thing that things can be done before they return to the course. However they will often not recall what was problematic when they reach this stage or EILR need the final data in order to evaluate the blended learning implementation strategy.

Evaluation
The blended learning implementation strategy is so recent that the evaluation design has not been developed yet. However, it is certain that the teachers’ analyses and adjustments, as well as descriptions of their desired competency attainment will constitute the frame for the evaluation. This data will most likely be supplemented by student evaluations gathered by questionnaire, but also qualitative studies from focus group interviews. The evaluation will cover goals for developing the selected educational elements, i.e. quality assurance of teaching, but also goals for competency development among teachers, i.e. professionalization of the programmes. Naturally it is also important that the evaluation determines whether the individual bachelor programme has been able to generate 30 percent of all educational elements as blended learning by the end of the year 2015. The evaluation will take place in the spring of 2015.

Conclusion
We have now looked at the potentials for and pitfalls for the UCL blended learning implementation strategy. Although this is a new process it is already clear that as long as deadlines and support is retained and the participants know what to do the will be a high degree of satisfaction, motivation, and creativity. It is therefore hoped that the implementation will be successful.

References


