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Evaluation of a blended course for interpreter trainers: the teachers’ point of view

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Key words: Blended learning, face to face and on-line integration, interpreter trainer continuing education, internal course evaluation, socio-constructivist learning environment

Abstract:
This article addresses teacher evaluation of the first blended edition of the Certificate for interpreter trainers course, ETI, University of Geneva. A total of five teachers - two in Geneva, two in the United States and one in Israel-, nineteen participants - five males, seventeen females, from over twelve countries-, one tutor, one technical support staff and one pedagogical advisor were involved in the course. This article reports on the findings of qualitative semi-guided interviews with teaching staff: 1) teachers praised the integration of on-line with face-to-face parts both for pedagogically enhanced activities and for enhanced social community building; 2) teachers’ training success is the result of modelling of integrated practices and of the coherence of the pedagogical approach, content and learning environment; 3) instructional design of on-line courses is still viewed as consisting mainly of technological issues and the pedagogical engineering part occupies a less prominent role at this stage; 4) although conducting a blended socio-constructivist oriented course in the first run is exhausting for teaching staff, it is rewarding and teachers are ready to engage in follow-up projects.

1 Introduction

1.1 The problem under investigation
The Certificate course for Interpreter Trainers at ETI (University of Geneva) is a continuing education program that represents approximately 350 learner working hours (modules: 300 hours, seminar paper: 50 hours), worth 60 ECTS credits. The Certificate was run face to face for four editions. 2005 was the first edition of the Certificate in a blended format. For the overall evaluation of the course, and the learners’ point of view we refer you to Moser-Mercer, Class, & Seeber, 2005. This article will focus exclusively on the teachers’ point of view.

1.2 Literature background

1.3 Blended learning
We adhere to Graham’s (2005, p. 5) definition of blended learning, “blended learning systems combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction” and these occur along four dimensions – space, time, fidelity and humanness - of interaction in face-to-face and distant learning environments (Figure 1).
According to Graham blending occurs at four different levels: the activity level, the course level, the program level, and the institutional level. He also identifies three categories of blended learning systems: enabling, enhancing and transforming blends (Figure 2).

**Enabling blends** Primarily focus on addressing issues of access and convenience—for example, blends that are intended to provide additional flexibility to the learners or blends that attempt to provide the same opportunities or learning experience but through a different modality.

**Enhancing blends** Allow incremental changes to the pedagogy but do not radically change the way teaching and learning occur. This can occur at both ends of the spectrum. For example, in a traditional face-to-face learning environment, additional resources and perhaps some supplementary materials may be included online.

**Transforming blends** Blends that allow a radical transformation of the pedagogy—for example, a change from a model where learners are just receivers of information to a model where learners actively construct knowledge through dynamic interactions. These types of blends enable intellectual activity that was not practically possible without the technology.

Having laid the theoretical foundation, we will now discuss five practical studies pointing at relevant areas for our own study.

### 1.4 Classroom teaching changes in web-enhanced courses

Wingard (2004, p. 28-33) in his study examined instructionally rich courses, i.e. “courses including content, interaction and communication”. He used exploratory, qualitative inquiry methods to gather qualitative data about how faculty perceive changes in the classroom resulting from adding on-line to face-to-face instruction. Analysis of the data revealed changes along three lines: degree of interaction, course content, and teaching and learning process.

Regarding the degree of interaction among participants in the course, faculty notice that students were generally more comfortable in the classroom as a result of early and continual...
digital communications with other students and with the instructor. This increased comfort level contributed to higher levels of engagement and communication in the classroom setting. Concerning the nature and delivery of course content, over a third of the faculty introduced higher-level, more challenging instruction in their classes.

Finally, concerning the teaching and learning process itself, the sense of continuity in the learning process is the most outstanding change noticed. This continuity is probably not independent from the fact that designing a blended course afforded faculty the opportunity to work with instructional designers for the first time and thus allowed them to refine skills for developing goals, objectives, tasks, and assessments. Early planning, instruction, and student learning were hence improved.

It is interesting to notice that faculty mention technical services and support rather than instructional development services and support. This reflects a common tendency among faculty to focus initially on the technologies rather than on the underlying pedagogical goals. Concerning future plans, more than a third of the faculty expected to continue using the web, while over half expected to expand their use. Impacts faculty anticipated from this use include: more efficient face-to-face interactions, more active learning, decreased in-seat contact hours, more readily available practice and feedback opportunities for students, and more student-centred instruction.

1.5 Teaching and learning with discussion fora

Lin et al. (2005), in a study on how learner psychological type differences influence the learner’s engagement in asynchronous written discussions, list the following advantages of communicating through asynchronous written dialogue. Asynchronous writing allows 1) the writer to clarify thoughts before stating his or her points, 2) participants to review previous dialogues, examine what has been said, make new discoveries, and share their meanings in a deeper and clearer way, 3) time for participants to support a point of view with new or compelling information through various resources including the Internet, and 4) for reflection (p. 1794). Lin et al. add that different personality types appreciate different aspects of asynchronous written discussion. For example, more introverted learners find the time to think and reflect before sharing their thoughts most beneficial, whereas more extraverted learners find viewing perspectives, otherwise unavailable, most satisfying. Moreover, participants tend to interact with the online media in ways that are consistent with their ways of interacting with their traditional face-to-face learning environments (p. 1808).

Ellis and Calvo (2005), also working on forum discussions, carried out a study on the quality of the experience of learning through discussions both in face-to-face and on-line contexts. They conclude that from a theoretical point of view learning by discussing, reflecting, learning from the experience of others and seeing things from new perspectives are some of the positive outcomes. From a practical point of view though, only a small number of students knew how to approach discussions both in face-to-face and online contexts meaningfully. Students in this study, then, did not generally understand the value of discussions for learning. Such outcomes suggest instructors should avoid assuming students know how to extract instructional value from online discussions. Students need to learn discussion skills for both contexts. Without explicit strategies learning (modelling postings, demonstration and reinforcement of ideas, strengthening of the relationship between the purpose of the discussion in relation to the learning outcomes), “poor approaches to discussions, negative perceptions of workload and a general lack of awareness of the value of discussions for learning will hamper the quality of learning experienced in discursive learning contexts” (pp. 67-68).
1.6 **Blended teacher training**

Motteram (2006) reports results from a study on the role of blended-learning in teacher education. She found that having an instructional model from their own learner experience in the training, teachers felt stimulated and motivated to think about it. The aim of her study was to show how blended learning can play a role in helping the process of transforming teachers, by providing them with precisely the kind of relevant and useful deep learning experience that is at the heart of higher education (p. 29).

Gold (2001), reports results from a study on a constructivist online teacher training course and indicates that the teachers shifted towards a more constructivist orientation, valuing increased interaction and communication. Teachers felt that online courses offered more student participation than traditional face-to-face courses, and that online courses had more student-to-student interaction than traditional face-to-face courses. The online medium was also seen as an extension of their faculty work. The author states that integrating method and medium was the primary reason for the positive results in changes in teachers’ attitudes and thinking about educational practice. The author also considered the shift in teachers’ perceptions of the online world as something ‘out there’ to something within the domain of their regular duties a positive outcome of the study. “By viewing the experience from the students’ perspective, teachers’ choices of instructional methods and objectives vis-à-vis the media and technology used may reveal a prescription of teaching practices that are subject to quantitative scrutiny. It can also provide great insight into the course structure and methods used” (pp. 53-55).

The above review of relevant literature supports the decisions taken to transform the Certificate course into an on-line blended course. Evaluation of the first edition of the blended course, whether it be by students (Moser-Mercer, Class, & Seeber, 2005) or teachers (reported in this article) provides further confirmation of a step taken in the right direction as will become apparent from our discussion below.

1.7 **Rationale**

The Certificate course transformation occurs at the course level and falls very much into Graham’s third category, transforming blends, and to some extent into category 1, enabling blends. Part of the motivation for the transformation was to i) focus on human coaching to enable rich intellectual interactions and co-construction of skills and knowledge, and to ii) make this course available to a larger number of interpreters wishing to become trainers. Teachers’ evaluations will be discussed bearing in mind the following parameters:

- the teachers’ pedagogical point of view as we shifted from a frontal face to face course to a socio-constructivist blended one;
- the teachers’ upfront training and the necessity to master a certain amount of technology and their feelings in this regard;
- the teachers’ point of view on the learning environment and the human resources support structure;
- the personal and financial cost of this blended course.

2 **Method**

2.1 **Participants**

The entire Certificate course was run with five teachers - two Geneva based, two United States based and one Israel based - ; one tutor; nineteen learners - five males, seventeen females from over twelve countries and three continents - one technical support staff and one pedagogical advisor - both Geneva based.
2.2 Data gathering procedure
We will present data gathered from four qualitative semi-guided interviews with four teachers (annex 1) and one semi-guided interview with the tutor (annex 2). Interviews have been conducted by the first author of this paper, who was also the pedagogical advisor throughout the Certificate course.

2.3 Data analysis
We have used qualitative coding methods for each interview and will illustrate our results with quotations.

2.4 Study limitations
This is a small-scale exploratory study and for the purposes of this paper we analyze only interview-based data and no data from real-life learner-teacher interaction have been considered here.

3 Results

3.1 Teachers’ pedagogical point of view
From a pedagogical point of view, interviews confirm that the Certificate falls under the category of “transforming blends”, characterised by a radical transformation of the pedagogy. Teachers agree that there was a clear shift from teacher centred to learner centred pedagogy. The advantage for learners is to be engaged in professional-related activities (Moser-Mercer, Class, & Seeber, 2005). For instructors, this demands considerable work upfront: designing all the activities, providing the most accurate reading material, and creating cognitive scaffolding-oriented templates. A considerable amount of time is also spent on providing feedback while activities are going on.

It is different because there are activities. It was more talking to them in previous editions. Here they have the tremendous advantage of all the work they did. I would say, these students have had more thorough training than those of previous editions because of what they did.

It is also a good opportunity for sitting back, thinking of your answer and then formulating it. In our profession, all we do is talk and we never leave any trace.

The on-line coaching and co-construction of knowledge influenced the face-to-face portion of the course. Instructors already knew participants and shared a common ground.

There is something different about the group when you come to the face to face part. To some extent I have the feeling I deal with more advanced students because they have done the on-line portion.

Somehow it is a bit more nebulous to me what they know, what they do not know, what they want to build on; whereas before you just walked in and you knew that was the starting point and you could take it from there.

In fact, I would not say, I prefer, but I enjoy teaching in this way rather then coming in, not knowing students’ reactions. There is a much stronger bond with each participant.

A large part of the course was dedicated to knowledge co-construction through active forum-based discussions. The portal as discussion support, discussion framework and mediating tool enabled discussions that are simply not possible in a face to face setting, partly because of the time factor and partly because participants do not behave the same on-line and in face-to-face.

In the Certificate we had some responses to activities, I would not say they were intimate, but where people really talked about something in a clear and structured way because of the time factor and because people do not necessarily talk about these kinds of things in a classroom.

The interaction between different discussion spaces, particularly the forum and the journal, is very informative both to instructors and peer learners. Upfront we provided participants with a journal to fill a meta-cognitive need, which it did according to results reported in Moser-Mercer et al. (2005). It gave instructors a better grasp of the situation since we encouraged public entries in journals, which means that all members of the community portal were able to access journal entries.
As manager of the course I found it extremely useful to have access to journals, to be able to supervise what is going on in each module, being able to keep track in an unobtrusive way. That is something you cannot do in a face to face course. It was good to understand where the whole course was going, where it was not going.

One thing is not to be forgotten: choosing a socio-constructive approach to teaching requires cultural adaptation and participants have to be trained appropriately for instructors to obtain satisfying answers to such pedagogical options.

There is no comparison between the two ways of transmitting knowledge, of creating knowledge. You get away from transmitting knowledge, although there is a little bit of it since some participants are not used to creating knowledge. Some people are used to being talked to, hearing things from the authority. It is an issue I would not like to forget since it is a worldwide course.

3.2 Training and influence of the media

Teachers benefited upfront from an on-line training on and with the very learning environment they were going to use for their own teaching some weeks later, since it was the first distance teaching experience for most of the teachers involved in the Certificate (4 out of 5, the one staff member who had previous experience with on-line teaching coordinated a module that did not occupy a central place in the course). Training lasted one week and as for content teachers were exposed to the same but in a more condensed fashion as what learners would go through some weeks later in the introductory module.

Teachers considered the training adequate. In addition, when it was their turn to teach, they had the opportunity to observe interactions in the learning environment throughout the entire introductory module offered to participants (the first module that lasted one month) and felt sufficiently at ease to begin teaching. A guide was provided which explained each tool together with its pedagogical value and how to use it from a functional perspective. This guide was appropriate and useful as a general introduction. In addition, a technical issues forum was created which offered more or less immediate replies to technical questions.

From a pedagogical point of view, instructors introduced tools in their teaching progressively.

It took some time in the beginning to get used to the arrangements, the tools, but once I got used to them I used the forum most in addition to the library. The forum remained the most important tool for the 1st module and then for the other modules, I tried to broaden up, introduce collaborative learning, templates. Little by little I introduced things.

Teachers have nevertheless felt that not enough training had been given to them in terms of creating on-line activities, and to facilitate material development.

If you are a too novice, then perhaps a little more about how to create activities that work on-line and about what you should avoid is needed. That is independent of the field you are studying. The medium is the message: you are not just training them to be interpreting teachers, you do it in a way that you want to pass on as a good model. So that puts more pressure on you. On the activities, I would say more on that and more on creating learning resources. Ultimately, everyone finds his own system.

The other outstanding feature is that teachers collaborated more. Any teacher could discuss her course activities and how her course was going on the teachers’ forum and share this with the entire group of teachers. This resulted in increased collaboration among teachers and is largely due to the fact we were using a socio-constructivist learning environment where everything is visible to all other members of the community.

I would also say that this kind of teaching has created the opportunity to work as a team, for us as teachers, that we do not have in our regular work even with the department head’s efforts. It was a closer community and I found it very interesting work. You get more out of it as a teacher.

The teacher forum was an extremely valuable tool to discuss any issue. The ongoing discussion on the teacher forum allowed us to go way beyond what we are able to do in our department in face to face. The fact that discussion is going on is very good for pedagogical issues.

One teacher complained about personal physical limitations and this has to be taken into account upfront since it reduces potential involvement in a distance course.

I have some problems reading on the screen and problems with my wrist, and that was another reason why I did not want to spend that much time working with a computer physically. So I have some personal difficulties with managing the environment.
3.3 Human resources support structure: teachers’ point of view

The entire Certificate course has been designed upfront using the Tutoring Support Structure engineering tool which takes into account 3 levels -institutional, material and cognitive- (Class et al. 2004). From a human resources point of view, the structure was the following: a teacher-manager of the project who was also actively teaching, teachers, one tutor, one pedagogical advisor and one technical support staff.

Instructors reported the structure did support them in an efficient way.

I have not given that much thought to the organisation and thought of another model, but we certainly needed someone who headed the whole thing, the director having an overall view of what we are going to achieve, how this Certificate fits in with her relationship with the school hierarchy, with other institutions. And have someone like you (the pedagogical advisor) who has the technical know-how and can answer questions. And someone like (the tutor) who was really very good and very present. I do not see how we could do it another way. It definitely supported me.

Roles were well defined and this helped to know who to address in case of any problem.

Our roles were pretty well defined. You were gently but definitely pushing to a certain way of teaching that none of us had ever experienced, so it was good to have you there. It was also good that almost everyone reacted to your suggestions, either saying “no, we cannot do that and then coming around anyway”, or else saying right away “that is a good suggestion and let me try and incorporate it”. So there was a discussion... you as a resource were useful.

A very important point that was brought out in these interviews relates to the sharing of a common vocabulary among course designers. One teacher, for example, was not used to employing a key word in the same sense as the pedagogical advisor did and this created difficulties for her. An effort to build a common vocabulary ground around pedagogical concepts is something to take into account in future.

I did not understand some of the terminology. For example “scenario”; it is used in a sense that I was not familiar with. There were a few things like that, with the vocabulary. It was new to me and I did not know if this was because I was coming into a new field.

3.4 Teacher-tutor organisation

One tutor had been assigned to the entire Certificate. He had had previous experience in face to face tutoring, had followed the Certificate in one of its face to face editions and is both an interpreter and scientific collaborator at ETI.

In their regular face-to-face courses, interpreter trainers at ETI are not used to using teaching assistants. The role of the tutor, thus, was all the more foreign to them. The pedagogical advisor had underestimated this variable and tutor training had been offered only to the tutor. It would have been necessary to add a component to staff training, something about the “different ways of using the tutor in one’s own course”. Because of their lack of experience with tutors, it took teachers some time to integrate the tutor fully and to co-organise the work with him.

It was a bit clearer in the Feedback module, how we divide things up. But in the Curriculum module, somehow, we did not manage to have a good talk about how to do it. In the future, I have to think about redesigning the module and then it might be clearer.

It was more this time, about discovering. Till you have taught on-line, there is no way you can tell what is going to happen. And then, if you want to have an overall view, you have to have a very efficient system sharing the work to make sure you do not lose part of what is going on in the module. In module 6 the tutor was part of the show.

In addition, there was not a clear willingness to delegate on the part of teachers:

I am not good at using tutors and I still have a ways to go simply because I am somebody who constantly adjusts to how things are going. I size up the situation. The way I deliver my course is very much determined by the class environment. And that does not make it easy for anyone to work with me.

I could have made more use of the tutor, but in the end, I wanted to read everyone’s contributions!

As for the tutor himself, training was adequate from a theoretical point of view, but nothing replaces real-life tutoring experience. As long as one has not been through the course once, one cannot act in an appropriate way. This is particularly true since all actors involved in this
experience lacked teaching and tutoring models they could have had as learners in a distance learning environment.

Of course, in the equation there is this unknown factor at the beginning. You say ok, I read some stuff, I have been told some stuff, but what will it look like? And having done the exercise once now I feel that the factor of the unknown has become really small and even if I worked with teachers I never worked with I could be more assertive, proactive in the shaping of the whole tutor-teacher relationship.

It is interesting to notice that both teachers and the tutor agree about the exact moment when real tutor-teacher interaction started, i.e. module number 6 out of a total of 9 modules.

It is one thing having the theoretical idea what the tutor’s role should be and then implementing that within a framework that is entirely new to the teachers as well. And not really knowing how the whole thing unfolds made that implementation quite difficult. I think it started kicking into gear by the time the Feedback module was around and we said, ok there are the 3 of us, we break the work up among us. Then the distribution of labour worked quite well. But at the beginning, I as much as the teachers was a bit lost: I could not really propose to do much and they could not really delegate too much because every so often we did not know how we were going to do things.

3.5 Investment: what about getting involved in another blended experience?

It is evident that in this first blended experience, all actors involved were very motivated and expended considerable personal effort. All teachers found the experience very interesting, albeit exhausting. We tried to calculate an average number of hours spent by teachers and came up with very impressive numbers. Teachers spent approximately 50 hours on one module that demanded 30 to 45 learner working hours of learners. This enormous investment is due to the fact that all the teachers were novices in on-line learning and thus needed to find the strategies that fit best. It can also be interpreted in the light of the overall pedagogical approach chosen, socio-constructivism, that necessitates sustained human coaching. As to the tutor, he invested approximately 15 hours per module.

After a time of reflection teachers are nevertheless all ready to jump into another blended teaching experience.

Not immediately. Not tomorrow, I have to recover from this one. But I would do it. I found it pretty exhausting. Module 4 was exhausting but it was my fault. Also the face-to-face week.

If you asked me a while ago, I would have answered you maybe I am not the right person to do this. But if there is not the same amount of partake and intense planning going on, if it is picking up from here, changing it, improving it and not all the development work again, I think I can manage it. If we have already done most of the ground work, I feel I can manage it a second time.

And so does the tutor.

Yes I would be prepared to jump into another such experience. I would be very interested in doing such a project again.

4 Discussion

We note similar to Wingard (2004) that there is complementarity of face to face and on-line parts, both socially and pedagogically speaking. As Gold (2001) we notice that teachers underscore the different pedagogical approach adopted in the blended edition, changing from rather frontal teaching to learner centred instruction. Additionally, although knowledge construction with and through fora is known to be a difficult pedagogical task (Ellis & Calvo, 2006), it has recognised advantages. Teachers have practiced these and saw them reinforce their instructional strategies.

Unlike Motteram (2006) we did not have the opportunity to train teachers in a blended way. Nevertheless, we strongly believe, as she does, that a great part of training happens through modelling. We agree with Gold (2001) that training for socio-constructivism within a behaviourist learning environment would not allow one to reach stipulated pedagogical goals. There must be a synergy between pedagogical approach, content and learning environment as all three must be considered key factors for successful training.
Concerning human resources support, it is interesting to note that technology is more of a challenge to teachers than pedagogy. When referring to the pedagogical advisor, teachers mentioned her technical help rather than bringing up her pedagogical help. Instructional design for on-line courses seems to be so much technology-embedded that teachers forget to mention the other part of the equation.

Teacher-tutor organisation required some time to become productive in the sense that the tutor shares part of the teacher’s workload.

From a personal and professional investment perspective it is interesting to notice that all teachers agree it has been a very intensive and exhausting experience, but that they are ready to take part in a similar experience. Proof is provided by the fact that at the very time we are writing this article, 3 out of the 4 teachers are involved in other distant socio-constructivist courses.

Finally, from a financial point of view, contrary to what is found in the literature (Graham, 2005), the first blended edition of the course yielded a profit, albeit not as substantial as previous, face-to-face only editions had. With some members of the pedagogical team accomplishing Certificate related work as part of their regular employment contract, the burden on the budget was obviously mitigated. Nevertheless, the course manager seized the opportunity to study time investment of staff members in order to develop a more reliable costing basis for future editions of the Certificate course as well as for other on-line training modules. The literature on distance teaching is fairly silent on the issue of cost accounting, leaving course managers to grapple with the details. As the announcement for the second blended edition has just gone to press the authors can confirm that as a result of the careful study of time investment by staff and in light of the remarkably improved outcomes (95% completion rate as opposed to approx. 50% in previous face-to-face editions) and the added value for course participants in being constantly coached throughout the 12 months of the course, course fees had to be increased to a level more in keeping with similarly long and comprehensive on-line training courses.

5 Bibliography


6 Annexes

6.1 Annex 1: Interview guide for teaching staff

1) Portal and pedagogical aims
Did the portal as learning environment, support your teaching in an appropriate way?
Did you enjoy teaching with the portal?
Compared with your experience of previous editions of the Certificate and face to face teaching, what are the outstanding points of this blended edition? What are the drawbacks?
Did the media influence your way of teaching? Have you been able to teach in a more extensive way? (not sure what “extensive” means)
What about participants’ performances? Compared to previous editions of the Certificate, are there any changes?
Would you jump into another similar blended teaching experience?

2) Human resources organisation
Was the human resources organisation efficient? What would you change?
Was the organisation between you and the tutor appropriate?
Was the work dispatching between you and the tutor appropriate?
Were the tutor’s roles sufficiently clearly defined?

3) Training
Have you been trained appropriately before you “met” participants on-line? What would you add? What would you change?

4) Tools
Which tools did you appreciate most?
Which tools were the most efficient to support your teaching?
Were there enough tools to support your teaching? Were there tools missing?

5) Cognitive tools
Did you use templates in your activities?
Did you observe any particular effect in the participants’ deliveries when templates were used?

6.2 Annex 2: Interview guide for tutor

1) Portal and pedagogical aims
Did the portal, as learning environment, support your tutoring in an appropriate way?
Did you enjoy tutoring with the portal?
Compared with your experience in previous editions of the Certificate and face to face teaching, what are the outstanding points of this blended edition from a tutor point of view?
What are the drawbacks?
Would you jump into another similar blended tutoring experience?

2) Human resources organisation
Was the human resources organisation efficient? What would you change?
Was the organisation between you and the teacher appropriate?
Was the work dispatching between you and the teacher appropriate?
Were the tutor’s roles sufficiently clearly defined?
How would you define yourself as a tutor? What did your work consist in?

3) Tutor and portal training
Have you been trained appropriately before starting to work with the participants? What would you add? What would you change?

4) Tools
Which tools did you appreciate most?
Which tools were the most efficient to support your tutoring?
Were there tools missing?