

Teaching Today's Students

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The first thing that most college students do as soon as the bell tolls to announce the end of class is to pull out their cell phones and rejoin their modern world. The fact that they need to suspend participation in their world in order to attend college classes shows that our teaching methods need to be changed to accommodate their learning needs. Students today have been raised in a world infused with technology and have become accustomed to having the ability to reach out to their friends and peers at will. Therefore, it behooves us, as teachers, to take their new learning styles and lifestyles into account when teaching today's students.

1. Why Blended Learning

Hoopingarner suggests that in order "to address the learning styles and educational needs of our students, it is important that we understand how technology influences their everyday lives" (3). Once we understand how much technology is a part of our students' lives, then we can use that information to make our classrooms more conducive to their learning styles. The International Telecommunication Union in its "Measuring the Information Society Report" (2010) on the state of information and communications technology in countries around the world ranked Japan eighth in its list of countries progressing toward becoming 100% information societies (12). In Asia, Japan is ranked number 2 behind the Republic of Korea. Internet World Stats reports that 78.2% of the Japanese population use the Internet (1), and over 73% of them have high-speed broadband access: the third-highest number of Internet-users in the world (3). In addition to wide-spread, high-speed Internet access in Japan, Hulme-Jones reports that Japan is "one of the world's leading mobile telephone markets, not only in terms of size, but also in terms of innovation..." (par. 2). Based upon discussions I've had with other university professors in Japan, I would estimate that the vast majority of Japanese university students have cell phones. With the ever-increasing number of applications for, and capabilities of cell phones, Hoopingarner's posit that "the cell phone is the technology of choice for today's students" (3) is undoubtedly correct, and the technology infrastructure of Japan offers an amazing opportunity to make our classes more engaging for today's students.

When questioned about their access to a computer and to the Internet, almost all of the students in the English Department at Hirosaki Gakuin University stated that they have access and were interested in learning how to use technology to study. This is the world our students live in and it is the world we must prepare them to work in upon graduation from our universities. Capozzoli warns that students must be prepared for employment in what is being called "Enterprise 2.0" - the digitally integrated workforce of today (par. 3). The way to do this is engage our students in learning on their

turf and teach them how to use the technology they take for granted in productive, educational and business-oriented ways. The name for this engagement and diversification of teaching tools to optimize instructional effect is blended learning: “a practice that is no longer on the fringe and is now quickly becoming a core part of instruction” (Blackboard 11). This paper will discuss specifically how language classes can be blended but the concepts and methods described are applicable across all subjects.

In addition to engaging students in learning with tools that are integrated into their daily lives, blended learning allows teachers to add more authentic materials to their curricula and courses. Harmer defines authentic materials as those which are “designed for native speakers; they are real text; designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language” (146). Kilickaya compiled the main advantages of using authentic materials as follows: they have a positive effect on learner motivation; they provide authentic cultural information; they provide exposure to real language; they relate more closely to learners’ needs; and they support a more creative approach to teaching. In sum, “[w]e can claim that learners are being exposed to real language and they feel that they are learning the ‘real’ language” (par. 3). Blending a class will not only help to better engage the students, it will allow the teacher to incorporate more authentic materials into the classroom.

Professors can engage their students in learning by employing blended learning methods to their traditional teaching repertoire. Josh Bersin, a leading consultant and researcher in e-learning technology, defines blended learning as “the integration of e-learning and instructor-led approaches into a seamless program” (xv). Instead of radically changing their traditional teaching practices, teachers must only “blend” in new activities that allow students to learn with the technology tools they’re comfortable with and thereby, immerse their students in a deeper learning experience. The goal of blended learning is merely to create more effective, optimized learning. Changing our approaches to teaching a little bit will engage the students in our lessons even more. Technology allows teachers to address students’ varied learning styles and teach to visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners’ desires (Bersin 32). Blended learning techniques address individual learners’ needs in a variety of ways, such as using audio and video materials to supplement the lessons for visual learners, using websites to have higher-level students further explore the topic being taught, by creating a wiki page for students to collaborate on the topic, or by having students create podcasts, wikis, websites or other tech-based materials: a hands-on activity for kinesthetic learners.

Before launching into an effort to inject technology into all instruction, it is important to consider what technology to use, why to use it and how it will improve existing instruction. Including technology for the sake of technology will not make instruction more effective. Duda and Meadow emphasize that technology should not be the focus but it should fit into the instruction seamlessly and that it is important to select the appropriate blend of technology before deciding to blend your classroom instruction (31). When considering how to blend your classes, the three main things you should consider are 1) the technology to be used and how often an update of the technology will be necessary; 2) the course objectives and how the technology will support reaching those objectives; and 3) the audience’s skills, motivation to learn and size (Duda & Meadow 84).

When choosing technology to include in a lesson, the instructor should consider whether or not it is widely available, what costs are involved for the student or the institution, the frequency of the technology updates and exactly how it can be incorporated into the lessons to enhance the instruction and learning. Any technology that is added to lesson plans should fully support the lesson’s and course’s objectives. For example, if a terminal objective of a Business English class is to better enable students

to use English in business communications in an international context, then one way to blend the learning in this class could be to have students analyze English-language business websites and then create a website in English to promote a product or item of their own creation. Conversely, in an English reading comprehension class, having students conduct voice chats online with native speakers would not support the course objectives, so it would be an inappropriate course of blending technology into the curriculum.

One of the most important items to consider about including technology in one's teaching repertoire is the audience you teach. If the students do not have access to technology outside of the classroom, then your options are limited to what can be done in class. If the students are motivated adults who have access to technology in a variety of forms, then the sky's the limit with how you can blend your classes, as long as the blending supports the learning process. Considering that the majority of university students today are young adults who are, as Prensky called them, digital natives who are not only comfortable with technology, but dependent upon it; the audience that most college professors deal with strongly desires that their classes be blended to enhance their learning. Most of them have already sought out ways to use technology in their own learning, as evidenced below.

Research conducted in 2009 of adult language learners' technology use in their language studies revealed that today's students actively use a variety of technology tools when studying foreign languages. Briefly, the research surveyed 758 military linguists who are required to maintain high-level language proficiency in one or more foreign languages and are tested on their proficiency annually. These linguists were given 32GB video iPods in 2008 as a tool to use in maintaining their language proficiency. This survey was conducted to measure both how they use their iPods in language study as well as to investigate what other technologies they employ. Of the respondents, 76% used their iPods to study their language and 72% of them felt that the technology enhanced their language study. When using their iPods to study language, most preferred to listen to foreign language audio files and a smaller number also watched videos. Other technology that these learners used includes computer-based language training programs, foreign language podcasts, movies and videos, and language training websites. When asked how they use the Internet for language study, the respondents provided over 150 different websites that they used to support their learning; sites that they found and accessed primarily on their own without directives from instructors. One of the clearest conclusions this research supports is that today's learners naturally use tech-tools in their learning strategies and strongly desire that their education include technology as an integral, supportive factor.

2. How to Blend Instruction

Teachers and professors who are not tech-savvy or who are not sure where to begin to incorporate technology into their lessons and classrooms need not fret. Today's students are very community-minded and willing to assist teachers who want to learn about and use technological tools. Forsythe recommends that teachers who are interested in using technology reach out to their students for assistance in deciding what tools or programs would be best for reaching a learning objective. This is an especially effective approach if instructors are personally uncomfortable with technology. A student with whom the professor has established a strong rapport and trusting relationship can be consulted for ideas of how the professor can begin to incorporate technology or other media into their classrooms. The student would view this as a sign of respect as well as relish the chance to help their professor

improve the effectiveness and engagement in the lessons. The professor provides the lesson's learning objectives and the student can collaborate on how to achieve the objectives using blended learning methods. This approach takes the burden of learning about ever-emerging technology off of the teacher and also empowers the students to become actively engaged in their learning process: a win-win situation for all involved.

For teachers who do not feel comfortable giving that much control to their students, they can still take small steps toward blending their instruction. The first step is to consider what the lesson's objectives are and think about how technology can support or aid the students in reaching the lesson objectives. Bersin recommends that a first step towards beginning the blending of your lessons could be incorporating online materials that support your main topics (57). If the topic of the instruction is Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the instructor could teach the lesson materials and then provide a list of online reference materials to supplement the students' studies. The teacher can then assign students to review these for homework. The handout could include links to videos of the play posted on YouTube; a list of websites about Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, and other plays; or perhaps a list of podcasts that discuss Shakespeare and his works.

Once the teacher and the students are comfortable with the first steps in blending a course, they can gradually include more blending of instruction. Duda and Meadow outline the continuum of blended learning levels as going from 0% blended: pure face-to-face instruction with no technology integration, to classes being taught 100% online in web-based instruction (64). In order to engage our students more, we need to find a compromise which meets both our school's needs and our students' needs as much as possible. Below is an example of how an English reading, grammar and writing class can be gradually transitioned to create an engaging, blended learning environment.

Semester 1: As you progress through the semester, find texts online which align with the topics being discussed. For example, if your students are reading about jobs or occupations, the students could be given links to online job ads (such as those at an online newspaper's classified ad section) and be told to find examples of jobs that match the information discussed in the text and print a copy of the online ad. Then the students could talk about their findings in groups and compare where they found the information and what information is included in a job ad. Activities such as this, when added periodically throughout the semester, help make students familiar with using the Internet for learning and allow the professor to include supplemental, technology-based materials in the curriculum.

Semester 2: In addition to continuing to provide supplemental reference materials, the teacher can have students read newspaper or magazine articles online which relate to the topic of the lesson. After reading the article and comments about the article online, the students could add their own comments and share them with their fellow students during the class. The teacher could display some of the students' comments and have groups discuss the articles and topics.

Semester 3: Once the students are comfortable with reviewing material online and reading and posting their comments to articles online, they can be engaged in more activities involving technology. For example, the teacher can create a wiki site and have the students collaborate on commenting on the topic of the lesson. If the teacher posts a text related to the lesson's topic, then the students could be tasked to highlight a part of the text and create a link to more information about the highlighted text. This simple exercise would allow the students to become acquainted with exploring the Internet in English and with using a variety of technology tools before moving to more in-depth blended assignments in the future.

Semester 4: Once the students are comfortable with using technology in their studies, the teacher can add more independent, technology-based activities. The students can be assigned to write letters, journals and essays and also comment on and peer-edit one another's drafts on a wiki page which the teacher creates. If a wiki page is not available, websites like *The Mixer - Language Exchange Community for Everyone* or *Livemocha* provide learners a place to post their written work in a foreign language and have native speakers and others comment on and correct their materials. Both of these sites are free to use and provide the infrastructure a teacher needs to begin to blend their instruction. A more tech-savvy teacher could create an account on the *ePals Global Community* website where classes and students from around the world can correspond with one other in a safe, controlled environment.

Once students and teachers become accustomed to including these tools into their learning processes, the tools will become second nature and the students will begin to take the reins and collaborate in how other technology could be used in their lessons. Roberta Lavine, director of the undergraduate Spanish program at the University of Maryland, points out that "kids are so tied into technology; they don't learn exactly the same way that we teach. Using technology is almost like creating a safe place for students" (qtd. in Hallam 57). Clearly, blending our classes and lessons will tailor our instruction to the needs of today's students so that their learning experiences are even more engaging and productive.

3. The First Step to Blending

Teachers today may feel uncomfortable with technology. They may also be unsure of where to begin or when to use technology, much less feel savvy enough to add a technological aspect to their instruction. Thankfully, there is a lot of help available. In addition to reaching out to one's students for assistance, suggestions and guidance, as Forsythe suggests, instructors can take advantage of myriad resources, magazines and tech-experts available to anyone who just asks.

Bersin provides an excellent resource for administrators or teachers who are interested in establishing a program which integrates blended-learning strategies in his book, *The Blended Learning Book*. This book is very detailed and might be too in-depth for teachers who are just starting out and looking to take the first steps toward using technology as a tool in their lessons.

For beginners, books like Shank's *The Online Learning Idea Book* and Murray and McPherson's *Using the Web to Support Language Learning* are great resources. Both of these books provide basic ideas of how teachers can begin to incorporate technology into lessons and classroom or homework activities. Blended learning has become such a major effort in education that new books are being published every year to aid professors and teachers in the incorporation of technology in their lessons. Novices need only begin browsing such publications and ideas for blending their instruction will begin to bloom in their minds.

In addition to the hundreds of books in print to support technology-enhanced instruction, there are also dozens of periodicals which provide guidance and suggestions for blended learning practices. *Language Learning and Technology*, *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, and *Edutopia* are three which provide excellent examples of what works in practice.

Many teachers may prefer to discuss how to take the first step toward blended instruction with others who have already ventured into that frontier. Many professional organizations for teachers have a special interest group or community of practice that focuses on blended learning or technology-enhanced instruction. Joining such groups will give a hesitant teacher the support he or she needs to

venture into blended learning because they'll know that there is always someone to reach out to for help -- someone who's been in their shoes before and understands how difficult it can be to begin to integrate technology into the classroom. A few examples of such professional groups are the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) special interest group and the Japan Association for Language Teaching CALL special interest group. Additionally, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages online community provides a web-based forum for communication and collaboration on a wide variety of topics.

Professional organizations for educators also often host conferences, which provide training sessions on how to use technology in education as well as allowing private companies to showcase and demonstrate their newest technology tools. These conferences are an amazing opportunity for teachers who are interested in blending their instruction because the presentations are given by their peers who want to share their own experiences and successes. Teachers can try out a variety of educational computer programs and tools, and see what tools other instructors are using. Professional conferences are the best source of knowledge, guidance and encouragement for teachers who desire to take the first step toward blending instruction for their students.

4. The Launching Point

Smith suggests that "schools should reflect the world we live in today" (par.3); and that "we need to teach students how to be effective collaborators in that world, how to interact with people around them, how to be engaged, informed 21st-century citizens" (par.3). Teachers need to be aware of how students' lives have changed in the past decades and modify our own approach to instruction to accommodate those changes. Students who are engaged in learning will learn more and be motivated to continue their education. Teachers who adopt blended learning strategies and methods for their instruction allow the students to remain plugged into their world while they learn, and thereby, help to make them more comfortable and focused on learning.

With technology as widely integrated into society as it is in Japan, it is especially important for Japan's educators to become practitioners of blended instruction. The fact that Japan is leading the way in providing nation-wide broadband Internet access means that educators in Japan have unparalleled possibility to bring the world to their classrooms. Once students learn to take advantage of the wealth of information at their fingertips via their cell phones or computers, they will become proficient 21st century learners who will grow into the tech-savvy labor force that today's businesses demand.

Success in using blended learning methods requires only that teachers stop to consider that today's students' lives are integrated with technology and how to engage their students in learning with these tools. Once a teacher takes the first step, they will find that students will break free of traditional classroom practices and help the instructor expand their educational boundaries. Taking the first step into blended learning will be the spark that launches today's students' education into realms of unlimited potential.

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