



## TACKLING BLENDED LEARNING AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH IN KOSOVSKA MITROVICA

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### Abstract:

The introduction of the blended learning approach at the University of Priština in Kosovska Mitrovica was organized within the Tempus BLATT project (530266-TEMPUS-1-2012-XK-TEMPUS-JPCR). The primary goals of going hybrid at the Department of English Language and Literature in Kosovska Mitrovica are to ensure the continuity of learning at a displaced university, as well as to facilitate student-centered learning. The aim of this paper is twofold. Primarily, it will describe the process of piloting a blended course at the Department and outline the supplemental model of blended learning. It will provide the step-by-step account of how the implementation was accomplished, giving emphasis on the learning platform, coupled with a discussion on the challenges and possible solutions. Secondly, the paper will present the results of the pre- and post- course analysis.

### Key words:

EFL,  
blended learning,  
asynchronous learning,  
educational technology,  
Moodle,  
piloting..

*“Would you tell me please, which way  
I ought to go from here?  
That depends a good deal on where  
you want to get to.”*

*Lewis Carroll*

## INTRODUCTION

The approach discussed in this paper goes under many names: blended, hybrid, flexible, integrated, multi-method or mix-mode, and e-learning. Also, it has many faces and appears to evade exact definition. The explication of blended learning starts as the combination of different teaching/learning strategies with or without using technology [5], [7]. Similarly, Shank describes blended learning as a way to boost face-to-face learning with extra tools and resources [9], while Purnima characterizes it as “learning that mixes various event-based activities” [13].

On the other end of the continuum are definitions that imply the use of digital technology to improve student engagement and reduce seat time [3]. Dziuban et al. define a blended course as the one where the social scope of the brick-and-mortar classroom is coupled with “active learning possibilities” of the online component. These authors are not interested in “the ratio of the delivery modalities” but rather in the remodeling of the teaching and learning processes [2].

Finally, we have opted for the supplemental model of a blended course which “retains the basic structure of

the traditional course and uses technology resources to supplement traditional lectures and textbooks” [16]. This course is delivered under the basic principle that immediate oral communication is integrated with asynchronous written communication online to create “a unique learning experience congruent with the context and intended educational purpose” [3].

## RATIONALE

### Why blended learning

In 1999, the University of Priština was displaced to the diverse areas of Southern Serbia and only two years later returned to Kosovo. However, the University is even nowadays dispersed to several relatively distant locations – Kosovska Mitrovica, Zvečan, Leposavić, Zubin Potok, Lešak, and Gračanica.

Moreover, 40-45 percent of the student body and more than 85 percent of teaching staff come from the displaced families who originally resided in Kosovo and subsequently moved to Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1999. Therefore, besides having a dispersed university, we also have the diffused body of students and teaching staff. Since the places where the faculties are located have insufficient capacities to accept large numbers of students, the classes are organized on the bi-weekly basis, which makes the continuity of learning and teaching obstructed.



Therefore, we needed a comprehensive solution to mend the system. Blended-learning approach lends itself appropriately to the organizational issues we are faced with and extends the teaching arm beyond the contact time. According to Kitchenham, blended learning can achieve the goals and objectives of any higher education institution in the world [1]. In addition, Dziuban et al. believe that hybrid courses can be the solution to the problems of “cost, access, efficiency, and timely degree completion” [2].

## How

The introduction of blended learning was done in the framework of the Tempus BLATT (Blended Learning: Advanced Teacher Training) project which started the implementation under the slogan “Be tech savvy” in November 2012 [12]. Its primary focus is the systematization of the current practice of using educational technology at the University under the umbrella of the blended-learning approach. Furthermore, the project pivots around the introduction of student-centered learning, as well as the revision of the ECTS in the given context.

The project provides scaffolding for the lecturers through virtual training sessions (via Adobe Connect) with e-learning specialists from the partner institutions, guidance in the course design [11], as well as the expert evaluation of the piloted courses. In total, seven courses were piloted within the project in the fall semester 2013/14. More information about the project can be found in [12].

## THE RE-DESIGN OF THE COURSE

The Contemporary English Language 1 (SEJ 1) course is delivered in the first semester for the students of English at the Faculty of Philosophy in Kosovska Mitrovica. It is an integrated language skills course at the level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference. The course combines three learning environments, each dealing with the separate set of language and learning skills and also supporting each other in the ‘presentation-practice-production’ cycle.

- ♦ Classroom: the classes are organized on a biweekly basis; students attend lectures in normative grammar for 90 minutes on one week. In the alternate week, they come to seminar classes for 6 hours.
- ♦ Moodle: the learning platform acts as support because it contains the comprehensive syllabus and course materials, something to fall back on in case a student misses a class or is unable to attend classes at all.
- ♦ Class blog: the blogging platform is a place for students to share their reflections on learning, findings on English language and culture, resources for learning English, and their musings on the topics covered in class, as well as to post their written assignments for peer review.

Fig. 1 is the visual representation of the course structure and organization. It shows the flow of course work from face-to-face, structured, teacher-led learning to self-directed learning at a distance [7].

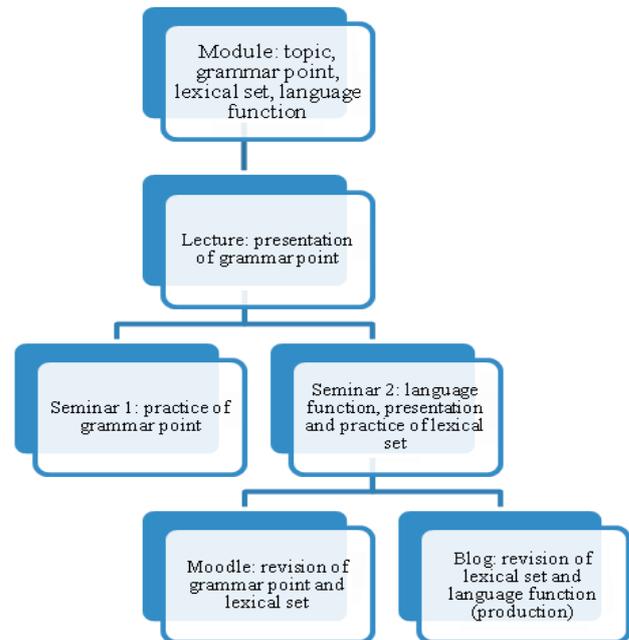


Fig. 1. Organization of the course

The SEJ 1 course is awarded 7 ECTS. Overall, the student workload is distributed as follows: 60 contact hours, 40 hours of online work, and 75 hours of self-study. On-line components of the course will be elaborated in the next sections.

## Moodle

When selecting the course management system we were led by Lieser and Taff's criteria: “cost and development time; ease of maintaining and updating for faculty; and ease of use for students” [7]. We opted for free Moodle site hosted by the Academic Network of Serbia (AMRES) in cooperation with the Computer Centre of the University of Belgrade (RCUB). They provide the services to all higher education institutions in Serbia. This way, not only did we take our students outside the classroom walls, but also placed them in the middle of the national academic community.

A blended course ought to be more than the collection of lecture notes and the syllabus [8]. The SEJ 1 course in Moodle was organized in seven modules, plus two additional sections as preparation for the term tests and speaking assignments done in class. Each module followed the same pattern and they were displayed one at the time in order to avoid *the scroll of death* [11]. As shown in Fig. 1, each module would provide abundant practice opportunities for the learning units covered in class, ranging from controlled drill practice to the open production assignments. The activities would ask of students to work individually and in groups [7].

Furthermore, there were weekly assignments in the discussion forum which were also assessed [11]. The



students were given the lead in assessing forum activity through the rating tool in Moodle. They were instructed to base their assessment against the rubric and the netiquette guidelines. In addition, each week, the group of students was assigned the role of a moderator.

Moodle was the only communication channel [11]. The most insisted form of communication was the Help forum so that everyone could benefit from the answer to a question or a solution to a particular problem. One-on-one time with the instructor was enabled through the messaging system and virtual consults. Virtual office [9] was set on Meetings.io site, a free video-conferencing tool which offers: video call, screen share, file transfer, chat, personal notes, and virtual waiting room.

## Class blog

Our blogging platform of choice was Edublogs because its free user account enables an instructor to easily manage a group blog from adding students to the blog to monitoring their activity. Secondly, by joining Edublogs, we have become the part of the worldwide educational community. Our original idea was for the blog to serve as a reflective learning tool first, and then as a place for posting writing assignment.

As we accepted Richardson's definition of a blog as "a democratic tool that supports different learning styles", the posts were not limited to text only; the students were encouraged to explore different media to express themselves [14]. Furthermore, the students were guided through the process of teamwork in order for the learning to be constructed by the group, not an individual, thus promoting the constructivist approach [4].

Moreover, having students write for public, instead of having their instructor as their only reader, made their effort relevant outside the classroom walls [15]. Writing for public without being pressed for time made our students more careful writers who are deliberate and pedantic in their word choice, sentence structure and text organization. They also developed meta-writing skills such as using spell checkers, dictionaries and thesauri, as well as other online writing tools.

## THE PILOTING OF THE COURSE

The SEJ 1 blended course was piloted in October 2013. The course enrolled 42 students, 83 percent of which were taking this course for the first time. They were surveyed on their perceived digital skills and habits. The results showed that our students spend approximately 2-3 hours a day online, while 60% of that time is spent surfing the internet or connecting with friends via social networking sites.

One fourth of their online time is spent in studying or any kind of school-related activity. As for their perceived digital skills, 50-77 percent declared to be very skilled with e-mailing software, word processors, presentation software and photo editing programs. They were least skilled in audio and video editing software.

Finally, when asked about the way they learned how to use new programs and applications, only 4 percent answered they would contact tech support. One quarter of the students responded they would watch a video tutorial; 24 percent would ask a friend; same percentage would read the instruction, while 23 percent would ask a friend for help.

## Students' readiness for blended learning

The quiz on students' readiness for e-learning [14] revealed that 35 percent of them had many characteristics of a successful online student. They seemed to realize that online component required the considerable amount of time. They finished all projects they started and were persistent in reaching their goals. They seemed to be able to acquire new skills easily, approached the challenges with an open mind and felt very comfortable communicating online. They were very experienced computer users, and didn't have any problems accessing or interacting with the online component of the course.

The half of the students needed to improve some of their technical skills and equipment before taking the course. They seemed to be well-organized. They were prepared to pace themselves, figure out things on their own and communicate with people in writing [14]. They generally seemed to realize that taking a hybrid course required more time and study discipline. Overall, they performed fairly well in this course, with a little extra effort on their part.

Only 15 percent of the students underperformed in this quiz. They lacked independence and time-management skills. Based on their answers about their technical readiness, it seemed that they were not very comfortable using digital technology for learning [14].

## Scaffolding

The students were supported and facilitated in their navigation through the course constantly. Their initial contact with Moodle was organized through a Moodle scavenger hunt [9] in their first class. In addition, the first module was a practice session with activities, assignments and resources that illustrated different functionalities of the platform. Furthermore, each new activity was explained with a video tutorial made with the online tool for recording the screen, Screenr.

Any issues the students had concerning the technical aspects of Moodle or the interaction with the course content were addressed to colleagues and instructors in the Help forum. RCUB tech support was rarely consulted as they failed to respond in a timely manner on occasions when we did turn to them for help.

The course was ended on January 24, 2014 with 87 percent of students successfully completing the online component of the course. The percentage of students who successfully completed the whole course was 63, which is 40 percent more than the number of students who passed the exam in the first exam period (February) in the past three generations.



## COURSE EVALUATION

The internal quality assurance of the course was performed through a series of formative assessment techniques and student evaluation at the end of the course.

Short anonymous surveys [9] were administered at the end of each module in order to assess the learning events. These surveys would ask generic questions such as:

1. What questions or problems came up in this module that would require further investigation?
2. Did you experience any challenges with key activities? What are your suggestions for improving these activities?
3. Was the pace of this module too fast, too slow, or just right? What would you suggest as a way of changing pace?
4. What do you think is the purpose of each activity in this module?
5. What did you learn in this module?
6. What activity was the most useful for you in this module? Why?
7. What activity was the least useful for you in this module? Why? How would you improve it?

The students needed to get accustomed to thinking about their learning in this manner, so the questions were mostly answered with yes/no or a very short phrase in the first few weeks. By the end of the course, however, we would get meaningful answers and constructive suggestions how to improve the learning activities.

Similarly to these surveys, the students would get exit slip notes to complete before leaving the classroom with only one question: “What did you learn today?” Their answers varied from simple ideas such as “when to use gerund compared to infinitive” to more complex ones like “how to express disagreement politely”.

### COLLES Actual

After the two thirds of the course were completed, we administered the native Moodle survey, COLLES Actual (Constructivist On-Line Learning Environment Survey) [10]. This survey aimed at assessing the degree to which the learning activities and course materials improved and helped our students learn. The survey was organized in six categories:

1. Relevance of the course content to students' learning needs and educational profiles.
2. Opportunities for reflective thinking.
3. Degree to which students engaged with the course materials, their colleagues and instructors.
4. How well the instructors facilitated the learning process.
5. How sensitive their colleagues were to their learning needs.
6. How well we understood each other in on-line communication.

Fig. 2 shows the overall results of the survey. The answers were graded against the five-point Likert scale. Only three degrees are shown as there were no answers labeled “never” and “seldom”.

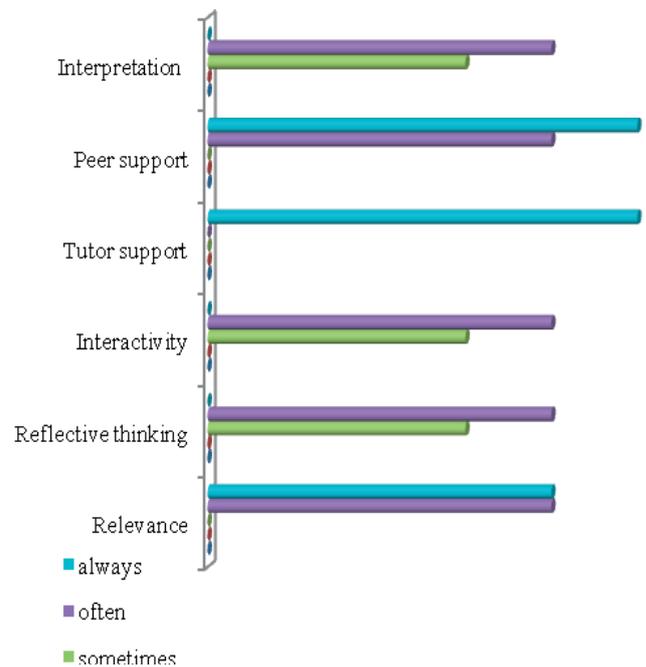


Fig. 2. COLLES Actual results

### Student satisfaction survey

The student satisfaction survey was conducted via on-line questionnaire in Serbian, composed of 38 questions [11]. The questions were divided into five categories:

- ◆ Basic demographic data (4 questions)
- ◆ Cognitive attitudes toward this course (10 questions)
- ◆ Moodle: ease of access (10 questions)
- ◆ Affective attitudes towards this course (10 questions)
- ◆ Students comments (4 questions)

We were not surprised by the student satisfaction survey results because the weekly surveys we administered as the part of the formative assessment painted the accurate picture of how they felt about the blended-learning approach in this course.

There was an even distribution of genders in the student body. The female students were more open to the innovation and could easily and fast extrapolate the benefit they would gain from it. On the other hand, 15 percent of male student body said in the comment section that they would prefer the course to be traditional. Reason for this was, as they explained, because this blended course required too much work during the semester and they would have rather taken their chances with the final examination.

Between 75 and 94 percent of the students agreed that they asked for help more freely in this course compared to others they enrolled in that semester; that the course materials were more accessible; that they were more active in this course; that this course offered more opportunities for



meaningful interaction between colleagues and instructors. Table 1 illustrates the additional selection of results.

As for the course design in Moodle, there was a hundred percent agreement that it followed the project guidelines [11], which was important to us because the piloting stage was actually our exam. The course will be submitted for external evaluation in April this year. Everything that worked and failed in this piloting stage was a learning opportunity because we are approaching blended learning as “a journey rather than the destination” [6].

Table 1. Selected results

Questionnaire item	agree (%)
Course organization was logical and easy to follow.	97
Instructions were clear.	96
There were enough opportunities for the practice of the main concepts.	91
Course activities made learning easier.	97
Tasks were aligned with the learning outcomes.	87
Tasks allowed me to demonstrate my knowledge.	92
Difficulty level was appropriate.	94
Teacher feedback was helpful.	90
Teacher feedback was timely.	100

## LESSONS LEARNED

Overall, we are satisfied with the course design. The three learning environments intertwined and complemented each other, and proved effective in meeting the course objectives. However, certain elements of our design failed in the field test.

### Moodle

- ◆ Too many modules too soon. The weekly timetable stipulated that registration, adjustment, and the first module should be completed in the first week. This was a highly unrealistic expectation. We had students registering for Moodle throughout October. Therefore, most of the next two modules had a low completion rate resulting in lower grade.
- ◆ Discussions in the Q&A forum livened up after we gave the students the assistant roles with permissions to rate each other’s contributions and posts.
- ◆ Generally, giving students more executive role is a powerful motivator. In the next course, they alone will be in charge of the course glossary.
- ◆ FAQ sections should be the integral part of the revised course.
- ◆ Written instructions should always accompany a video tutorial.

### Blog

- ◆ Blogging activity failed in its primary function for two reasons. The initial idea for the blog was to have versatile posts. Unfortunately, it became a medium for publishing writing assignments only, and according to Richardson, posting assignments is not blogging [15].
- ◆ Secondly, there was very little interaction between students. They would cordially respond to instructor’s comments, but there was no conversation going on between students themselves. We believe that the lack of interaction was due to the fact that there were too many assignments the students needed to complete and post. Therefore, in the revised course, commenting will get more attention and be rewarded by badges or symbolical awards in class. Also, there will be fewer writing assignments.
- ◆ However, the blog as a medium turned out to be very valuable as it promoted writing for public, “connective writing” [15].

## CONCLUSION

The model of blended learning we opted for should be “a problem-solving exercise from the perspective of the learning experience rather than the perspective of the tools” [5]. Besides the infrastructural and organizational issues our University is faced with, we chose to transform the SEJ 1 course into a hybrid for several reasons:

- ◆ It advances much needed interaction in the language classroom.
- ◆ Digital literacy is an added value for students preparing to be teachers and translators [2]. At the root of the approach lies the intent to open up the educational mind to the world of possibilities [3].
- ◆ It caters for different VAK cognitive styles.
- ◆ It acknowledges individual contributions to the learning experience [6].

The threefold learning environment has proven successful in achieving course objectives, yet not too convoluted to present an obstacle to learning. We welcomed all the challenges faced with throughout the piloting stage of the course as they will improve the design for the new academic year.

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