

Chapter 3

Social Aspects and Web 2.0 Challenges in Blended Learning

Tiziana Guzzo

CNR - Istituto di Ricerche sulla Popolazione e le Politiche Sociali, Italy

Patrizia Grifoni

CNR - Istituto di Ricerche sulla Popolazione e le Politiche Sociali, Italy

Fernando Ferri

CNR - Istituto di Ricerche sulla Popolazione e le Politiche Sociali, Italy

ABSTRACT

The term e-learning is revolutionizing learning way and it is having a large impact on knowledge society is rapidly evolving into a Blended Learning method, which blends online learning with more traditional learning. Blended Learning can contribute to enhance learning and teaching opportunities worldwide. The chapter analyses the features that impact the success of the blended learning methods, evaluating their potentialities and characteristics. Moreover, an analysis of future challenges and perspectives represented by the mobile devices, the collaborative technologies of Web 2.0, and of multimodal interfaces, are explored. Finally, a qualitative study that the authors carried out by means of open interviews to Italian teachers in order to analyze their perceptions and experiences of Blended Learning methods is described.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth in the use of Internet and web-based communication is providing many more opportunities to learning. Internet-based tools, in fact, can facilitate communication, interaction, and collaborative learning in a way not available in the past. Although e-learning has had posi-

tive impacts, one of its main limits is the lack of social interaction, typically characterizing the conventional lessons face-to face. For example, less independent students, sometimes need to be motivated (Salmon, 2002). This issue brought to the birth of a new approach to teaching and learning, integrating conventional methods based on traditional face-to-face learning systems and online learning based on distributed computer-mediated learning systems, for a better learning

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experience (Rogers, 2001). Blended Learning represents an opportunity to learn at the right time and in the right place for workers and students, integrating innovation of technological advances with interaction and participation of traditional face-to-face methods (Thorne, 2003).

Blended Learning provides a great opportunity to integrate people that may risk the social exclusion in higher education such as: disabled students, people that live remotely from a university, parents with children, learners that work. This approach to learning can cross boundaries and bring students together through different cultures and time zones; in this perspective it could become one of the most significant developments of the 21st century.

Today learning online can use an open flexible and informal environment, without space and time limits that contributes to spread of the knowledge and competencies. The spread of Web 2.0, the use of webcams, wikis, blogs, multimedia software and participatory technologies has enabled to improve distance learning programs. Information and Communication Technologies allow, in fact, having synchronous interactions as face-to-face relations. We, in fact, assist to the development of computer-supported collaboration, social networks, virtual communities, blogging, instant messaging. Methodologies and tools of e-learning point more and more towards forms of collaborative learning, which put the user at the centre as an active participant and constructor of knowledge interactively shared with other people. The network allows learning both in a formal and informal way, creating also the process of lifelong learning.

This chapter aims at giving a comprehensive analysis of both Blended Learning and its social implications and potentialities by studies reviews. Moreover, it explores the future challenges of this learning method represented by the use of new collaborative tools and their diffusion on mobile technologies and the adoption of new multimodal interfaces. Finally, the results of a qualitative study

that we have carried out for analysing attitudes and experiences of Blended Learning methods in Italian Universities are introduced.

WHAT IS BLENDED LEARNING?

The needs and organizational aspects of learning are changing and are leading to a new paradigm of distance learning. In this context e-learning offers great opportunities to access contents of global knowledge market, in terms of speed, flexibility and costs.

According Assinform Observatory in Italy (2006), although face to face classroom training is still the most used method (80.1% of cases, down from 2004 when it was 89.3%) however, e-learning is considered the most effective training approach with 89.4% of preferences, surpassing albeit slightly the classroom training with 84% of preferences. Furthermore, the polls forecast of use and efficiency lead to a contrasted future scenario with e-learning in the top, in fact, while the perspectives of classroom use are reduced (80.3%), those of e-learning are significantly increased (88.3%), leading this method to surpass the more traditional ones (Assinform, 2006).

The Blended Learning model is the most suitable because it integrates the flexibility of ICT tools with the important feature of the human socialization supported by face-to-face approach. Blended Learning, therefore, implies a new approach to training, both teachers and participants have greater autonomy in the construction of training: from training receptive to the constructive synergy between technology and human potential. Blended Learning uses a combination of different resources; in particular, this approach joins the best aspects of both face-to-face classroom sessions with computer-mediated activities to create an integrated instructional approach.

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