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## A multitude of modes: considering 'blended learning' in context

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# A multitude of modes

*considering 'blended learning' in context*

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*CDE RIDE conference, Senate House, University of London, 15 March 2019*



# Abstract

Discussions of mode in higher education tend to contrast face-to-face teaching with distance education, while acknowledging that somewhere in between these poles, some students are engaged in a somewhat mysterious practice of 'blended learning'. Blended learning is generally taken to indicate that a combination of face-to-face time in the classroom with the use of digital/online platforms is in use. While the question of whether blended learning is well understood or well-defined remains unanswered, it can nonetheless be described as the 'new normal'. This session considers transformation in educational delivery mode in the context of the results of an institutional review of technology-enhanced learning, undertaken at Birkbeck, University of London in 2018. An overview of the method and results of the review will be discussed, alongside consideration of the extent to which these findings are more widely applicable. Birkbeck's mission has been to create opportunities to study for groups who are usually excluded by conventional modes of provision. However, where 'distance' mode teaching acts to take location out of the equation, Birkbeck has historically opened access through its timetable. Birkbeck students give up the semblance of a normal life to dedicate many of their evenings to the classroom. But perhaps this has obscured the extent to which student life is increasingly the life of the computer, as well as of the mind. Evening, face-to-face mode teaching, while seen to a great extent as the college's 'USP', is only one element of the 'student experience' and digital practices have quietly gone mainstream. These results have thrown into question whether 'face-to-face' mode truly exists at Birkbeck any more. Furthermore, if blended learning has become an umbrella term that covers a multitude of modes, it seems that much closer attention is now due to the nature and diversity of



BIRKBECK: "LONDON'S EVENING UNIVERSITY"

# Context

is king.



**Birkbeck**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

...established **1823** then as the *London Mechanics Institute*, for the purpose of enabling **working** people to study in the **evening**.


...this was also referred to at the time as ‘spreading the seeds of **evil**’.

...the mission continues.



# There is no typical Birkbeck student...

- Overwhelmingly ‘evening-taught’ - between 6 and 9 pm, studying across all levels and varied disciplines.
- Traditionally: majority **part time**, enter via direct application, average age mid 30s. But, increasingly: more **full time**, more UCAS entry, average age getting younger.
- Many ‘non-traditional’ students (mature, working, first in family).
- Higher than average: EU, those with disabilities and SpLDs, taught postgraduates.



## TEL support in a small(-to-medium), 'face-to-face university'

- The TEL team in 2008 was one Learning Technologist, & one IT Trainer.
- Joined by one more LT for 2008/09 to support WebCT to Blackboard migration.
- IT trainer role then not replaced when staff member left, but lecture capture project role created 2014/15.



# Much was achieved, considering....

- Migration from WebCT > Blackboard 2008/09.
- Rapid growth from 500 live modules to 1500.
- Migration from Blackboard > Moodle 2011/12.
- Growth of online submission and marking.
- Improvements to data integration.
- Introduction of lecture capture.
- Lynda.com.



And even some surprising things...

**STEP UP** **ARTS**  
to Postgraduate Studies in ARTS 2013-18



**Birkbeck for All**

Joined-up Thinking on Accessibility

2016

*with learning technologies. ✓ Indeed,*

**Assessment, Feedback & Technology**

*Contexts and Case Studies in Bloomsbury*

2017



# Birkbeck TEL myths persisted ...

1. We're *not* the *Open University*

1. The academics *don't* want to *do TEL*  
(\*except enthusiasts)

1. Our students are *not* 'digital natives'



# Debunking was needed...

1. We're *not* the *Open University* but we are 'an open university'
2. The academics *don't* want to *do TEL* but they are actually already doing it
3. Our students are *not* 'digital natives'  
...but it's actually digital natives that are mythical

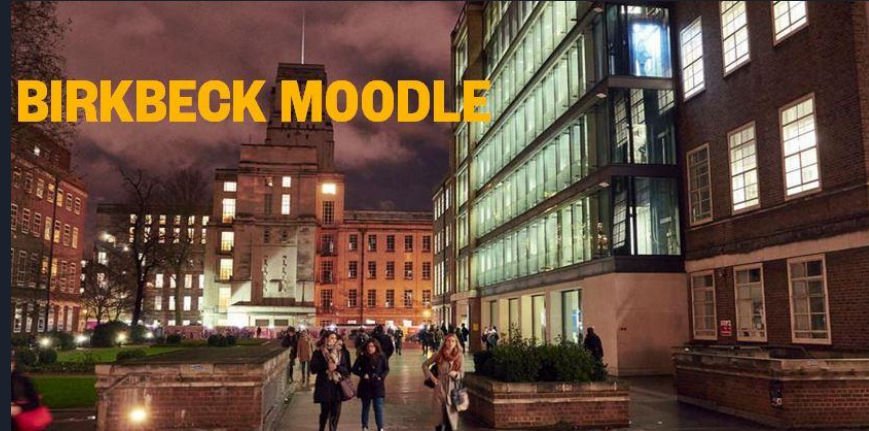
Don't ask,

don't **TEL**?





# 2018 TEL Review: Getting beyond 'business as usual'?





# External strand

1. Pull together aggregated data from known surveys (UCISA, HeLF)
2. and reach out to contacts at other HEIs (City, UCL, Sussex)



# Internal strand

Interviews with key academic staff

~~Online surveys for (i) staff and (ii) students~~

~~User testing for (i) staff and (ii) students~~

Focus groups

Usage data



# External strand

Through looking at HELF and UCISA survey data we confirmed suspicions that ....

- 1) **we already use the standard/most popular platforms**, therefore unlikely there is a fundamental technology lack / fix. And
- 2) **availability of TEL support staff** is the largest driver of adoption of learning technologies.





# External strand

Our interview questions considered...

1. TEL Vision, Strategy, Policy
2. Governance
3. Development and Innovation
4. Team Structure and Roles
5. The Good the Bad and the Ugly



# Findings of external strand

- Across most of the campus-based HE sector, education is now seen as **inherently blended**, and this understanding forms part of institutional strategy and key processes.
- Digital education is a fast-moving field, in which usage, provision and policy need to be **routinely** reviewed and updated. Institutions often have a governance structure which oversees the links between TEL strategy and implementation.



# Findings of external strand

- **There is no magic formula** - structures have evolved organically and responded to local priorities
- *But*, there is a tendency to separate staff from student support, pedagogic from technical support, and have dedicated support for distance learning.



# Findings of internal strand

Learning technologies are used across all departments of the college and the top 20 most visited Moodle modules were spread across 9 departments.

Students appreciate online resources and study materials such as digitised readings, handouts and slides, and video (high production values not required, but rather content that is relevant, timely, and authentic).



# Findings of internal strand

Staff noted that a lack of support in making small, modest improvements is a significant brake on enhancement and innovation.

Staff felt Birkbeck needs a **culture shift** around TEL, expressed through academically-led strategy and governance.

Most staff would accept some degree of **standardisation** based on clearly-evidenced guidance, implemented locally.



# Findings of internal strand

Staff and students across the college, as elsewhere, now regard our typical so-called ‘face-to-face’ mode as in fact ‘blended’ (to varying degrees of intensity).



# Recommendations arising from the review

Four main areas:

- (a) developing a digital education strategy;
- (b) establishing a digital education governance structure;
- (c) building a digital education service; and
- (d) other key actions arising.



# Thinking about mode

Tendency to talk about face-to-face and distance (or 'fully online') as opposite poles on a continuum...

and everything in between as *blended*.

< face-to-face

blended  
online >





# Face-to-face teaching, blended learning

Perhaps face-to-face is a better description of a context in which teaching is done rather than a 'mode' of study...implying that the 'mode' of modules which involve face-to-face teaching is actually by default blended.

But in this case what does blended even mean?



Blended: time for a more nuanced understanding?

UCISA TEL Survey 2018: “Blended learning delivery focusing on the *provision of lecture notes and supplementary resources* to students still represents the most commonly supported activity”

Dziuban et al, 2018, [Blended learning: the new normal and emerging technologies](#): “U.S. Department of Education... defined BL as ‘a combination of online and in-class instruction *with reduced in-class seat time for students*’.”



## Discussion

- What does blended mean to you?
- How can we meaningfully break down ‘blended’ into more useful categories?



Thank you!