

Establishing Blended Learning Provision in Your Department: Reflections on the Blended Language Learning Consortium Project

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Funded by the University of Worcester's Business Partnerships Office, The Language Centre has recently piloted two blended learning courses using a combination of face-to-face and synchronous videoconferencing sessions. The Supporting Student Learning Conference 2009 provided an excellent opportunity to hold a workshop to share what we have learnt so far and enable others to consider how they might use the technology for their own purposes.

The workshop started off with a brief face-to-face delivered overview of the background to the Blended Language Learning Project, explaining how our interest in blended learning was not motivated by using technology for technology's sake, but to bridge the geographical gap between tutors and students. We wanted to investigate whether there was scope for collaboration with other HE and FE institutions within our region to bring together students from a wider geographical area, to avoid having to cancel classes due to low student numbers.

We subsequently joined forces with Aston University, the University of Bath, the University of Coventry and Worcester College of Technology and set up two pilot courses, one in Beginner Arabic and one in Advanced French. Course participants were located in Worcester, Bath, Birmingham, Bristol and Coventry and Barcelona.

Each course consisted of six sessions, two delivered face-to-face at the University of Worcester and four online. The teaching resources used were by no means all 'high-tech', but ranged from traditional materials such as books to e-resources in the form of interactive quizzes, for example.

To enable those attending our conference workshop to gain practical experience with synchronous online learning and teaching, the next part of our session was presented remotely via a 'virtual classroom', using collaboration software called Wimba. Workshop participants were set a variety of tasks to enable them to explore the basic tools in the virtual Wimba classroom for communicating with other students and the tutor, such as the Talk button, the text chat window and emoticons. It soon became clear how important it is to use these tools effectively, so that students can express their opinion without everyone talking simultaneously. In particular the

emoticons allow the tutor to quickly gauge the response in a class, the equivalent of glancing around in a 'real' classroom to check whether students have for example understood an explanation.

We demonstrated how remotely located tutors can, for example, use an interactive whiteboard, give PowerPoint presentations, display interactive assignments for students to carry out in the virtual classroom and show video clips. In addition participants were given the opportunity to explore asynchronous Wimba Voice components integrated in the VLE for consideration how they might employ these tools in their own subject area. Of particular interest is the Voiceboard, which allows students and tutors to post voice messages with optional text on a message board and invite others to reply.

The workshop concluded with a brief evaluation of the technology used. All participants felt it had great potential for enhancing learning and teaching quality and flexibility.

After the workshop participants were sent a hyperlink to an archive of the online part of the session, enabling them to play back and review sections of particular interest to them.