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Blended Learning and Tuition in Religious Studies: An Open University Perspective

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Abstract

This article explores issues that need to be taken into consideration when different forms of tuition (including online, face-to-face and telephone) are 'blended' within higher education. It focuses on the significant challenges and benefits of blended tuition approaches. Issues are explored that are specific to higher education and to the discipline of Religious Studies in particular. The growth of online resources available within the field is highlighted as well as the need to find diverse, effective and creative ways to support students in the development of their information literacy skills. Reflecting on her involvement in the production, presentation, delivery and management of a range of Religious Studies modules at the Open University, the author explores what lessons can be learned from the Open University's experience of the development of blended tuition models. These insights are related to recent theoretical literature on blended learning and tuition (for example: Ellis and Goodyear, 2010; Vaughan, 2010; Garrison and Vaughan, 2008). The article highlights how important it is to avoid simply 'bolting on' new technologies without a consistent and coherent approach to their integration with other forms of tuition. It concludes that it is important to not utilise technology 'just because it's there', but to maintain a focus on what it is used for. It highlights the need for continual work on the development of pedagogical approaches in order to creatively and effectively accommodate the

challenges and opportunities new teaching technologies present to higher education and to the field of Religious Studies in particular.

What is 'blended' learning and tuition?

How can we choose thoughtfully and effectively from an ever increasing range of formal and informal media and methods of teaching and learning? How can the best assets of these media and methods be best selected, combined and 'blended' in order to meet educational goals? These are the questions 'blended' approaches to teaching and learning are essentially concerned with. They are based on the insight that it is not sufficient to simply 'bolt' new technologies onto already existing approaches, but that some thought needs to go into the development of pedagogical approaches that enable and support the integration of these new technologies. Blended approaches to teaching and learning acknowledge that the availability of new technologies not only requires the acquisition of new technical skills, but also a re-think in pedagogical approaches, and potentially the development of new teaching and learning skills. Notions of blended tuition focus more on the teacher's experience, whereas notions of blended learning put greater emphasis on the student learning experience (Prescott, 2009). Blended approaches to teaching and learning are nothing new as such, though the composition of the 'blend' has of course been changing. Whereas the types of technologies and methods that form part of the tuition blend do not necessarily need to be new, issues of blended tuition and learning tend to come a lot more to the forefront when new technologies are introduced. A lot more attention has therefore been paid to blended learning and tuition in recent years since the increasing availability of digital and web-based teaching and learning technologies (Vaughan, 2010: 165). Parallels can indeed be drawn between the impact of the availability of these new digital technologies on educational institutions and the impact of the invention and use of paper or of the printing press. There are, of course, limits to these comparisons, most importantly in relation to the speed of the developments. As Alan Clarke highlights:

e-Learning has exploded on the awareness of education and training professionals and widespread use has been achieved within a few years whereas printing took centuries to reach large numbers of people. (Clarke, 2008: 1)

The speed of these relatively recent developments highlights the urgency to consider the impact of digital technologies on educational institutions and pedagogical approaches. As Diana Laurillard from the Institute of Education's London Learning Lab puts it,

digital technology will not go away, and we cannot afford to separate it out. Its use in teaching and learning has to be woven into the fabric of the institution, manifested in every aspect of its activities, infrastructure and organisation, just as paper is. (Laurillard, 2010: xvi)

Blended approaches to tuition are committed to enabling the process of 'weaving' new technologies into the 'fabric' of educational institutions in effective and thoughtful ways. They are based on the assumption that it is far more productive to facilitate the co-existence of old and new technologies and learning and teaching methods rather than 'treating each new idea or technology as if it is a challenger - as if the new can only find a place by displacing something old' (Ellis and Goodyear, 2010:16). 'Blended' approaches to learning and teaching are aiming at the 'organic integration' (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: 148) of new technologies and approaches into previously established ways of teaching and learning. Ellis and Goodyear (2010) use the concept of the 'ecology of learning' to describe approaches to the creation and sustenance of learning environments that 'focus on the ways in which entities achieve joint success and sustainability within an ecosystem by co-operation rather than by competition'. (Ellis and Goodyear, 2010: 17) This comparison between learning environments and ecosystems is useful in the development of blended tuition models as it signals a shift 'away from thinking of progress as something we can

achieve by selecting the better of two rival 'interventions' or 'treatments' and towards thinking in more systemic or holistic way of thinking' (ibid). However, how can this be achieved in practice?

Blended tuition within the Open University's Arts Faculty

In order to contemplate the practical application of 'blended' approaches to teaching and learning, it is helpful to consider the potential elements of the 'blend' first. The composition of such a blend is of course very different within each educational institution, and for each department and each module or course. In this instance, I will draw on my own experience of working in higher education for the Open University's Religious Studies Department and my involvement in both the production as well as the delivery of a range of modules.

Interaction with students within modules associated with the Open University's Arts Faculty currently occurs either face-to-face, online or on the telephone. Modules within the Arts Faculty draw on a combination of some (or in some cases all) of the following forms of tuition: Face-to-face tuition happens either in the form of regular tutorials that usually last for two hours at a time (usually in the evening or on Saturdays). They are also offered in the form of whole day events ('Day Schools') or residential schools that run over several days ('Summer schools'), though currently there are no summer schools offered in Religious Studies.¹ Online tuition is also offered in various forms. Asynchronous forms of online tuition include Moodle forums (which are widely used in a variety of different ways and for a range of different purposes, including structured tutorial sessions as well as less formal interaction), e-mail communication between tutors and individual students and e-mails sent out to groups of students. There is also the option of using Blogs and Wikis,² though these are currently not very widely utilised as forms of tuition within the Arts Faculty. Some modules (though this does not apply to modules within Religious Studies) also use Elluminate, a synchronous conferencing system.³ Tutors also use the telephone to support individual students or to offer group telephone tutorials. These group telephone tutorials involve small groups of students and connect up to six students with their tutor via a conference call system.

In order to understand the way tuition 'works' within the Open University, it is important to highlight that the modules are not usually delivered by the people who design them. In the Arts Faculty, a module production team does not just involve a team of authors, but a range of other staff, such as a curriculum manager, a curriculum assistant, a media project manager, a sound and vision producer, a librarian, an editor as well as an external assessor and an Associate Lecturer assessor. The complex production process takes several years, at the end of which the Open University's thirteen regional centres appoint tutors (Associate Lecturers) to teach the module in their region. So, whilst module production teams always include an Associate Lecturer in an advisory function, the staff teaching a module to students is generally not the same as the staff involved in the design and production of the module. This creates an additional challenge in finding the best tuition blend for each specific tutor group. There are certain university wide and faculty specific guidelines for tuition models that need to be followed, and the module production teams can further specify tuition models. However, different regions, and in some cases individual tutors, are often given a certain degree of freedom of choice as to what elements to include in the tuition blend and how to respond best to the needs of each tutor group. So, if for example, the majority of students within a particular tutor group prefer group telephone tuition instead of face-to-face tuition because they live in geographically remote areas, adaptations can usually be made. However, there is an ongoing discussion around degrees of regional flexibility and levels of choice for individual tutors and students in the composition of the tuition blend (Mackie, 2009; Owen, 2009; Wiseman, 2009). It also needs to be borne in mind that in light of the Open University's open access policy, students are not obliged to attend or participate in any form of tuition that is not assessed. In other words, a student can pass a module even if they choose not to attend any of the face-to-face tuition sessions or participate in any online forum or telephone tuition offered to them (as long as they submit and pass the summative assessments required for their specific module). In the design of modules, the question of how optional elements can best be integrated with compulsory elements in the 'learning mix' is therefore an important consideration (Prescott, 2009).

Module materials are disseminated in printed form, on CDs, DVDs and CDRoms and an increasing amount of

resources are provided online. The age of a module is often an important factor influencing the extent of online resources students are offered and expected to use as part of studying the module. Online resources are provided as part of the module website and can include, for example, pdf documents, weblinks to relevant websites, library resources, podcasts, pre-recorded Elluminate sessions, illustrations and especially designed multiple choice quizzes. Formative and summative assessments are also making use of an increasingly wide range of different media. Assignments are now mostly submitted online by each individual student, and the detailed feedback students receive forms an important part of tuition.⁴ Some modules have also introduced the use of wikis as a form of assessing group work.⁵

The use of such a wide range of media and technology and the extensive module production 'machinery' within the Open University offer a lot of fantastic and exciting opportunities, but it is also important to be aware of the challenges the creation of a balanced tuition blend in this environment poses. Some of these challenges are specific to the Open University and to the field of Religious Studies, but others are relevant to many other higher education institutions.

Challenges and Opportunities of Blended Learning and Tuition

Open Access

One of the major challenges for the Open University has been the difficulty of consolidating its commitment to its open access policy whilst at the same time taking advantages of the opportunities offered by e-learning technology. The increasing reliance on online tuition in the tuition blend raises equality of opportunity issues. According to its Equality and Diversity Scheme, the Open University is committed to be

open to people, places, methods and ideas [?], promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential [and bring] equality of access to higher education to countless students who had previously been excluded from the chance to participate (Equality & Diversity Strategy Office, 2010).

This is a laudable aim, but how can this commitment to open access, social inclusion and widening participation be reconciled with the fact that not everybody has got access to the Internet and/or has the skills or financial resources needed to access online learning resources? How can equality of access be taken into consideration as a factor in the composition of the tuition blend? There are concerns with regard to levels and ease of Internet access available to students. According to the Office for National Statistics, in the first quarter of 2011, 17.5% of the adult population in the UK had never accessed the Internet before (Williams, 2011: 3). Even though this proportion has been continually decreasing over recent years (ONS, 2010; Williams, 2011), it is still a concern that Internet access cannot be taken for granted, particularly within socially excluded groups. Students - distance education students in particular - with no Internet access at home are clearly disadvantaged. In 2010, 73% of UK households had access to the Internet (ONS, 2010) - which implies, of course, that 23% did not. The speed and quality of the Internet connection are important factors that also need to be taken into consideration. Household Internet access rates do not give us information about the levels of access of individual household members. Even though there might be computers with Internet access in a household, they might not necessarily be available to the student as they might be in use by other family members for a range of different purposes (such as entertainment or shopping). ONS data suggests that 'Internet use is linked to various socio-economic and demographic indicators' (ibid.), in particular age⁶ (with younger people being more likely to have accessed the Internet), disability⁷ and location.⁸ This data suggests that socially and/or economically disadvantaged groups in particular have restricted access to the Internet. We also should not forget that the Open University also offers access to higher education to prisoners - whose restricted or non-existent access to the Internet limits their access to online learning materials as well as online tuition.

On the other hand, can it be argued that these factors are less important than the realisation that e-learning skills are

now an essential part of higher education and of the skills universities need to equip their graduates with?

Graduate skills

The ability of students to work confidently with IT tools, learn from a wide range of sources and apply critical thinking skills in different contexts are essential attributes for twenty-first century graduates and employees (Open University Library Services, 2010: 2).

Competence in dealing with digital technologies and with the increasing availability of online resources is a skill that is not only of great relevance within higher education institutions. Given the increasing emphasis on notions of employability and on transferable skills, higher education institutions cannot afford to ignore the impact digital technology has had on society and need to equip students with relevant communication and e-learning skills. Within the field of religious studies, it would be difficult to justify the exclusion of online communication skills from the 'highly sophisticated written and verbal communication skills' (HEA Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, 2009: 13) that religious studies students are expected to develop. It is important to acknowledge that the Internet has had profound effects within the field of religious studies, for example, on ways in which religious organisations present themselves and are represented (Beckerlegge, 2001). Only limited insights can be gained into the relationship between religion and contemporary society if online sources are ignored. Historical approaches to the study of religion also increasingly rely on digitalised databases. Online sources form an increasingly important part of an increasingly complex and diverse information landscape.

The Internet has generated unprecedented possibilities by making an incredibly wide range of information and resources available at our fingertips, but the evaluation and use of these sources requires certain skills. Students need to be supported in the development of relevant information literacy skills to help them understand, navigate and utilise the ever changing information landscape. The Open University's undergraduate information literacy framework identifies four principal areas of information literacy skills that need to be developed throughout the different levels and years of study:

- Understand the information landscape
- Plan and carry out a search.
- Critically evaluate information.
- Manage and communicate results(Open University Library Services, 2010: 5).

Whilst e-learning skills are not explicitly mentioned here, they play an increasingly important role in the development of these skills. There are therefore great benefits to the integration of online resources and/ or forms of tuition in the tuition and learning blend. However, careful thought needs to be given to the development of pedagogical approaches that support the development of relevant information literacy skills.

E-learning technology also supports the development of independent learning and research skills that were previously very difficult to facilitate in a distance learning environment. Before the wide availability of the Internet, previous 'generations' of Open University modules were designed without the expectation that students would have access to libraries. All materials required for the completion of the module were included in resource packs sent out to students in the post.⁹ The establishment of the Open University's online library with access to a wide range of e-journals, e-books and databases has created unprecedented opportunities for independent learning and research for Open University students. According to the Open University's Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Curriculum and Qualifications),

the production of learning resources [?] accompanied by a mediating and supportive teaching role [?] has now developed further so that this mediating role has to support the capacity of learners to make sense of the wealth of resources which they can, with guidance, find

themselves. This in turn accelerates the move towards enquiry based learning, where the support of enquiry becomes the dominant mode of teaching (Tait, 2010: xi).

The availability of online technology, such as forums and wikis, has also created more opportunities for interaction between students and collaborative approaches to teaching and learning. It has also made it much easier and cost effective for module teams to update module materials and respond to current developments or events during the lifetime of a module. It is considerably easier to change or add to material online, rather than in print.

Time management

In terms of cost effectiveness and time management, it would, however, be a mistake to assume that the adoption of blended tuition models saves time in comparison to more 'traditional' forms of tuition. A considerable amount of time and effort is involved in the development of high quality 'blended' teaching and learning materials. It has been estimated that the development of modules based on a blended tuition model takes about two to three times longer than the development of a module in a 'traditional' face-to-face format (Johnson, 2002). A lot of time and effort needs to go not only into the utilisation of an increasingly wide range of technologies, but also into finding ways of combining the different elements of the blend.

The delivery of online tuition as such can also be very time intensive. Tutors can now potentially be available at all times via e-mail or forums. The time required for managing these forms of communication is often underestimated, not only by employers, but also by students. Student expectations with regard to the availability of their tutors and their speed of response need to be carefully managed, and the time involved in using online forms of tuition needs to be acknowledged by employers in workload planning procedures.¹⁰ This is often much easier said than done, as it is difficult to estimate how much time will be required.

It is equally important to be aware of the time and effort students need to invest in the completion of online learning activities and the location of online resources. However, even though inadequate time management skills are one of the key challenges students face when studying blended learning and tuition modules (Vaughan, 2010: 170), it has been found that 'the increased opportunities for self-directed learning in the blended model help students develop project- and time- management skills' (Vaughan, 2010: 169; see also Spilka, 2002).

Bridging the distance: 'communities of inquiry'

Blended approaches to tuition enable the utilisation of the assets of different forms of teaching and learning technologies in order to bridge both 'the physical space [?that needs to be bridged in distance education...], and even more important, the psychological distance that characterizes any educational activity' (Thompson, 2007: 162). Garrison and Vaughan argue that blended approaches to tuition and learning need to be focused on the creation and sustenance of 'communities of inquiry': 'communities that stimulate and guide creative and critical reflection and discourse' (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: 144). The 'community of inquiry' framework aims at the creation of an environment that fosters 'personal but purposeful' relationships and helps students feel emotionally secure so they feel confident 'to engage in open, purposeful discourse' (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: 20). However, the creation of 'a common sense of community among students of very diverse backgrounds and interests' (Miller, 2010: p. 41) is a great pedagogical challenge. Fostering a sense of community within the context of modules that adopt a blended model might also require the acquisition of new teaching skills, such as the skills required in the facilitation of online forums (Vaughan, 2010: 173).

In my own experience,¹¹ it is much harder to establish a sense of community in an online forum if the students have not met face-to-face. This impression is supported by research conducted by Conrad who found that '[d]istance learners who have the opportunity to meet each other face to face, even once, report an enormous surge in connectedness' (Conrad, 2005: 9).

Garrison and Vaughan argue that the spontaneity of the face-to-face setting 'reinforces education as a social activity' (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: 28). Conrad concludes that face-to-face and online forms of communication have a mutually beneficial impact on each other and facilitate 'greater ease in the other medium' (Conrad, 2005: 9). This highlights that face-to-face tuition remains an important part of the blend, though it is unfortunately not always possible to provide this form of tuition or for students to attend.

The responsibility for the creation and maintenance of a sense of community does not entirely lie in the hands of module designers or tutors - it also involves the students. However, particularly in the early 'forming and norming' stages at the presentation start of a module, a stronger teaching presence is often required (Conrad, 2005: 11). In my experience, it can be very beneficial for the establishment of 'personal but purposeful' relationships if the tutor initiates telephone contact with each individual student at the presentation start of each module. Given that attendance at face-to-face or telephone tutorials or in forum discussions is optional for Open University students, it is also important to encourage students to participate and highlight the benefits of different forms of tuition that are part of the blend. It needs to be clear from the outset what each form of tuition is for and what the 'rules of conduct' are. In order to create and sustain a tuition 'blend', connections need to be established between the different forms of tuition throughout a module. Forums can, for example, be used in the preparation of face-to-face sessions by providing links to relevant materials that are going to be discussed in the session or by giving students space to suggest topics for discussion. Forums can also be used to re-cap topics covered and to continue discussions around issues raised in face-to-face sessions. There are 'opportunities for reflection' and 'considered opinion' within asynchronous forms of online communication that are difficult to provide within the more spontaneous and immediate context of face-to-face tutorials (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: 28).

In order to create a learning environment in which students feel secure and confident 'to engage in open, purposeful discourse' (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: 20), it is of great importance that the different elements of the tuition blend are clearly signposted. The availability and use of many different forms of teaching and learning technologies can be rather confusing for students. Learning activities need to be designed and organised in a clear and concise manner to enable students from very different backgrounds (with varying experience of using new technologies) to confidently navigate across the information landscape, utilising the different elements of the tuition blend whilst feeling part of a 'community of inquiry'.

Conclusion

Blended approaches to learning and teaching offer many opportunities and benefits, most importantly greater flexibility in educational provision and more scope for responses to different learning styles. Research indicates that students enrolled on modules that adopt a blended model acquire a wider range of skills, tend to perform better and achieve higher grades than on equivalent face-to-face modules. Modules adopting a blended approach also tend to have higher student retention rates than modules that are provided exclusively online (Vaughan, 2010: 169).

Whereas the Open University can draw on a vast range of resources that many other educational institutions have not got available to them, the development of blended tuition models within the Open University context highlights many issues that are not unique or specific to the Open University. Many of the issues raised in this article, such as open access issues, the establishment of 'communities of inquiry' (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008), the practical application of Ellis and Goodyear's notion of the 'ecology of learning' (Ellis and Goodyear, 2010) or the specific benefits and challenges of the application of blended tuition models within the field of religious studies, need to be explored in further depth and detail, and I am hoping to do this in future.

Most crucially, in the design of modules that adopt blended approaches to teaching and learning, it is important not to be blinded by the 'rings and bells' of new technologies, and not to lose sight of educational goals. Different technologies and forms of teaching and learning need to be utilised and combined to foster the establishment of an environment that is best suited to support the acquisition of subject specific knowledge and more generic social, cognitive and technical skills. In the selection of the tuition blend, technologies and methods of teaching and learning

need to be chosen on the basis of what they can offer that other technologies or methods cannot provide or do not provide as effectively. Technology should not be used 'just because it is there' - the focus of module design needs to remain on what the technology is used for. Pedagogy needs to drive technology - not vice versa.

Endnotes

- As far as I am aware summer schools are increasingly being phased out by the Open University and are currently only run within the Arts Faculty by the departments of Philosophy, Art History and History.
- 'A wiki is a website that allows the creation and editing of any number of interlinked websites' (Wikipedia). It can be used collaboratively and can be easily edited by multiple users (see also: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>, accessed on 21 August 2011).
- Elluminate is, for example, used as part of the module AD281 'Understanding Global Heritage'.
- In exceptional cases students send their assignments in the post to their relevant tutor, and some end of module assessments or MA dissertations are still submitted in the form of hard copies.
- Wikis are, for example, used as a form of assessment as part of A150 'Voices and Texts', one of the Open University Arts Faculty's Level 1 modules.
- According to the ONS, 'the largest proportion of Internet users was in the 16 to 24 age group' (Williams, 2011: 3).
- A recent ONS study found that in the UK, 35.9% of people with disabilities had never accessed the Internet before (Williams, 2011: 3).
- According to the ONS, 'the region where people were least likely to have used the Internet was Northern Ireland, [?] Merseyside had the second highest rate of Internet non-users, [?and the?] region where adults were most likely to have used the Internet was Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire' (Williams, 2011: 4). In terms of household access to the Internet, 'the region with the highest level of access was London, with 83%, the lowest was the North East, with 59%' (ONS, 2010).
- With some exceptions, such as the televised OU programmes broadcasted on BBC2 as well as any set reading that had to be purchased in addition to the module materials.
- The Open University's Arts Faculty is currently in the process of revising its specifications for tuition models that take more appropriate account of the time involved in online activities.
- I can draw on eleven years of experience of working for the Open University as an Associate Lecturer tutoring a range of different modules. As a lecturer with the department of Religious Studies I have also been involved in the production of modules and in overseeing the presentation of modules as a module team member.

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