

ELT Ireland bulletin



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No.1 20th February 2015

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An Introduction to Blended Learning

by John Byrne (ECM College)

One of the many problems teachers come across is students not having enough time to study or practice English outside of the classroom. This in turn delays their progress and can become frustrating for some. Occasionally students request extra homework to help them with this. Having extra work available to them online can make it easier for them to work at home outside of class hours. This article aims to give you ideas to take your class out of the classroom to help expose your students to even more opportunities to practice their English and progress.

The idea of using computers to extend classroom learning has been around since the 60s but the term Blended learning is a 21st century invention (Friesen 2012). It essentially means mixing face-to-face learning with study using by computer applications either online or offline. In our context that means students do a portion of their English course in a classroom in a teacher led environment with the rest completed at home through computer based study. This was originally done using off line learning packages which were expensive and not always easy to obtain. As there are so many useful sites available online for free and internet access has grown to a point where it is unlikely that any student would have a difficulty accessing, this has made blended learning a option in every classroom.



Where to begin?

At its simplest blended learning can mean setting small tasks, quizzes and written work, for students to complete at home and submit via *email*. If students are sending completed work at different times and can be hard to follow. To combat this, have them complete the task within a given time-frame. This lends weight to the task. Also try to keep it relevant to the in-class lessons. When the students feel the importance of the after-class work, they will have more confidence in it. The extra benefit of setting time limits is that work can be checked at a time that suits your schedule and saves having to go back and forth to see if work has been submitted. Set-up an e-mail account which will be solely for students to contact you and check this at regular intervals for extra work set for students.

With the growth of the smartphone, students don't even need a computer to participate in online learning.

Pic by Pixabay

“It essentially means mixing face-to-face learning with study using by computer applications”

Another way to introduce online work to a class, is with social media. *Facebook* can be used for connecting students with each other and getting them to communicate using real world English. By setting up a group for the class on Facebook students can upload content such as photos and pictures to comment on and discuss it after the lesson. Take a photo of the board in class with specific language points and put it on the Facebook page for students to comment on at home and see what they remember. If you would rather avoid Facebook then there is Google Plus which is a similar social network.

Starting a class blog gives all your students an opportunity to contribute and react to the content and encourages them to interact outside class. A blog is a web page that is updated regularly and take the form of an online journal. Some students use these as a sort of learning journal to keep a note of what was new for them in class. Tumblr is a good option here and students can use it to start their own blogs to practice writing, giving opinions and making comments.

If they don't feel like writing a lot then there's Twitter which restricts messages, called 'tweets', to 140 characters. A fun activity for this site is, in class to have students set a date/time when they will tweet what they are doing after class and comment and then discuss each other's tweets the next day.

With a Google account you can go a bit further and set-up a virtual classroom for free using Google Plus and Google Docs. Google Docs is good for writing and reading work. It also is possible to upload documents with prompts for student to collaborate on and which the teacher can monitor and correct.

For a more all-encompassing blended learning experience there is Edmodo and Schoology, which are dedicated online classrooms that allows the teacher to set homework, quizzes. They also have a message board for communication similar to social media sites. Lessons taught in the classroom can be supplemented by activities and

exercises on these sites. These sites have lots of features to aid in an online class. They take a little practise but are relatively easy to use. The idea is to experiment. You won't break the internet by trying new things and it will pay off in the long run.

All of the sites mentioned above also have mobile apps (for tablets or smart phones) which give the student more access to the content you have provided as well as more opportunities to complete work you have set without the need for a computer. An if you are feeling adventurous there is a myriad of other apps to explore which could give students even more access to learning opportunities,

This is in no way a complete list and by performing a few simple searches you will find many sites that can serve your and your students' needs. The sites listed here are to give an idea of how to get started.

Caveat actor!

A few common problems that may arise when you are starting up is ensuring face-to-face classes don't become into online classes, so make sure your students keep the two separate. I find students looking for excuses to use their mobiles (you may be familiar with the old 'just checking the dictionary' trick) to check social media, so that's what they could be doing if you let them do online work in class.

Make sure you familiarise yourself with the website you are using before you introduce your students to it. This way you can pre-teach and troubleshoot, making it easier for the student, and not end up running an IT class. You want to

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make it as easy for the student as possible so they are not wasting time trying to figure out new websites.

As the website used for blended learning tend to be in English, care should be given regarding the language level of the students it is used with. An Elementary student may struggle with the language on certain sites, it is possible for them to translate websites online though this may lead to confusion as online translators are not always reliable. Therefore, sites should be targeted appropriately.

Planning is very important when it comes to blended learning as not only will the students have to work outside of the classroom, the teacher has to be prepared to put in the work too. If you let it, this can monopolise your time so it is important to manage the amount of time spent creating this work and getting used to the websites. Focus on what is most effective for your lessons rather than letting

yourself get side-tracked.

Making use of a range of internet sites and tools, you can broaden your students' access to learning. The ones you choose will depend on your own level of computer skills and online knowledge. Don't be daunted, even a complete novice will be able to find some very simple yet effective tools to help their students. It is also possible to find easy to follow step-by-step tutorials on practically everything on YouTube or using Google. As technology has become more prevalent in our lives, it makes sense to bring this into the classroom. Have fun exploring a world of new possibilities!



Students can interact and collaborate outside class about class using social media, blogging and other tools.

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References

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20th February
2015