

An Experience of Synchronous On-Line Classes

Noa Talaván Zanón

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (España).

ntalavan@flog.uned.es

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RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta el diseño de un curso de máster basado en la utilización de una metodología de aprendizaje mixto; se trata de un enfoque bastante novedoso en los programas de máster de la Universidad Antonio de Nebrija y se presenta con el fin de generalizar su uso e investigación.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje mixto, aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, recursos en línea, clases presenciales, herramientas sincrónicas y asincrónicas.

ABSTRACT

This article presents a master's course design based on the use of blended learning methodology; this is a rather novel approach to M.A. programs at Nebrija University and is thus presented to be further generalized and researched.

Keywords: Blended learning, foreign language learning, on-line resources, face-to-face classes, synchronous and asynchronous tools

Marta Genís Pedra's & M. Teresa Martín de Lama's paper presents a clear example of the current tendency in Spanish higher education: the blended learning approach. E-learning as such does not seem to be as effective as it was thought to be a few years ago, at least when it is used on its own; apparently, the presence of the teacher is still required by the students to make the most of technological tools. Blended learning is presented here in its most common form: face-to-face classes and online learning combined to take the greatest possible advantage of the corresponding educational framework.

After offering a quite thorough description of the theoretical framework for blended learning, this type of methodology per se is presented through the listing of the main elements that can be encountered no matter the type of 'blend', as the authors put it: 'on-campus and on-line sessions, independent activities, practical activities, communication tools, assessment procedures, virtualized contents, collaborative group work, and tutors'.

The introduction of blended learning at Nebrija University took place a decade ago, in a Masters course for Spanish as a Foreign Language, where students could not attend regular classes because of their professional situation (being teachers themselves). The second experience at the institution is the one presented in this paper, within the Master's Degree in Bilingual Education.

The course design is explained in three blocks: on-line classes, on-campus classes and virtual campus tools. On-line classes make use of synchronous videoconference, are very interactive and possess an interesting aftermath in the form of 'breakout rooms'; here, students can work collaboratively in reduced groups to later share their work in the main videoconference room. As regards the on-campus classes, these are scheduled once a month (except for some subjects that need to be taught twice a month); what is interesting about these sessions is the final so-called 'immersion weeks', that include practical workshops on teaching methodology, where everything learned online and in class can be applied. Last but not least, the virtual campus tools are there to be used in an asynchronous manner, so that students can access them at any time; all these tools (documents, links, task box, bulletin board, forum, chat, etc.) are described by the authors before closing the article.



The general conclusion derived from this paper stresses the value of this type of flexible course designs that balance synchronous and asynchronous tools and methods, such as the one offered at the M.A. in Bilingual Education at Nebrija University.

The significance of this paper would have been increased by the inclusion of some sort of research in the form of data gathered from the students' performance using this design as opposed to students who just follow the traditional face-to-face approach. Additionally, data could have been provided as far as the students' feelings and opinions about the course design, as well as information on the type of students involved. Mere descriptions of course designs do not seem to be considered very practical in the current academic world anymore, since readers cannot see the actual realization of the proposal and the actual benefits its use may entail. Hence, further research possibilities become harder to follow.

Even if the use of Academic English should be revised for publication, the proposal put forward is very useful and interesting for other teachers and institutions interested in running similar courses and it can turn into a very practical reference guide.