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## **Blended Learning Offers the Best of Both Worlds**

**by Dafne González**

Imagine EFL students doing oral presentations for an authentic audience from different countries or listening to presentations by a group of invited guest tutors from all over the world. Through blended courses (courses that include an online component as well as face-to-face [F2F] classroom activities) at Universidad Simón Bolívar, in Caracas, Venezuela, students have increased their exposure to the target language, learned how to use Web tools, and gained flexibility in how and when they learn.

Nearly four years ago, after I joined the online community of practice called Webheads in Action (Stevens 2005; see the review in *Essential Teacher*, Spring 2004), my professional practice changed from teaching purely F2F to teaching blended courses because of these benefits.

The English for Architecture and Urban Planning Program at the university has always been student centered, following a content-, task-, and collaborative learning-based approach (see González and St. Louis 2002). To enhance the program with an online component, I designed some blended courses.

### **Authentic Materials, Field-Specific Practice**

The courses aim to provide practice in English in the context of the students' fields, architecture and urban planning. Each course has objectives in three areas: content, language, and study skills.

The content is related to the subject matter taught in the two career paths. The course materials are authentic, consisting of online journals and magazines, books, articles, videos, photos, and blogs intended for and created by architects and urban planners. The language is taught through the content of the specialty. Teachers give grammatical explanations to students individually, according to their needs. The idea is for the students to manage the vocabulary and the different kinds of discourse used in their fields. Regarding study skills, students learn, for example, outlining, mind mapping, brainstorming, and taking notes from readings and lectures. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies are also introduced in each course.

### **Face-to-Face Classes Complement Flexible Online Sessions**

Having F2F as well as online class sessions gives students the opportunity to experience different kinds of activities and modes of learning.

In the required F2F sessions, students discuss readings and present group projects to their classmates. The classes allow the students to practice and to receive feedback from their

classmates before they present their work to their architecture and urban planning teachers. Students also do simulations in which they prepare classes as if they were teachers of architecture and urban planning. These activities are self-, peer, and teacher evaluated with rubrics generated by the students and the teacher. The students receive individual and group grades.

In the online classes, students access the wealth of resources found on the Web and learn to use many Web tools. For the online component, students have the freedom to attend class from home, from the computer lab, or from anywhere else. I do not take attendance; what counts is that students complete the weekly individual, pair, or group activities. As soon as I get to the computer classroom for these sessions, I open the instant messaging software Yahoo Messenger (see <http://messenger.yahoo.com/>) and invite all students-- those in the lab and those at remote sites--to a conference. In this way, I can talk to everyone and give instructions; the students can also communicate among themselves. For group work, they open other conferences in Yahoo Messenger and get to work as if they were in a traditional classroom.

### **Web Tools with a Purpose**

The online component takes advantage of a variety of Web tools, the most important being the class Web site and the course management system Moodle.

#### **Class Web Site**

Each course has its own Web site, where students have access to all the course syllabus, schedule, weekly activities, assessment plan, and resources (for two examples, see González 2004, 2005). The Web site gives the course flexibility: I prepare the skeleton of the site before December 2005 Portal 3 each course starts, but I revise and gradually complete it as the course develops. As necessary, I make changes and add rubrics generated by students, presentations by guest tutors, and student work.

#### **Management with Moodle**

Moodle (see <http://moodle.org/> and the review in this issue) is a course management system that provides the virtual learning environment for the asynchronous communication in the course (for Simón Bolívar University's Moodle course sites, see <http://80.60.224.77/moodle2/>). With Moodle, students carry out class activities using a set of modules, and I can keep track of which students visit the platform, how long they spend there, and where they go. I organize the material by week so that students can find the required modules for each activity.

Using Moodle's Forums module, students discuss the various topics presented, hand in assignments, give opinions, and ask questions. The Wiki module enables groups of users to author documents collectively in a simple markup language using a Web browser. Students use Wiki for collaborative activities such as writing group compositions, sharing the addresses of their blogs, or selecting readings. With the Journal module, students can write to me about any topic, knowing that I will get back to them in no more than twelve hours. The Glossary module, which allows participants to create and maintain a searchable list of definitions, is one of my favorites. As students read articles, view videos, or attend speakers' presentations, they jot down unfamiliar vocabulary, look it up

in online dictionaries such as *OneLook* (<http://www.onelook.com/>), and create a glossary entry by defining the word, translating it, writing a sentence with it, and adding an image if possible. I use the entries as the source of interactive online exercises and vocabulary quizzes created with, for example, the online quiz and exercise creator at *Quia* (<http://www.quia.com/>). The fact that the students create their own glossary means that I do not have to guess at the words students do not know.

### **Recording with Handybits**

With the free application Handybits Voice Mail (<http://www.handybits.com/>), students can record messages to send via e-mail or save on their hard disk.

In the course, students use Voice Mail to record summaries of readings, narrations for presentations, and messages to me. One year, students recorded scenes from the play *Albert's Bridge* (Stoppard 1969), which they worked on with a guest tutor in the Netherlands, Arnold Mühren (<http://80.60.224.77/eld/am/index.html>). This play served as a literary intermezzo to introduce a unit on bridges.

### **Tailored WebQuests**

WebQuests have been invaluable for my courses. Even though the architecture and urban planning students in my courses share some interests, they also need to learn different vocabulary items and kinds of discourse. Designing WebQuests for each group of students helps me address these differences. For example, one trimester I designed a WebQuest on house plans for the architecture students and a simulation WebQuest for the urban planning students.

### **Interacting Live Online**

My students say that they enjoy most and learn the most from the live online interactive activities in the course. So far, students have participated in three different kinds of live online activities: group chats for collaborative group work, online oral presentations for a foreign audience, and interaction with guest tutors from different countries.

### **Focused Group Discussion**

After watching videos or reading articles related to the topic under discussion, students chat with two or three other classmates to share their views, compare and contrast the readings, relate the content to their core subject matter, and come up with conclusions. The chat logs generated by each group are then posted to a forum in Moodle. Sometimes, students publish them on their individual blogs.

### **Rising to the Challenge of Presenting Online**

Presenting online for an international audience has been a challenging and wonderful experience for the students. My purpose in including this activity was to have students present their projects to an authentic audience that would listen for content more than for correctness of the language.

Although the students were nervous because they knew they were being evaluated, they agreed to participate because they had been interacting via chat with some of my international colleagues in the first weeks of the course.

Each pair of students prepared a project in which they evaluated a building in Caracas. Together, the students designed a rubric containing the criteria for evaluating each of the aspects they considered important, based on the architectural literature. Students created Microsoft PowerPoint presentations, which were converted to Web pages and presented to an online audience of invited teachers gathered in a virtual room at *Alado* (see <http://www.alado.net/> ).

The results were amazing. The students carried out their presentations well, and the audience, most of whom had never been to Caracas, asked good questions and gave useful feedback. Students who were not presenting interacted via text chat with the audience, helping the presenters answer the guests' questions (for a report on this activity, see G3n3zalez 2005, under Assessment). Interestingly, after their presentations, all the students said they felt more at ease than when they had presented F2F to their classmates.

### **Learning from International Guest Tutors**

As described above, one guest tutor helped the students record scenes from a play. One trimester, another guest gave a presentation on rhythm and acoustics, and a group of six guest tutors spoke about bridges in their countries, following my guidance on which aspects to cover. The guests were five teachers from Argentina, Denmark, Germany, Japan, and Portugal, and a civil engineer from Canada, who was part of the team that had designed the bridge he was to present.

The presentations were given at Alado's site and at the online community *LearningTimes.org* (<http://www.learningtimes.org/> ) using the collaboration software Elluminate (see <http://www.illuminate.com/> ). The presentations included Web pages, photo stories, photoblogs, and PowerPoint presentations. Using such a wide range of tools helped students come up with ideas for their own final projects. (For a report on these presentations, see G3n3zalez 2004, under Syllabus).

### **Blogging Their Thoughts Away**

For the course, students set up blogs at *LiveJournal* (<http://www.livejournal.com/> ), and Blogspot (<http://www.blogspot.com> ) which offer simple-to-use blogging tools. They have discussed readings, videos, and presentations by guest speakers; shared Web resources; and published photos, including those of their own projects. The students' acceptance of this activity has exceeded my expectations. Through it, they are becoming experts at blogging their thoughts in English and getting feedback from all over the world.

### **"A Space to Interact More Personally"**

A blended online and F2F approach to teaching and learning can help maximize the advantages of both types of classroom. A student who took the course says it best: I think it is awesome to have a space to interact more personally with the teachers, and to have a platform so we can work outside the college. I think that it is known that we usually don't have so much time left for works, and working this way is a nice advantage. The use of technology for learning is something that should be used, not only in this course, but also in other courses.

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*Dafne González is a full professor of EFL/ESP at Universidad Simón Bolívar, in Venezuela; a member of the TESOL Electronic Village Online Coordination Team; and a member of the advisory board of ESL MiniConference Online.*