Assessment: the Trojan horse of blended learning

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Abstract

The Quartet Method, a methodology for EFL implemented by The Q Group PLC, is based on core pedagogical principles that underpin a standards-driven, blended language-learning model. The use of multiple delivery channels creates a learning environment whereby skills and competencies are delivered through channels that suit learners best. This blend of delivery channels creates an effective balance in learning and caters to different learning styles.

Assessing the learning achieved through these different channels, however, is not a simple process. Therefore, The Q Group has developed an online grading tool which enables teachers to reflect on the blended Quartet methodology in assessment as well as in learning and teaching. Just as the different learning components that are parts of the courses range from self-paced learning to teacher-monitored learning, and from individual to group learning, and take place in computer-based environments, face-to-face classrooms, and home or workplace environments, so the Quartet Method grading tool allows for input comprehensively reflecting these aspects of learning.

This paper will present the Quartet Method and its grading tool together with their theoretical underpinnings, and provide a sample case of its use.

Keywords: blended learning, assessment, EFL, methodology, teaching, learning.

1 Overview

The Quartet Method is a blended learning methodology developed and implemented by The Q Group PLC in various learning environments in the world for the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). These learning environments include both corporate and institutional settings. They include environments for young learners as well as environments for young adults.
and adults. This paper will describe the Quartet Method and examine issues of assessment of this blended learning in institutional settings, and will show how assessment can be used as a Trojan horse in blended learning environments.

2 Blended learning: a mosaic of delivery channels

2.1 What is blended learning?

Blended learning is not new. Teachers have always used a blend of materials and teaching techniques in their lessons. In a recent teacher development session which I led in Budapest with EFL teachers, I asked the teachers to list all of the delivery methods they use at the moment. They came up with nearly 30 different methods including frontal, lock-step teaching, collaborative project work, pair work, storytelling, use of audio CDs, class discussions, etc. They were able to connect very naturally to the question. So when I suggested that perhaps using various computer-based delivery methods would just be “adding tools to the toolbox” of teaching, rather than negating what they have been doing all along, the comfort level in the room immediately rose.

So what are we referring to when we use the term “blended learning”? Blended learning has been defined in different ways. The term is most often used to describe learning activities that are delivered through a combination of e-learning and more traditional classroom learning delivery channels. Masie (in Rosette [1]) suggests that blended learning, in general, is a mix of two or more different methods of teaching, and that we, as a species, are blended learners by nature. Good practice in EFL teaching reflects this.

So, then, what makes the Quartet Method unique? First of all, the Quartet Method provides materials which allow teachers to blend delivery channels smoothly, incorporating flexible classroom and computer-based components. More importantly, however, the Quartet Method stipulates conditions for the chosen blend. The blend must reflect diverse delivery channels. Most importantly, these delivery channels themselves are chosen to reflect research-based, core pedagogical principles.

2.2 What are the principles of the Quartet Method?

What principles underpin this core? First of all, the Quartet Method is standards-driven. Learners attain standards through the development of skills and strategies, as well as competencies, in the target language. The method integrates standards of what learners will know; i.e., their skills and strategies, with standards of what they will be able to do; i.e., their competencies in the target language. These standards reflect the domains of understanding (reading and listening), speaking (in both interaction and production) and writing.

2.2.1 Delivery channels are informed by pedagogical objectives

Delivery channels are utilised to do what they do best in language teaching and learning. Each of the skills and strategies, as well as their resulting competencies, is taught through the most appropriate delivery channel. Listening comprehension, for example, and strategies for listening (listening for specific
details, listening for main idea, etc.) are easily taught through activities which are computer-based, allowing learners to listen independently and to pace themselves accordingly. Communicative competencies, however, are built through interaction. Although some synchronous applications lend themselves to authentic interaction, these competencies benefit from face to face interaction, where oral language is aided by facial expression, lip patterns and gesture. Meaning is negotiated immediately, with no mechanical interference or delay. The computer, on the other hand, provides authentic opportunities for accessing information through the Internet, as well as providing an environment in which reading comprehension and reading strategies can be practiced. Course books also contribute by providing printed texts which, in a face to face environment, can serve as both a contextual presentation of a new grammar structure, and subsequently, as a springboard for discussion.

2.2.2 All course materials are theme-based and integrated, using appropriate delivery channels for the materials

By providing integrated course units based on a theme, learners are working on the theme from many different aspects at the same time. While they are participating in a forum on the topic of food, viewing online videos on food in various countries, discussing and exchanging recipes in class and presenting a short session on cooking, they are employing and practicing necessary cognitive skills and strategies as they are building competencies. A theme-based integrated curriculum provides learners with new learning material simultaneously from different angles, allowing them to develop confidence in their newly acquired language and generate new uses of the language while building on what they already know.

2.2.3 Teachers’ roles are diverse, and reflect the pedagogical underpinnings of the delivery channels

Fitzpatrick and Davies [2] suggest that a paradigm shift in teacher and learner roles is necessary in light of new pedagogical horizons. Traditionally, the role of the teacher was to impart knowledge to learners. Today, they claim, teachers must act more often as guides and mentors. They describe the multiple roles of the teacher as encompassing that of facilitator, integrator, researcher, designer, collaborator, orchestrator, learner and evaluator.

With all of these new roles, teachers are thrust into a need for crucial decision-making. What materials should they use? What delivery channels are the most appropriate? In the Quartet Method, teachers are guided in their choices by the provision of recommended, but flexible unit “maps”, displaying suggested blends for a unit. These recommendations are provided to assist teachers entering this frontier of new roles for the first time, but still leave room for the confident, experienced teacher to make choices appropriate to both her teaching style and her learners’ diverse learning styles.

2.2.4 Learning is learner-centred and caters to various learning styles

In all classes, learners possess different learning styles and different learning style preferences. A blended model creates a place for visual, auditory and
kinaesthetic learners, providing activities that allow for the different strengths and preferences of the learners.

2.2.5 There is a blend of individual and group learning that is served by diverse delivery channels

Learning occurs both individually and in social groupings. Cognitive learning theory suggests that learners develop schemata (Gagne [3]) which allow them to activate background knowledge and assimilate new learning. This is an individual process. On the other hand, Vygotsky [4] claims that all knowledge is socially constructed through language. This view underpins a need for social interaction in language learning. Therefore, as part of this socio-cognitive blended learning methodology, the Quartet Method prescribes that learning activities must include a variety of activities which fall along the continuum of individual to group learning.

2.2.6 There is a blend of self-paced and teacher-monitored learning that is served by diverse delivery channels

While the teacher is still responsible for enabling successful learning to take place, the paradigm shift in learning has shifted responsibility for the actual learning to the learner. One outcome of this shift is the necessity to allow more self-pacing in the learning process. The teacher as integrator and evaluator must monitor the learning that is going on and be sure that learners are moving in appropriate directions. With the acceptance of individual learning style preferences, however, comes the acceptance that learners learn at different paces. Activities, therefore, must reflect the entire continuum of self-paced to teacher-monitored learning.

3 Assessment: reflecting the blend

3.1 What is the role of assessment in this new paradigm of learning?

Language teachers have always assessed learners. They have used both formative and summative methods of assessment. They have provided ongoing feedback which helps learners to learn more effectively, and have clarified to learners where they stand in relation to both the material they are expected to have learned and to the achievements of the peers. They have used multiple methods of assessment ranging from closed-ended, discrete item assessment, to contextualised, open-ended writing or speaking assignments.

3.2 How does assessment inform learning and teaching?

Generally, assessment is thought of as reflecting learning and teaching, and forming a third side of the triangle of learning, teaching and assessment. Traditionally, we often refer to teaching as informing learning, and learning as informing assessment. By moulding the way we expect teachers to look at assessment, however, we indirectly impact the way teachers teach and the way learners learn. Assessment begins to inform teaching, and in turn, learning.
Assessment has always been the Trojan horse of any education reform. By stipulating what is to be assessed and what methods are to be implemented, learning and teaching inevitably mould themselves to reflect the assessment.

3.3 What elements of language learning should be reflected in assessment?

In language learning, there are many aspects of the learning which can be assessed. According to Anderson and Krathwohl’s [5] revision of Bloom’s taxonomy, teachers should aim to assess the factual, conceptual, procedural and metacognitive aspects of learning. This is usually done in language teaching through varied types of assessment including tests, presentations, written assignments, projects and performance tasks, and often through overall portfolio assessment. These types of assessment take place in the classroom, the computer room, the learner’s home or workplace.

3.4 How does the learning management system (LMS) aid in assessment in most blended learning courses?

The LMS generally assesses aspects of learning that reflect the computer-based components of the course, and that have closed-ended, single answer question-types. The learner’s results are often displayed in fancy reports, but no matter what the display, they still represent only part of the learning that has taken place. They do not represent any of the learning that was assessed outside of the computer environment.

So even though the learner can track his learning, the tracking inevitably displays only part of his learning. This skews the appearance of the assessment. In addition to this, one of two things may happen when teachers prepare their final grades for their learners. In the corporate environment, the computer-displayed assessment may become the final assessment of the course, despite face-to-face encounters where additional learning events take place. In school environments, the teacher may not be able to access her learners’ records when she needs to prepare end of term grades, and the online assessment component may not be included in the learners’ grades.

3.5 How can the LMS be utilized to reflect a blended learning environment?

Teachers do keep records. Some do it in hand-written grade books, some on electronic spreadsheets and some in school-based administrative systems. The Q Group has developed a tool which allows teachers to input their own grades into the LMS of the Quartet computer-based system, and decide upon criteria for grading and weighting of the criteria. This online grading tool both provides support for the Quartet Method’s blend of learning, and creates a need for the teacher to truly utilize a blend of assessment methods and tools to reflect her teaching. This tool is the Trojan horse of blended learning!
4 Sample case: assessing the blend in a high school environment

4.1 Iris’ class

Dahlia is a high school EFL teacher in a government school. She teaches Quartet courses using the Quartet Method. One of her classes is a class of 32 tenth graders who are in their seventh year of English studies, and are at a low advanced level. They study English five hours a week, two hours in the computer room, and three hours in the classroom. They also have access to computers after school hours. Some have fast Internet connections and can access their online computer-based lessons and assignments from home, and others can visit the computer lab in the school during the afternoon and evening hours.

In the classroom, Dahlia does many communicative tasks with her students that range from semi-authentic role-plays to authentic interaction on group assignments. They work on literature, reading several short stories and poems during the course of the school year. They have a number of writing assignments, some based on the literature they read, and others based on the themes they are working on in class and on the computer. They are required to produce group projects based on authentic performance tasks.

In the computer lab, the students do computer lessons to practice reading and listening comprehension and improve their use of cognitive learning strategies. They participate in discussion forums and do a number of open-ended online tasks and assignments. All of these aspects of learning, both in the classroom and at the computer enable the learners to develop the competencies they need in English.

4.2 Building the blend

At the beginning of the school year, Dahlia must build the grading criteria for her class. She goes to the computer and opens the grading tool in the LMS of the Quartet system. She is provided with a number of templates suggesting a recommended grading blend for the level of EFL she is teaching. One template includes six criteria together with their suggested weights: computer-based lessons, 20%; computer-based achievement tests, 15%; in-class tests, 15%; writing assignments, 20%; class work, 20%; homework, 10%.

Dahlia had used this suggested template during the previous school year, but this year feels confident enough with the tool to create a blend that she believes will work for her students in reflecting the many faceted aspects of learning in the course. Dahlia agrees with the first four criteria suggested, but would like to include projects and communicative tasks as well. She doesn’t see class work and homework as activities in and of themselves, but as settings in which her students do their writing assignments, their projects, or in some cases, their computer-based lessons and activities.

Once Dahlia inputs her criteria and her weighting for each criteria, each time her class does an assessed assignment, she will be able to use the online grade book to input her students’ grades. The LMS will automatically calculate the
weighted grades of her students at any point that they decide to check their records when they enter the LMS.

4.3 The Trojan horse of blended learning: the washback effect of assessment on teaching and learning

Changing the way Dahlia related to assessment of her students had a washback effect (Cheng [6]) (sometimes called backwash effect (Hughes [7]) on her teaching and, in turn, on her students’ learning. She was forced to think at the beginning of her course about how she wanted her students’ to be assessed. This required her to consider in advance all of the aspects of learning that would go during the course that she was preparing to teach. In order to decide on the relative weights of these aspects, she had to weigh their effect on learning and the percentage of time she and her students would spend working on them. Making these decisions in advance impacted on her teaching. She found herself organizing her lessons to reflect the blend she had decided upon. She analysed her teaching in greater depth than in the past, and reflected upon her choices. She was less tempted to make intuitive decisions about students’ grades, and when student grades did not reflect her expectations, she was more apt to analyse the reasons why.

An additional benefit of the washback effect of using this tool is that Dahlia’s students knew what their grades would be based on from the beginning of the course. Although this may be common practice in tertiary level courses, it is not so in most high schools. Including students in what their grades are based on allows them to be full partners in their learning, taking responsibility where in the past they may have been quick to blame their teacher. Knowing what aspects of their learning are going to be assessed also allows students to make informed choices about their learning.

5 Conclusion

In a blended learning methodology, assessment must reflect the blend just as teaching and learning do. By providing a tool inherent to the methodology, the Quartet Method encourages teachers to be more reflective about their teaching, to think about their assessment choices in advance and to implement assessment that is consistent with teaching and learning.

References


