

Planning online engagement in a language learning unit

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ABSTRACT

Demand for effective learning design in diverse digital environments is increasing in higher education. This report introduces a plan to integrate online engagement opportunities into an English as a foreign language unit for first-year students at Hachinohe Institute of Technology.

Key Words: *online learning, digital learning environment, blended learning, foreign language learning*

キーワード: オンライン学習, デジタル学習環境, ブレンド型学習, 外国語学習

1. Introduction

Online learning has become prominent in higher education, and demand for effective learning design in diverse digital environments is increasing (Segrave & Holt, 2003). Research suggests that installing an online component in the regular face-to-face classroom creates more opportunities to shape learning, and the blended mode of education provision helps enhance achievement (Bates, 2014, Chapter 9). Since the advent of Web 2.0, a myriad of attempts have been undertaken by instructional designers and educators seeking optimal choices in creating a delivery design that incorporates online tools such as the computer and the learning management system (see Meyer, 2010). In language learning in general, in computer-assisted language learning especially, the literature recommends that language educators draw on some guidelines to shape optimal conditions for online language learning to occur, which are simultaneously informed by multiple second language learning theories (Egbert, Hanson-Smith, & Chao, 2007). These recommendations indicate, to name a few, that (1) learners interact in the target language with an authentic audience,

(2) learners be guided to attend mindfully to the learning process, and (3) learner autonomy be supported (Farr & Murray, 2016). Taking account of these conditions, I draw a plan as below to introduce online engagement opportunities in a unit of English as a foreign language at Hachinohe Institute of Technology. I hereafter use the word “unit” to refer to individual courses that make up the entire degree pattern.

The aim of the plan is to encourage students to devote more of their time to out-of-class, purposeful learning experience in the unit which currently comprises face-to-face sessions along with paper-based exams only. First, I will describe the teaching context from which this plan has emerged. I then give a brief explanation of the conceptual framework which has informed the integration of technology into the current unit delivery. This description is followed by the rationale for the choices that I have made in integrating the virtual learning environments (VLEs) into the unit as described below. In so doing, I map the unit components—face-to-face and online—to the VLE elements. I then move on to propose the timeline along which the online engagement opportunities will be sequenced with the rationale for the locations of these engagement elements.

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2. Context and plan

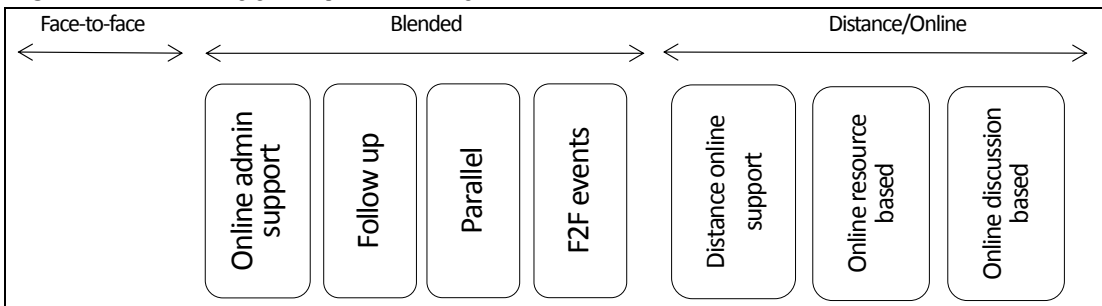
The unit that will be the focus of this report is a 15-week English as a foreign language unit for first-year engineering and design students. It is a compulsory unit across departments and faculties at the Institute. The unit currently has no online component, let alone online administration support; the learning activities have been carried out entirely face-to-face in the lecture room. At the time of writing, the vast majority of the student body come from the northernmost region of the central island of the country with shared cultural heritage. The cultural and linguistic diversity of the student body at the Institute remains negligible with very few exceptions of international postgraduate as opposed to undergraduate enrolments, which occurs every once in a while. The range of proficiency in English within the unit is also kept minimal through a placement test administered in the first week of the academic year. In this teaching context, I outline the plan to introduce online engagement opportunities into the unit to meet the *parallel* template details as described by Jara and Mohamad (2007), as opposed to the current delivery format into which no online engagement elements have been integrated.

Jara and Mohamad (2007) created pedagogical templates for the integration of technology into learning and teaching. These models are meant to serve as a structure which suggests how e-learning could be integrated into a unit. They have been informed by pedagogic practice in e-learning distilled through

interviewing course leaders and investigating their course designs at Institute of Education, University of London as well as an examination of the course design literature. Jara and Mohamad proposed seven pedagogical templates that represent a variety of approaches which emerged through their investigation. Figure 1 shows a basic representation of the location of each template on the continuum of fully face-to-face to distance/online approaches. The plan I propose subsequently adopts the parallel template in which learning activities run in parallel, some in the face-to-face sessions and others online. Jara and Mohamad’s report should be consulted for full details as they describe other templates.

In the parallel template that I have opted for, the core learning activities are conducted in both face-to-face and online formats in tandem, and the activities in these strands are parallel and intertwined (Jara & Mohamad, 2007). In order to align the current delivery mode with this parallel template, I have chosen freely available digital learning management tools—*Stretch Online Practice* run by Oxford University Press the access key of which comes with their English as a second language textbook *Stretch* (Stempleski, 2014) and Google’s blended learning platform *Google Classroom* which enables online support provision and student-student as well as student-teacher interaction. Two reasons have informed this choice. One is the availability of funding, and the other is the desirability of the function these environments are anticipated to serve in light of the unit’s intended learning outcomes.

Fig. 1 The Continuum of Pedagogical Templates for e-Learning



Note. F2F = face-to-face. Adapted from “Pedagogical templates for e-learning,” by M. Jara, and F. Mohamad, 2007, *Occasional Papers in Work-based Learning 2*. Copyright by Institute of Education, University of London.

Table 1 describes the planned VLEs and the possible functions they are expected to serve. Further, the specifics of the face-to-face and online components in relation to the VLEs are explained in **Table 2**.

Table 1

Planned Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and Intended Functions

VLEs	Intended functions
Oxford Online Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reinforce the learning carried out face-to-face ● Monitor students' engagement and progress ● Provide automated feedback to students
Google Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide online support ● Facilitate student-student and student-instructor interaction ● Elicit feedback from students ● Provide feedback from instructor

Table 2

Mapping Planned F2F and Online Components to VLE Tools

Unit components	F2F	Online	VLE
Content	Printed materials	Electronic file repository (identical to print version)	Google Classroom
Learning Activities	Emphasis on face-to-face interaction with peers	Focus on weekly timed review and application exercises	Oxford Online Practice
Communications	Yes	FAQs Discussion space	Google Classroom
Learning Resources	Hard copy of handouts and textbook	Electronic version of all handouts	Google Classroom
Assessments and Feedback	Quizzes and feedback provided manually and orally	Submission of weekly timed exercises	Oxford Online Practice Google Classroom
Unit administration	Reminders of quizzes, weekly exercises, and deadlines Announcements of <i>ad hoc</i> events Face-to-face, telephone	Reminders of quizzes, weekly assignments, and deadlines Announcements of <i>ad hoc</i> events Contact information of convener	Google Classroom
Course evaluation	Uni-wide student satisfaction survey	Short version of the Critical Incident Questionnaire	Online survey linked through Google Classroom

Note. F2F= face-to-face. Adapted from "Pedagogical templates for e-learning," by M. Jara, and F. Mohamad, 2007,

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3. The timeline of engagement opportunities

Literature recursively underscores that establishing the instructor's online presence, especially during the first weeks, is essential in encouraging students' sustained

online engagement throughout the unit delivery (Palloff & Pratt, 2011). The unit's Classroom will start to run ahead of the face-to-face session, and all students will be sent an e-mail invitation to sign up to join the class. The message begins with the instructor's welcome announcement and includes an electronic copy of the detailed unit outline and

the manual to enroll in Oxford Online Practice. The Week 1 face-to-face session begins with the instructor’s self-introduction, followed by the icebreaker activity where students, in turn, introduce themselves to each other in a small group in the *Circle of Voices* manner (Brookfield, 2006, Chapter 11). This activity is conducted in basic English in response to the four items, such as individuals’ major and student club they (intend to) belong to, those indicated by the instructor, plus one or two more at individual students’ discretion. This activity continues into the online Classroom activity in which students introduce themselves with the *Circular Response Technique* (see Barkley, 2010) to the other classmates with whom they

have not yet interacted face-to-face.

Literature iterates that it is as much important that students establish their presence in the online community early on. In the instructor’s effort to assist students in developing their presence in the community, it is stressed that raising “good” questions is essential to stimulate and sustain meaningful interaction in the online community (Toledo, 2006). However, in a foreign language unit in which students have a very limited proficiency, like the one I propose here, only basic formats of questioning might serve this purpose, such as asking about, and in return, reporting to peers particular facts about the real world.

Table 3

The Timeline of Face-to-Face and Online Engagement Elements

	F2F	Online	Online feedback to/from students
Before commencement	n.a.	(G) Welcome message by instructor published (G) Electronic copy of unit outline and instruction manual to enroll in Oxford Online Practice course published	n.a.
First weeks	Student and instructor self-introductions in Japanese Information and expectations of the course Core learning activity begins	(G) Student and instructor self-introductions in English (O) Students enroll in Oxford Online Practice (O) Weekly assignment exercises begin (G) Students post their work in asynchronous discussion forums	(G) Instructor posts comments to students intro’s (G) Students post technical questions (G) Students post Online Practice content-related questions (G) Instructor posts content-related feedback to Students
Middle of the semester	Instructor elicits feedback through students’ minutes from/about face-to-face sessions – every three weeks	(O) Weekly assignment exercises (G) Students post their work in asynchronous discussion forums	(G) Students post Online Practice content-related questions (G) Instructor posts content-related feedback to students (G) Feedback from students – the short version of the Critical Incident Questionnaire submitted anonymously through free online survey (e.g., <i>Questant</i> , <i>Survey Monkey</i>)
Final weeks	Uni-wide end-of-semester student survey	(O) Weekly assignment exercises (G) Students post their work in asynchronous discussion forums	(G) Students post Online Practice content-related questions (G) Instructor posts content-related feedback to Students

Note. F2F = face-to-face; (G) = Google Classroom; (O) = Oxford Online Practice

In parallel with the face-to-face class sessions, the online engagement opportunities include (1) students' self-introductions, (2) weekly assignment exercises in Online Practice, (3) asynchronous discussion forums in Google Classroom, and (4) feedback to/from students (i.e., students' minutes about the face-to-face sessions and the Critical Incident Survey as adapted from Brookfield [1995]) (Table 3).

At the first face-to-face session, the instructor explains the unit requirements including how to sign up for the VLEs. Throughout the unit, the planned delivery—both face-to-face and online—provides a range of topics such as “jobs” and “weekends,” related grammar points, and communication skills including those for presentation and viewing in English. Oxford Online Practice works as an automated formative feedback provision tool. Students are required to complete the weekly exercises as scheduled in the unit outline so as to qualify as test-takers in the mid-semester and final quizzes. Although Google Classroom, as it stands, does not allow for synchronous interaction, it will be used throughout the semester to post students' tasks and demonstrate their learned skills in asynchronous discussion forums. Thus, Google Classroom serves as a forum in which participants are encouraged to raise questions—from technical to content-related—and post and test their learned skills as per task instructions displayed by the instructor, such as video viewing and presenting their daily life and ideas using learned linguistic forms.

Meanwhile, as research evidence suggests, both active and passive patterns of engagement among different learners at various points do be observed (Smith & Smith, 2014): One and the same student could engage in the same unit moving back and forth along the continuum of passive and active modes of learning. Importantly, a value can be found in passive engagement itself as discerned at some point along the way, like, when they do not find any difficulty in performing a given task. Thus, assuming experiences of all participants are different at various points, their contributions to the discussion forums do not count towards the final mark. Equally important, the forums

serve as a space for feedback provision to students. The feedback function is intended to elicit issues of technical difficulty, ease course content delivery, enhance communication skills development in English, and provide formative assessment as well as “feedforward” from the instructor (Hattie & Timperly, 2007; Shute, 2008).

4. Conclusion

I have outlined a plan to introduce online engagement opportunities into one of the units that I have responsibility for so that the current unit meets the parallel template details for blended learning (Jara & Mohamad, 2007). The outline was proposed by describing how and when online engagement opportunities would occur throughout the semester, along with a plan to implement online feedback provision to and from students. Care was taken to show the differences between the current and planned delivery methods as well as to support the proposed recommendations by making them informed by the literature and pioneers' successful experience.

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要 旨

高等教育において、多様なデジタル環境下における効果的な学習デザインが求められている。本論は、八戸工業大学における一年次必修英語科目へのオンライン学習導入計画を紹介する。

キーワード: オンライン学習, デジタル学習環境, ブレンド型学習, 外国語学習