

E-learning and blended learning

INTRODUCTION

Learning is a means to the goal, not the goal in itself. Adult learning has become more important in today's knowledge era because lifelong learning is a necessity in all venues. Adults seek out learning experiences in order to cope with specific life-change events. Although adult learners have been found to engage in learning for a variety of reasons: job advancement, pleasure, love of learning etc., it is equally true that for most adults, learning is not its own reward. Learning has become integrated with working. Adults need to be able to integrate new knowledge with what they already know, that means active learner participation. There is also a need, in the area of Adult Education, to develop and use more flexible teaching methods (e.g e-learning, blended learning) that reach out to the target groups. Delivering teaching and learning remotely became much more easier thanks to technology. In recent decades, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for educational purposes has increased, and the spread of network technologies has caused e-learning practices to evolve significantly.

The evolution of distance education, as a result of new technologies and the contributions of computer scientists to the field of education along with the conceptualisation of education as a lifelong process, poses a major challenge for educational institutions: how to integrate these technologies into their organisation and, especially, into their teaching. From simple occasional use of ICT to reinforce face-to-face teaching and learning to the use of virtual environments for courses conducted completely online. **E-learning could be considered a natural evolution of distance learning**, which has always taken advantage of the latest tools to emerge in the context of technologies for structuring education.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

E-learning

There are many different definitions for the term:

- E-Learning can be defined as learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communications technology. It can cover a spectrum of activities from the use of technology to support learning as part of a blended approach (a combination of traditional and e-learning approaches), to learning that is delivered entirely online. Whatever the technology, however, learning is the vital element.

- E-learning is electronic learning, and typically this means using a computer to deliver part, or all of a course whether it's in a school, part of your mandatory business training or a full distance learning course.
- E-learning includes numerous types of media that deliver text, audio, images, animation, and streaming video, and includes technology applications and processes such as audio or video tape, satellite TV, CD-ROM, and computer-based learning, as well as local intranet/extranet and web-based learning.

In the early days it received a bad press, as many people thought bringing computers into the classroom would remove that human element that some learners need, but as time has progressed technology has developed, and now we embrace smartphones and tablets in the classroom and office, as well as using a wealth of interactive designs that makes distance learning not only engaging for the users, but valuable as a lesson delivery medium. Like society, the concept of e-learning is subject to constant change. In addition, it is difficult to come up with a single definition of e-learning that would be accepted by the majority of the scientific community. The different understandings of e-learning are conditioned by particular professional approaches and interests.

M-Learning (Mobile learning)

It means using mobile devices including mobile phones and other handheld devices to facilitate teaching and learning. m-Learning is one of the latest developments in e-Learning, which takes advantage of mobile devices for learning on accessible portable platforms, ideal for people on the go or for taking your training away when you can't access a regular computer. The term has more recently been adopted for the use of e-learning on mobile device platforms, meaning smartphones and tablets like the iPad or Samsung Galaxy. In particular, younger generations are growing up using mobile devices to access the Internet and complete tasks as part of their school and college work. Using a mobile device to deliver training means that learners can learn anywhere they have their phone available, so they're not restricted to an office computer if resources are tight.

Blended learning

A method of delivering teaching and learning that involves both face-to-face teaching and the use of technology together at the same time. For example the internet may be used to support a session that includes interactive tasks for the learner. Generally speaking, blended learning means a course or subject in which students have required face-to-face learning sessions with their teacher of record and then are free to complete their remaining coursework remote from the face-to-face teacher. Online learning is the backbone

of student learning when the students are located remotely. The same person usually serves as both the online and face-to-face teacher.

Actually, no single, reliable definition of blended learning exists. Many use terms like hybrid, mixed, or integrative to describe the same trend. There is a general consensus among education innovators that blended learning has three primary components:

- In-person classroom activities facilitated by a teacher,
- Online learning materials, often including pre-recorded lectures given by that same teacher,
- Structured independent study time guided by the material in the lectures and skills developed during the classroom experience.

In some situations, the move to blended learning has inspired educators to redefine traditional roles. The word **facilitator** has emerged as an alternative to **teacher**, bringing with it a slightly different focus. The facilitator places an emphasis on empowering students with the skills and knowledge required to make the most of the online material and independent study time, guiding students toward the most meaningful experience possible. Facilitators focus on four key areas:

- Development of online and offline course content.
- Facilitation of communication with and among students, including the pedagogy of communicating content online without the contextual clues students would get in person.
- Guiding the learning experience of individual students, and customizing material wherever possible to strengthen the learning experience.
- Assessment and grading, not unlike the expectations for teachers within the traditional framework.

Blended-learning experiences may vary widely in design and execution from school to school. For example, blended learning may be provided in an existing school by only a few teachers or it may be the dominant learning-delivery model around which a school's academic program is designed. Online learning may be a minor component part of a classroom-based course, or video-recorded lectures, live video and text chats, and other digitally enabled learning activities may be a student's primary instructional interactions with a teacher. In some cases, students may work independently on online lessons, projects, and assignments at home or elsewhere, only periodically meeting with teachers to review their learning progress, discuss their work, ask questions, or receive assistance with difficult concepts. In other cases, students may spend their entire day in a traditional school building,

but they will spend more time working online and independently than they do receiving instruction from a teacher. Again, the potential variations are numerous.

Over the past decade, digital- and online-learning options have become more popular and more widely used in public schools, although many schools have been slow or reluctant to adopt new technologies for number of complex reasons, ranging from inadequate funding, technologies, and computing networks to general organizational recalcitrance and resistance to change. Given the fact that the internet and most digital learning technologies are still relatively new, instructional alternatives such as blended learning could be seen as de facto reform strategies. For example, if students begin learning both in-person and online, it might lead schools to reexamine their traditional school schedule and rethink how the typical school day is structured. In many cases, blended learning is one component of a larger reform initiative in a school or district.

Generally speaking, blended learning offers many potential advantages and disadvantages that will largely depend on the quality of the design and execution of a given blended-learning model. Advocates may argue that blended learning gives students the benefits of both online learning and in-person instruction. For example, students can work independently and at their own pace online, but still have access to the personal attention of a teacher and all the assistance, knowledge, and resources such an educator provides. At the same time, teachers can structure courses and deliver instruction more flexibly or creatively than in a traditional classroom setting. That said, advocates of blended learning may also argue that online learning, on its own, is insufficient without in-person or one-on-one interactions with a teacher.

Blended learning may also allow teachers to spend less time giving whole-class lessons, and more time meeting with students individually or in small groups to help them with specific concepts, skills, questions, or learning problems. Blended learning may also allow schools to teach more students more efficiently at a lower cost to the school and because students are required to use digital and online technologies in blended-learning situations, they naturally acquire more technological literacy and greater confidence using new technologies.

However, critics of blended-learning experiences may question whether the practice can provide students with enough personal attention, guidance, and assistance from teachers, especially for learners who may not be self-directed, self-disciplined, or organized enough to learn effectively without regular supervision from teachers and adults. Without in-person supervision, for example, students could easily spend more of their study time using social media and chatting with friends than doing their schoolwork. We, teachers, should be aware of this obstacles when organising educational process with e-learning tools.

BENEFITS OF USING E-LEARNING METHODS IN THE CLASSROOM

An immediate potential benefit of considering to implement e-learning in the classroom is that it can be seen as an additional avenue which can support teaching and learning practice. E-learning covers such a wide sphere that it is difficult to point out any benefit as a given, so any benefits should initially be termed „potential” benefits. However, many teachers point the following as broad benefits that e-learning supports:

- the ability to provide distance learning (learning not at school or training centre),
- a blended learning/teaching approach (using face-to-face and technology),
- the use of technology to support a wide range of educational activities.

Advantages

Learning 24/7, anywhere: Many face to face courses only operate within normal school/training centre hours. Allowing learners to complete the course when and where they like makes the process of learning more flexible. This also means that learners will be happier because they don't need to travel to specific training centres.

It's discreet: Not everybody feels comfortable learning in a large group, especially if they find something hard to understand that co-learners have no problem with. E-learning allows each individual to tackle the subject at their own pace, with interactive tasks being set in place to ensure a thorough understanding throughout each module.

It saves time: By reducing the time taken away from the work/family life, removing travel costs and doing away with online learning helps adult learners to save their time and money.

Disadvantages

Key disadvantages of e-learning include:

- Lack of social interaction between teacher and students,
- Lack of direct and immediate feedback from teachers,
- Asynchronic communication hinders fast exchange of question,
- Teachers' lack of knowledge and experience to manage virtual teacher-student interaction,
- Danger of postponing (the tasks, the study duties etc.). Sometimes happens that learners spend more of their study time using social media and chatting with friends than doing their study-work, which may cause some problems.

To sum up, for many students, e-learning is the most convenient way to learn and study. A lot of learners are attracted to a flexible, self-paced method of education to attain their degree. However, many teachers have a harder time keeping their students engaged in e-learning class. A disengaged student is usually an unmotivated student, and an engaged student is a motivated student. One reason why students are more likely to be disengaged is that the lack of face-to-face contact makes it difficult for teachers to read their students' nonverbal cues, including confusion, boredom or frustration. If a student is confused, bored or frustrated, he or she is unlikely to be motivated to succeed in that kind of class.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in our life and for educational purposes has increased, and the spread of network technologies has caused e-learning and blended learning practices to evolve significantly. There is a need, in the area of Adult Education, to use this flexible teaching methods that reach out to the target groups.

Adults learners often find it difficult to study because they have to work and take care of their families. E-learning is a perfect opportunity to complete their educational process and it enables them to minimize time they spend on learning, so that they can pay more attention to work and family.

Of course, e-learning and/or blended learning methods are recommended for teaching both: adults and young people. The knowledge can be passed on to students in many ways (e.g.: by online lectures/courses, videoconferences, electronic mailing lists). Adult learners usually prefer the simplest forms of e-learning. They expect teachers to send them texts and lectures or exercises to do by email. The materials need to be short and brief and clear, easy to understand. But that is just very small aspect of e-learning method. Some of the learners and students take advantage of greater possibilities, which e-learning can give, eg. online courses and resources available online at the e-learning platform.

Thanks to supporting traditional education by e-learning methods, learners:

- have access to the materials that were discussed during lessons they did not attend,
- have ability to use materials which enables them to extend or improve their knowledge,
- have direct contact with the teacher (because of continuous access to internet forum),
- all tests that learners submit are automatically checked and marked,
- learners can send the same homework many times and each time they receive tips from the teacher,
- learners can work in groups on internet forum.

GOOD PRACTICES INVOLVING USES OF E-LEARNING IN TEACHING

First of all, teacher's involvement and teachers' ability are crucial (are key factors) when considering the start of using e-learning or blended learning methods in teaching. That is the reason that examples described below, concerns mostly training of teachers.

Case study 1

“How to prepare and run an e-learning course with using of Moodle platform”
(Jak przygotować i prowadzić kurs e-learningowy z wykorzystaniem platformy moodle).
It is an online course for teachers of various professions who wish to prepare and run an e-learning course and make it available to their students via Internet.



The main theme of this course is actually Moodle platform in use. The course shows teachers how to prepare and run an e-learning course through the use of the Moodle platform and then, how to create their own e-learning courses using the skills they have acquired. The online course helps teachers to acquire the basis of digital literacy necessary and sufficient to develop their own web based course and web training materials for their individual learners.

The starting point was experience of educators (teachers, tutors, authors of the courses, other educationalists) who already developed and implemented the blended learning courses in the process of education of students from the teenage schools and learners of the adult schools at the post-secondary level. Thus the developed and executed teaching innovations may be considered the basis of knowledge and skills necessary to prepare, implement and execute e-learning courses. The good practices concerning creation of educational courses in the relationship of a teacher (a course creator, a consultant and an educator) and a learner became a set of experiences that may be shared with other educators who want to develop their competences in in this area. Thanks to this the good practice gained by teachers already engaged in e-learning was shared with other educators.

Methodology

In the consequence of the idea of helping future creators of e-learning courses the idea of creating the exclusively Internet course for teachers themselves has arisen. The experience and the already proven methods have formed the basis for creation of the innovative course-guide for educators entitled “How to prepare and conduct an e-learning course with using of Moodle platform”. The form of the online course was applied, without the option of so-called “blended learning”, to enable newly created tool to become an universal, independent of extrinsic factors (time, place, economy among other things) improvement in the educator's work.

Innovative Character of the Content

- introduction of new problems,
- individually considered recipient orientation of the content,
- transfer of the content, making use of multimedia techniques.

The Course prepared by Teachers for Teachers

The guide has been prepared by teachers and its recipients were to be other educators, future creators of e-learning courses. It aims at facilitating and improving work of a teacher having the idea for an Internet course and the necessary preparation and providing the sufficient and adequate content-related materials. The guide takes a form of a short study that includes indispensable directions, advices and practical suggestions how to work step by step, making use of the moodle platform.

The Structure of the Course

The course was built on a thematic framework, where individual modules are prepared at explaining the key issues of creating new online courses with Moodle. The titles of each block explain the scope of the course.

The Goals of the Course

It's worth noting that the name itself. How to prepare and conduct an e-learning course with using of moodle platform – does the job of conveying the goals, and the type of information the course focuses on. Course has a clear presentation and form (e.g. the titles of individual modules), so the view of the center panel is a good substitute for the course plan.

The intention was to simplified the tools and made Moodle's interface easy to use for a beginner.

The Course Form

The course for teachers provided the capabilities offered by the moodle educational platform – the authors decided to choose it because of its availability (moodle is free of charge) and functionality (simplicity of the moodle operation).

In effect the formal priority became its easiness and clarity because its users were the persons who did not have the advanced competence in using a computer. Thus it was not necessary for the users to have any skills to use HTML, to create web pages and to write computer programs, etc.. It was enough to have basic computer literacy, skill of working with texts and graphic materials and mailing messages together with enclosures, and, of course, passion and commitment.

Therefore the transferred subject-related content covered exclusively the necessary range, and its layout was to improve a future course creator's systematic increase in competence, to facilitate navigation and quick search and usage of the resources. The subject-oriented arrangement of the modules, the order of the discussed resources and the activities

according to their degree of difficulty resulted from that aim.

The practical aim of the exercises was to improve the recipients' self-assurance and satisfaction having resulted from the fact that knowledge was assimilated and the competences were appropriately applied.

The Content of the Course

Informative part - include some assumptions, targets and specification of the course form. Next, there appeared simple advices referring to the preparatory phase and the subsequent work comfort in the phase of the e-learning course execution.

Two sorts of resources were used there and they included, as follows:

- the theoretical part (lectures, charts, lessons, books)
- and
- the practical part (various types of exercises to check the acquired competences). It should be stressed that both parts are closely interrelated and the originators first of all cared about the course participants' own work.

The subject area of the particular parts (chapters of the course-guide) was subordinated to the following modules that contained both, as follows:

- the condensed knowledge of the possibilities of application of the next 'moodle' tool in the situation of creating and conducting an e-learning course, and
- the manners of its application.

Usability

In accordance with the made assumptions the course is an useful tool that improves activity of the educators who cooperate with adult students. Its advantages are of two types:

- it strengthens the competence and skill development and it simultaneously increases experience of the teachers themselves,
- and also
- it prepares in a precursory manner the basis for future e-learning activities oriented to
 - efficient cooperation between the educator and the educated,
 - usage of the proven and available teaching tools.

Such form of the course enables getting familiar with the general requirements concerning application of the primary tools and the auxiliary tools; it enables one to indicate what tools should be used and which should be avoided, and it enables making the teacher's competence more coherent in the scope of preparation of his/her own courses. These competences would enable educators to act with greater flexibility in their curriculum delivery and served to increase the level of interest amongst adult learners in the subject being covered by the course.

Remark: the course is available in Polish language.

Case study 2

“How to Build a Website With WordPress”

It is an online, step by step, course which teaches the course participants how to create their own website or blog with using the WordPress CMS system. This course may be useful not only for ordinary students but also **for teachers or educators who wish to use WordPress system and to exploit the website this way created in their educational practice.**

Introduction - What WordPress is?



In short, WordPress is an open source web software application that you can use to create and maintain a modern website, even if you don't have any technical expertise. Since it is a web application, WordPress does not need to be installed on your home computer, or any other machine under your control. It can live on the server (a kind of computer) that belongs to your website hosting company. **WordPress is free, easy to use,** and packed with excellent features.

Originally, WordPress was an application meant to run a blog website, but it has now evolved into a fully-featured Content Management System (CMS). Actually, at the time of writing, WordPress powers over 4.5 percent of the entire internet. And if that's not enough, the newest version of the platform gets downloaded 1 million times every two days.

Even though WordPress was originally a blog engine – used primarily to run blogs – it's now being used by a number of big (by today's standards) online agencies to run their sites. Outlets such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, and Reuters all use WordPress as the base of their web publishing platforms.

Undoubtedly, the platform has evolved a lot over the years, and, even though a massive amount of new functionality got introduced, WordPress still remains one of the easiest to use web publishing platforms out there.

Why using WordPress to build a website is one of the best available solutions these days?

- Have you ever wanted to have your own website, at low cost, without the need to hire a team of developers and designers, without learning advanced programming languages, and with almost unlimited extension possibilities? If that's a yes, WordPress is likely the platform you should look into
- These days, everyone has a good reason to get a website. It's not just large companies anymore. Individuals, families, and small or independent businesses all

need to have one. Some individuals simply don't have the financial resources to hire a website development company or a freelance web developer to create a website for them. This is where WordPress comes into play.

- In short, WordPress is an open source web software application that you can use to create and maintain a website on your own, even if you have the minimum of technical expertise.
- This course will take you through the complete process of building a fully functional WordPress site from scratch. The journey goes all the way from teaching you how to install WordPress, start publishing content, pick the right design, and add some extra functionality through plugins.
- The best part is that you can do all this without losing your shirt along the way. Moreover, once you get some practice, you will be able to launch new WordPress sites within minutes (not a metaphor, by the way; this is as true as it gets)
- This course guides you along the way in a step-by-step manner to explain everything there is to know about WordPress.
- We'll start with downloading and installing the core of WordPress, where you will learn how to choose the correct settings in order to guarantee a smooth experience for yourself and for your visitors.
- After that, I'll teach you all about content management functionality for your site, from posts and pages to categories and tags, all the way to links, media, menus, images, galleries, administration, user profiles, and more.
- Next, you will find out what plugins and themes are, and how to use them effectively.

Once you're done with this course, you'll have all the knowledge required to build a professional WordPress site from scratch and use it for whatever project you have in mind.

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Kategorie kursów:

Jak utworzyć stronę internetową opartą na WordPress	<p>Jak utworzyć stronę internetową opartą na WordPress - jest to kurs typu "krok po kroku" przeznaczony dla osób, które chciałyby utworzyć własną stronę internetową opartą na systemie zarządzania treścią. Kurs może być przydatny również dla nauczycieli, którzy chcieliby wykorzystać tak utworzoną stronę w praktyce edukacyjnej.</p>
How to Build a Website With WordPress	<p>"How to Build a Website With WordPress" is a step-by-step course meant for people who would like to build their first website and use it for the purpose of their choice. This course can also be used by teachers who would like to use the website as an additional resource for their students.</p>

Remark: the course is available in both: English and Polish languages.

The English version of this course was prepared and implemented during the year 2014.

Case study 3

Moodle e-learning Platform at the Gliwice Methodical Centre for Teachers

Gliwice Methodical Centre for Teachers (Gliwicki Ośrodek Metodyczny) is a public institute which uses different forms and techniques of e-learning to support the educational process.

DESCRIPTION OF THE METHOD

Methodical Centre for Teachers (Gliwicki Ośrodek Metodyczny) is an educational institution dedicated to improve the qualifications and professional skills of the teachers. The Centre, founded in 2002, is a public institution conducted and funded by the City of Gliwice. The Centre carries out tasks in the field of the continuing education and in-service training for teachers and covers the operation of all teachers in Gliwice schools, both public and private. On the base of the agreement concluded by the city hall, also teachers working in schools in the district of Gliwice can participate in activities conducted by the Centre.

The Centre employs several consultants – specialists, who support teachers in their work and help to solve didactical and educational problems.

The Centre collaborates with counselors - they are teacher working in schools, professionals in the field they teach. Counselors have individual consultations with teachers, they conduct open classes (every teacher can participate in them), organize various courses and workshops. Methodical Centre arranges various conferences and thematic seminars for the directors and teachers, develops and implements the EU projects related to educational programs. The Centre stays in contact with teachers and provides updating information about its activities.

In order to facilitate the organization of work and the intensification of its activities Methodical Centre for Teachers has applied the method of contact with colleagues and beneficiaries of activities through the following tools:

- Website
- Newsletter
- Moodle platform.

IMPLEMENTATION

Moodle platform is an e-learning tool used by Gliwice Methodical Centre for Teachers to support the process of learning and sharing the teaching experiences. Network is useful for a wider group of users who want to enjoy not only traditional forms of communication. The platform is a useful tool for the coordination of methodological advisors. Counselors create teacher networks, manage them and coordinate all the activities implemented in the network, e.g. they are also moderators of the thematic discussions.

For the purposes of methodological advisors "advisors' zone" was created. It is available only to employees of the Centre and methodological advisors (access key is necessary to enter). This is the area of communication and information exchange between employees and teachers-colleagues of Gliwice Methodological Centre. In the "Advisers' zone" there are the most important documents about the work of the Centre (e.g. Constitutive Act, the Statutes of the Centre).

There are forms/templates of documents related to the organization of training: attendance list, surveys, logs, certificates. These are edited documents; their inclusion was to facilitate the activities of the organizational advisors.

The "Advisers' zone" also contains forms like documents, work plans and reports. These are documents which are obligatory to fill by every counselor. Information about deadlines and rules of preparing the documentation are provided there.

For the purposes of advisors, there are articles which contain concepts of work of the Centre and state educational policies. Functioning of this zone is to provide advisors knowledge necessary to perform their work and inspire teachers to boost skills. Within this area teachers-counselors have the opportunity to create their own blogs, enroll on available courses, create their own courses and exchange their experience and points of view at the Internet forum, which is a part of the Moodle Platform.

Recommendations and pieces of advice for teachers

First of all – it is always a good idea for teacher to join a few online courses as a learner before starting act as an online course creator.

- Plan carefully what subject matter your online course should cover,
- When planning, have in mind your learners, their needs, preferences, obstacles etc.,
- Guide the learning experience of individual students, and customize material wherever possible to strengthen the learning experience,
- Plan carefully the structure of the course in order to lead the user, step-by-step, through the contents of the course in a very accessible way,
- Elaborate the content,
- Create /adapt the content suitable for the level, expectations and competence of your recipients,
- Try to discover how your intended audience wants to interact with that content and choose the media (eg. text, articles, tutorials, audio, images, animation, webinars, films, some combination thereof),
- Try to simplify the tools and make course's interface easier to use for a beginner. Adult learners usually prefer the simplest forms of e-learning. The resources available online and teaching material need to be brief and clear, easy to understand. However, some of the students take advantage of greater possibilities, which e-learning and its tools can give,
- The good point of the course can be the presentation of additional resources and types of information that the user would find valuable. This includes eg. web links and various multimedia presentations. It is good solution when presentations provided do not require any additional (third-party) software or drivers to work,
- Do some pilot testing before you make the course available to your learners, eg. hold a few sessions where your colleagues or your internal team thinks about potential futures for your e-learning course even though you've done your research, and you know a lot about what your recipients want.