**Learning from best practices in online courses**

## Thoughts on the academic literature around online learning

Very quickly, an academic literature search on e-learning, online learning, or flipped classrooms leads to two dominant terms: *blended learning* and *technology-enhanced learning (TEL)*. “At its simplest, blended learning is the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (Garrison, Kanuka 2004:514). The leading researcher in blended learning is Garrison and his team in Alberta (Calgary or Athabasca, depending on the date). TEL, on the other hand, seems to be more of a U.K. term (Bayne 2015) and can be understood as encompassing a broader field that we might call online education. “Online education is used to encompass all forms of teaching and learning using the Internet. It also refers to the plethora of names and acronyms that have evolved over the past two decades including: online learning, e-learning, blended learning, web-enhanced learning, hybrid learning, flipped classrooms, and MOOCs (massive open online courses).”(Picciano 2015:3)

So we see that a practical application of TEL, or online learning coupled with classroom instruction or interaction with a professor in the environment of higher education provision is most appropriately labelled “blended learning”. Garrison’s work, both books and articles, addresses more questions than we probably will ever have, and yet it also provides a framework for incorporating new ways of learning and teaching – the Community of Inquiry Model (Garrison, Kanuka 2004, Garrison, Cleveland-Innes 2005) which is based partly on the work of John Dewey (1938). Herein, we see the need to create presence – namely three types of presence: Social, Cognitive and Teaching. These can be (over-)simplified to “belonging, inquisitiveness and creating shared personal meaning”. The model is not complex, and gives much food for thought.

Technology-enhanced learning has perhaps had its greatest boost with the arrival of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) established by “old school” schools such as Stanford, MIT and Harvard (Hill 2014). The history and possible future problems have been discussed, but again we have to ask with Bayne (2015) what it is that technology means – is all tech neutral or beneficial? What does it mean to enhance something and is the introduction of technology in this case always an enhancement? And finally, what is learning and how do we, as educators, create the setting, select the content, and facilitate the discourse to achieve some kind of educational experience (Garrison, Kanuka 2004)

## Online learning in higher education in practice

The contact modes for an online course can be asynchronous or synchronous. In the **asynchronous mode** the students are not required to be online at the same time with each other or the lecturer. The benefits of this mode include flexibility with the place and timing of learning, individually adjusted time to process information, and opportunity to look for additional. On the other hand, this mode is less social and the learners may feel isolated. In this mode it may also be more challenging to create belongingness and facilitate shared personal meaning. In the **synchronous mode**, participants attend the course at the same time but independent of place. If the course facilitates interaction between learners through text, voice or video, the conversations are immediate, the students may feel more supported and the group can create greater understanding of the content together. On the downside, lively real-time conversation may produce quantity over quality and it may be difficult to manage the conversations of large groups online. (Wikipedia, 2017)

The MOOC have developed to two different directions: the so-called cMOOCs are based on connectivist pedagogy (hence the ‘c’) and attempt to connect learners to each other to answer questions and/or collaborate on joint projects. The xMOOCs are more traditional in structure, with short video lectures and self-test problems (see, e.g. TEDx, edX). The instructor is the expert provider of knowledge, and student interactions are usually limited to asking for assistance and advising each other on difficult points. xMOOC use short videos (as learners may stop watching already after 9 minutes) and online assessments, e.g. quizzes and exam, with automated feedback to facilitate learning. cMOOC use peer-review and group collaboration, where students are expected to become more engaged and learn via grading others. Grading is often based upon sample answers or rubrics, which need to be simpler for peers as for teaching assistants. (Wikipedia, 2017)

In the blended learning courses students can, for example, watch lectures online and work on their own with new concepts. During face-to-face sessions, teachers are then freed up to e.g. circulate in the classroom and support individual students or facilitate informed group conversations. Blended learning arguably takes the best sides of both asynchronous and synchronous modes but it has a strong dependence on the technical resources of the university and may be more time-consuming to prepare and deliver than traditional forms of learning. It also requires careful coordination to ensure that all students progress through the online sessions in required timelines. (Wikipedia, 2017)

In summary, the online elements enable richer and more individually tailored approaches to learning but more research is needed to create consensus on when and how online courses (or elements of them) can best be used (McFarlane, 2011; Myers, 2008; Clark & Mayer, 2011).

## Aalto Online learning technology and services

**Aalto AV production services** (<http://mediafactory.aalto.fi/av-production-services/>) provides consultation for Aalto staff and students who want to shoot own videos, learn the basics of editing, or want to record a lecture. AV production services also lend out recording equipment and editing facilities, offer consultation in planning video productions, and provide short courses in public presentation skills and video editing. Find AV production services from Media Factory: Otakaari 7 A, Espoo.

**Communication Services** (<https://inside.aalto.fi/display/encos/Quick+tips+for+internet+video+production>) provide quick tips for internet video production about pre-production, filming, editing and post-production, and distribution.

**Panopto Video Platform** (<https://wiki.aalto.fi/display/OPIT/Panopto>) is a technology to live stream, record and share videos. Aalto Learning Center has a studio for recording that Aalto staff and students can use. You can also record the Panopto videos with your own Aalto computer.

**Adobe Connect Meeting** (<https://wiki.aalto.fi/display/OPIT/Adobe+Connect+meeting>) is a web conferencing software service that Aalto offers for immersive online meetings, virtual classrooms and webinars. Adobe connect works with PC, Mac and mobile devises (iOS and Android devices). It allows participants to enter with no downloads. Teachers can record, edit, and publish webinar recordings with students after the sessions.

More information on online learning services at Aalto in Finnish: <https://inside.aalto.fi/display/files/Oppimisen+verkkopalvelut>

## References and further reading

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<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E-learning_(theory)>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blended_learning>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_learning_in_higher_education>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massive_open_online_course>

## Examples of sites offering courses online:

<https://www.coursera.org/>

[http://ed.ted.com/](http://ed.ted.com/about)

<https://www.edx.org/>

<https://www.khanacademy.org/>

<https://www.lynda.com/>

<http://online.stanford.edu/about>

<https://www.udacity.com/>

## For practical experience, try out the following course on blended learning:

<https://www.edx.org/course/blended-learning-edx-edx-blendedx-1>