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Online Learning Delivered via Blended Problem-Based Learning

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Online Learning Delivered via Blended Problem-Based Learning
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Course and Institution: Online Learning Module on the Postgraduate Diploma in Third Level Learning and Teaching; located in the Dublin Institute of Technology.

Teaching Strategy: Blended Problem Based Learning approach for 10 weeks.

Students/Participants: 10 lecturers/academic staff members from a variety of higher education institutions from around the Republic of Ireland.

Average Age: mature participants; some are new to teaching in higher education, and some have been teaching for anywhere between 5-25 years.

Background: Eclectic Mix: many subject disciplines represented: aeronautical engineering for apprentices, undergraduate marketing, home economics for teacher education, nurse tutoring, electrical engineering for apprentices, IT Staff Development, Science Librarian, IT inservice teaching, undergraduate hotel and catering management, professional cookery for apprentices.

Pre-Module Questionnaire distributed to discover the following information about the participants:
- Virtual Learning Environment: their Access to the Internet, preferred time of access
- Basic IT Skills: word processing, email etc
- Internet Skills: navigating web browsers, using search engines etc
- Prior Knowledge/Experience about the area of designing online learning, participating in asynchronous or synchronous discussions
- Preferred method of working: individually/independently, small group work
- Motivation for doing the module

Rationale for Blended Strategy
For the first two years of this module, it had been delivered entirely online; specific problems developed with this approach have been outlined in Donnelly (2004a)

In the light of these problems, it was decided to adopt a blended approach to delivery in that weekly face-to-face problem-based learning tutorials would be supported by online learning events e.g. exploration of online resources, collaborative research, online reflective journaling, self and peer assessment.

Activities/Technologies
WebCT was the OLE used. The module web site was the hub that held the participants together outside of the once weekly f2f PBL tutorial. The activities were designed to
scaffold the participant’s learning: they began with a few individual activities, moved to pair work, then to working collaboratively in groups of four.

**Factors Critical to Success**

Problem complexity; language and communication; right mix of group vs individual learning; role of the tutor in the blend.

It is this last area that I am particularly interested in investigating further with regards to blended learning and teaching. A hugely important area in any form of face to face and PBL delivery is the role of the tutor; in an e-learning environment, it is even more crucial. As an educational developer and course tutor in higher education, whilst working with academic staff, I encounter issues in this module that uses a blended problem-based learning delivery method. The role of the teacher/tutor in blended PBL is both special and crucial for effective learning outcomes and enjoyable learning experiences for students in higher education.

**Relevant Papers**


