Chapter 46
Second Language Writing Instruction through Blended Learning: Report on a Pilot Course at the University of Freiburg for Undergraduate Students of English

Alison Nagel
University of Freiburg, Germany

Kai Woodfin
University of Freiburg, Germany

ABSTRACT
This chapter presents the results of a blended learning course in writing instruction piloted at the University of Freiburg for undergraduate students of English. It provides a brief overview of recent research into online learning with discussion of the trend from e-learning to blended learning and discusses a selection of web-based technologies. This is followed by an outline of the syllabus with a focus on the technologies used. It concludes with a discussion of student feedback and evaluation of the course and the implications of these for the future integration of blended learning within the current teaching programme.

INTRODUCTION
The decision to pilot a blended learning course evolved out of ongoing research into e-learning, including the use of the university learning management system (LMS: CampusOnline) and the incorporation of other new media/web 2.0 applications into university language instruction, along with the need for more writing instruction at undergraduate level. After successful initial trials using elements of the LMS and various wikis within existing language courses it was decided that writing instruction might be a skills area in second language learning that could benefit from a blended learning (b-learning) environment. The course was intended as a flexible alternative to
the current language practice courses we offer in the form of two hours per week throughout the semester in the traditional classroom. Before discussing aspects of the syllabus we designed we shall first give a brief overview of selected recent research into e-learning, taking a closer look at two recent case studies in a b-learning environment. Finally, we shall report on student feedback and evaluation, with particular reference to the social interaction aspect of discourse behaviour, and discuss the implications of these for the future implementation of b-learning courses within our current teaching programme.

SOME ISSUES IN E-LEARNING

Interest in e-learning in higher education has developed out of the need for greater flexibility for both learners and instructors regarding time and place of the learning environment; in this sense, e-learning may be seen as the newer generation of distance learning (Caladine, 2008) - often referred to as anywhere, anytime learning (Baumgartner, 2007, p.9; Horizon Report, 2008, p.8). Recent developments include the recognition that learning is a lifelong process, also referred to as informal, implicit or experiential learning, that is not restricted to the classroom or lecture theatre, and which has received great impetus from the knowledge-sharing and people-connecting developments of the internet. The term e-learning 2.0 has been coined to describe the possibilities offered by multimedia - from text to audio/visual - for creation and presentation of content, that have led to what Banse (2007, p.7) calls an “umfassender Kulturwandeln” (“sweeping cultural change”: authors’ translation).

Current researchers of e-learning stress that e-learning is highly interdisciplinary in nature and thus requires designers and instructors with both pedagogical expertise plus technical knowledge and skills (Apostolopoulos, 2007; Reinmann, 2007). Thus views of learning theory are emerging that can link current developments in software, the internet and the web to the application of these in individual subjects and skills areas (see, for example, Caladine’s Learning Activities Model and Learning Technologies Model, op cit). Within the history of pedagogical theory we have long since experienced a paradigm shift from instructivism to constructivism, also referred to as teacher-oriented to learner-oriented learning (Höbarth, 2007), whereby the learner is no longer a passive consumer of knowledge provided by the teacher, but takes an active part in the learning process, constructing knowledge and understanding by integrating new into existing knowledge through interaction with other learners, the instructor and the materials. The theory of constructivism has now received added impetus from developments in the internet and the application of these to e-learning environments: the shift from web 1.0, also known as the read-web, where content was provided by few for many, to web 2.0, or the read-write web, that is characterised by user-generated content and the sharing of knowledge through social software. Thus the hierarchical nature and static structure of earlier learning environments is giving way to a dynamic, networked learning environment. Bernhardt and Kirchner (2007) even suggest taking constructivism one step further with their idea of connectivism as a learning theory for the digital age.

Much of the data available on e-learning seems to indicate that the majority of courses now offered are in fact a combination of online-learning and traditional face-to-face (F2F) teaching - otherwise known as blended-learning. After initial forays into e-learning in higher education it has become clear that e-learning is not necessarily a way of effectively educating large numbers of students with a minimum of cost: not only must a great deal of time be invested in getting to know the technology, keeping up with the changes, and producing materials, but, most importantly, many of the online learning scenarios require intensive tutoring (Ecker, 2007; Schoop, 2007). Having said