The future is blended

Santiago Iniguez explains why business schools and corporations must accommodate the increasing role of technology in education

> ***There is a fear, expressed frequently, that technology will replace professors. But I can say emphatically and unequivocally, THAT IT WILL NOT SUBSTITUTE THEM.***
>
> *Bill Gates*
> *Road to the Future, 1995;*
> *capital letters in the original*

> ***The question is not whether I can invest big, it is whether I can learn fast.***
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> *C K Prahalad*
> *World Innovation Forum, 2009*

Technology, in parallel with developments in cognitive psychology and education sciences, is producing a formidable paradigm shift in the learning process and the mission of educators and, of course, in business schools.

Traditionally, the objective of education has been standardisation: to teach students the "three Rs", prepare them for a particular job, and help them develop the skills required to engage in and contribute to society.

That said, the future of the learning process is focused on personalised development, seen as an opportunity to stretch and strengthen each individual's qualities. This is where the real change lies.

Thanks to technology, education will not just be about acquiring the knowledge needed to do this or that job. Rather, it will allow us to help develop a student's personality by focusing particularly on their strengths, adapting the time spent studying to their needs and capacity – all while measuring the results of the learning process and which teaching methods best help with personal and professional development. This personalisation will undoubtedly foster the entrepreneurial profile of learners and identify many new job opportunities.

Though it may sound counterintuitive, technology can humanise the learning process. We sometimes look at technology as an obstacle to personalisation, proximity, sociability and humanity but this fallacy is rooted in the myth that technology is a threat to mankind – for example, the destruction of jobs through automation and, in short, that the robots will end up taking over the world.

Aside from adapting to learners' circumstances, the integration of technology and teaching brings teachers closer to their students and students closer to one another. It also helps teachers with repetitive tasks such as assessing academic performance, passing on basic information and answering frequently asked questions.

In doing so, technology frees teachers' time, allowing them to focus on activities with greater added value for faculty and students alike and enables the so-called phenomenon of "flipping the classroom".

Flexible, adaptable, intensive, user-friendly and, yes, even entertaining: these are the hallmarks of blended learning, which combines online learning with a classroom-based approach. The advantage of high-quality and engaging online methodologies is that they keep the learning momentum going by adapting to the specific circumstances of the learner. It also allows for greater interactivity between participants.

Blended teaching methods, both in university education and in corporate learning, are here to stay and will only continue to expand. That said, there are still some analysts who downplay the importance of the impact of online learning, and those who argue that nothing can replace face-to-face teaching. (For example, P. Hunter, "Why MOOCs and executives don't mix", *Management Issues*, 28 April 2015 http://www.management-issues.com/opinion/7051/why-moocs-and-executives-dont-mix/)

At this point, it is important to highlight that I am talking here about blended programmes of the highest quality, with online modules delivered by the same academics as those giving classroom sessions to small groups of highly motivated students.

There is a tendency to assume that online teaching automatically means the cheaper option of open entry and open access as well as MOOCs (mass open online course.) This assumption is wrong. There are high-quality online and face-to-face forms of education,

which fit the standards of excellence demanded from premium educational institutions. Associating technology-based learning methods with low-quality, cheapness and the massively distributed is an old fashioned and outdated cliché.

It is also widely believed that senior management is averse to online in-company training. This has been largely true until recently; we need to ask ourselves whether this is a generational problem and if the upcoming generation of CEOs, who will be quite familiar with the online environment and communication via mobile platforms, will be more receptive to these methodologies.

We need only to think back to the panelled boardrooms of a century ago with their ornate furniture, coal fires and other luxuries and compare them with their 21st century descendants who rely on digital platforms, video conferencing and other technologies to communicate globally round the clock.

Despite research showing that online learning can be at least as effective as classroom sessions – and even more transformational – there is still a widespread bias against it among educators, HR managers and executives. Interestingly enough, some 80% of teachers with no experience in online teaching say it is less effective than face-to-face teaching while the majority of educators with online experience say the results are as good if not better. Not to mention that many academics believe that online teaching will ultimately lead to layoffs. (See L Redpath, "Confronting the Bias Against On-Line Learning in Management Education", Academy of Management Learning & Education, 2012, Vol 11, No. 1, pp. 125-140.)

This bias against online teaching likewise extends to many professionals, particularly senior managers who have been educated along traditional lines and tend to associate quality education with face-to-face teaching. But what really determines the quality of a programme is its methods of teaching and learning rather than the means by which they are delivered.

Whatever the arguments, the simple truth is that those educational institutions that offer blended courses (combining quality online training with traditional classroom teaching) are growing, and rapidly. It is very likely that in few years' time most business schools will run a majority of programmes on blended formats.

For example, the *2015 Grade Level: Tracking Online Education in the United States* survey shows that 70.8% of chief academic leaders believe online education is a critical component of their long-term strategies (up from the 48.8% who believed this back in 2002.

At the same time, 77% believe that online training produces the same or better results than traditional face-to-face teaching. Just 28% admit that their teaching staff accept the value and legitimacy of online teaching. (I E Allen and J Seaman, Grade Level: Tracking Online Education in the United States, February 2015, http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/gradelevel.pdf.)

Another survey of corporate learning (Roland Berger, Corporate Learning Goes Digital: How companies can benefit from online education, May 2014 https://www.rolandberger.com/media/pdf/Roland_Berger_TAB_Corporate_Learning_E_20140602.pdf) estimates that in 2014 77% of US companies used e-learning for their professional development programmes while in Europe, more than 3,000 companies used these types of teaching methods. The same survey estimates that 90% of companies will be using e-learning platforms by 2017.

It is clear, then, that blended learning will play a growing role in executive education, particularly in cases where participants are unable to attend classroom sessions. The question is thus not whether blended learning is the future or whether classroom teaching is more effective than online teaching but rather: what is the optimal blend of online and face-to-face?

Obviously, achieving the right combination of online and classroom teaching depends on a programme's objectives, participant profile, content, the abilities and skills being developed, as well as costs, infrastructure, and the ability of instructors and faculty to teach online.

What are the main challenges for blended education in the near future? I believe they are mainly three:

- First, and most importantly, the adequate preparation and involvement of faculty. In

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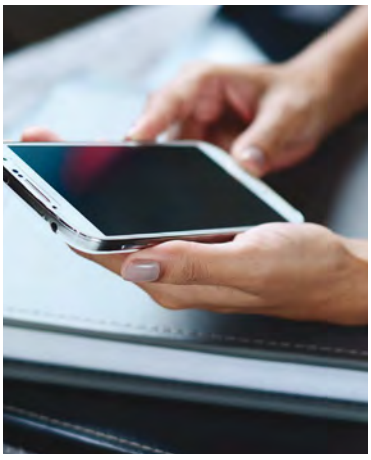

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the new blended environment, the professor becomes the orchestrator of the learning process, calibrating the use of different methodologies adapted to each individual participant and balancing group and personal learning. In order to achieve this, it is essential to invest in faculty development and expose them to the full educational potential of learning technologies. The basic requirement for success in this new environment is that the faculty remains forever passionate about teaching.

• Second is striking the right balance between the three different components of blended learning: face-to-face modules, which remain essential for the socialisation and integration of the class; live videoconferences and synchronous sessions (there are some developments that radically improve the look and feel of live streaming, like the "WOW Room," recently launched by IE Business School); and friendly and engaging asynchronous sessions via forums, chats, tutored-led interaction, and peer learning and feedback support.

• Third, the development of teaching materials that better adapt to this new learning context. For example, multimedia case studies set in real time, interactive group and individual simulations, personalised content and individualised assessment tools to maximise personal progress. Gamification enriches the learning experience and can be applied to nearly every context and educational content as well as serving as a vehicle for instant feedback. There are even those who argue that it can help change personal behaviour and, perhaps most appealing, that it has a positive impact on the bottom line.

Technology will certainly contribute to the humanisation of learning. However, in this new and fascinating context of education, the competitive advantage of a business school will rest on the unique experience it provides to students.

Content may be prince; technology may be king; but experience is emperor.

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