4. In Motion Around Blended Learning

Insights from the Lecturers' Perspective

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Blended learning is not a flash in the pan, it's here to stay. At The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS) the implementation of blended learning is not yet in an adult stage, but in a newly introduced educational framework (The Hague University of Applied Sciences, 2017) blended learning plays a vital role. The intention is for teams to come to a shared approach when it comes to blended learning. In his blog, Leonard Geluk, (Geluk, 2016) the Chairman of the Executive Board of the University notes that 'the development is slow to get off the ground' and 'there is still work to be done before we can fully embed ICT in education.'

The main goal of this research

The toolkit of teachers has been supplemented with many digital tools in recent decades (Geluk, 2014), but what makes lecturers actually use these new possibilities? What causes them to pick up the toolkit or leave it? Jacobs (2013) indicates that people's ability to exploit the benefits of technology, in particular digital technology, is not obvious and can be a big challenge, especially for teachers.
The central question to this study is: *What brings lecturers in motion around blended learning?* In my opinion, gaining more understanding in the lecturers' perspective is an important part of the 'work' that Leonard Geluk describes above. This is the main goal of this research.

Why keep reading?

On the following pages, you will read an overview of the insights I gained from in-depth interviews with nine lecturers from two faculties of THUAS.
If you are a lecturer I hope you recognize yourself in what you read, that you feel you're not alone in what you feel, value or need. Perhaps this helps you understand a colleague better, or to help yourself or others move forward and take the plunge into blended learning.
If you are a manager, advisor or policy maker I hope you realize that you have a key role in this process too. I also hope that what you are going to read will help you understand what happens in the hearts and minds of the lecturers you lead or advise. I hope what you read helps you connect with them.

And if you are not part of one of the above-mentioned groups, you are of course invited to keep reading too!

Method

Research shows that teachers diverge in their use of online learning resources in their education and the blended design of lessons. Often a distinction is made between pioneers (or innovators), early majority (or forerunners) and late majority (followers) (Fransen, 2016; Rogers, 1962). I use this division in my research….by taking three groups of lecturers, which have been selected from two faculties within THUAS and nine semi-structured interviews have been conducted. Five lecturers were from the Department for Business, Finance and Marketing (BFM) and four lecturers from the Department for Social Work and Education (SWE).

Based on the ideas of the 'design thinking' methodology (Both & Baggereor, n.d.), curiosity and understanding of the teacher's perspective is central in the way that interviews are conducted. Teachers are challenged to tell stories based on elicitation techniques and creative interview forms. The (semi) structure in these interviews arose from conversations with (blended learning) professionals within the university and earlier literature research into the motives and perspectives of teachers on educational innovations.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Analysis occurred through open coding with the following topics as a framework.

Research question: What brings lecturers in motion around blended learning?

Five topics (feelings, beliefs, values, needs and actions) were central in gaining insight into this central question.

1. *Lecturers' feelings about blended learning*

Frijda (2005) makes many connections between behaviour and emotion, and on the basis of this research it was decided to ask for emotions about the subject. An image sometimes says more than a thousand words. To make it easier for the teachers to talk about their feelings, we searched for images that could symbolize their emotions. Lecturers were asked this question: Which of the above pictures say something about your feeling concerning blended learning?

2. *Lecturers' beliefs concerning blended learning*

According to Albert Ellis (the inventor of RET therapy), thoughts and beliefs affect our emotions and our behaviours (Yankura & Dryden, 1994). Insights into lecturers' thoughts and beliefs around blended learning was explored during the interviews by asking each of them to finish the following sentence: "I believe blended learning is …"

3.   *Lecturers' values in blended learning*
The uses and gratification theory (Ruggiero, 2000) formed the basis for questioning lecturers' motives (or gratifications) and values. Lecturers were asked *why* they would consider 'blending' their lessons in the interviews in order to gain insight into what they value in blended learning.

4.   *Lecturers' needs when it comes to blended learning*
Questions about the needs of the lecturers were based on the toolkit of the design thinking approach (Both & Baggereor, n.d.) asked throughout the interviews.

5.   *Causes to act*
A better picture has been obtained by asking questions about the experiences lecturers had had concerning blended learning by using a symbolic traffic light. What caused them to 'go'? What caused them to act? What caused them to 'stop'? What caused them to come to a standstill?

Results

Below you can read the insights from the nine in-depth interviews on the five questions just mentioned.

1. How do the lecturers feel about blended learning?
The lecturers did not have one single feeling about blended learning. A wide spectrum of feelings was expressed within the interviews. Both negative and positive feelings occurred with almost all of the lecturers. Although positive feelings were mentioned more often by the innovators and the early majority, feelings such as *fear* and *inconvenience* were also indicated by them; they seemed a natural part of the process.

The image that was most often chosen by the lecturers to describe their feelings is one of a free fall. The *fear* of leaping into the deep is a feeling broadly shared amongst the lecturers. "It can be a kind of leap into the deep, or a leap to something that you do not know the outcome yet." (Respondent 7, personal communication, 27 November 2017). It is new and therefore *scary*. Jumping can also be *fun* and *exciting*, but first you have to go over a threshold. Some lecturers describe *pride* when they succeed. "Yes, it worked! Sometimes I feel as if I've found a piece of the holy grail." (Respondent 1, personal communication, 31 October 2017). *Vulnerability* and *uncertainty* are much described feelings during the implementation process, the new role feels *uncomfortable*. "This vulnerability is scary. When you give lectures you know exactly what is going to happen." (Respondent 1, personal communication, 31 October 2017). Some lecturers sometimes feel *overwhelmed* by the complexity and lack of overview. This, and feeling alone within the process (students can also be hard to motivate), can cause *frustration*. Other lecturers (more often the innovators and the early majority) also identify positive feelings: they *enjoy* the freedom, the new possibilites and learning experiences that blended learning can bring to their classroom.

2. What beliefs do lecturers have concerning blended learning?
Again, we see a diverse spectrum of answers. When we look at the beliefs about blended learning, we see that these are generally more negative in the late majority group.

Some of the interviewed lecturers see blended learning as *supportive to contact moments*, which, according to them, should remain central. "Blended should be supportive to school work." (Respondent 8, personal communication, 4 December 2017). One lecturer said that he thinks blended learning is *a lot less complicated and innovative* than he first thought.

On the positive side of the spectrum, some lecturers see blended learning as a *natural development* that belongs in (the future of) education. "Blended learning is very obvious in this time. Because yes, we do more and more digitally and there are more and more possibilities digitally, so why not use them." (Respondent 3, personal communication, 22 November 2017). Blended learning is also described as a *valuable opportunity* by some lecturers. Furthermore, these lecturers are convinced that blended learning *offers new opportunities* to make education *more flexible and stimulating*. They also believe that blended learning can be *fun*.

On the negative side of the spectrum, the *complexity* of blended learning is often mentioned and some lecturers find it *unclear* and *difficult*. Some teachers believe that they are *not good at it* themselves. A few teachers consider it *risky* even; it could lead to less competent lecturers and students and even be used as a *cost-saving measure*. They think one *should 'get it right', the first time*. "It could create the possibility for lecturers to be deployed on courses that they do not know much about." (Respondent 6, personal communication, 4 December 2017).

3. What do lecturers value in blended learning?
A common denominator in the answers given by the lecturers is that they see blended learning as an opportunity to *increase the quality* of their lessons. Blended learning adds value in various ways, according to them. Lecturers indicate that they see the era, society and student population changing rapidly. They see blended learning as a way for the educational sector to *stay in line with these developments*. "The increasing complexity of our society... Whether that is positive or negative, we should do something with it." (Respondent 8, personal communication, 4 December 2017). Lecturers ultimately want to give the best lessons possible. Many say blended learning adds value by *increasing opportunities in activating students and making classes more varied and less one-sided*. "I have to say I notice that students appreciate alternatives to just hearing a lecturer talking." (Respondent 3, personal communication, 22 November 2017).

Most teachers want to *'connect' with their students* and are looking for tools to do so. They appreciate the possibilities that blended learning gives them to *adapt their approach to the (individual) characteristics of the students*.

Some lecturers mentioned valuing the opportunities that blended learning offers to *increase connectedness* and to *let students learn from each other*.

Finally, a few lecturers value the *personal learning opportunities* that blended learning offers them. They see it as an opportunity to develop.

4. What do lecturers need when it comes to blended learning?
The lecturers' needs cover several levels, which I will also use to structure the section below. First, you will read about the needs of the lecturers at university level, after which managerial needs will be addressed, followed by needs that relate to the team in which the lecturer works. Finally, individual support needs are described.
Some teachers mention the need for a 'backbone' for blended learning at university level. It must also be considered important at the top level, they say. This is expressed in (few) offered facilities, but there are also needs in adjusting the layout of classrooms accordingly or in making teaching periods more flexible to match new teaching methods.

The managerial level was mentioned frequently in the interviews and seems to be a key part of the implementation process. Many lecturers consider it important that the manager sets out the general lines, directs the whole team and encourages sharing. Although 'pressure' sometimes seems a dirty word within the university, some lecturers say it can help them get over the threshold described above (at feelings). Some lecturers mentioned that they hope for a positive kind of pressure, in which their strengths are considered and mistakes are learnt from. Blended learning requires a great deal of time (for development, preparation and maintenance) and most of the interviewed lecturers expressed the need for a manager who is realistic in facilitating them and the effort they need to put in. "It takes a lot of time. I just do not have that time anymore because I have many other tasks." (Respondent 5, personal communication, 28 November 2017). One lecturer says that lack of time can sometimes also be used for an excuse when we feel insecure.

Many lecturers indicated the need to feel connected to others within the process. "I think that the feeling of doing it together is essential." (Respondent 5, personal communication, 28 November 2017). Even innovators indicated that doing it all alone is ultimately very difficult to sustain. They feel the need to walk the path together rather than go it alone. They want to get feedback on how they are doing, and be stimulated and inspired by their peers. (One lecturer used this image of someone who is alone to explain his need for togetherness.)

In terms of support the lecturers expressed different needs, but a common denominator was the need for a visible and 'hands-on', preferably personal, support which fits into their work process. "People must have the idea that you are there to help them. You have to remove a threshold." (Respondent 4, personal communication, 27 November 2017). 'Just in time' information seems part of this formula. If offered at the wrong moment, too much information can contribute to the feeling of 'overload' (mentioned in feelings). Some lecturers expressed a need for overview and a concrete picture of the possibilities and best practices. By dividing the process into small steps, the threshold can be lowered. Some lecturers indicated that blended learning should start with the basic teacher training at THUAS. A good foundation must be laid, as it were, to build upon later on. In terms of didactical support, several teachers indicated that they want to know how they can motivate students when using blended learning. In technical support, some lecturers would like to see a hands-on approach also. Working together with experts who know the Programs well in a technical infrastructure that works.

5. What causes lecturers to act upon blended learning (or not)?
This question has two sides: What causes lecturers to act? And what causes lecturers to come to a standstill? These questions are answered below in this order.

When lecturers were asked about their experiences with blended learning and what caused them to actually do things, a number of insights arose. Some of the teachers started experimenting with blended learning out of intrinsic motivation, just because they liked to try or learn new things. Other teachers indicated that pressure from a manager led to their movement. A clear assignment, combined with attention and a sense of security, caused them to pick it up. "It is new, so the manager's role is to give a clear assignment. That is that threshold. Otherwise you will fall into your daily routine again." (Respondent 4, personal communication, 27 November 2017). It also helped if a manager provided enough time and space for the assignment to be completed appropriately.

Furthermore, the need for togetherness mentioned at the needs section also appears here. When colleagues engage in blended learning this causes others to follow. The 'culture' within a team makes a difference. The need to do it together doesn't only apply

to colleagues; the effort and the feedback from students is also a motivator in lecturers' behaviour. "It lifts my spirits when second-year students ask: Are there clips for us to watch again?" (Respondent 5, personal communication, 28 November 2017). Awareness of the importance and added value of blended learning is a motivating factor in the behaviour of some lecturers. Not only by themselves, but within THUAS as a whole and at managerial level.
Furthermore, trying out and working with blended learning also provides cause for further action. By going through the process and gaining knowledge and skills, the confidence arises to take the following steps.

When we look at what causes lecturers to come to a standstill, we recognize the aforementioned topics. Most often lack of time is mentioned. When their manager sets other priorities and there is no time for blended learning, the implementation comes to a halt. "It is quite a big investment on top of your other tasks." (Respondent 6, personal communication, 4 December 2017)
Many lecturers experience a high threshold (most often in the late majority group), sometimes self-imposed 'knowledge clips', for example, have to be of really good quality, according to lecturers. Sometimes the organization adds to the threshold that the lecturers experience. Some lecturers feel that there is little room to make mistakes for instance. One lecturer said his blended lessons are right at the centre of attention. Some lecturers can feel they can no longer see the forest for the trees where the possibilities in blended learning are concerned, which can cause a wait-and-see attitude.

A number of lecturers who tried blended learning indicated that the new role felt uncomfortable (see feelings) and that the students were difficult to activate, which posed a risk of falling back to the familiar. "You notice that students are not used to it. And if you do not have too much energy yourself... You have to say: 'If you don't want to do it... it has to end here'." (Respondent 5, personal communication, 28 November 2017). Multiple lecturers mentioned that a lack of connectedness (to either colleagues or students) is a cause for them to stop. "In the end that's a killer. You can only think of and do so much on your own." (Respondent 1, personal communication, 31 October 2017). It can be difficult to involve others (both colleagues and students). One lecturer indicated that it was difficult to connect with a learning environment that he had not developed himself.

Poor support was another reason for some lecturers to come to a standstill. Think of not connecting to the lecturers' needs, engulfing lecturers in information at the wrong time, and having a know-it-all attitude instead of creating insight. "It's as if a bin of information has been emptied over you. You can do this, you can do that... And in the end you cannot see the forest for the trees anymore." (Respondent 7, personal communication, 27 November 2017).

Many lecturers mentioned the technical side: When it doesn't work, I'm out. A few lecturers experienced being dependent on support (editing videos for example) as a let-down.

What do we take from this?

To get people moving you first need to know what moves them. What do these insights mean to bring people to action? Is it possible to convert the results into a practical approach to implement blended learning at THUAS?
An approach that is based purely on innovators to pull the cart seems to be inadequate. In order to scale up blended learning at THUAS, a team effort is needed. Lecturers express the need for connectedness. At various levels within THUAS, one must understand and underline its importance. There must be willingness for action. It is important to be realistic in the fact that it also requires an investment, both in time and effort. Such a change can bring feelings of anxiety, tension and inconvenience for lecturers. Lecturers need to be helped over this threshold. Positive pressure can help, but there is a thin line and there are risks of exerting too much pressure. Interestingly, the study indicates that we should not only be looking at lecturers for the solution. The manager also appears to play a key role in the process, and a solid foundation is essential. It consists not only of a human component, but also of a technological component that is user-friendly and that (always) works. In order to achieve a mature implementation, the support must also be geared to a serious increase in use and link up with the experience of both students and lecturers. It also seems important to offer information and support at the right time and in the right way.

What's next?

From the methodology of design thinking (Both & Baggereor, n.d.), it is important to give lecturers a central role in the next steps in the process. Ideally, this would be a co-creation process in which the lecturers can also give feedback and there is room for an open dialogue.

On two occasions, at the ATEE winter conference 2018 and during a meeting of the research group on sustainable talent development within THUAS, lectures and teacher trainers were asked to contribute to solutions based on the research results described above. After a short presentation about the results, four 'point of views' were presented based on the research that could be brainstormed by those present. The goal of a 'point of view' is to highlight some of the results from the 'empathy phase' of design thinking in a stimulating way in order to get the creative process going.

The four 'point of views' where:
1. Lecturers have to cross a threshold but 'now is not the time..'
2. Somebody has to start but nobody can do it alone...
3. To get to the positive feelings (to feel competent)
   lecturers seem to have to work through negative feelings first…
4. In hindsight pressure was good. But don't push me!

The attendees were asked to generate as many ideas as possible and to write them on post-its. After a write and pause, the post-its were collected and grouped by the attendees. In this way ideas that joined together were put together on a sheet of paper. Here the attendees could add a few things to further shape or elaborate the idea.

After the two meetings, all generated ideas were inventoried and grouped.
The ideas of the attendees can be divided into the following themes:
- institutional policy; involve the management level; involve students
- digital platform and technology; facilitation; support; teacher training / start small
- share best practices; do it together
- make room for emotions and making mistakes; pressure and motivation

It would not do justice to the input from both the conversations with the lecturers and the ideas put forward during the follow-up meetings to insinuate that there is a single solution for the situation outlined. This research offers countless leads to align policy and practice. A successful approach would focus on several aspects described above and on several stakeholders within THUAS.
In addition to the feedback and cooperation with the lecturers, theoretical insights can help to provide a basis for the approach (as the focus has been on the lecturers' perspectives theoretical insights have been underrepresented in this chapter). Van Leeuwen et al (2016) give suggestions on how the frame creation method could help combine insights from different perspectives (from both above mentioned in situ research and scientific literature and philosophy, arts and culture personal experiences) on the themes mentioned above.
The implementation process will then be one of trial and error. Insights from this study seem applicable in a 'practice what you preach' kind of way. It is important to be able to make mistakes during this process and to learn from them. The need for connectedness found within the study also applies to the next steps of this process. It seems vital to involve stakeholders at different levels within the university. In the words of one interviewed lecturer: "What you can do and think of on your one is limited." (Respondent 1, personal communication, 31 October 2017).

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