Reports of Practice

Using Blended Learning as an Innovative Delivery Model for an In-House Language Program

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Abstract

This paper reports on the development and implementation in 2012 of McGill University's French at Work program for McGill employees, using a blended learning model. The program is an example of how a reduction in face-to-face teaching presents one solution to employees' scheduling constraints and how this model might offer suggestions for the development of similar programs in a higher education setting.

McGill University's French at Work program welcomes a diverse participant body from different faculties and service groups. Created in response to decreasing enrolment and higher levels of absenteeism, the authors report that interdepartmental collaboration and a complete course redesign, along pre-established professional themes, were required in its development. Using the University's Learning Management System (Desire2Learn) the course incorporates in-class sessions, self-directed, web-based activities as well as synchronous and asynchronous online discussions employing Microsoft Lync.

A subsequent increase in registration and retention rates strongly suggests the

Résumé

Cet article traite du développement et de l'implantation, en 2012, du programme intitulé *French at Work* qui est basé sur un modèle d'apprentissage mixte et conçu pour les employés de l'Université McGill. Ce programme démontre qu'une réduction du nombre d'heures en enseignement individualisé peut représenter une solution aux contraintes d'horaire que vivent les employés et peut servir d'exemple pour la conception de programmes similaires en milieu universitaire.

Créé pour répondre à une baisse d'inscriptions et à un taux d'absentéisme élevé, *French at Work* accueille divers participants provenant d'une variété de services et de facultés. Les auteurs rapportent qu'une collaboration interdépartementale ainsi qu'une restructuration complète du programme basée sur des thèmes professionnels préétablis ont été mises de l'avant pendant la phase de développement. Disponibles sur la plateforme d'apprentissage en ligne de l'Université (Desire2Learn), les cours incluent des ateliers en classe, des exercices en autonomie ainsi que des discussions synchrones menées à l'aide de l'outil Microsoft Lync.

program answers a real need for professional development in French as a second language within McGill University through innovative use of certain technologies.

Une augmentation subséquente des inscriptions et du taux de rétention suggèrent que, grâce à l'utilisation innovatrice de certaines technologies, le programme répond à un besoin réel en matière de perfectionnement professionnel en français langue seconde à l'Université McGill

Introduction

More and more continuing education institutions are offering options such as online courses to answer student demands for greater flexibility in learning. As organizations that cater to the educational needs of their target students, an important part of success is to also provide training and professional development opportunities for staff. They too are looking for flexibility in their learning activities. So, what is being done to answer staff's need for greater flexibility?

For several years, McGill University School of Continuing Studies' department of Language and Intercultural Communication (LIC) provided language courses to McGill University staff as part of a professional development program sponsored by the human resources department. After a series of successful semesters, enrolment numbers began decreasing while absenteeism increased. Scheduling constraints on the part of the employees were identified as the main cause of the observed decline and as a result the course delivery model was questioned. In 2011, LIC proposed the adoption of a blended learning model that has resulted in a reduction of face-to-face teaching and the use of alternate means of instruction, while maintaining the same learning objectives. Besides in-class sessions, the new teaching strategy includes self-directed, web-based activities as well as synchronous and asynchronous online discussions.

An initial French at Work pilot program was launched in winter 2012, becoming a full program the following September; it has since enjoyed a tremendous success. French at Work welcomes a diverse participant body from different faculties and service groups. An increase in registration and retention rates since its inception suggests the program answers a real need for professional development in French as a second language within McGill University.

This paper presents the case for blended learning as an answer to the greater flexibility needs of in-house training programs. It presents a short literature review on blended learning and a description of the in-house language program. These sections are followed by a reflection of the program development process, which includes the rationale for the tailored mix of media, technology, and learning activities selected. Finally, it concludes with a summary of the key benefits of the blended learning design and a description of the pilot participants' reactions to teaching and learning with technology.

Literature Review

In the bilingual context of Quebec, employees need to be able to communicate in the workplace both in English and French to answer everyday needs. Professional success might often depend on their ability to use both languages fluently (McAll, 2003).

Technology is bringing changes to continuing education with the format of courses evolving to accommodate mobile devices and a growth in the number of online certificate programs being offered (Kart, 2012). Blended learning is often defined in the literature as a mix of delivery methods selected and fashioned to accommodate diverse learning needs (McSporran & King, 2005). One challenge is to mix the different learning activities that occur in the various environments so that they come together as one single, unified course. A second challenge is to determine which activity is better suited for each option.

There is a convergence of intuitive appeal, educational demands, and potential of communications technology with regard to blended learning (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). In this respect, the French at Work model was created to accommodate scheduling constraints, the needs for learner engagement, and interaction and creative use of available technology.

Program Description

Employees develop their language skills by exploring targeted professional themes throughout the program. Seven courses comprising four levels of proficiency are offered (see table below). These courses allow participants to develop oral and written skills in formal and informal professional situations as well as improve their listening and reading comprehension. Such courses also help participants use efficient communication strategies and gain awareness of the social, professional, and cultural context of Quebec.

Table 1: Levels of Proficiency

Level of Proficiency	Course Theme
Beginner	First contact in French
Elementary	Customer service: communicating and giving information
	The work place: physical, psychological, and social environment
Intermediate	Interpersonal relations in formal and informal contexts: superiors, colleagues, and employees
	Customer service: handling complaints
Advanced	Values at work: from money to self-development
	Communication strategies in formal and informal situations, from giving presentations to making small talk

Developing the Blended Model
Through Department Collaboration

The design and development of the blended delivery model required a collaborative effort between the school's LIC and McGill's Instructor Services and Educational Technology departments. Furthermore, the technology component and administrative tasks such as registration and course evaluations required the services of McGill's Information Technology (IT) Services and the human resources department, respectively. These exchanges fostered a positive and energetic dynamic as the departments worked together to solve problems that inevitably arose while moving toward the common goal of launching the new program. The experience helped the departments develop a better understanding of each other's roles and to acquire a valuable body of knowledge that could be applied to other contexts. It also established a foundation for future collaborations between the departments.

Coordination of this project appeared to be a challenging and critical component of the program's success. Multiple players tackled the many academic, instructional, technical, and logistical challenges. The academic coordinator, content experts, course designer, and developer/programmer took part in the planning, production, and review phases. Meanwhile, IT services participated in the initial setup of the technological components, instructor training, and user technical support. Interdepartmental deliberations were held to assess existing resources and how they might be used to answer the needs of the program. An important outcome of this collaboration was the innovative delivery model that included the idea of using Microsoft Lync as a pedagogical tool.[1]

Content and Course Development

The design and production of course material generated some unexpected challenges. The initial step consisted of designing content relevant to pre-established professional themes. The first three courses (phase 1) were adapted from material used in the original in-class program and assumed that this strategy would save time and effort. This assumption appeared to be incorrect, and it was soon realized that adapting material from an in-class course to online delivery was labour intensive and inefficient. Some of the material developed for a classroom environment was simply unusable for use online, and the logic and organization of learning activities needed to be reviewed. In hindsight, it appears to be easier to redesign a course entirely from scratch rather than try to adapt material from one delivery mode to another.

Since students would be undertaking almost half their learning activities online, it was important to ensure that the time they spent online would be dedicated to learning. Furthermore, students would need to retrieve information and complete the learning activities independently, so it was critical to develop an interface that would keep the learning curve for navigating the online materials as easy as possible. Usability tests were conducted with subjects from the target population to determine if they could quickly find the required content and learning activities. These confirmed that the interface design was, in fact, intuitive and easy to use.

The program was launched with the first three courses (phase 1) in the 2012 winter semester and the following three in the spring (phase 2). Results from the pilot evaluation suggested, surprisingly, that a beginner level would be needed to better cater to the employees' proficiency, which previously had been assumed to be above beginner level. A fourth level was created during the summer (phase 3) and seven courses were finally offered as a whole in the fall. (See table below.)

Table 2: Implementation of Phases

Phase	Courses
Phase 1 – Winter 2012	**Elementary** Customer service: communicating and giving information **Intermediate** Interpersonal relations in formal and informal contexts: superiors, colleagues and employees **Advanced** Values at Work: from money to self-development
Phase 2 – Spring 2012	**Elementary** The work place: physical, psychological, and social environment **Intermediate** Customer service: handling complaints **Advanced** Communication strategies in formal and informal situations: from giving presentations to making small talk
Phase 3 – Summer 2012	**Beginner** First contact in French

An Overview of the Delivery Model

The tailored delivery model includes both synchronous and asynchronous activities. Each week, participants attend an in-class session, perform self-directed online activities, and take part in an online group discussion. The model involves the use of a communication and collaboration application (Microsoft Lync) to host the online group discussions and the university's Learning Management System (Desire2Learn).

The course interface, developed in HTML, provides uniformity to course structure and appearance across the program. The interface design segregates the course content relative to the theme of the week. Content for a particular week is split into four sections, based on the physical environments in which the learning takes place (i.e., content to support the instructor-led class-room activities, self-directed online activities, oral activities, and exercises for students who want to explore the learning content further).[2]

In-Class Sessions

Weekly 1.25-hour in-class sessions are offered during the lunchtime break or in the late after-noon to accommodate employees' schedules. During each session, participants explore the theme of the week through exploratory activities (an article, dialogue, listening, etc.). Concurrently, grammatical concepts are introduced followed by oral activities reflecting situations likely to occur in the professional world.

Self-Directed Online Activities

Participants work independently at their own pace and convenience on their listening, reading, and writing skills. Online quizzes with automatic feedback confirm knowledge acquisition, and discussion boards host online debates on subjects covered during class. Instructor support is also available via email.

Online Group Discussions

Since on-going learners' interaction with peers and instructor is a key element of the teaching strategy put forward by LIC, small-group discussions are held during periods that fit the work schedules of the university employees, which allow them to practise critical oral and conversational skills. These discussions are hosted on Microsoft Lync, a communication and collaborative tool that supports audio, video, chat, and document sharing.

Optional Exercises and Activities

Optional resources and activities are provided for those students who might want to practise and explore the topics further.

BENEFITS OF THE NEW MODEL

The reduction in face-to-face time offered by the blended delivery model presents the best solution to address employees' scheduling constraints. With this new model, the same amount of time commitment is required per week but is now organized differently. Whereas students previously spent 2.5 hours per week in the classroom, the blended delivery model represents only 1.25 hours per week of in-class learning. In addition, learners participate in weekly 15-minute oral group discussions directly from their office computer using Microsoft Lync. These discussions can be held during an employee's break time with minimal disruption of their workday. Students have complete flexibility to schedule the remaining hour dedicated to self-directed online activities within the week, at their convenience. This innovative delivery format leaves students with the flexibility to reconcile the time required for them to fulfill their work commitments with that required to be successful in the language course.

The blended learning approach serves not only to meet the needs of students in terms of minimizing scheduling conflicts, but also to capitalize on the strengths of the three learning environments—classroom, Desire2Learn (the learning management system), and Microsoft Lync.

The classroom teacher provides feedback—vital for the more dependent learners who need instructor approval—and this feedback often benefits the entire class. Spontaneous socialization also creates a sense of cohesion among the group.

The online learning activities in the learning management system favour more independent learning styles, visual learners, and students with better computer skills (Swan, 2004).

The communication and collaborative environment of Microsoft Lync promotes a practice environment in which students learn from each other as well as from the feedback from the instructor. Additionally, some of the discomfort of the face-to-face interactions is reduced as students have the flexibility to connect with or without a web camera.

The blended approach used provides a format that caters to the variety of learning styles and learner characteristics of the target students.

Teaching, Training, and Technological Challenges

Three of the seven courses were launched as a pilot implementation. Instructors were provided with training on Microsoft Lync by McGill IT Services prior to the pilot, while students were taught how to use Microsoft Lync by their instructor. The learning management system proved to be of little challenge for both instructors and students, due to the intuitive design of the HTML interface.

The language instructors who taught the course lacked experience with online teaching or blended delivery models. Thus, an important challenge was to develop training that would bring them to an acceptable level of self-confidence with the proposed teaching strategies and the associated technology. Several instructors were anxious about using Microsoft Lync. Although training provided by IT services did not initially help them develop a reasonable level of comfort, frustrations eventually subsided towards the end of the pilot testing, when most instructors and participants finally became skilled with the application and technical problems were resolved.

The availability of pre-built and structured content was greatly appreciated. According to several instructors, the format facilitated teaching and led to dynamic interactions with the participants. One interesting observation is that instructors quickly took ownership of the course content and felt they were still able to be flexible in their teaching by modifying existing or suggesting alternative learning activities.

Conclusion

Five semesters have been completed since the new format of the program was implemented. The high level of satisfaction, the important increase in attendance, and the number of returning participants suggest that the decision to adopt the blended learning delivery format was a step in the right direction and definitely answered a real need in language acquisition. Furthermore, it has already brought about positive results: the valuable lessons learned about interface design as well as the design and development of the blended learning delivery format have benefited subsequent online course initiatives at the school. A Microsoft Lync pilot has been planned to further explore its feasibility as a learning tool for other programs being offered by the McGill continuing studies and the university as a whole.

The mission of the McGill School of Continuing Studies is to respond to the educational needs of our learners and partners and help them to realize their personal and professional goals by promoting transformative learning through innovative programming.[3] In this respect, the French at Work program has contributed to enhancing our use of technologies in teaching, while helping individuals to perform better in an everyday work environment and seek better opportunities in their field.

Continuing educators might benefit from this practice of using target learner needs as a measure to weigh their decisions throughout the program design. Keeping this focus was a significant contributor to the program's innovative design. Additionally, innovation is a more likely outcome when department collaboration is encouraged at the early design and planning phase. Integrating new technology into our continuing education programs may be initially met with resistance. However, target instructors and learners will willingly embrace technology if it results in a more effective learning experience.

McGill University is aiming to significantly develop its use of technologies in teaching. Projects such as the French at Work program are steps in achieving this goal. This program could serve as a model for other units at McGill, or human resource departments elsewhere in Canada, and could easily be used as an innovative tool for teaching French or English as a second language in the workplace.

Notes

1. Microsoft Lync was already in use by staff as a tool used for interoffice communications. However, this was the first time it was considered for use on a broad scale as a pedagogical tool.

2. The French titles for these sections are Atelier en Classe, Activité en Ligne, Activité Orale (Lync), and Pour Aller Plus Loin.

3. Summary of McGill School for Continuing Studies Mission Statement.

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Biographies

Manon Gadbois has been teaching French as a Second Language for the past 20 years. She holds a master's degree in education, specializing in the pedagogical uses of technology. In addition to her role as teacher and course designer, she is currently the coordinator of various French programs and projects for the department of Language and Intercultural Communication at McGill School of Continuing Studies.

Manon Gadbois détient une maîtrise en Éducation, spécialisée en technologies éducationnelles et enseigne le français langue seconde depuis maintenant 20 ans. Outre l'enseignement et la conception de cours, elle coordonne présentement divers projets et programmes de langue française au département Langues et communication interculturelle à l'École d'éducation permanente de l'Université McGill.

Denise Quildon has been designing classroom, simulation, and computer-based learning experiences for adults and young learners for more than 10 years. She holds a master's degree in educational technology. She is currently an instructional designer for the department of Instructor Services and Educational Technologies, where she services online and blended learning projects for the McGill School of Continuing Studies.

Depuis plus de 10 ans, Denise Quildon conçoit, pour les adultes et les jeunes étudiants, des expériences d'apprentissage en classe, par simulation et assistées par ordinateur. Détentrice d'une maîtrise en technologie éducative, elle est présentement conceptrice pédagogique au département des Services aux instructeurs et technologies d'apprentissage où elle produit les cours en ligne et d'apprentissage mixte pour l'École d'éducation permanente de l'Université McGill.