PROMOTING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE
THROUGH ONLINE CHATS AND FORUMS

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Summary

Communities of practice have been the topic of discussion since their definition in the late 1990s. Working together to solve problems, learning from each other, and having a sense of support and community are several aspects focused on in the literature. With the advent of Web 2.0 tools the possibilities for the development of virtual and real Communities of Practice has become a focal point of recent research. These ICT tools, combined with blended learning methodology, can promote situations for better learning, individual progress, and reflection. The two case studies presented in this study will illustrate how these tools and methodology combine in a blended learning setting and in a traditional F2F classroom to provide for more effective language, skills, and content learning, which ultimately should be the goal of teaching. These topics will be addressed in the discussion of the program and methodology developed, the skills and language promoted, and specifically the role online chats and fora play in developing communities of learners.

Keywords
Integrated Approach, Blended Learning, Web 2.0 tools, Online Chat and Forum, Communities of Practice

Összefoglalás

Az 1990-es évek vége óta, vagyis definiálásuktól kezdve a gyakorlati közösségek tudományos viták témájául szolgálnak. A problémák megoldása érdekében való együttműködés, az egymástól való tanulás, a közösségért érzett felelősségvállalás csupán néhány aspektus, amelyre a szakirodalom fókuszál. A Web 2.0 eszközök megjelenésével a virtuális és valós gyakorlati közösségek kialakulásának lehetőségei váltak a legújabb kutatások központi témájává. Ezek az IKT eszközök a kevert tanulás módszerével kombinálva előidézhetnek olyan szituációkat, amelyek jobb tanuláshoz, egyéni fejlődéshez és elmélkedéshez vezethetnek. A jelen tanulmányban bemutatásra kerülő két esettanulmány illusztrálja, hogy miként lehet ezeket az eszközöket és a módszert kombinálni egy kevert tanulási környezetben és egy hagyományos, személyes részvételen alapuló tantermi környezetben, hogy lehetővé tegyék a hatékonyabb nyelv-, készség- és tartalom-elsajátítást, amely végső soron a tanítás célja kellene, hogy legyen. Ezekkel a témákkal a kifejlesztett program és módszer, a támogatott készségek és nyelv, és különösen az online chatek és fórumok tanulói közösségek kialakításában játszott szerepének tárgyalása során kerülnek kifejtésre.

Kulcsszavak
Integrált megközelítés, kevert tanulás, Web 2.0 eszközök, online chat és fórum, gyakorlati közösségek

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Introduction - Fundamental Principles and Ideas
Since the beginning of the Information Age, much research has been done on the use of computers in education. In the field of language learning, we have seen a progression from the digitization of traditional handouts emailed or burned onto CD-ROMs to more sophisticated programs with interactive features to support self-access, to the use of ICT (Internet and Communication Technology) tools to facilitate interaction in synchronous and asynchronous situations. One fact remains constant, though, in this development, namely, that the acquisition of knowledge is a dynamic and interactive process in which the learner seeks, discovers, and applies learning in real world, problem-solving situations.

The past decade has seen a shift from an initial focus on students' use of ICT technology to how technology and pedagogy can be combined to promote better learning. The current generation of students has achieved a state of "normalization" regarding technology, which Bax (2003, 23) describes as much the same as with the use of television and radio media in and outside the classroom. He notes that this will have occurred when computers

> [...] "are used every day by language students and teachers as an integral part of every lesson, like a pen or a book without fear or inhibition, and equally without an exaggerated respect for what they can do. They will not be the center of any lesson, but they will play a part in almost all. They will be completely integrated into all other aspects of classroom life, alongside coursebooks, teachers and notepads."

The integration of computer technology, familiarization with Internet and communication technology in daily life, and the increasing importance of social media in daily, academic, and professional settings has led to an interest in technology facilitated teacher-student and student-student interaction (Trajtemberg – Yiakaumetti 2011, 1). The use of such tools as weblogs (blogs) and forums can be a substantial help in promoting student interaction, discourse, and reflection.

ICT tools are at the core of new methodologies and creating new roles for teaching and learner centeredness, as illustrated in Figure 1, which represents the fundamentals of the author's philosophy of teaching to support student learning:

Figure 1: The Essence of VOLL: A Symbiosis of Teaching and Learning

Source: (Brewster, 1995, 2)

At the center of this model are learners who acquire language, skills, and content by working with material, practicing, and studying, in the context of their professional or academic situation, with the goal to learn for life.

One key aspect of successful learning, with or without technology, is the role teaching plays in creating learning environments. Added to this is the increased focus in the last decades on self-access, which by definition is an individual path to knowledge, the discovery of one's own limitations, and the chance to break through individual barriers. Therefore, the teacher, course design, and the proper use of technology will all combine to support the learner.

Another important aspect in this "blend of necessities" is the emphasis on collaborative and constructionist methodology, and an increased understanding how learning takes place in a cooperative and interactive environment, whether in the classroom or online. According to Vygotsky (1978), the most significant intellectual development occurs when language and practical activity are combined. This implies that the exposure of students to various forms of communicative and collaborative activities, where discussion, problem-solving, feedback, and reflection occur, will produce the desired language, skills, and content learning outcomes. This idea is at the heart of the blended learning course design and use of Web 2.0 technology explored in this article.

Above all, the teaching philosophy, tools selected and course design should contribute to what Laurillard (1993) describes as the role of teaching, namely to enable student learning to take place. In this context, Chickering and Gamson (1987, 3) outline seven best practices, which will promote learning if they

1. Encourage student-faculty contact;

2. Encourage contact among students;

3. Encourage active learning;

4. Give prompt feedback;

5. Emphasize time on task;

6. Communicate high expectations;

7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

These Best Practices form the link to the goals of teaching and learning as applied to both the traditional F2F classroom and the blended learning situation. The current research will show that blended learning is an effective methodology to ensure the acquisition of language, skills, and content. The use of Web 2.0 tools, namely virtual, synchronous chat and asynchronous forum, can further enhance the building of Communities of Practice in and outside the F2F classroom.

Communities of Practice - F2F and online
Communities of Practice are defined by Wenger (1998) as a group of learners who interact and learn together and come together for a certain period of time. They share competences and experiences, tools, and solve problems together. In the case of online communities of practice, which are becoming increasingly common, Wenger et al. (2002, 34) describe this new phenomenon as

"[…] not just a Web site, a database, or a collection of best practices. It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment."

With an increasing emphasis on how Internet and Web 2.0 technologies are used to promote interaction among learners in and outside the classroom, Lai et al. (2006, vi) note that these technologies have contributed greatly to the way learners communicate, provide further opportunities outside the traditional classroom to share experiences and knowledge, and increase the actual development of online communities of practice. These tools further enhance collaboration and also increase the accessibility of resources to share among the community members (Boyington, 2011, 28-29).

These ICT tools and blended learning course design also contribute significantly to the development of reflective practice within the groups of learners. One key feature here is the importance of feedback, particularly peer feedback, which is seen as a key element in building Communities of Practice, i.e., one of its expressed purposes to improve student learning. Of particular note is the effect of the combination of F2F meetings with online, collaborative activities, whether synchronous in an online chat or asynchronous in a forum. The possibilities for effective learner-learner mentoring and coaching are increased and supported by the online presence and the F2F meetings, particularly because trust, conversation, reflection, and knowledge building are mutually supported. As Merl (2005, 9) notes, it is this combination of online and face-to-face communication which nurtures a community's learning processes.

Within the framework of an action research setting, two cases are presented below to underline the effectiveness of a blended learning course for language learning with students of business sciences at Johannes Kepler University, Linz, Austria. Seven students in the author's blended learning module on Intercultural Communication Skills and Business English participated in an online discussion about the course components and their individual learning progress. In addition to classroom observation and recording online interaction, end of course interviews were conducted with 19 students in the author's F2F Academic Writing class for Third Year undergraduates during the Spring Term of 2014. The aim of the research was to show which impact online, synchronous chats and asynchronous forums have on student learning and the building of Communities of Practice in a blended learning, distributed environment and in a traditional classroom based course setting.

Case Study 1- MuSSS English 1 and 2

The MuSSS English 1 and 2 courses are designed as modules to offer working students and care-givers the opportunity to complete their English requirements for their Business and Economics major. The first module, English 1, comprises the content from the traditional Communication Skills and Business English 1 courses offered at Linz University. The English 2 module consists of the course content from Intercultural Studies and Business English 2. Both modules are offered in consecutive semesters, with the F2F blocked meetings of six hours on a Friday or Saturday at one of the two university centers outside Linz. Weekly on-line chats provide additional contact, support, and opportunity for collaboration on tasks.

In addition to the physical and virtual contact hours, students have self-study assignments and research tasks to complete in preparation for the weekly chat sessions and bi-monthly F2F meetings. In the first module, the self-access component also includes 25 hours of work with the TellMeMore (Rosetta Stone) program. These three components blend to form an effective model for learning and teaching, as shown in Figure 2.

The overlapping elements can be changed in any direction to provide for individual learner needs or to meet curriculum requirements. It is interesting to note that, in a blended learning context, ICT use overlaps all of these three areas.

*Figure 2:* A Model for Blended Learning and Teaching
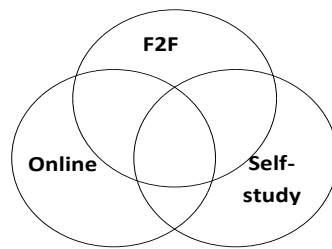
Source: (Brewster, 2013, 267)

> "[...] the crux of the matter for learners and teachers is and remains the integration of classroom interaction with self-access skills and online support in and outside of the classroom, which will most likely supply the greatest benefits to language learning" (Brewster, 2008, 327).

In the case of the blended learning class, the Adobe Connect Virtual Classroom is used for the weekly one to one and a half hour chat sessions, usually divided into small groups of 4 – 5 persons to increase effectiveness. The platform provides multiple forms of communication possibilities, such as the presentation mode, both for the host (instructor) and student, a text chat available to all participants, a private chat mode available to all participants for individualized messages, feedback, and "note passing", and breakout rooms for group work sequences. Likewise, PowerPoint slides, pdf files, and other graphic files can be shown during presentations and discussions. A whiteboard is available to all participants, as is a screen and document sharing mode for collaborative work. Correction and additions to work in progress can be made by both the participants and the instructor. This is shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Adobe Connect Meeting Example
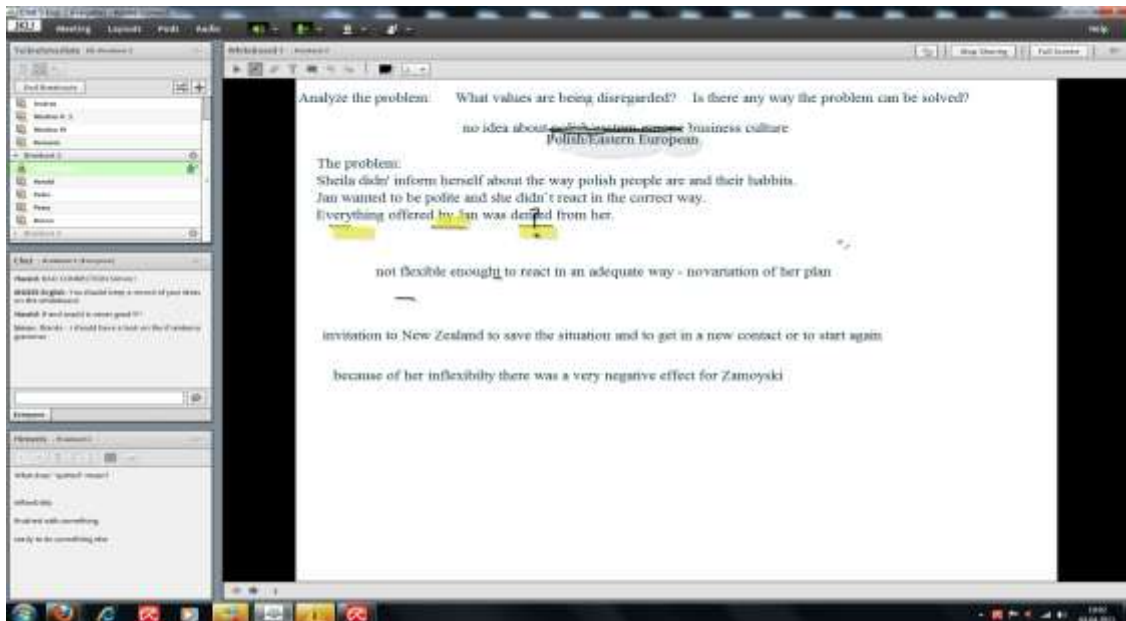
In addition, the learners can telephone or email the instructor for technical help. It is also notable that the learners themselves help each other overcome any technical problems during chat sessions using the same means. This alone shows how trust and collaboration are promoted by these Web 2.0 tools.

The use of electronic tools and chats are significant factors in building Communities of Practice among learners in this course. They help to build trust and cooperation, increase time on task for the learners, help to overcome shyness, strengthen contact and a sense of place, both in a virtual as well as a spatial sense. They have a very positive effect on student learning and developing skills and language. Learners make effective use of Web 2.0 tools to increase their language and skills development throughout the course. The tools specifically used in the author's blended learning course are highlighted in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Computer-supported communication and collaboration tools located according to public-private and synchronous-asynchronous dimensions

Public	
Blogs	Multi-way Chat
Wikis	Online Whiteboard
Online Discussion Forums	Document and Screen Sharing

Asynchronous	Synchronous
Electronic mail	Instant Messaging
Mailing lists	Two-way Chat
Private	

Source: (adapted from Hernández-Ramos, 2004, 4)

As Yeh (2014) notes, the benefits of using these electronic means of communication are numerous. First, constructive oral and written feedback from the instructor and peers helps learners focus on meaning rather than form to promote fluency. Secondly, the text-based possibilities in the chats are used by the instructor and the learners to clarify misconceptions and as a form of discrete correction to improve accuracy. Learners find this to be very motivating for their continuing language and skills learning.

The results of interviews with the seven participants in the blended learning class confirm these ideas. Students were asked to rank which components of the course affected their language and skills development most (Rank 1-4, from most to least), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Evaluate the effectiveness of these parts of the course

	Most effective	Effective	Less effective	Least effective
F2F blocks	3	2	2	0
Weekly online chats	3	2	2	0
Self-access (assignments and TellMeMore)	1	2	3	1
Timed tasks and exams	0	0	6	1

Source: Own research

As the table shows, the importance of F2F meetings and the online chats are equally valued as useful and significant in promoting the learners' language and skills development in the course. The participants noted an increase in their sense of learning, their sense of

community, and recognized the development of a sense of place in the virtual setting. Some of the comments from the learners show the effect of this development due to the course design and tools used:

"We always had something to do every week for the course (chats), so you will improve your speaking skills and presentation skills."

"Chats and F2F improved our presentation skills."

"Assignments and online tasks improved our writing skills and understanding of articles; also improved our reading skills, e.g., what is important to include in my commentary/reading club."

Overall, the evaluations by the participants showed a high degree of satisfaction in their language and skills development and with the blended learning design of the course.

Case 2- Academic Writing - Collaborative dialogues and writing improvement
The Academic Writing forum is used by participants as a platform to exchange and generate ideas, compare and contrast experiences in the writing process of their term papers, and to see that "we are all in the same boat". From the instructor's perspective, the forum is integrated into the F2F lessons and is further used to clarify misconceptions, avert problems, praise and support the learners, and, ultimately, to help weld group participants in a common purpose.

Several favorable results are derived from this process and combination of F2F meetings with an asynchronous forum. First, interviews with participants showed that they felt that, at the end of the process, they wrote better papers and increased their skills and fluency. Secondly, the forum provides an increase in time on task, a link outside of class for reflection and deeper understanding of the usefulness of the process writing strategy through participation and collaboration. A significant factor in the course was also seen to be peer review as an aid to generate in-class collaboration and online discussion, but also as a space for tips on dealing with resources, referencing, and exchanging ideas and methods "taken on-board". Table 3 shows the rankings according to student interview comments.

Table 3: Ranking of forum use by participants

The forum provided useful things and real answers.	11
The forum increased interaction, exchange of ideas, and built a feeling of community.	11
The forum increased awareness and self-reflection	8
Immediate peer feedback, along with instructor feedback was very important.	8
The forum provided a progress check to keep on track with tasks and provided reassurance.	3
The forum provided a networking opportunity and was good for interaction.	4

Source: Own research

Overall, the value of forum participation between classes was recognized and seen as beneficial to each participant's writing, language, and collaborative development. In other words, as Yeh (2014, 33-34) suggests, highly collaborative groups produce significantly better essays in terms of fluency and accuracy, as they have an opportunity in class and outside of the classroom to generate ideas, exchange information and experiences, and to comment and edit peer work.

Discussion

As shown in the cases studies, online tools effectively facilitate speaking, presenting, writing practice, reading and note-taking. In addition, they help promote confidence by comparing other participant's progress and through interaction on and offline. Through the use of social media tools, i.e., chat and forum, participants in the case studies recognized the community of learners that had formed by collaboratively working on course tasks, through feedback, and by reflecting on one's own development during the course of the semester. Aside from creating a special space for work and reflection beyond the physical classroom, the ICT technology used in both cases clearly shows that they facilitate learning in groups, working individually, and in a less "teacher or textbook centered" manner. Approaches to topics, problem-solving, and skills emerged more from the learners themselves than from instructor led discussions (cf. Elola – Oskoz, 2014, 65).

Within the development process in both cases presented in this study, the importance of feedback in the virtual and F2F settings proves to be central. The possibility for immediate and constructive feedback and correction in both cases are perceived to have a significant impact on learner progress and is seen to be very motivating to participants (Stein et al., 79-80).

Conclusions and Outlook

Online tools as demonstrated can and do promote Communities of Practice both in F2F and online settings. They are most effective when embedded and integrated into the course design and tasks, which provide more opportunity for students to work, revise, and reflect. By far, this type of methodology has gained wide acceptance and appreciation among participants in the two cases presented due to the overall feeling of improvement, increased depth of understanding, increase in skills and language abilities, and content understanding. The course design, tasks and tools provide learning steps to awareness and responsibility for one's own and the group's learning. When this combination of online, F2F, and self-access are properly balanced and supported, they form a basis to actively construct and share knowledge, i.e., the very basis of what constitutes a Community of Practice.

What is needed further is research to show how blended learning may ultimately be more effective than the traditional classroom setting and to study which combination of methodology, tools, support, and feedback are needed to effectively facilitate student-centered learning. It is clear, however, given the possibilities offered by ICT and social media tools to further content, skills, and language development. It is essential that these opportunities be increasingly explored and implemented in curriculum and course design. As one participant in the blended learning course noted, "Only the classroom is not enough."

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