

# Developing a Blended Learning strategy: Motivating university students to learn English by implementing blended learning activities (instructional media and pedagogical considerations)

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**Abstract:** The switch from the traditional face-to-face to an online model implementing technology in the classroom affects students' motivation. By applying blended learning approach in class I introduced the concepts of synchrony (integration of learning environment) and elasticity (integration of instructional media with instructional strategies) to ensure the right mix is attained. In my blended learning class I combined modes of web-based technology with various pedagogical approaches to produce an optimal language learning environment. In attempting to achieve the optimal learning environment I employed a variety of activity types with group work and pair work, collaborative learning and independent learning to engage my learners in communicative language practice. As a teacher I try to address the need for personalized learning through the introduction of self-study resources designed for independent study.

The participants in this study are students from different faculties, attending Basic English skills sessions (pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate courses). Students completed a questionnaire designed to determine: 1) if blended learning activities done in and outside the classroom could enhance their learning of English; 2) what factors might motivate students to perform tasks; 3) what were possible underlying factors which affect students' motivation, especially in stimulating students' practical work, and enhancing their language learning achievement at the earliest stage of their university education. This study investigates the influence of competence-based learning in motivating students to learn English as a foreign language.

**Key words:** blended learning approach, attitude & motivation, blended learning activities, constructivism

**Abstrakt:** Účastníky této studie jsou studenti z různých fakult, navštěvující lekce základní angličtiny Basic English skills (pre-intermediate, intermediate a upper-intermediate). Studenti vyplňovali dotazník za účelem zjištění: 1) zda smíšené vyučovací aktivity v učebně a mimo ni mohou zlepšit jejich studium angličtiny, 2) jaké faktory mohou motivovat studenty k provádění úkolů, 3) jaké jsou případné skryté faktory, které ovlivňují motivaci studentů, zejména při praktických cvičeních a zlepšování výsledků při studiu jazyka v raném stadiu univerzitního vzdělávání.

Článek prezentuje současnou teorii a vysvětlení smíšené výuky a popisuje přínosy smíšené výuky v učebně v prostředí vyššího vzdělávání. Autorka uzavírá popisem, jak ona sama aplikovala výsledky průzkumu ve své vlastní učebně tak, že pro dosažení správného poměru zavedla koncepty synchronie (integrace studijního prostředí) a elastičnosti (integrace instruktážních médií s instruktážními strategiemi).

## Introduction

Blended learning, an approach that includes a mixture of online and face-to-face communication, is an increasingly popular method of content delivery in higher education, often also called hybrid learning. The primary advantage of blended learning is the potential to incorporate the strengths of synchronous and asynchronous learning (Ho et al., 2006; Vaughan, 2007). For instance, some learning is completed in the classroom and some in a digital context away from the classroom. The approach encourages a community of inquiry that allows learners to connect and collaborate with their peers and to create “a learning environment that integrates social, cognitive and teaching elements that in a way will precipitate and sustain reflection and discourse” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 8). Students in blended learning classes generally have two weeks of online work time in between face-to-face meetings. There is ample time for reflection in readings and online contributions by classmates. Additional modes of communication and participation can lead to an increase in student motivation (Ho et al., 2006).

The intention of Blended learning classes is that students are motivated to learn, thus they will learn more quickly and achieve language success. The process in blended learning classes is effective because using a combination of technology, on-line and face-to-face classes seems to make the time pass quickly since the students are engaged in collaborative activities, participate more and thus are more eager to learn. Blended learning courses have advantages for both students and teachers because they provide flexibility of time, meeting different students' needs and learning styles, and teachers have more time to reflect on students' writings.

## Blended Learning: Transformative Potential in Higher Education

Blended learning uses a variety of learning resources that can help students choose their preferred learning style and become more autonomous in acquiring English as a second language. For instance, blended learning allows for students to explore more deeply many topics than could be presented in a lecture. In higher education, this could be important because online learners can work together or apart and connect anytime and anyplace.

The challenge for the university instructor in applying blended learning is to predict possible drawbacks, difficulties, and obstacles such as how the institution and administration will support this approach of learning.

In a higher education setting blended learning focuses on the learner and the learners' need. Instructors can support students in understanding what it is they are expected to learn, the choices they have available for them and how can they

assist them in developing the necessary skills of reflection, self-direction, self-independence and self-management.

The learner-centred construction of blended learning helps learners choose what and when to blend, so that it can be manipulated and controlled by learners rather than teachers. In addition, through effective facilitation, blended learning is based on transforming higher education in rethinking and restructuring the potential of the learning experience. This approach has the potential to enhance both the effectiveness and efficiency of meaningful learning experiences. The following figure (reprinted from Rosenberg, Marc, 2009, p. 1) shows the paradigm comparing instructor vs. learner controlled learning.

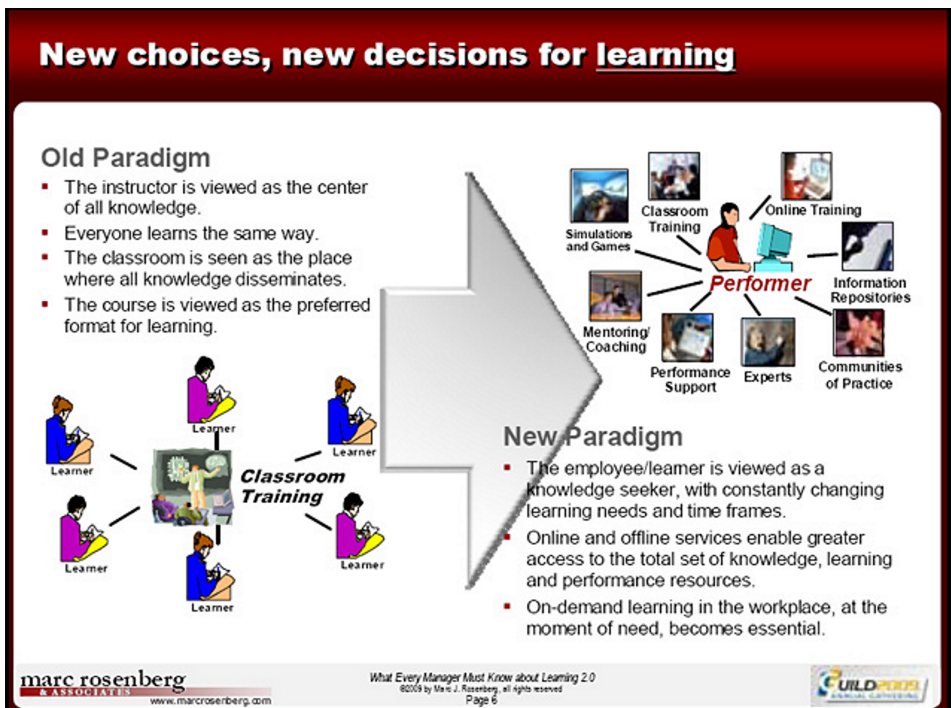


Fig. 1: reprinted from Rosenberg, Marc, 2009, p. 1

It is a fact that Internet Information and communication technologies have the major influence on transformative innovation for higher education in the 21st century (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004, p. 95). In the traditional model the instructor is viewed as the center of all knowledge, students learn the same way in the classroom where in the modern classroom the learner is viewed as a knowledge seek-

er constantly changing learning needs using online resources to learn in a new interesting way.

Arguments that higher education should consider are:

1. Blended learning builds an effective community of inquiry that provides a stabilizing, cohesive influence that balances the open communication and limitless access to information on Internet. These communities of inquiry provide the condition for free open dialogue, critical debate, negotiation and agreement. Blended learning has the capability to facilitate these conditions and adds a reflective element with multiple forms of communication to meet the specific learning requirements. Whether face-to-face or online, communities of inquiry consist of three elements: cognitive, social, and teaching presence (Garrison and Anderson, 2004, p. 97)
2. The sense of community must be on a cognitive and social level that requires consideration of the different cognitive and social characteristics in order to achieve higher levels of learning. The focus is given on the teaching presence that facilitates learning experiences. Blended learning offers a distinct advantage in supporting higher levels of learning through critical discourse and reflective thinking, as shown in Figure 2 below.
3. Blended learning facilitates critical thinking and higher-order learning. (Hudson, 2002) argues, for example, “that the very basis of thinking is rooted in dialogue, drawing on a socially constructed context to endow ideas with meaning” (p. 53). The emphasis must shift from assimilating information to constructing meaning and confirming understanding in a community of inquiry. To be a critical thinker means to take control of one’s thought processes and gain metacognitive understanding of these processes (i.e., Learn to learn) as described in the chart Figure 2: *D. R. Garrison, H. Kanuka (2004, p. 98)*.
4. Blended learning can provide independence and increased control essential to developing critical thinking as well as encourage scaffolded acceptance of responsibility for constructing meaning and understanding.

### **Blended learning approach: Why a Focus on students’ attitudes and motivation matters**

Motivation is considered a very significant factor for language learning success. I investigated students’ success in learning English as a second language. The key factors that determine students’ success or failure are students’ enthusiasm, commitment and persistence.

In his socio-educational model Gardner (1982), notes “motivation is composed of three elements: effort, desire and affect. Effort refers to the time spent studying the language and the drive of the learner. Desire indicates how much the learner

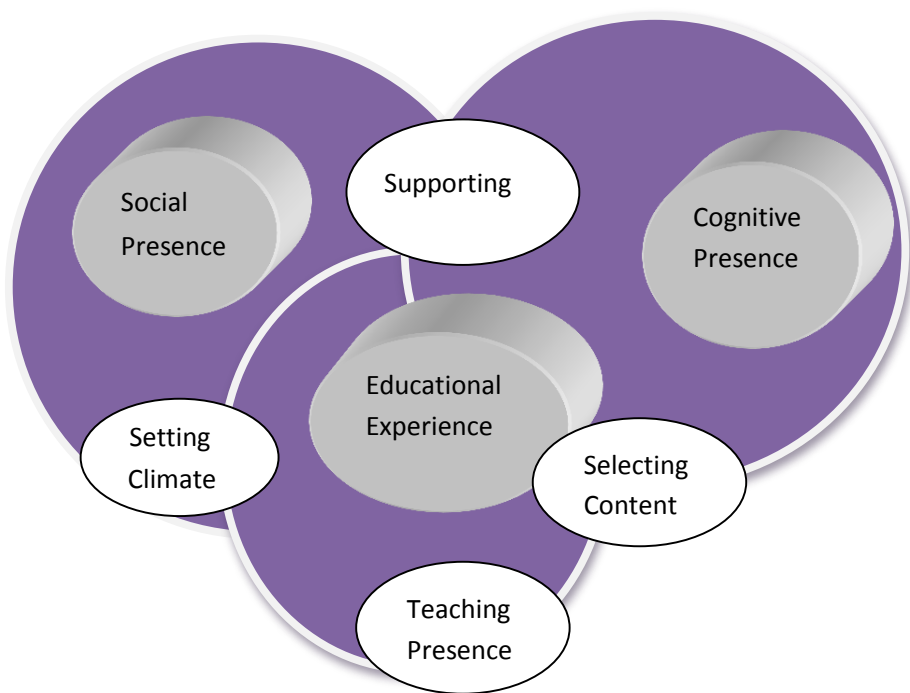


Fig. 2: *Community of inquiry*  
Garrison, Kanuka (2004, p. 98)

wants to become proficient in the language, and affect means the learner's emotional reactions related to language study". (p. 906).

Although important, it is very difficult to find exact method for motivating students because what may work for some students may not work for others.

The level of motivation is very important in an EFL classroom. In order to stimulate students' progress, the teacher should possess some specific qualities, consider his/her personal characteristics and behaviour, classroom management practices, and the materials and tasks used in the classroom. These motivational techniques affect students' behaviour, their engagement, success and overall relaxing atmosphere. Other ways that motivate students include positive behaviour of the teacher, appealing activities and technology used in the classroom as well as effective classroom management.

A motivating teacher should offer conditions for students to feel free and co-operate to make classes interesting where activities are based on creativity, humour and friendly competition.

Teachers need to explore the factors that motivate students to perform tasks and what affects students' motivation in learning English as a second language as well as encourage students' practical work, enhancing their language learning achievement at the very earliest stages of their enrolment in the first year. Furthermore, motivation is an important component in the learning process. In order to achieve something learning and motivation have the same importance: we gain new knowledge and skills in learning and motivation helps us go through this process.

In conclusion, motivation is a very important quality of blended learning that stimulates students' progress in an online environment as well as help learners achieve their desired goals.

### **Creating effective opportunities for learning English as a second Language: Why this matters for offering a blended learning approach to university students**

“Learners in the twenty-first century have been Web consumers for much of their lives, and are now demanding online instruction that supports participation and interaction. They want learning experiences that are social and that will connect with their peers.” (West and West as shown in Figure 3, 2009, p. 2)

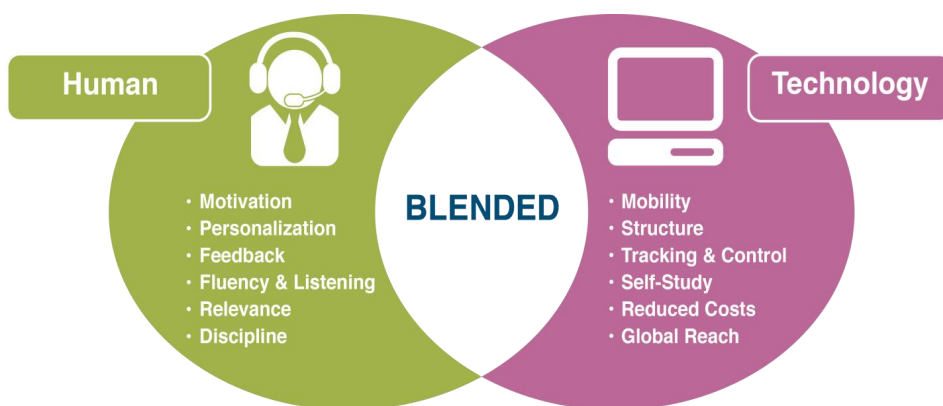


Fig. 3: Blended learning environment. West and West, 2009

Engaged learning is active learning that involves constructivism and problem-based learning all of which emphasize student-focused learning with instructor

as a facilitator. Learning theorists such as Bruner, Vygotsky and Piaget all embraced the philosophy that humans do not learn in a vacuum but rather through interaction. Bruner in his work with (Bornstein, 1989) stated that “development is intrinsically bound up with interaction” (p. 13), which builds on his earlier definition of reciprocity as the “deep human need to respond to others and operate jointly with them toward an objective” (Bruner, 1966, p. 67).

Vygotsky 1981 asserts that “instruction is effective only if it stimulates the individual potential ability when working with an adult or more advanced peer and helps learner across the zone of proximal development”. Piaget’s philosophy emphasized “that learning must be connected to the learner in order to be meaningful”. He described engaged learning as knowledge build on prior experiences and affected by new experiences. Development would be more likely to occur when two equal partners collaborated in finding a solution than when a more skilled partner dominated the task. He believed that effective discussions are possible if there is a symmetrical power between discussants. “Peer-to-peer discussion was more valuable than adult-child discussion because equals were more likely to resolve contradictions between each other’s views than partners of equal authority” (Piaget, 1969).

Engaged learning is closely related to problem-based learning. A problem is posed to learners who work together in teams to define the nature of the problem and determine its resolution. Through this process learners can “develop intellectual curiosity, confidence, and engagement that will lead to lifelong learning” (Watson & Croh, 2001, p. 21). This process is based on interaction and meaningful learning.

Constructivism considers interaction essential for learning and addresses epistemology within the context of the individual and within social constructs. According to Smith and Ragan (1999, p. 15), the key assumptions of individual constructivism are the following:

- Knowledge is constructed from experience.
- Learning results from a personal interpretation of knowledge
- Learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience
- Learning is collaborative with meaning negotiated from multiple perspectives.

The collaborative acquisition of knowledge is one key to success for creating an online learning environment. Activities that require student interaction and encourage a sharing of ideas promote a deep level of thought.

In his summary of social constructivism, (Weigel, 2002) focused on content acquisition that defeats the overall purpose of education: “Content is the clay of knowledge construction; learning takes place when it is fashioned into something

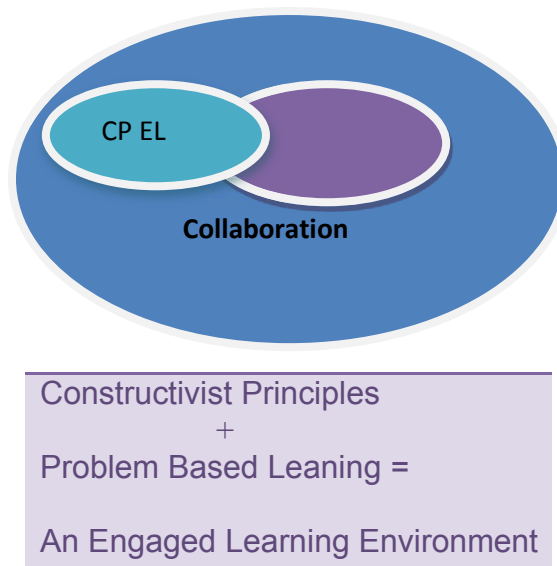


Fig. 4: An engaged learning model

meaningful.” “Creativity, critical analysis, and skillful performance are inextricably linked to the process of creating more viable and content knowledge structures” (p. 5). In an online environment the focus is on the learner being engaged in collaborative activities that allow the clay to take form and have meaning for the learner.

Figure 4 illustrates the combination of constructivist and problem-based learning within a collaborative result in an engaged learning environment. Engaged learning is primarily based on the learner and each learner’s actions contribute not only to individual knowledge but to overall community knowledge. According to Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, and Tinker (2000) “There is strong evidence to suggest that learners learn best when constructing their own knowledge.”

## Findings and results

According to Parson and Brown, to be “an effective educator one must be an ‘active participant’ in the classroom, observing, analysing, and interpreting information about student learning and then using this information for planning and decision making” (p. 34).

The survey research was designed to measure students’ interest in a hybrid approach so that the instructor can design objective learning goals when creating the course. Fifty students at SEEU from different departments with mixed ability



skills in English as a foreign language completed a survey aimed to find out about their preferences in learning English, such as whether they preferred learning via a digital environment. Although the blended learning model is not well known to students at South Eastern European University (SEEU), students still expressed a preference to communicate from home (60 percentages) rather than to come to class regularly. They relied on the knowledge management system LIBRI and they expressed interest in using Discussion Forums (32 percentages), more than Face-to-Face discussion only (26 percentages).

The majority of these students indicated that they use computers 2–5 hours a day (62 percentages) when completing their assignments. Students showed more interest in taking the courses on line than coming to class (80 percentages answered positively). They also agreed strongly (70 percentages) that it will be better if they have combined classes, for instance 50 minutes in class and 50 minutes in a computer lab.

Moreover, students agreed that technology plays an important role in the society today and that it could be useful to use the Internet in order to improve their English skills (86 percentages). They felt comfortable to use the materials online (82 percentages), and indicated that it would be easier for them to complete the assignments at home on the computer (54 percentages) than come to class.

Furthermore, students thought that it would be very useful to receive feedback from their peers online (70 percentages), and attend scheduled classes face-to-face once per week instead of coming to class two or three times per week (64 percentages).

Students said that they would like to be assessed on weekly basis (42 percentages), by self-assessment (20 percentages), weekly quizzes (28 percentages), weekly assignments (8 percentages), and combined on line work (2 percentages).

Overall, the results of the survey show that students would value a blended or hybrid learning approach. They are ready to try something new. Based on their feedback, the instructor can design a course with objective learning goals. In my blended learning class the combination of the traditional face-to-face and online modern model motivated students to perform the tasks and stimulate their practical work.

## **Conclusion**

Blended Learning courses are very useful because they implement active learning strategies as well as variety of pedagogical approaches that help students learn the course material easily. Furthermore, by combining modes of web technology students discuss online which encourages reflections and in that way they reach maximum participation. As a result, the face-to-face time can be used more ef-

fectively, with students extending the material beyond what might be achieved in a conventional face-to-face course.

The students in a blended course make more and richer connections between what they are learning and what they already know.

Svinicki (2004) points out that one of the most effective things we can do as instructors is to help our students encode information in their long-term memories is to help them build an organizational structure for the material: "It is worth your while as an instructor to spend time thinking organizationally about your course's content and to design instruction around that organization" (p. 31). Well-organized knowledge is easier to connect to prior knowledge, and therefore easier to retrieve when needed.

Blended learning has a transformational lifelong learning effect in the lives of many university students. It helps students develop the desire and skills to continue learning throughout their lives by giving students' more control over their learning and teaching them skills they need to acquire, organize, and incorporate new information into their understanding of the world.

In my blended learning class I try to combine the traditional face-to-face and online modern model by implementing technology. Moreover, I use various motivational techniques to motivate them to perform the tasks and stimulate their practical work. I have based my instruction on the results of the survey described above. Every second class in the week for 50 minutes students had a chance to practice activities in a computer lab at SEEU-Skopje. I manage to achieve the optimal learning environment by using variety of activity types: group and pair work as well as engage learners in collaborative and independent activities in communicative language practice. As a teacher I try to address the need for personalized learning through the introduction of self-study resources designed for independent study.

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## **APPENDIX**

### *BLENDED LEARNING QUESTIONNAIRE*

#### *SECTION ONE*

**1. How much do you use computers daily?**

- 1 hour
- 2-5 hours
- more than 8 hours

**2. Would you like to take courses on computer?**

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

**3. Would you bring your computer in the classroom?**

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

**4. Would you like to take on-line courses?**

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

**5. Are computers useful at SEEU?**

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

**6. Do we have enough computers at SEEU?**

- Yes
- No
- I don't know
- Maybe

**7. How important are today computers in our society?**

- Extremely important
- Very important

- Not important
- I don't like using computers

**8. Would you like to take combined classes 50 min. in class, 50 minutes on computer lab?**

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

## *SECTION TWO*

**9. Would you like to be able to select your own courses in English?**

- Yes, very much
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

**10. Would you like to take elective courses after the required English courses?**

- Yes, very much
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

**11. What would you like better?**

- courses on-line
- courses in class
- combined model (in-class and on-line)
- I don't know

**12. Would you prefer to communicate from home on a computer than come to class regularly?**

- Yes, very much
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

**13. What would you like the most?**

- Discussion Forums
- Writing e-mails
- Workshops/Seminars
- Face-to face communication

**14. What courses would you like to take as electives?**

- Drama

- Computer related courses
- Academic English
- Public Speech
- Language and Culture
- Basic English Skills

### *SECTION THREE*

**15. Can internet improve your English skills?**

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

**16. Do you think that courses can be improved by creating assignments or lectures by the use of Internet?**

- No
- Yes, but I haven't tried that yet
- Yes, but at home I don't have internet
- Yes, I have tried this

**17. Do you use computers to complete your assignments?**

- Yes
- Only for my purposes
- I often copy-paste from Internet
- No, I do my assignments individually without the use of Internet

**18. Do you think it will be more useful to have materials on-line?**

- Yes, I am comfortable using it
- No, I am not comfortable using it
- I don't know

**19. Do you agree with the statement 'It is more important to be able to use teaching materials on-line instead of coming to class'?**

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- I don't know

**20. Do you think our programs in English are well organized?**

- Yes, very much
- No
- should be improved

- I don't know

**21. Blended learning is:**

- combined learning applying traditional and modern technology  
 traditional way of teaching  
 modern way of teaching  
 I don't know what it means

**22. Would it be better if you have classes once a week (per group) instead of 2, 3 times per week?**

- Yes  
 No  
 Maybe  
 I don't know

**23. Can we make the process of learning easier by using Blended Learning? (combined-traditional and modern on-line learning)**

- Yes  
 No  
 Maybe  
 I don't know

**24. Do you think it would be better to take the exam on the computer?**

- Strongly agree  
 Agree  
 Disagree  
 I don't know

**25. Do you think it will be better if the time for the class is scheduled on line, students don't have to come to class?**

- Strongly agree  
 Agree  
 Disagree  
 I don't know

**26. Would you like to receive feedback from another student on-line?**

- Yes  
 No  
 Maybe  
 I don't know

**27. What kind of materials would you use on-line?**

- Lesson Plans  
 Discussion Forums

- useful websites
- Facebook

**28. How would you like to be assessed?**

You may choose more than one answer

- on weekly basis
- self-assessment
- weekly quizzes
- weekly assignments
- collaborative on-line work

**29. Would you like to have more classes in computer lab than in the classroom?**

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I don't know

## Bionote

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