

DOI: 10.12731/2218-7405-2017-7-193-203

УДК 378

**THE SYNERGISTIC CYCLE
OF MICRO-BLENDED LEARNING INCORPORATED
IN RUSSIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION TO GENERATE
MORE INFORMAL LEARNING**

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E-learning with its diverse forms and wide-ranging applications has gone forward changing globally teaching and learning strategies in tertiary education. Technology-enhanced learning has progressed both from enhancements of innovative technologies, amendments in educational sphere and integration of international designs in learning environment.

Purpose: *The article analyses the interaction of blended learning models aiming to promote the most effective curriculum design to serve the learners' requirements, their life experiences and the opportunities and limitations of the particular learning setting. The subject of the study is to get the insight of the newly emerged catchword micro-blended learning, which is abundantly used in educational sphere with its interwoven constituent parts.*

Methodology: *The research is based on empirical studies conducted by contemporary scholars, comparative analyses of diverse modes of teaching and learning and practical implications of micro-blended learning strategies.*

Results: *The study outcomes imply that technological enhancements and inconsistencies in scholastic environment dictate the emergence and evolvement of blended learning styles which pursue the goal to increase the insufficient language practice through informal self-study. The authors assume that the synergistic cycle of micro blended learning applied in the design of in-company produced textbooks suits directly the requirements of undergraduate and postgraduate learners.*

Practical implications: *The research findings can be helpfully applied in educational sphere for designing and introducing e-learning schemes.*

Keywords: *micro-blended learning; synergistic cycle; informal learning; audiovisual hypermedia; web-enhanced syllabus.*

СИНЕРГЕТИЧЕСКИЙ ЦИКЛ МИКРО-СМЕШАННОГО ОБУЧЕНИЯ ВНЕДРЕННОЕ В РОССИЙСКОЕ ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ С ЦЕЛЮ ФОРМИРОВАНИЯ БОЛЕЕ НЕФОРМАЛЬНОГО ОБУЧЕНИЯ

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Электронное обучение с его разнообразными формами и широкомасштабными приложениями стремительно развивается, меняя мировые стратегии обучения в высшем образовании. Технологически усовершенствованное обучение является успешным как из-за совершенствования инновационных технологий, изменений в образовательной сфере, так и из-за интеграции международных стандартов в учебную среду.

Цель. *Статья посвящена анализу взаимодействия смешанных моделей обучения, направленного на продвижение наиболее эффективных учебных программ с целью усовершенствования знаний учащихся, с учетом их жизненного опыта, а также возможностей и ограничений определенной модели обучения. Предметом исследования является ознакомление с недавно появившимся модным термином микро-смешанное обучение, которое широко используется в образовательной сфере вместе со всеми своими составными частями.*

Метод или методология проведения работы. *Исследование основано на эмпирических исследованиях современных ученых, сравнительном анализе различных способов обучения и на практических примерах микро-смешанных стратегий обучения.*

Результаты. *Результаты исследования подразумевают, что технологические усовершенствования и перемены в академической среде диктуют появление и развитие смешанных стилей обучения,*

которые преследуют цель увеличить недостаточную языковую практику посредством неформального обучения. Авторы предполагают, что синергетический цикл микро-смешанного обучения, применяемый при разработке учебников созданных внутри компании, напрямую отвечают требованиям студентов и аспирантов.

Область применения результатов. Результаты исследований могут быть успешно применены в образовательной сфере для разработки и внедрения учебных программ, нацеленных на электронное обучение.

Ключевые слова: микро-смешанное обучение; синергетический цикл; неформальное обучение; аудиовизуальная гипермедиа; веб-расширенная программа.

Introduction

*“I am always ready to learn although
I do not always like being taught.”*

Winston Churchill

It is quite apparent and acknowledged that education plays a paramount role in society development, nationwide progress and welfare. Currently the era of development of international economic, scientific and educational relations has created prerequisites to improve the higher educational standards, hence ‘building of new educational environment for training highly qualified specialists has become an urgent issue in Russia’ [5, p. 399]. To address this global goal of qualitative student preparation, the tertiary educational system has to evolve and progress in three main directions: scientific research, faculty development and information technologies integration in study programs.

Plekhanov Russian University of Economics (PRUE) was among the first to integrate multilayer system of specialist preparation in accordance with Bologna Declaration. At present PRUE is dedicated to the ambitious goal of preserving and raising its highly ranked position among top universities worldwide, thus focusing on such constituents

as world level research development, formation and implementation of globally competitive education programs, and the scholars' involvement in scientific networks worldwide to transfer and contribute knowledge management. Subsequently higher education witnesses 'paradigm shift to students' self-study training, transfer from the principle of *one education for a lifetime* to *lifelong learning throughout a lifetime*, freedom of university choice, academic mobility, education computerization and usage of new information' [6, p. 404].

ICT integration in tertiary education to create micro-learning

To keep pace with evolution in the educational sphere many teachers now apply Information and Communication Technologies to create or enhance teaching materials with multimedia formats which prove to be useful and effective to support learners' informal and individual learning. Likewise, the advent of audiovisual hypermedia resources and availability of a wide range of portable electronic devices make the task of educators fairly easy to implement interactive technology-led learning in tertiary education. Henceforth, there has emerged a new buzzword *micro-blended learning* which we would present as a cycle (Diagram 1) that integrates four elements – distance learning, mobile learning, e-learning and traditional classroom learning, so creating a synergy of knowledge acquisition processes and varied ways to address diverse learning goals and styles both in institutional and individual learning settings.

It is noteworthy to define each of these terms, to highlight the advantages and see how they are related to each other. *Traditional classroom* learning is defined as 'face-to-face instruction with interaction between classmates and general education teacher during the learning processes'; whereas *the 'e-learning*, a mode of instruction, which relies on an Internet based program as a medium for instruction, is emerging as a popular method of instruction and learning at the secondary level' [2, p. 10]. Thus the educator's role in each teaching situation is different; in the former he acts as an instructor and delivers knowledge in a traditional way, in the latter setting he acts as a facilitator and helps to reach online resources.

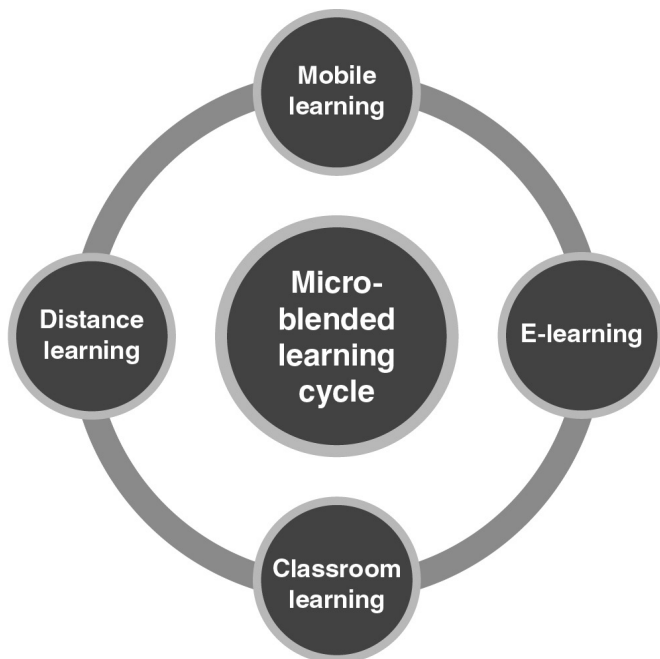


Diagram 1

Mobile learning is defined by Clark Quinn as ‘...the intersection of mobile computing and e-learning: accessible resources wherever you are, strong search capabilities, rich interaction, powerful support for effective learning, and performance-based assessment’ [8, p. 126]. Therefore, mobile learning is completely independent of location and space, leads easy tracking of information contents, and supports mutual teaching-learning creativity. It covers paramount use of multimedia, instant communication and unlimited database sharing.

Distance learning means that both educators and learners appear in different areas and time zones while completing teaching and learning procedure. The provision of materials and contents are mostly via bandwidth connections and communication is also through electronic media [7, p. 671], which provides the learners larger space for time and location flexibility. Moreover, distance learning is beneficial from the point

of knowledge accessibility, cost-effectiveness and is highly learner-centered allowing them to develop their own pace of learning.

Consequently, the integration of Information and Communication Technologies in educational sphere is equally beneficial for educators and learners as they bring forth new challenges and opportunities to enhance and supplement the teaching materials, provide learners more room for autonomy and informal learning, increase the instructional effectiveness. For instance, educators intend to use more audio-video authentic materials during the teaching process, but in accordance with current educational changes and emergence of larger multilevel groups, it is more effective and practical for learners to access these materials in an informal learning mode. Technology allows students to cover materials, review and do activities with immediate feedback [10, p. 1458].

In case of e-materials developed by our colleagues we have enhanced the in-company designed ESP coursebooks by audiovisual and reading resources (www.britishcouncil, www.ted-ed, www.bbc.videos) with supportive tasks, tapescripts and direct feedback. As a result, students can learn individually outside the class, replay or reread the materials multiple times, complete the tasks in their own pace and join the community for discussion. As a result, ICT not only diminish the teaching constraints for material choice and practice, but also simplify curriculum development, enrich the learning environment for both in-classroom learners and those taking courses virtually. It proves that ‘the advent of e-learning as part of the collaborative learning paradigm includes Web 2.0 technologies, which are widely used by our students and are now making their way into the classroom’ [1, p. 210].

Micro-blended learning modes penetrating into the course designs

Grounded on above analysis we can assume that micro-blended learning is a synergistic effect of incorporating multimedia technologies, mobile pedagogy, adaptive methodology with diverse teaching strategies and approaches to create e-textbooks or virtual learning resources. ‘Blended learning can be defined as a method of teaching that combines the most

effective face-to-face teaching techniques and online interactive collaboration, both constituting a system that functions in constant correlation and forms a single environment' [4, p. 285].

So blended learning has become an integral part of higher education, as it has proven to be an imperative tactic for informal or workplace learning allowing learners to deal with smaller units, short videos and little number of activities. Therefore, the designs of course syllabus look diverse and even narrow profession-led with the integration of creative in-class and out of class (formal & informal) learning strategies, innovative and mobile technologies. For instance, in case of our tailor-made materials we have entitled micro learning activities as *Digital Learning* or *Internet Review*, hence providing the learners with further instructions to explore the web-enhanced learning resources which easily fit the needs of all learners.

Let us have a look at the Contents of Unit 1 per textbook (Diagram 2) in order to perceive how synergistic cycle of micro-blended learning works for higher education in the fames of the presented in-company produced resources: *Guide to Management* and *English for Business Communication* (PRUE, Moscow, 2017).

Diagram 2

Contents	Learning strategies
<p><u>English for Business Communication</u> Unit 1</p> <p>1. Theory: <i>Concepts of competitive markets</i> 2. Case Study: <i>Competition</i> 3. Brainstorming: <i>Video conferencing</i> 4. Internet Review: <i>Why do competitors open their stores next to one another?</i> 5. Individual Project: <i>Recent perfect competition market model</i> 6. Written Discourse: <i>Business Presentation</i></p>	<p>1, 3 Traditional classroom learning</p> <p>2 Distance & classroom learning</p> <p>4, 5 Mobile learning, E-learning, Micro learning</p>
<p><u>Guide to Management</u> Unit 1</p> <p>1. MANAGEMENT 1.1 <i>Reading & Comprehension</i> 1.2 <i>Role Play</i> 1.3 <i>Individual Project</i> 1.4 <i>Digital Learning</i> 1.5 <i>Writing Skills</i></p>	<p>1.1–1.2 Traditional classroom learning</p> <p>1.3 Distance & Mobile learning</p> <p>1.4–1.5 E-learning & Micro learning</p>

The analysis of the above table illustrates how the learning materials incorporate all learning styles and tactics and so create micro-blended learning environment being rather challenging and motivating for undergraduates pursuing economic specialization and learning English for Specific Purposes, or employed learners seeking to improve foreign language skills related to their profession in the frames of in-house or on-line courses. As many educators agree ‘combining online elements with face-to-face instruction means that learners show better performance than if they do learning only in a traditional class environment’ [3, p. 189].

The effectiveness and high-level student involvement can be guaranteed in case the syllabus components are balanced and methodically appropriate to program educational objectives. In our view the suggested micro-blended learning model supports the realization of the following goals:

- to develop in learners independent productive learning through fostering learner autonomy;
- to stimulate constructive and analytical thinking, foster decision making skill;
- to create optimum conditions for revealing individual potential of every learner;
- to accumulate language skills, be flexible in choice and mobile for constant upgrading;
- to improve communicative skills while performing pair or team projects;
- to search and process relevant information by using computer skills;
- to prepare specialists pursuing lifelong self-learning by extensive practice of information technologies;
- to enhance the efficiency and quality of teaching by expending the use of information technologies;
- to strengthen interdisciplinary connections and amplify networking.

Conclusion

The core goals of technology-based learning encompass enhanced access to a wide range of students – undergraduates, post-graduates, employed adults being able to attend courses partially to get face-to-face learning experience and be engaged in the entire process in an informal mode. This

kind of micro-blended learning provides with prospects to improve learning productivity and effectiveness by using e-learning media and augmentation of self-learning modules. Especially cyberspace is beneficial for introvert learners who find it appealing and feel more confident to cover the learning materials isolated at home with their technological device.

Moreover, micro-blended learning strategy is effective and supportive to diminish the inconsistencies in language learning process caused by the shrinkage in tutorial hours in higher institutions, to offer more informal and student-led learning space. ‘A great variety of tasks in the online component of the blended course contributes both to elimination of knowledge gaps and profound material study’ [5, p. 401]. Likewise, integration of blended learning addresses the following challenges:

- ‘engagement as the main driver of students’ learning that has a crucial importance in programs where the native language is other than English’ [9, p. 6886];
- contribution in decreasing academic workload which is cost-effective and time-saving in the conditions of intensification of the faculty research involvement;
- transition from traditional reproductive tasks to individualized learning, featured with high-level of motivation and commitment;
- perpetual increase in professional expertise, as teachers develop and practice a series of teaching roles: a creator, educator, facilitator, mentor, supervisor, instructor and just interlocutor.

Finalizing the above said with the statements by Thornton & Yoong ‘an important contributor to the success of this technology-enabled approach to professional learning was the role taken by the blended action learning facilitator. Two complementary aspects of this role were: enabling learning, the main focus of which was encouraging participation in online interactions; and acting as a trusted inquisitor, a process involving both supporting and challenging participants in their leadership learning’ [11, p. 129].

Micro-blended learning blows a fresh breath of wind onto language teaching and learning. The research in case assumes that the synergistic cycle of contemporary learning models is quite timesaving, cost-effective providing learners with convenience and flexibility. Micro-blended learning devours an incredible potential in teaching foreign languages of-

fering an opportunity to integrate innovative and technological advances of online learning with interaction and participation of the best traditional practices. Moreover, it fits the capacities and requests of a larger auditorium focusing on mostly informal and independent knowledge acquisition.

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