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# The changing learning landscape

**Best practice samples of blended learning concepts**

*Die Befürworterinnen und Befürworter der Neuen Medien im Unterricht und von eLearning sehen eine befriedigende Antwort auf immer rascher sich verändernde Arbeitsweisen und gesteigerter Lernererwartungen in Blended Learning-Konzepten, die sich als ein abnehmerorientierter Mix von verschiedenen didaktischen Methoden und Lernformen verstehen. Durch eine möglichst optimale Kombination und ein ausgewogenes Verhältnis von Präsenzunterricht, Selbststudium und Lern- und Arbeitsphasen in virtuellen Arbeitsräumen soll ein erhöhter und nachhaltiger Lerneffekt erzielt werden. Das belegen Studien aus dem Fremdsprachenunterricht, von denen Okke Schlüter im Klett-Themendienst 24 (April 2004) berichtete: „Die eingesetzten Ressourcen werden, sofern sie optimal verzahnt sind, bei der Mehrzahl der Lernenden bessere Erfolge zeitigen als das klassische Präsenztraining. Damit bietet Blended Learning dem Sprachentraining einen beträchtlichen Mehrwert, erfordert allerdings auch spezielle Materialien, deren Entwicklung sehr aufwändig ist.“ Diese richtige Aussage erklärt die zögerliche Haltung von Kolleginnen und Kollegen, sich der neuen Herausforderung zu stellen und sich auf dieses Abenteurer ohne Unterstützung und Hilfe einzulassen. Dieser kleine Artikel versucht, Vorlagen zu liefern, an die man sich anlehnen kann, wenn man eigene Vorhaben in die Tat umsetzen und dabei auf ein günstiges Verhältnis von Aufwand und Resultat achten möchte.*

“The increasing pace of change in US markets, regulatory environment and technology, together with a new learner profile is affecting what’s required of blended approaches. The traditional approach of discrete, one-size learning events, perhaps sandwiched with e-learning, is being replaced with something radically different. The new world blurs the distinction between learning and communication and delivers mass-volume, business-led community solutions that engage learners in a continual learning process.”

(Alec Keith, *The Future of Blended Learning - Global Mission report* http://www.epic.co.uk/content/resources/email_newsletter/global_mission.htm)

“To my way of thinking, blending is new only to people who were foolish enough to think that delegating the entire training role to the Computer was going to work. I could not imagine unblended learning. My first-grade teacher used a blend of storytelling, song, recitation, reading aloud, flash cards, puppetry, and corporal punishment.”

(Jay Cross (2006). *Informal Learning* in chapter *Unblended* p. 17)

“*Blended Learning* ist ein integriertes Lernkonzept, das die heute verfügbaren Möglichkeiten der Vernetzung über Internet oder Intranet in Verbindung mit klassischen Lernmethoden in einem Lernarrangement optimal nutzt. Es ermöglicht Lernen, Kommunizieren, Informieren und Wissensaustausch losgelöst von Ort und Zeit in Kombination mit Erfahrungsaustausch, Rollenspiel und persönlichen Begegnungen in klassischen Präsenztrainings.”

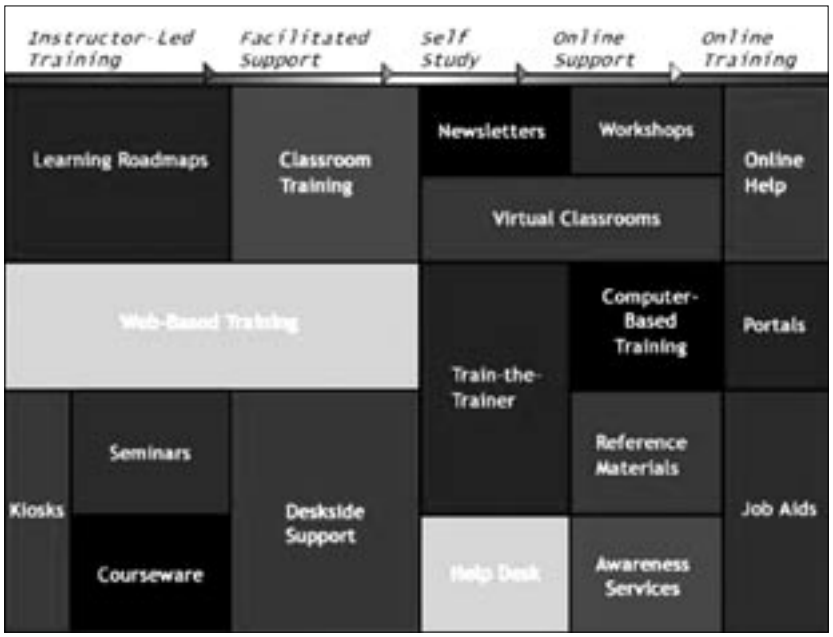
(Werner Sauter, Annette M. Sauter (2002). *Blended Learning*)

## 1 Overview: Blended learning put to the test

The three introductory quotations[1] speak for themselves and show a great variety and diversity of opinions and statements concerning characteristic features of blended learning concepts and their impact on classroom methodology. [2] We should admit that there is a clash between developers of virtual learning environments on the one hand and teachers on the other. Teachers concerned with practical questions are normally quite interested in what is going on, but are also at the same time reluctant to get involved since they do not exactly know which amount of time is necessary to build up persuasive offers on the basis of blended learning and how to use available platforms effectively inside and outside their classrooms. In this short article I would like to examine why and where blended learning is still alive and kicking and can be considered in fact a bridge to the latest learning technologies to foster learning which is truly informal.[3] We all agree upon the fact that in a competitive society it is essential to effectively share knowledge, strategic or learning processes and expertise. Blended learning is an attractive solution to accomplish these goals. ”Its success lies in breaking down the learning process to take into consideration people, time, interaction, challenges specific to an organization or business. It is critical to understand the learners’ needs; how to best leverage their reasoning capabilities, work process, resources and environment.”[4] It all comes down to the most efficient paths to get our message across and to get the learner from point A to B as the following picture shows. Please note that there are several ways to success on the basis of wanted and given sup-

port (see e.g. 'awareness services' and the like). The teachers know their learners' needs best. They are able to decide which option(s) is/are best for their target group.

After choosing an appropriate platform or a suitable virtual learning environment, teachers will be given a helping hand by blended learning pilots, online and offline tutorials and handbooks, and the like. They will not be left in the lurch and should not be afraid of getting lost in the jungle of information and - above all - not be intimidated by what experts have already achieved.[8]




*Endnote* [5]

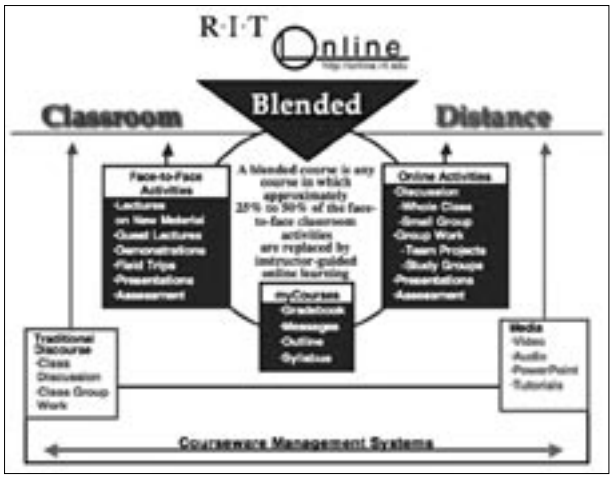
Let us all remember that "blended learning programs can be designed for almost any type of education and training that needs to be created, including deploying new applications, launching new products, skills training, management and leadership training, sales training, process and standards based training, and other types of knowledge sharing programs.

When designed properly, blended learning can bring vitality to learning that one delivery method alone often cannot deliver. Learning can be made more interesting – and thus more effective – through the mixing of delivery modalities, along with the mixing of structured and unstructured activities, the immediate application of knowledge, the immediate application of skills, the use of interaction with subject matter experts, problem solving, collaborative work, and self study."[9] I could not agree more.

Language learning (especially SLA, Second Language Acquisition and ELT, English Language Teaching) has been at the forefront of the development of blended learning solutions since it normally requires a face-to-face teaching and interactive (elec-

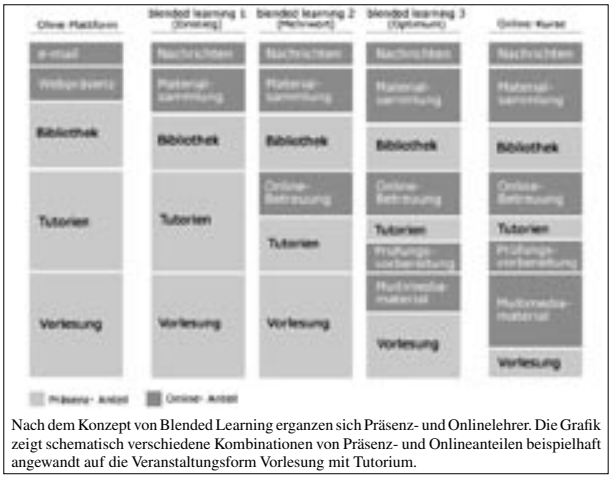
Instructional models of blended learning courses can look like the following two examples (A and B), which illustrate different approaches and procedures.

***A***




*Endnote* [6]

***B Einstieg, Mehrwert oder Optimum - was ist die passende Form für meine Lehrveranstaltung?***




Nach dem Konzept von Blended Learning erganzen sich Präsenz- und Onlinelehrer. Die Grafik zeigt schematisch verschiedene Kombinationen von Präsenz- und Onlineanteilen beispielhaft angewandt auf die Veranstaltungsform Vorlesung mit Tutorium.

*Endnote* [7]

tronic) practice activity.[10] This can be achieved through the adoption of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).[11] This is the reason why some of the following examples are taken from the subject areas SLA and ELT.

**Implementing blended learning is not straightforward. It involves a number of critical decisions and consultation among teachers, students, and the school management.**

## 2 Insight

### 2.1 *lo-net²*

The well known and highly esteemed German e-learning platform *lo-net* was taken from the Internet with May 1, 2007 and was replaced with its successor *lo-net²*.[12] Teachers can use the excellent new platform, which was originally developed on the basis of a cooperation between the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and Deutsche Telekom AG, free of charge if their school or educational institution has registered with lo-net2. Information sheets and leaflets are found on the quoted Internet page (e. g. "First steps using *lo-net²*") and make the use of this platform simple and a pleasure:
The following figures concerning users speak for themselves:

***User statistics with lo-net² as of March 2007***

| | |
|---|---|
| Institutions | 3250 |
| Teachers | 50000 |
| Learners | 300000 |
| Groups | 7650 |
| Classes | 18000 |

Newcomers to the scene are well advised to take this VLE into consideration and to benefit from the experts' offers, since only a short span of time is needed to gain an insight into its structure. Although the layout and presentation of *lo-net²* cannot be changed to suit personal tastes and preferences, it serves educational purposes well in offering different 'meeting rooms': private rooms with restricted access, classrooms with graded access and forums with unlimited access allowing a differentiated approach to learners, their needs and learning materials. As *lo-net²* will be further developed and will offer new courses in different subject areas, users should visit the relevant homepage quite often to be informed about sample courses and to be introduced into this platform worth recommending for different subject areas including (second) language learning courses. The advantage simply lies in the fact that you can easily become a member of the lo-net community and profit from their expertise without having to develop the structure or architecture of your VLE.

### 2.2 *Moodle*

Mentioning *Moodle* in this article could mean "carrying coals to Newcastle" since this course system is used by a wide community of educators worldwide:
**Moodle** is a course management system designed to help educators who want to create quality online courses. The software is used all over the world by universities, schools, companies and independent teachers. Moodle is open source and completely free to use. [13]

Let me draw your attention to a sample of best practice, an English course developed and designed for students of social sciences by my colleague Steffen Skowronek at Potsdam University. This course was developed between 2005 and 2007 as part of the EUROVOLT via VLE program, sponsored by the EU program "Leonardo da Vinci". The "Topic Outline" (Table of Contents) indicates what the learners will be offered when they join the class. The precise table of contents includes subject areas of general or specific interest (Fields of Modern Political Science, What is Sociology?, Conflict Resolution, Non-Governmental Organizations), structural areas for SLA students (Present Tenses, Past Tenses, Adjectives and Adverbs), Forums and Online Consultation (Grammar), Help Desks, questionnaires, feedback forms, reports of project work etc.[14]
The students are traditionally taught in courserooms and given assignments to be fulfilled outside the classroom in pair work or group work using *Moodle*. The learners have got access to different forums, chatrooms and courserooms and work on texts, graphics, sound files etc., benefit from online encyclopedias and dictionaries, i. e. authentic foreign language material relevant to their studies. [15] The participants' reactions to such a blended learning-offer have been extremely positive since they have enjoyed working together and have greatly profited from the continuous support of their teacher(s). Like other fellow students, Potsdam students have also appreciated learning material directly linked to exam success. Learners and

The Moodle Partners are a group of service companies guided by the core developers of Moodle. We provide a range of optional commercial services for Moodle users, including fully-serviced Moodle hosting, remote support contracts, custom code development and consulting. Our customers range from individual educators up to company training departments and universities.

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is our community site (made with Moodle) where you'll find information, free downloads and detailed community discussions about installing, using and extending Moodle.

teachers are constantly looking for breakthrough strategies that will give them a competitive edge carrying out specific fruitful activities to develop basic and advanced language skills. A close relationship has been built among the learners and the teacher(s) who successfully aimed at transforming potential into performance.
In my opinion the combination of approved teaching procedures offline, the use of a highly flexible VLE online and the stimulation of the students' interest to show responsibility in setting and reaching learning targets of their own has been the key to success. Such a course can offer a reliable guideline for all those who need help in developing content for blended learning classes and specific target groups. The course was evaluated on the basis of a set of evaluation sheets. The results will be published shortly under http://www.elias-nc.org.
The keyword 'performance' leads us to samples of assignments allowing the learners to follow their own interests and to nurture autonomy (1) or guided assignments dealing with a specific (topical) event (2) and students' contributions (3) to a discussion concerning killer games and school massacres (Forum 2)

These samples clearly show the value of blended learning using a VLE where students receive valuable ongoing support and service to make their learning successful. They directly link to best-practice methodologies, understand their changed roles und see what partners and solutions providers have contributed. Increasing the students' responsibility concerning their own learning procedure and pace will undoubtedly lead to wanted learner autonomy. Support and help are at hand when needed. This is not always the case with traditional and conservative face-to-face courses where teachers cannot invest the necessary care, interest and time for their mixed ability learners.

Blended learning provides more structured time for student work while still allowing students the opportunity to proceed at their own pace. The teacher is available to monitor progress and provide encouragement and support to



***FORUM 2: International Conflicts***
***by Skowronek Steffen - Wednesday, 27 September 2006, 10:54 AM***

**Group 2**
Step 1: Work in the group which you were assigned to. Find a controversial article in an online newspaper or journal that reports about an international or a regional conflict. Post this article to the forum, cite it adequately or supply a link to the article if it is available online.
Step 2: Briefly present your own opinion (100 – 200 words) concerning possible future developments of this conflict.

**All students**
Step 3: Students respond to the comments from group 2 and start a discussion. Please be sure to read the comments which were previously posted and refer to the opinions which have already been given instead of always posting new ideas.



***Killer games and school massacres***
***by Skowronek Steffen - Tuesday, 3 April 2007, 08:49 PM***

Can killer games be blamed for school massacres? Should they be prohibited?
What is your opinion?
Three topics have been suggested, and it is up to you to which question you reply. Your mails should be 50-100 words long, and you can add attachments or links if you like.

**Further advice**
It is useful not to change the subject line so that we can have replies to earlier mails and not an awful lot of unrelated statements.
Be sure to read and respond to the comments which were already given instead of posting new ideas every time.



***Better upbringing***
***by xxx - Thursday, 14 December 2006, 02:43 PM***

In my opinion the prohibition of "killer games" would not prevent school massacres. I think this suggestion is an example for doing things for the sake of doing things (blinder Aktionismus) without analysing the school problems exactly. The main reason of such terrible disasters is the bad social climate in school classes. Many pupils do not have any social competence. In order to solve this problem the parents have to spend more time for the upbringing of their children.
Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



***Re: Better upbringing***
***by xxx - Sunday, 17 December 2006, 11:23 AM***

I am the same opinion as xxx. The prohibition of so called killer games would not prevent school massacres. In my point of view killer games are not responsible for such massacres. It is mentally deficient to say that games are the reasons for such incidents. I think sometimes the society is responsible for school massacres. If you are not a member of this society, which accepts adaption to her rules for example the right clothing, then you are not accepted. And if you ask me not the social competence is responsible for this. There are problems with excluding of people in every social class.



***Re: Killer games and school massacres***
***by xxx - Sunday, 17 December 2006, 04:24 PM***

Games don't kill people, people kill people. It's absolut ridiculous to blame something like games, music or movies for a social problem like that. So it is hard to say what leads to things like that, but I won't go so far to generalise the problem by saying: "These violent students are mostly outsiders who have not many friends." - makes a bit too easy in my humble opinion. I think it's more a question of duties. Parents should protect their children from violent games, not the state. The state should try to make guns non-accessible to children or teenager, which is indeed business of the parents too.



***Re: Killer games and school massacres***
***by xxx - Sunday, 17 December 2006, 12:44 PM*** [16]

Some computer games are really brutal but I do not believe that these games are the reason for violence and massacres on schools. It is always easy for politicians to blame computer games for those things. It seems they only search for simple reasons but they do not want to see the real problems. These violent students are mostly outsiders who have not many friends. In my opinion they could be better helped with school psychologists then with prohibitions of some computer games. However, psychologists cost money, prohibitions do not.

students who may lag behind. Blended learning courses provide physical resources that are not available in courses that are presented completely online, including language and technology labs. They also provide many benefits not to be found in traditional classrooms. The need for coursebooks is diminished. Material presented is timely and relevant, and student progress is self-paced as I already mentioned before.[17] With this in mind, interested teachers might do well to consider online (foreign) language offers on the Internet and to integrate them into their own language classes in order to take the first necessary steps to get their learners accustomed to course add-ons and enhancements.[18]

Yet implementing blended learning is not straightforward. It involves a number of critical decisions and consultation among teachers, students, and the school management. We must consider pedagogical principles: what are the students' needs? Learning is on the move, consolidation may happen through interactive exercises or storing unknown words in an electronic notebook or using a VLE effectively and the like.

### 2.3 *Claroline* (Classroom Online)

After taking these first steps without getting trapped teachers may feel tempted to use a VLE and look for a free and suitable platform.[19] One of my favourites is *Claroline*, a Belgian VLE released under Open Source license. It has been used in more than 80 countries and has been appreciated by teachers and learners alike. In the context of my brief article *Claroline* is especially worth considering since it offers excellent tutorials and handbooks in many languages how to use the course management web application. As the welcome page promises it really offers an intuitive and clear interface "making the use of the platform particularly easy".

Since the proof of the pudding is in the eating, I would like to invite you to go on a tour around the application, have a closer look at the demos, and select a sample course in the categories SCIENCES, ECONOMICS or HUMANITIES yourselves, as "a picture is worth a thousand words". I am convinced that you will like the programme and that you will undoubtedly develop the expertise for using it effectively for the sake of your learners. It will not take you long to do so.

### 3 Outlook: Blended learning in action

*Blended learning* has become a buzzword in corporate training and above all in adult education. "It sounds so simple: mix e-learning with other types of training delivery. But questions persist. What are the best ways to blend delivery types? When do they blend? What blends work best with what?"[21] Research has uncovered a variety of methodologies. A first common simple approach was to create electronic content and surround it with human, interactive content. Learning together with a teacher or trainer takes place in classroom time, while learning together with all other participants takes place in the virtual classroom.




*Endnote* [20]

With specifically designed modules attendants learn outside the specific class times at their own pace and get the necessary support and coaching if needed via the phone or email. Such a simple and straightforward approach can easily be modified and adapted following the needs and expectations of specific target groups. In companies employees may be provided with tools that facilitate work-flow learning, allowing them to get what they need and get back to work. So multi-modal learning can surround the employees with resources that help them reach the highest level of effectiveness in their jobs. My samples have hopefully shown that blended learning approaches are flexible, using the most impelling training delivery option (or combinations of options) for each stage of learning. "It is more effective than any single form of learning at creating the results you want: sustained behavioral change that increases the return on your training investment."[22]

On 22 March 2006 the British Council organized a seminar on blended learning in English Language Teaching in Brussels. Studies have shown that most language learning happens outside the classroom, in a blend of various learning environments.[23] If this is true we all must be kept informed about the discussion and debates on blended learning and we all should definitely begin using cogent teaching ideas and methods in our lessons. The sooner the better.

## Endnotes

[1] Many other conclusive definitions may easily be found using different search engines on the Internet such as: "Blended Learning is learning that is facilitated by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning, and founded on transparent communication amongst all parties involved with a course." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blended_learning

[2] In diesem Zusammenhang sei empfehlend auf eine Studie aus dem Sommersemester 2002 von Christian Scholz (Fachhochschule Wedel), *Blended Learning* verwiesen, die als pdf-Datei im Internet zur Verfügung steht.

[3] This is the key idea of Clive Shepherd's article "Blended learning is the bridge" to be found under http://www.learningtechnologies.co.uk/magazine/article_full.cfm?articleid=223&issueid=24&section=1, which is really worth reading.

[4] http://www.sselearn.com/blendedLearning.aspx

[5] The picture displays one possible "solution of a diverse mix of content areas, as unique as each client's requirements, from soft skills to support of new technology initiatives." http://www.sselearn.com/blendedLearning.aspx

[6] http://distancelearning.rit.edu/Blended/

[7] The picture shows possible combinations of traditional courses and online teaching related to lectures given at FU Berlin. The Free University of Berlin uses the commercial VLE *Blackboard* with 1,200 classes for about 16,000 students.

[8] I would like to suggest to subscribe to the newsletter of *Blended Learning Network*, the association of European experts in this area, to be informed regularly.

[9] Amy Finn and Mark Bucceri, „A Case Study Approach to Blended Learning", pdf-file to be found under http://www.conferzone.com/resource/wp/CaseStudy_BlendedLearning.pdf

[10] To my mind it is not necessary to deal with the different objectives of the two mentioned methologies here. Their main interest lies in the enhancement of learning results for the sake of the second language learner. That is the main reason for developing new strategies and implementing innovative technologies.

[11] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blended_learning in "A Model used by Language Schools"

[12] See information under http://www.lo-net2.de

[13] See http://www.moodle.com or http://www.moodle.de

[14] The moodle platformcan be accessed in parts at http://moodle.spz.uni-potsdam.de/moodle/course/category.php?id=3 or http://moodle.spz.uni-potsdam.de/moodle/course/view.php?id=55

[15] This statement is shared by other surveys. See e. g. Doughlas MacKevett, "Business Students learning English: VLEs, learner autonomy and advanced-level learning", *Babylonia 3/05*, p.39. The electronic journal can be found under http://www.babylonia.ch. The quoted article is linked to the VLEs BSCW and ILIAS which has been the reason for me to look for samples based on and related to different platforms.

[16] To be found in forum 6 of the course. I have not changed or corrected the students' authentic texts, but I have deleted the writers' names for reasons of discretion.

[17] See commercial blended learning courses, e. g. "You want to learn German." http://www.goethe.de/ins/in/mum/lrn/deu/blr/enindex.htm and "Blended learning: With your teacher + online Spanish" http://www.centrohumboldt.com/eng/Spanish-online

[18] These online courses are either offered for free or for a small licence fee.

[19] Recommendations can quickly be found, e. g. "Evaluation von Lernplattformen: Verfahren, Ergebnisse und Empfehlungen (Version 1.3)", http://www.campussource.de/opensource/docs/evaluation_lernplattf_at.pdf and Sandy Britain and Oleg Liber (University of Wales – Bangor), „A Framework for Pedagogical Evaluation of Virtual Learning Environments", http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001237.htm

[20] http://www.claroline.net/about-claroline.html

[21] Josh Bersin, „What works in blended learning" under http://www.learningcircuits.org/2003/jul2003/bersin.htm Help is available to find satisfying answers to the mentioned questions: see e. g. Allison Rossett, Felicia Douglis, and Rebecca V. Frazee, "Strategies for Building Blended Learning", http://www.learningcircuits.org/2003/jul2003/rossett.htm

[22] Caroline Gray, „Blended Learning: Why Everything Old is New again – but better", http://www.learningcircuits.org/2006/March/gray.htm

[23] http://www.britishcouncil.org/brussels-learning-blended-learning.htm. The links given here (PowerPoint presentations, articles, web addresses …) are worth visiting.


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