

Transcription of Interview

Dr. Rosemary Lehman of Instructional Communications Systems, University of Wisconsin-Extension interviews session panelists from the New Directions Forum.

These interviews were held at the 19th Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning on August 15, 2003 and were part of the New Directions Forum: Blending Asynchronous and Synchronous Formats.

Rosemary Lehman: At the 19th Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning, in Madison, Wisconsin, I had the privilege of moderating a New Directions Forum on “New Models of Learning: Blending Asynchronous and Synchronous Technologies.” The session panelists were:

Wayne Pferdehirt – Director of University of Wisconsin-Madison Master of Engineering in Professional Practice, Department of Engineering Professional Development

Dr. Rick Lillie – Instructor at California State University, San Bernardino and UCLA Extension Programs

Ellen Goldstein – Instructional Designer at GE Medical Systems’ Performance Solutions

Jennifer Hofman – Training consultant and President of InSync Training Synergy and

Dr. Chuck Kater – Associate Dean of Professional Studies and Southwestern College Online

These panelists offered presentations, Q & A, and strategies for effective teaching and learning using technology. They also agreed to short interviews after the presentations and I’d like to share their thoughts with you.

I want to thank all of you for your presentations today, for the dialogue, and for the Q & A and your valuable ideas. Since the focus today was on blending technologies for teaching and learning, I’d like to begin by asking each one of you your definition of “blending.” I’m anxious to hear your perspectives on the term.

Wayne: It’s looking at different instructional technologies that are not traditionally paired and integrated and using them in creative ways. It’s always getting back to what are we trying to achieve in this learning situation and how can I and how can our team creatively use different technologies to accomplish that end? So sometimes it’s using say asynchronous and synchronous formats. I think that’s one of the key blendings that happens. It can also be using traditional say web-based course formats with things like videoconferencing, audioconferencing, webconferencing. So to me it’s, I guess it’s an

approach to learning design, to instructional design, of saying what are the various technologies we have and how can we get outside of our traditional boxes to combine them for collective maximum impact?

Rick: Blending is really the willingness to use more than one way or more than one method or more than one technique to meet a learning objective or a delivery objective or however we want to do something. Nobody uses the term in exactly the same way. You know, that's why when you say you know what's your definition of blending, just because right now it's in a state of flux, nobody quite knows. And as Chuck and I talked earlier, I used the phrase "nobody has the keys to heaven" when it comes to all this.

Ellen: Blended technologies, it's kind of a new, it's a new term, It really means incorporating all the things that we used to do and trying to figure out how to do them better through technology. I think the whole key to blended technologies or using a blended solution is that you choose the right solution for the problem that you're faced with when it comes to training.

Jennifer: Blending learning technologies, is something I think we've all been doing for a long time, we just didn't give it the name of blending. Using a textbook to support a live classroom is a form of blended technology that we're very used to. It's picking different types of delivery methods from textbooks to satellite, very low-tech to very high-tech and combining them in such a way where the students can most effectively learn.

Chuck: I know that it's a popular buzz word in this the year 2003. We've probably been blending things for a long time, but we have not had access to the wide range of technology options that we have today for online learners to blend things. So when I hear the word blending, specifically in the online learning context, I'm thinking of the opportunity to use more than one type of online learning technology to impact the student or learner in a given course or program.

Rosemary: Thank you for giving us an understanding of the term blending. Now I'd like to know how each of you actually use blending in your work and – if you can, give us a few examples?

Ellen: Our training programs, some of them are to solve problems, to fill a performance gap, some of them are to just make short changes, some are to introduce new products. Based on our scoping, our analysis of the problem of the training that needs to happen we determine at that time what objective is taught and how best to teach it. If a learning objective is really important, for instance, something that has to do with safety where perhaps a person fixing one of our medical imaging, equipment pieces of our imaging equipment doesn't make the adjustment to the gantry or another part of the equipment absolutely right, it might result in the patient being injured or worse, then it's a higher level objective. You may need to be sure that that person can do it absolutely 100% effectively – and you may need to do that in person. If on the other hand it's knowing when to use protective equipment, if we're all talking about safety, that might be done either asynchronously or during a synchronous session.

Chuck: Well, we've had asynchronous technologies for quite some time and they're very good at allowing students and learners to interact with the instructor and other students, vis a vis writing papers, responding to questions, posting thoughts, conducting threaded discussions, those types of activities. But with the advent of synchronous technologies, now people can interact in real time and in the business world that's how people do interact - they interact in real time. A few years ago I ran a program for the Walden Institute, and it was designed to help instructors become effective facilitators of synchronous technologies. Well, because the instructors who were signing up for the course didn't know very much about synchronous technologies, we used an asynchronous tool and posted information, we had questions for them, we had activities that they could do individually to learn the basics. But then to help them become proficient in the virtual classroom, which is a word I sometimes substitute for synchronous technologies, we actually had exercises that everyone participated in, in real time. So we basically put them through the paces, or you might say, put them in the co-pilot's seat and exposed them to situations that they would encounter in the virtual classroom in order to build their skills.

Jennifer: Well what I do is take a look at the program as a whole and not try to say, "Can I teach this entire program one way or another way?" I take it in a whole and I break it down into its individual chunks or learning objectives and I might even go down to the task level. So what's the best way to teach this task or meet this objective? I break it down into chunks and I figure out, "How do I need to test that particular objective?" So it really comes down to, "How can I test it?"

Rick: I blend it by using the technology that's appropriate at the moment for the student's need. And it goes back to something that I described this morning where I look through the eyes of the student so that I can see the screen, see the experience the way that the student's seeing it. I make myself available in both synchronous and asynchronous approaches or methods at the same time, so that the student can use whichever one is most convenient. It's an investment on my part, the university doesn't pay for my high-speed connection. But for me, for example, to be available and to be willing to be available, so that students using like MSN Messenger can reach me throughout the day, or students using, you know, Groove can reach me throughout the day, or students use net to phone or they use the telephone, each one of these represents a different method and a different technology that can be used in whichever way is most convenient for them. The key to it is that whichever method they use, and I make them all available, is that I'm willing to be there to respond to the request when it happens, and it's the timeliness of the response.

Wayne: The way that we use blending in the Engineering Degree Programs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison are to—we have all of our courses use a web-based asynchronous tool—currently that's Web CT soon to become transitioned to Desire2Learn. We supplement that within each of our courses with the weekly webconferences. Those sessions are held at times convenient to the students. So as part of each week's learning there's an asynchronous learning that's happening at the web site,

there's a synchronous webconference. That is supplemented then with other materials that are distributed through CDs that students will listen to. And the webconferencing is also used as a tool for students to get together to work on projects together. So it's not just what the whole class is doing, but we're making these tools available to the students to use to get together in subgroups, to work on projects together, since so much of the learning is cooperative learning and doing projects together. Then the other part of that isn't a technical solution, but is another format that's combined, is our annual residency where students get together face-to-face. So we find that one week face-to-face, the web-based courses, and the webconferencing all supplement each other in terms of the nature of the interaction.

Rosemary: So, once you've made your decisions, designed your program or course, and implemented it, how do you know that it's been successful – how do you measure and evaluate it?

Jennifer: The programs that I've worked on that have always turned out to be the best programs are the programs where we have a chance to go back and evaluate after the program is over. And I don't mean immediately at the end of the program, but several weeks, several months, going back and either doing interviews or some type of objective testing, going back and saying are actually using what it is you've learned? Skills transfer and knowledge transfer should be evaluated I think with the same techniques you would use in a face-to-face environment. Unfortunately the corporate environment from which I come, we don't do enough of that.

Ellen: One of the things you do early on is design your evaluation plan, and you don't only plan to evaluate the program itself and then there are all the different levels you can evaluate that at, but you also evaluate the tools that you use, the instructor's effectiveness, the technologies that might be used and we have what we call our evaluation score card and our students fill that out. But that's how we know whether the blending, or the solution that we've chosen is the correct one.

Chuck: If it's synchronous type of an activity, the evaluation is almost a self-evaluation. As soon as people have done an activity, they will tell you, "Oh, I think I could have done that better," so, it's almost looking in a mirror when you're doing a synchronous activity for someone who's learning how to do something. In the asynchronous world, you can, of course you can grade things, you can have other people comment, that's the world where you can do things that are more factually based, where answers might be "yes" or "no". Or, you can of course generate a grading rubric and try to define ahead of time for people what's going to be evaluated and what weights different evaluations are going to carry.

Wayne: Our evaluation program has several key components. First of all, each of the courses has at least an end of the course evaluation. Most of them also include mid-course evaluations, so we have online evaluations that the students do anonymously and they give very good feedback to the instructor, the instructional designer, and the MES Program Director. And then at the end of each course the three of us, the instructor, the

instructional designer and I will sit down and review what the students have told us and we identify changes we want to make for the next cycle. In addition to that, when students graduate they complete an overall program evaluation, where they give us feedback on the overall program design – what they would change if they could about the curriculum or any other aspects of the program. So we have that feedback. And then, the third part is that nine to 12 months after the students graduate, we do an evaluation, what we call a program impact evaluation, where they tell us what difference the program has made in their career and their on-the-job performance. They also ask peers at work to complete an evaluation that similarly reflects on their changes in performance over the last two years at work. And there's an evaluation that family members fill out to tell us a little bit about what's happened to this person personally in terms of their development. So, it's all three of those that give us feedback as to how we can improve the program.

Rick: Academia is, in my opinion is hung up on testing, and giving a survey where somebody clicks off “yes” or “no”. I do that because there's required formal documentation. But I think the informal way of doing it is simply to ask, and I ask often, so that the student always has the opportunity to tell me if something's working. When I'm looking for attitudes I'll use a survey, and I've got, you know, online surveys, programs that I can use that a student can fill out very quickly. They'll finish an exercise, there'll be a hyperlink – click, bing, bing, bing, - and it's always anonymous so that they can always feel that they can give me whatever comment they want. I ask students to talk to me, so we'll do this either through video-chat or finger-chat or telephone, whatever. But I ask them often, you know, tell me what you're thinking. What do you like, what don't you like? Give me your suggestions. So I think it's that open solicitation. The key to it is that while some things are quantitative, a lot of what I'm doing right now is qualitative because I simply want to know what their reaction is. And I think they find out pretty quickly that whatever their reaction is or whatever their feedback is, I respond to it and then I'll take the time to show them how I've changed something in response to their comment. The more that I do that, the more they believe that I do care about what they're saying, and as soon as they get that feedback, they start to give me even more.

Rosemary: As we wrap up – do you have a final comment on blending technologies?

Ellen: Yes. Design. Design is everything. It doesn't matter what technology you use, it doesn't matter what format, what platform, what bandwidth, what anything. You have to know that you're doing the right thing for the right reasons.

Rick: One of the areas where I learn the most about how to do it, as I used the little phrase before, “nobody holds the keys to heaven.” I'll spend the day there wandering among the vendors and I learn a great deal by talking with them – they have to do more than selling, we've got to get past that point - I learn a great deal by watching what other people are doing and then asking myself, okay, am I ahead of them, am I with them, am I behind them? You know, what do I have to do to improve what I'm doing? Is there a better way to do this, always keeping in mind that the cost of what we're doing can be very, very expensive. And while I think that using the telephone conference and all of that is exceptional, not everybody can afford that.

Jennifer: The thing that people need to remember about blended technologies is that that's the way you're going to make online learning work. It doesn't need to be complex, it doesn't need to be expensive, but doing an asynchronous self-paced tutorial in and of itself without any outside input, a lot of people won't be successful because they won't finish it or won't understand something. Having a face-to-face one hour interaction with nothing else surrounding it might not be enough time for people to process and practice. You really need to combine the things and combine follow-up techniques. Turn learning into a process and not an individual event. As we train ourselves to teach and learn that way, I think our programs will become a lot more successful.

Wayne: I think the only additional comment I'd make is that, it's really important to as I say, just think creatively. I think a lot of times we use a certain set of technologies because that's what we've been handed. And, just like any technology, I think we have to not let the technologist dictate how the learning happens, but we need to know enough about what the options are out there and how they can be used individually and collectively for maximum impact. And so I think that's what we're really always challenged with, in the program, is staying on top of what the options are and how they can be creatively combined so that the technology is not driving the design.

Chuck: I think colleges and universities are going to face a dramatic challenge, and I think the challenge is this – because they have had access to asynchronous technologies for quite some time, I think many colleges define online learning as an asynchronous technology. And I think the challenge they're going to face is that as other technologies emerge, now synchronous technology really has emerged as a possibility, colleges and universities are going to have to reevaluate how they define online learning and they're going to have to take into consideration are they going to use a mix of technologies because they want to improve the quality of the education they're offering, or do they want to just stay with a single technology for ease of administration and cost? And I think that's going to be a big decision for colleges and universities to make in the next three or four years.

Rosemary: Thank you all.....