Blending was not an option: Variation theory and reluctant international distance learners

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Abstract
This article reflects on experiences gained in designing what was intended to be a blended course. In the event, a blended option was not possible and the article explores how variation theory was then used to transition international learners, sceptical about distance learning, from in-person to distance learning modalities. The role of variation, in approaching both the content and process of the learning experience, was presented during the two in-person lectures at the outset of the course. While the results are preliminary and tentative, the use of variation seems to have positively impacted learner understanding of subject matter and the online learning experience.

Keywords: blended learning, cultural consideration, distance learning, learner scepticism, novice learners, variation theory

INTRODUCTION
Although not inevitable, errors can sometimes result in positive outcomes. That certainly was the author’s experience when asked by a college in the United States (US) to design a blended course in Cross-cultural Management for its international programme in the Czech Republic. The college administration was quite certain: the course would definitely be a ‘blended experience’, with both in-person (face-to-face) teaching and a distant component conducted online.

The invitation resulted in an assessment of targeted learners; the development of a design strategy addressing the anticipated educational challenges and opportunities; and a review of the blended course literature. Things were progressing well until it was realised that there had been an administrative oversight. While there is no magic proportion, the general agreement is that blended courses have at least 21 per cent of their material delivered in-person (Allen and Seaman 2010, 4; Allen, Seaman and Garrett 2007, 5). The college had allocated too little in-person teaching time, and it became clear that the intended course would essentially be an online learning experience with a couple of face-to-face lectures at the beginning. The strategies and instructional approaches relevant to blended learning could therefore not be employed convincingly.
At that point, the pressing question was: Could the learning experience be redesigned to at least include a flavour of blended learning? More pragmatically, the issue was how to structure the few face-to-face sessions to transition a cohort of sceptical students (who in their discussions with the author had expressed concerns about distance learning and a distinct preference for face-to-face instruction) to become enthusiastic online learners? Before considering the strategy that was eventually employed, it is necessary to review the potential of blended courses generally and to explain the particular educational aspects for this particular cohort of novice distance learners.

**BLENDING LEARNING**

The blended course – sometimes also referred to as a hybrid course – provides, conceptually at least, the opportunity to merge the strengths of in-person instruction with those of distance learning. By doing so, blended courses may offer a richer experience for instructor and learner (Garrison and Kanuka 2004, 96). Blended learning has recently enjoyed a significant degree of popularity in the US; although, according to recent statistics, that popularity may now have peaked (Allen, Seaman and Garrett 2007, 7–11; Parsad and Lewis 2008, 5–11).

Blended learning has been shown to provide greater social and cognitive connection between course participants, to lower transactional distance, to enhance learner motivation, to deepen a sense of community, and to offer an environment for effective communities of inquiry (Garnham and Kaleta 2002; Rovai and Jordan 2004, 9–11). Research also suggests that mixing elements of in-person instruction with distance learning can contribute to greater learner satisfaction (Kim, Bonk and Teng 2009, 304), with some studies reporting satisfaction rates higher than for comparable online offerings (Lee and Im 2006, 282; Lim, Morris and Krupritz 2007, 31–34). Empirical studies further suggest that blended options can produce learning outcomes comparable with in-person presentations (Delialioglu and Yildirim 2008, 479; Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart and Wisher 2006, 627) and that they are often associated with higher student retention rates (Dziuban, Hartman, Juge, Moskal and Sorg 2006).

The reason for these positive results in blended courses is generally ascribed to the synergistic mix of in-person and distance modalities; however, the nature of this synergism is uncertain. The process and dynamics of in-person and distance teaching/learning are significantly different, and it remains unclear how their distinctiveness could be mixed, merged, or blended. Oliver and Trigwell (2005, 24), in an insightful and critical appraisal of blended learning, question whether blending is the central issue. They suggest that the blended course might be more appropriately reconceptualised (‘redeemed’) in terms of contrast and variation, rather than of amalgamation – a point to which the author shall return later.
EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

The Cross-cultural Management course was designed within a transnational educational programme. The programme, offered by an accredited college in the US, attracts an international student body from the Czech Republic, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Students study for four years in the international programme located in Prague, complete their undergraduate studies, and graduate with a baccalaureate degree from the US college. The targeted students (n = 27) for this new course were enrolled in the business administration department and represented an internationally diverse group: Russians (9), Czechs (4), Slovaks (5), Vietnamese (2), and individual students from Albania, China, Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine. Most of the students were female (18), and all were in the 21–22 years age-group. The language of instruction, as with all course offerings, was English.

Students in the targeted group had no prior exposure to distance learning. Instruction in the international programme is delivered via traditional classroom lectures, taught by the faculty of State University of New York (SUNY) Empire State College’s local educational partner and by the college’s home faculty on their semi-annual visits. The following issues seemed relevant in designing this blended – well almost blended – course.

- **Learner wariness about distance learning:** The author’s extensive experience with Central and Eastern European students suggested that they generally hold negative views regarding the effectiveness of distance learning. This was confirmed for this specific cohort of students through pre-course discussions and structured interviews. Although adept with social media, interested in educational innovation, and enrolled in a progressive US college, students in the cohort held traditional views on the superiority of in-person instruction and were, at best, wary of the concept of distance learning. Many students, in discussion, claimed that the lecture format was ‘proper’ for ‘serious’ institutions of higher learning. None of these students had had prior distance learning exposure or experience.

- **Consideration of the learner’s perspective:** Oliver and Trigwell (2005, 18–21) observe that blending modalities is often seen exclusively in terms of shifting teaching style. They suggest a broader consideration: shifting the focus from instructor to learner; moving the emphasis from content to process; and realigning the centrality from delivery systems to pedagogical strategies. It was considered important to reflect these shifts and emphases in the new course. Similarly, Rogers, Graham and Mayes (2007, 214) have argued that distance learning environments should be designed to reflect the cultural difference of the learners involved. With a Cross-cultural Management course, in particular, it was considered imperative to make the course culturally sensitive and to allow learners to find an ‘experiential resonance’ between the cultural inclusiveness of their personal learning experience and the explicitly culturally-focused subject matter that they would encounter (Starr-Glass 2011, 87–88).
• **Rethinking design and purpose:** Garrison and Kanuka (2004, 99) note that designing learning environments with blended modalities is inherently ‘about rethinking and redesigning the teaching and learning relationship’. The design process is perhaps best understood as an invitation to reconsider the strengths of each modality and to rethink the total educational purpose of the course: stimulating new possibilities, rather than replicating past designs. It was decided that the new Cross-cultural Management course would reconsider the strengths and weakness of both in-person and online learning and would clearly communicate a unified purpose to those who would use it. The decision was to include the learners in the instructor’s design and instructional decision-making instructor, thereby adding to transparency to the process and empowering learners in the environment in which they were being asked to learn.

• **Flexibility and responsibility through self-direction:** George-Walker and Keeffe (2010, 12), considering blended courses, emphasise that the instructor should not prescribe the nature of the blend but try ‘to develop courses with multiple means of representation, expression and engagement and to scaffold and support students in the creation of their own individualised blend’. This seemed a significant point in designing the new course, and it was decided that it should provide participants with recognisable and multifaceted options in order to empower and engage them. It would have a flexible design, supporting learners in transitioning from familiar in-person models of instruction to distance learning. Learners, informed about the differences between in-person and distance learning, would be encouraged to assume responsibility for their distance learning and find personal directions for accomplishing their learning goals.

**PROVISION FOR VARIATION**

The design context was appreciated and the value of blended models considered, even although it then transpired that the new course would not be blended in any conventional manner. At that point the significance of Oliver and Trigwell’s (2005, 24) work became particularly germane. They suggest that an important feature of blended courses might not be that in-person and distance learning are ‘mixed or blended’, but that their differences are juxtaposed. Increased learner satisfaction associated with blended courses, they argue, might be explained in terms of an exposure to difference: a case of variation theory. A subsequent review of variation theory suggested that this pedagogical approach might offer an effective scaffold for designing the new Cross-cultural Management course.

Variation theory emerges from phenomenological education. Phenomenology relates to a comprehensive exploration of the lived-in world, in which meaning is constructed about phenomena encountered (Linder and Marshall 2003, 271–273). According to Trigwell, Prosser and Ginns (2005, 350), a phenomenological approach to education can ‘raise teachers’ awareness of their thinking and practice and on how
variation in this practice might be related to their students’ approaches to learning’. In trying to make sense of what is encountered, it is often helpful to review different perspectives and contrast alternative experiences of the same phenomenon. As Pang and Marton (2005, 163) have noted: ‘learning means being able to discern certain critical aspects of the phenomenon that one previously did not focus on or which one took for granted, and simultaneously bringing them into one’s focal awareness’.

Learning, it is argued, is more likely to occur when different perspectives and alternative representations of the topic are provided. For the instructor, this suggests creating learning environments where learners are presented with sufficient variation of a topic to stimulate reconsideration and to encourage ‘alternative ways of understanding’ (Marton, Asplund-Carlson, and Halász 1992, 10). Instructional strategies based on variation theory, providing alternatives perspectives and encouraging different considerations, have been used extensively in higher education, for example, in teaching computer programming (Thuné and Eckerdal 2009) in economics and management (Assan 2011; Pang and Martin 2005), and in physics (Fraser and Linder 2009).

The decision was made to incorporate variation in the new Cross-cultural Management course at two distinct levels. At a content level, the students would be encouraged to explore the impact of different national cultures – assumptions, values, traditions, stereotypes, rituals, and sagas – on workplace situations. They would be asked to review contemporary research findings in management, human resource management, communication, and decision-making conducted across cultural divides. These would include case studies contrasting different national cultural experiences in Europe and Asia. The content focus would not be on ‘the ways in which Polish managers go about managing’, say, but on a deeper appreciation of where difference resides, how it is expressed, and how it might be productively negotiated in a multicultural organisational context. Content would not accentuate exotic difference: the ‘sari, samosas, and steel band’ focus, as Pasternak (1998, 260) has termed it. It would avoid the ‘quick-and-dirty’ treatment of cross-cultural work that emphasises simplicity, predictability, and superficial generalities for sense-making in a confusing, culturally-diverse world (Osland and Bird 2000, 67).

At a second level, variation would be explicitly introduced in terms of process. The students would be invited to appreciate that they were making an excursion into national cultural difference in the workplace, and also an incursion into the new cultural territory of distance learning. Rather than have distance learning imposed, the students would be asked to consider in-person and distance learning as separate cultural realms, with different assumptions, values, and communication styles. They would be asked to explore new cultural dimension, comparing and contrasting distance learning with prior in-person learning. It was hoped that the students, sensitised to cultural issues and difference in content and process, would find that the new course presented a complex but approachable experience that would have a discernible ‘experiential resonance’ between what was being studied and how the study was being conducted (Starr-Glass 2011, 89–90). The learning experience
itself would be explicitly presented to the students as an engagement with cultural difference.

During the two in-person lectures at the beginning of the course, the students were provided with a map of content and a survey of the ways in which national cultural difference in organisations is recognised and appreciated. They also discussed the transition of the course to distance learning and, in doing so, examined learner concerns and scepticism. The students were prompted to view the distance learning phase of the course as a new cultural experience. They were asked to compare and contrast the way in which they learnt: how they approached the task of learning; what input was required from the instructor; and what questions they would have raised in in-person sessions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
At the end of a 14-week semester, an attempt was made to see whether this presentation of variation in learning had produced any effect on the participants. This investigation was preliminary and tentative, and it was hoped that results obtained could be used to inform future presentations of the newly designed Cross-cultural Management course.

Research approach
The research approach was explorative, seeking to capture students’ reactions after they had completed the newly designed course. It is appreciated that results refer to a specific course, and a specific cohort of students. As such, generalisations to other contexts and populations are not warranted. The research approach is in line with the literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), which encourages educators to obtain evidence-based outcomes regarding the learning environments that they create and to share those results with the wider community of practitioners.

Research setting
The setting was restricted to the cohort of students who had successfully completed the Cross-cultural Management course.

Researcher role
This research was undertaken to provide the instructor with a better understanding of the attitudes and experiences of the students who completed his course. As a practitioner, the instructor/researcher wished to use feedback to improve the learning experiences of those who would take future offerings of the course. Potential conflicts of being both instructor and researcher were mitigated by conducting the survey after final grades had been submitted. Survey responses, or lack of response, did not impact the final grade in the course.
Research procedure
At the conclusion of the course, a survey (Appendix A) was emailed to the 23 students who had successfully completed it. They were asked to consider the survey and, should they wish, to complete it and return it to the researcher. Completion was voluntary.

Ethical considerations
The respondents were informed that the survey was anonymous and no attempt would be made to identify them. Potential respondents were also informed that views expressed would not impact their course grades. Raw data were retained in secured conditions and were inaccessible to others; data were only shared in an aggregated form, and did not identify individuals, in order to preserve anonymity.

Sampling and inclusion criteria
Sampling was opportunistic and restricted to those who successfully completed the course. As such, the sample was not random and did not capture a wider distribution of views or opinions within the student body. The initial registration was 27, and 23 students successfully completed the course. Four students dropped out (all Russians: three females and one male), having not submitted the required assignments. These students were not surveyed. Although formal exit-interviews were not conducted, informal discussions with these students indicated that they had dropped the course due to work-load issues related to their overall study programmes. Three of these students subsequently re-enrolled in the current presentation of the course, which is also being taught via distance learning.

Data gathering, analyses, and reporting
The research instrument required responses to be indicated on a Likert scale, consisting of five levels (1= strongly agree). Surveys were analysed and Likert scores aggregated. Subsequent analysis and reporting recognises the ordinal nature of the data collected and does not assume an equal interval value between Likert scores. Accordingly, median and modal scores are used.

Strategies to ensure quality of data
The survey was reviewed by two colleagues for face validity regarding content and construct. Because of the low return rate, no formal statistics on validity or reliability (e.g. Cronbach’s alpha) were calculated. The survey is provisionally considered an appropriate instrument for collecting the desired data.

RESULTS
Survey completion was low: only seven (30%) were returned. Low survey completion can be associated with many factors, including participant self-selection. Those with
strong, but not necessarily representative opinions, tend to respond. Further, within the cultural norms of course participants, those with negative opinions might not have submitted them, despite anonymity, for fear of giving ‘offence’. Given these limitations, the results should be interpreted as tentative and may possibly be skewed in a positive direction.

The respondents agreed that the distance learning course was useful (Q 2: mode 2, median 2 – where 1 = ‘strongly agree’); however, they agreed that they would probably have learnt more effectively had the course been delivered in-person (Q 3: mode 2, median 2). Interestingly, they were neutral about changing the course from an online to an in-person modality (Q 1: mode 3, median 3). Most agreed that the distance learning mode was challenging (Q 4: mode 2, median 2); although, they also agreed that they had learnt a great amount about cross-cultural management issues through the course (Q 5: mode 2, median 2).

While all strongly agreed that they had to make an extra effort to learn online (Q 10: mode 1, median 1), most were neutral in seeing parallels between difference in culture and difference in learning modalities (Q 11–13: mode 3, median 3). There was a recognition that cultural content was strong and helpful (Q 6–7: mode 2, median 2), but there was no distinct reference to different pedagogical cultures. Generally, the respondents agreed that they would consider taking a similar online course in the future (Q 14: mode 2, median 2) and that they would recommend it to other students (Q 15: mode 2, median 2). They were neutral, however, about keeping the course a distance learning one (Q 16: mode 3, median 3).

The results suggest that there was a positive regard for the content of the course. At best, there was ambiguity regarding the new experience of distance learning and a willingness to participate in future online presentations. However, on the whole, the results indicate that respondent sentiment had moved significantly from the negativity that was expressed before the course began.

**DISCUSSION**

This article is best regarded as a research note on an on-going project. The explicit introduction of variation, in subject matter and in learning modality, seems to have had positive results for the students. From scepticism and deep reservation about distance learning (as evidenced in pre-course discussions and interviews with the author), the students completed the course expressing positive attitudes. This was their only online course and, while preferring traditional in-person presentations, the students indicated satisfaction and perceived quality learning outcomes. While there seems to have been an accommodation for distance learning in this student cohort, it is unclear whether they actively used variation theory to explore the specific cross-cultural content of the course and also in-person and distance teaching/learning modalities.

Further research is required to explore how learners construct knowledge in in-person and distance learning situations. The internal dynamics of each modality is
different, and it is anticipated that different learning styles are employed. Further research is also required to understand how learners recognise the need to switch learning styles and how the instructor might trigger and support these switches more effectively. In future work, journal keeping and on-going communication about learning approaches might be more appropriate. A methodological move towards longitudinal monitoring, rather than a cross-sectional survey at the end of the course, would be appropriate for exploring causal relationship and process development.

The popularity of blended options may have peaked in the US (Allen, Seaman and Garrett 2007, 3), perhaps reflecting either student disenchantment or a shift in administration preference. The blended option can allow the best of in-person and distance learning to be employed; however, it is unclear whether positive learner outcomes depend on the fusion or contrast of these elements. Juxtaposition of in-person and distance learning produces fertile ground for investigating how learners change their learning decisions and articulate their learning priorities. The blending of elements provides research opportunities for considering the consequences of distancing the learner from his/her instructor and peers; learning about learner strategies to reduce transactional distance; and exploring ways in which learners assume autonomy in their learning experiences (Moore 1993). Learner autonomy, in which the learner takes control and ownership of the learning process, was invoked as a basic distance-reducing strategy by Moore; whereas, Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998, 56–57) understood autonomous learning as a defining aspect of the adult learner. It would be interesting to consider, and perhaps reconcile, these different understanding and expressions of autonomy.

At the centre of the design perspective, and research consideration, was an understanding that learners can benefit from being included in the dialogue about the characteristics of distance learning compared with in-person instruction/learning. It is, after all, the learner who will have to navigate what might prove to be uncharted waters and to encounter difference that might be unsettling. Novice online learners should not feel that distance learning is something alien, unknown, or imposed. Being better informed, anticipating variation, and challenged with approaching difference in a constructive manner – in a manner that elicits consideration and reflection – learners can perhaps experience learning success and learning satisfaction as they move to distance learning modalities.

In the design of the Cross-cultural Management course under discussion, the centrality of the learner was appreciated and respected. While shifts in teaching perspectives are important, it is perhaps more important to recognise the shift that the learner has to adopt in moving from in-person to distance learning. With the growing use of open distance learning (ODL) and massive open online courses (MOOCs), there often seems to be a tacit assumption that the learning shift from in-person to online modalities is unproblematic, not unduly impacted by learner culture, and does not exclude the novice distance learner. The current study suggests that all of these issues are related to successful use of online learning and that more research is required to consider their effect in both ODL generally, and MOOCs
specifically (Kop, Fournier and Mak 2012, 89). In particular, more understanding is required of the cultural and experiential differences within learner populations that lead to self-inclusion in ODL and MOOCs, and the perceived barriers that restrict participation and reduce diversity and educational opportunity. Similarly, individual learner personality and sense of self-determination contribute to distance learning and MOOC inclusion and success (Tschofen and Mackness 2012, 137–139). This is critical, since the defining feature of ODL and MOOCs is their ‘openness’ and the relevant questions are: Open to whom and for whom? Openness might be understood by experienced distance learners in ways quite different from, and alien to, novice learners.

Variation theory was used in this course to alert students explicitly to the transition to distance learning. They were asked to consider distance learning as new cultural territory that would present as much cultural awareness and sensitivity as a physical relocation in a different country. While it is not obvious from the study that the students accepted the parallels between national and pedagogical culture, they did seem to think that such a comparison was not inappropriate. For the novice learner, distance online learning can be exciting; however, it can also be strange, bewildering, and stressful. The novice learner may need explanation, encouragement, and support to enjoy the freedom and flexibility that distance learning provides. Encouraging explicit comparison and contrast with modalities that the learner has already experienced, can perhaps provide a frame of reference for the new distance adventure. It can empower the novice learner, making the anticipated distance learning experience something to be approached with confidence, awareness, and excitement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES


**Appendix A**

Please cut-and-paste this survey, mark your answers to the statements with an ‘X’ in the appropriate box, save the document, and return it to me as an email attachment.

Your feedback is most valuable and would be much appreciated; however, participation in this survey is voluntary. It should take about 10 minutes to complete. Participation, or lack of it, will not affect your final grade. Your feedback will remain anonymous; although, the aggregated results of this survey may be disclosed to others but not in a way that would identify you.

Many thanks for your assistance and participation in this survey.

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<td>1. I would have preferred if the course had used face-to-face lectures</td>
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<td>3. I would probably have learned more if the course had used a face-to-face lecture format</td>
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<td>4. The distance learning format required me to think more carefully about the material presented</td>
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<td>The course content helped me think about different management situations</td>
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<td>The course content exposed me to new cultural understandings</td>
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<td>Assignments helped me to understand how people of different nationalities might act</td>
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<td>Classroom presentations and role playing would have help me to better understand cultural differences</td>
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<td>There are parallels between understanding distant learning and understanding a different culture</td>
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<td>I would be interested in taking a similar distance learning course in the future</td>
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<td>I would recommend this course in its present format to my student friends</td>
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