



JOIN A MASTER TEACHER ON THE JOURNEY TO BE A BETTER TEACHER

This book is an invitation to reflect on what it means to be a teacher, to remember the essence of teaching, why we go into the classroom in the first place.

Based on Sharon Hartle's renowned blog, [English Learning in Our World](#), *Keeping the Essence in Sight* is comprised of reflections on her teaching experience, and organized into four sections: Learning, Teaching, Testing, and Professional Development. Within each section she addresses key questions in ELT, such as:

- How can we encourage learner autonomy?
- What are the best ways to integrate technology into the ESL classroom?
- Can we improve our teaching and our assessment if we change our model of English?
- What are some easy and accessible ways to do professional development?

Discussion questions ask you to reflect on your own experiences and address these key issues for yourself, then apply your ideas to the classroom. So, don't be shy. Dive in!

REVIEWS

A very welcome and timely contribution to the growing literature on Reflective Practice in TESOL

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Sharon's writing is down to earth and her sense of humour shines through on every page... an entertaining read for any English language teacher.

—Anne Parry, English Language Consultant

The book provides many practical insights into four broad strands of contemporary ELT: learning, teaching, testing, and professional development.

—Michael Ennis, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano

KEEPING THE ESSENCE IN SIGHT

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Sharon Hartle lives and works in Verona, Italy as a teacher of ELT at Verona University where she teaches a range of levels. She is also involved in teacher training both in secondary schools and as part of the university training courses. She is a great believer in reflection for both teachers and learners and the importance of building meaningful environments which provide both learners and teachers with space to communicate, exchange their expertise and insights, and to scaffold growth. She is also a writer who has blogged for several years and has published several ELT books.



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PROBLEM FOUR: I WOULD LIKE TO USE TECHNOLOGY IN MY TEACHING. HOW CAN I INTEGRATE IT INTO MY NORMAL TEACHING WITHOUT WASTING TOO MUCH CLASS TIME?

Thoughts on blended teaching and learning

What is blended teaching

I would categorise most of my teaching as blended these days in that there is generally a traditional face-to-face (F2F) component taught in class and an added online component, which means that students can also work outside class at their own pace. In my case, the F2F component is usually taught in quite large university classrooms that can seat anything up to a hundred students and that are equipped with computers, projectors, and online access to the internet. This choice of projectors rather than interactive whiteboards makes sense when you work with large groups of young adults, as learners cannot easily come up to the board and interact.

My students are very happy with the idea of our courses having a central class blog¹². This blog has a page for each course that students can consult regularly, as well as an information wall, wikis, useful links, and various other resources. As a teacher I find it useful as I can do a whole range of things which help me to stay in touch with my students in ways that just a few years ago would have been impossible. I use the main wall to post messages, ideas, and reminders, as well as encouraging notes to different classes. On the specific course pages, students can generally find an overview of the work

done in class week by week, with links to backup activities and further study. There is usually information about how they can prepare for their next lesson too. This is valuable for everyone but particularly for those who miss lessons or cannot remember the links we have looked at in class. I can also post links to spaces such as Google Docs for students to submit written or spoken work and that work is then private, visible only to me. When they have posted it, I can then correct and post their tracked work and include other comments and discussions publicly if the individual students agree to having their work available publicly online. This is all, then, kept in a handy place that we can always look at during lessons in the classroom. This has, over the past few years, meant that I've been able to develop relationships with students in these large classes that would have been unimaginable without the blended element.

Why blended teaching and not blended learning

You may be wondering why I am talking about *blended teaching* rather than *blended learning*, which is the more usual term. Well, this is because what I do is to teach in a blended format, but I recently wondered if my students see things in the same way.

This term, I was very enthusiastic about one course that I was going to do at the University of Bolzano. This course had actually been marketed to the students as a *blended learning course*, rather than me just doing it as blended learning. They had been told that they would be doing one F2F class a week all term and that they would be given access to online materials, as well as doing chats online, outside class. I therefore had very high expectations of this course and, perhaps, had slightly too high expectations of them at the beginning, thinking that they would be able to use online contexts like Twitter for educational purposes. They had certainly heard of and, in some cases used, social media tools, but needed more guidance to be able to use them for the purposes of our course. Some of them had not really understood the spirit of blended learning, or, I think, the discipline and planning skills required to take advantage of this type of course and did not do the preparation before coming to class. The lesson to be learned for me as a teacher was that it is essential to take



things slowly, one step at a time, and to be aware of the fact that time needs to be spent working in class, increasingly, on supporting students who are learning to work in online environments. Here is a summary of my approach.

One step at a time

1. The first step was to introduce learners to the class blog, making sure that they knew how to access it and what to do with it. They needed very clear instructions such as: *“Go to the home page and read the messages, and then go to your class page and read the overview of the lesson as well as the preparation work for your next lesson.”*

This was the starting point and as the course progressed new tools and spaces were introduced both in class, and on the page. The students quickly learned how to use the blog, which is the mainstay of this course, everything else radiating out from there. The students now go to the blog on Fridays or Saturdays to see the home page, which contains notices from me. They then go to their class pages to see what to prepare and download for the next week’s classes, or to do activities that have been posted there for them. They can also use the class pages, of course, to review work we have done previously or to catch up if they have missed lessons.

2. One of the biggest problems in a course like this is organising resources, especially if they are new for learners, so some kind of bookmarking system needs to be adopted. Symbaloo¹³ uses a very effective format visually. Each link is presented as a button for students to click on and I can make a webmix, a collection of those links in button form, for my students, which I can update and share with them. Students can also make their own webmixes to share with each other, and access ready-made mixes as well. For instance, some one may make a webmix with resources for Cambridge exams and choose to share it with others so that everyone can benefit. There is also the option, however, to

and find the link to the class blog, the other sites we are using and resources too. Although they could have done that from the blog, using Symbaloo is highly intuitive and appeals to some learners. (it's all about providing tools for differing learning strategies).



3. These learners were given access to the Macmillan English Campus (MEC)¹⁴ which provided them with a whole range of materials that they could use online throughout the course, mirroring the coursebook we used in class. Once again, however, we used quite a lot of F2F time learning how to find our way round the resource and what we could do with it. When using a new resource it is a good idea to start with the mechanics of signing up for the site, followed by an overview of the different sections available and how to navigate the various pages. Learners can work in groups or pairs to do site quests, where they are asked to provide specific materials or exercises, to find their own gradebooks and marks, and other resources. This can even be organised as a competition to see which group is the first one to find all the various resources you ask them to. Prizes, of course, can be awarded to the first group and even consolation prizes can be given to those who have difficulty. This gives the teacher the chance to monitor what is happening and to help those who are having problems immediately.

The students used it to do remedial grammar work and to read news articles. Some of them explored the exams practice resources available there too. This meant that they could

14 <http://www.macmillanenglishcampus.com>





work autonomously in the ways that suited them best.

We used the MEC but, in fact, there are several alternatives to this platform, provided by other publishers, such as Pearson's "myenglishlab"¹⁵ or Cambridge University Press's "Touchstone" Blended Learning series.¹⁶ Both of the latter are organised and developed by the publishers, but another option is English 360¹⁷ which is an 'open platform, developed by educators who wanted to create a space where both publishers and individual teachers could create their own content and courses.

One of the plus points about the news articles on the MEC, however, is that learners can choose to read the same article at different levels. My students developed different strategies for approaching these articles which was fascinating to see. Some, for instance, read the "easy" version of an article and then read the more difficult version later. Some people chose to approach them the other way round, starting with the more difficult version and then reading the easier one as a sort of summary. In any case, what was very positive about this was that they had the choice, and this enabled them to develop these personalised strategies.

Having said that, however, the MEC was not the be all and end all of *blended learning* but should be just one of the resources for *blended learning*. Whilst the resources available on the MEC are well developed and the students liked them, they tend to be somewhat mechanical and not relevant or personalised to the learners themselves. Added to that, there is so much material available freely online these days, or in DVDs that come with coursebooks, that it may not be cost effective to use such a platform in the long run.

4. One of the problems with online work is that learners may feel isolated and/or may be lazy and simply not do it. This is why a certain amount of tracking is essential. Teachers can easily track what learners are doing on the MEC and then ask why so-and-so hasn't done anything. If you are not using a site that has this tracking function, you will have to develop a way of tracking whether students are not doing the work. I would suggest a tactful approach here, as there may be all

¹⁵ <https://www.pearsonelt.com/myenglishlab.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.cambridge.org/it/cambridgeenglish/catalog/adult-courses/touchstone-2nd-edition>

¹⁷ <https://www.english360.com/>

kinds of reasons why people are not doing something. Sympathy and interest can motivate students a lot more than censure and criticism.

5. As with any good course, the work learners do outside class must be integrated into the F2F class work too. Learners need to feel that there is a purpose to the work they are doing online, and that it is leading somewhere. There are many ways of doing this:

Integrating the online work into the F2F context

If students watch a video online, then they can write about it on a Google Form in Google Docs¹⁸ which they then submit to me. I can correct that work with a programme that allows me to add self-correction codes and comments such as Markin¹⁹ and then post a document on the class page with this work, posted anonymously in the interests of privacy. Learners can then correct their own work or other people's work and the results can be discussed in class.

Alternatively, learners may choose a text such as an article from the MEC or elsewhere, or a video from the TED Talks²⁰ and then be asked to give a short summary in class. The other students in the class then ask one question to each speaker. These questions can be developed into a discussion, with subsequent remedial work on accuracy and extension of emergent language coming out of the discussion.

After the first two weeks of our course, when the learners had become familiar with the blog, the MEC, and the procedures involved in our course, we began to use chat. Again, I felt this needed to be introduced gradually and in a sheltered environment, so I chose to use Hootcourse²¹ rather than Twitter, although both have advantages and disadvantages.

The plus point with Hootcourse was that I could set up a course for my class and we could use it easily together and in different ways. Enrolling on the course proved rather problematic for some, as we discovered that the best way to enrol was to use a Twitter account. Those who had a Twitter account

18 <https://www.google.com/docs/about/>
 19 <https://www.cict.co.uk/markin/index.php>
 20 <https://www.ted.com>
 21 <http://hootcourse.com>





Bookmarking

Everyone approaches their digital categorisation in different ways. There are those who organise bookmarks directly in the tabs on their browsers, but there are also websites that give you the option of creating your own personal digital dashboard. These sites provide for bookmarking, quick access to the sites you use the most and easy sharing with others as well. Here are four useful ones:

Symbaloo

<https://www.symbaloo.com/>

Let's start with bookmarking or making pages of sites that you use frequently and need easy access to. For the visually inclined, Symbaloo is a fantastic site for bookmarking your favourite online destinations and it can also be made into the homepage of your browser. The format is familiar because the tiles (see the image above) look like the app tiles that are instantly recognizable on smartphones. Each webmix, or page, can be a different topic or area of your life with 'tiles' that you use to bookmark the sites you are interested in. Your webmixes can be private or you can share them with others, if you want to make a webmix for a particular subject, for instance. You can also explore other public webmixes on any topic you are interested in, such as [academic writing](#) or [Halloween](#), for instance, depending on your interests.

Papaly

<https://papaly.com/>

Papaly, defined as a social bookmarking tool, creates lists of websites, which are called boards. They can be private or shared in a similar way to Symbaloo, and you can also import your bookmarks from all the most popular browsers. You can also access your social media accounts from tabs at the top of the page. So, if you prefer lists to pages, perhaps this is a good choice for you.

Protopage

<https://www.protopage.com/>

Protopage is another site that creates a visually appealing board, where you can pin the sites you want to bookmark. These boards were designed with the initial idea of accessing new sites. When you first create a protopage, you will be directed to a board with different tabs on it. The first tab is the 'Home' tab with default links to new sites, but you can personalise by creating new tabs, each of which can be used for bookmarking or even for adding sticky notes. Your protopage can be private, public, or shareable only by means of a password.

Evernote

<https://evernote.com/>

If you want a site that is also an app on your smartphone, and where you can bookmark, but also make notes, share them with friends

could use it to access Hootcourse and join our course. Not everyone had Twitter accounts, though, so this complicated matters. But in the end after a whole lesson on the subject, everyone managed to access the course. These kinds of complications are good to know about in advance so you can guide students through them.

Demonstrating chat by using it in class

To show everyone how the Hootcourse chat worked, I used it initially in class with learners using their mobile phones, tablets, and laptops to post questions whilst other students were giving presentations of their news articles (these were articles they had chosen from the MEC). Hootcourse has a function that enables classroom viewing so we could all see the chat stream projected on the class screen, and this meant that after each presentation we already had a series of questions from learners that we could discuss. It provided a focal point for everyone, and although there was inevitably some overlap in the questions, what ensued was a highly motivating discussion. Once we had used this course in class we started using it outside the F2F context as well.

and colleagues, and add media, Evernote may be the answer for you. It is a freemium site and the free version includes a comprehensive range of options, such as organising your links into notebooks, and tagging notes, which makes for easy searching later on. Popular in professional contexts for making notes at meetings and sharing them, as well as creating a series of notes which can be made into a slideshow and projected, Evernote is an extremely rich resource.

Using Hootcourse outside class

We began to use Hootcourse in two main ways. The most natural and unplanned use was for people to send messages to me and to each other, which was much quicker and more direct than email. It meant, for instance, that if someone couldn't come to class, they had a quick and easy way of telling me. I had embedded the Hootcourse onto the blog page too, which is very easy to do, so that we could all click on the Hootcourse tab directly from the class blog. This meant that I checked it almost every time I went on the blog, which was most days.

The second way we used Hootcourse was for our weekly chat in which we focused on a variety of areas ranging from



error analysis of learner work that had been prepared in advance to topics that learners chose. For the latter, we all then read an article about the topic and discussed it in the chat. If you would like to see the sort of thing we did in more detail go to the blended learning page²² on the class blog and scroll down until you come to the sections related to chat.

You will also be able to see the transcripts of these chats which learners could look at after the chats themselves had taken place. This is useful because of the nature of chat where information comes in fast and furious and nobody can take note of everything. Because of this, the chats were often very useful as brainstorming sessions and ideas that came up during the chats were then developed in the following F2F session.

Excerpt from the blended learning page on the class blog



²² <http://shartle.edublogs.org/bolzano/bolzano-blended-learning-2nd-semester-2012>



HootCourse Chat Transcripts May 11th and 14th

If you missed our chats on May 11th and the 14th, you can read the transcript here to see what we discussed. Remember when reading this type of transcript, you should start at the bottom and read upwards. This reflects the way the “hoots” came up in real time during the chat. We will be doing a quick review of some of these language points in our F2F lesson on Friday.

Link to: Hootcourse Transcript from the Chat on Monday 14th May

Preparing for Week Eight

Next week you should continue with the work from the MEC on Ritual that you started doing for this week (preparing for Week Seven above)

We will have another **chat** on **Monday 21st May from 17.00 – 18.00** and the topic is:

The London Olympics

To prepare for this you should:

1. Read one article connected to the London Olympics (from any newspaper or blog etc.)
2. Choose three points from the article that you find interesting to tell us in the chat (Remember that you can only type short pieces of information on Twitter.)
3. Choose three interesting language items (vocabulary, phrases, collocations, verb patterns) Choose these, not only because you don't understand something but because you like them or find them interesting too





4. Write three questions to ask the rest of the group (these should be general questions that you think of as a result of the things you have read.)

These are the questions that came up during this chat (Read the transcript from the bottom upwards to the top). Look at the questions and think about these issues for the lesson on Friday:

Link to: [Hootcourse Olympics chat questions](#)

See more at: <http://shartle.edublogs.org/bolzano/bolzano-blended-learning-2nd-semester-2012>

Another alternative is a structured chat, which I often prefer. In structured chats, participants are given behaviour codes, such as raising your virtual hand, or putting a question mark in the chat feed, when you want to ask a question, which makes the running of a chat more organised and it is not just a free-for-all. The moderator will ask a question or give an instruction and participants can answer that question only. After a set amount of time, the moderator posts a second question. Students, as mentioned above, can post “?” if they want to ask a question. They then must wait for the moderator to tell them to post.

The moderator keeps an eye on the chat and ensures that he or she is answering students in an organised way by saying, for instance, “Giacomo has a question. Please post it now.” Giacomo would then post his question and the moderator or other students can answer. The moderator can use the chat to do activities as well, such as multiple-choice questions, or questions can be asked in advance, and participants prepare their answers and then simply copy and paste during the chat itself. In this way, there is more of an element of “listening” to the chat, which makes it a bit easier to follow, particularly when there are more than three or four participants.

Aims and final thoughts

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The language aims of this course were for the students to progress from B2 to C1 during the course, and since the ones who came regularly and did both online and in-class work, were highly motivated, they made a lot of progress. As I said, most of my teaching is blended but here, because of heightened interest from those who had chosen this specific course type, the motivation to explore new study tools and strategies was greater perhaps than in more traditional courses, and the sense of online community provided by the chat led to a greater bond in the F2F classes, and therefore more confidence.

The key factor in a course like this is motivation because learners who are interested in what they are doing make progress almost without even being aware of it. In fact, that is why, at the end of the course, I can say that these lessons were not only examples of *blended teaching*, but involved a lot of *blended learning* too, both for the students and for me. One of the students, in fact, at the end of the course said she had learned so much more than she had expected from this course, and not only the English Language: this is the sort of feedback that makes it all worthwhile

Discussion questions

1. What experiences have you had as a *blended learner*? What were the pros and cons?
2. How important do you think it is to start slowly with new tools, one step at a time? What about your learners?
3. What online tools do you use now? What new tools would you like to explore?
4. What do you think *blended learning* adds, or could add to your own teaching context?
5. Would you use a chat feed in your classes? Why or why not?



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