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Conference Report

BLOSA (Blended and Online South Africa) Inaugural Blended Symposium 2019

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BLOSA 2019: Background

The 2019 Blended Symposium on blended learning in the field of languages, literature, and media held on 25 March 2019 was the inaugural event of the newly designed and launched BLOSA: A South African Platform for Blended Learning.² Two keynote addresses from international guests were presented along with seven papers, the majority of which were given by delegates from four continents; the conference was further attended by roughly 30 non-presenting delegates. The objective of the conference was the exploration of both the theory and application of hybrid and blended learning for languages, literature, and media pedagogy in the context of developing economies.

Blended learning broadly refers to a set of hybrid teaching and learning approaches that utilise a combination of online learning and classroom time. Bonk and Graham defined *blended learning* as “systems [that] combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction” (2006, p. 5). The notion of blended learning has risen in prominence on campuses worldwide³ and in South Africa⁴ as an extremely effective teaching and learning methodology with great potential to offer innovative

² The platform was founded and is coordinated by Christopher Fotheringham, Brian Zuccala, and Anita Virga. As to media attention to BLOSA thus far, see at least the Vuvuzela interview available at <https://witsvuvuzela.com/2019/04/13/boundaries-of-tertiary-education-broken/>.

³ Such rising prominence is well-exemplified by the staggering amount of scholarship that has been produced over the past couple of decades, for which it will suffice to refer to, alongside the mentioned Bonk and Graham’s compendium (2006), Garrison and Vaughan (2008) and Graham (2009), to mention just a few key contributions. The growing appeal of blended learning is due, among other things, to its transcultural potential in the context of the internationalisation of higher education, which is best appreciated in the sub-field of trans-institutional telecollaboration. See, for example, Carloni, Grassi, Virga, and Zuccala (2018) and Guth, Helm, and O’Dowd (2012).

⁴ See, for example, Ng’ambi, Brown, Bozalek, Gachago, and Wood (2016) with regard to scholarship, and refer to the 2017 Council on Higher Education report (CHE, 2017) with regard to institutional and governmental guidelines on blended learning. See also Virga (2018) for a recent and joint discussion of both aspects.

and transformative solutions to our specific contextual constraints and complexities.⁵ Blended learning has been identified as a key thrust in the latest University of the Witwatersrand digital strategy. While blended learning has great potential to improve the quality of teaching and learning at the university, and to enhance the student experience, the approach is by no means a panacea to the structural teaching and learning challenges—as it seems sometimes to be perceived by University management. Therefore, the Teaching and Learning Committee of the School of Literature, Language, and Media (SLLM) at Wits formed a research cluster in 2018 to conduct research into the implementation of blended learning in South Africa (and Global South contexts, more generally) and to provide a productive space for the sharing of ideas and working on joint projects.

With financial support from the deputy vice-chancellor of the university, the inaugural conference of BLOSA was organised for 25 March 2019. In designing the event itself, an innovative and blended conferencing model was followed. The model relied on online engagement as a support and a scaffold for the face-to-face event. Contributors were required to present a short videocast for uploading onto the BLOSA site, where it was made available to site members a week prior to the conference—in the hope that online engagement before the event would enrich the conversations at the face-to-face symposium. The streamlined and user friendly site (www.blosa.co.za), co-designed and built in collaboration with Teracore Digital Marketing (www.teracore.co.za), is structured along the lines of a social media platform allowing members to post comments and engage directly with contributors and one another.⁶ The videocasts remain on the site well past the date of the symposium as a digital, globally sharable resource for fellow practitioners and fellow scholars of blended learning. Where the contributions and the debates of a traditional time-and-place-bound conference are ephemeral and reserved for a closed community, the model of the BLOSA 2019 conference is one of open access and long duration. Year on year, as further BLOSA symposia are held, the site will become a digital archive of useful content for practitioners of blended learning anywhere and at any time.

The rationale for this format was twofold: the first objective was to enact the blended model within the very structure of our conferencing activity; the second, to engage the emerging practice of *unconferencing*⁷ as a catalyst for democratised accessibility and as a form of resistance to the traditional conference model which necessitates, for example, the presence of international keynotes and an elitist bias toward physical attendance at great expense to individuals and institutions. This is a model that arguably isolates academics from developing contexts from currents and debates emerging in large Global North conferences.

BLOSA 2019: Papers

The keynote addresses of the conference were provided by Rahul Gairola (Murdoch University, Australia) and Roopika Risam (Salem State University, USA). Both were enquiries into the matter of power relations in the digital humanities from the perspective of postcolonial academic contexts—from a scholarly angle and pedagogical angle, respectively.

In his paper, “Postcolonial Digital Humanities,” Gairola discussed how and why a theory and history of digital humanities is important in the context of postcolonial countries, and delineated two dominant views of digital humanities (DH) today. He linked these two views to the dominant history of DH in order to demonstrate its orientalist limitations. After zooming in on India as a case study, he reframed

⁵ See, for example, Garrison and Kanuka (2004), and Tucker, Wycoff, and Green (2017).

⁶ All contributions and interactions are protected by a members-only password wall. This security measure allows for quality control of the material uploaded by an international group of experts and scholars serving as BLOSA scientific committee and board members.

⁷ For which one may refer, for example, to Budd et al. (2015), Hansmann, Troxler, & Wolf (2011), Wolf & Troxler (2008).

the case for postcolonial digital humanities today for formerly colonised nations, turning his attention to learning and teaching in those sites of ongoing contention. Risam's paper, entitled "The Politics of Knowledge Production and Digital Pedagogy," addressed the notion of postcolonial digital pedagogy, while challenging a number of misconceptions such as the "myth" of the digital native, and foregrounding the in-built imbalance and intersectional inequalities that characterise the digital sphere. Within this conceptual framework, she illustrated teaching and learning activities—including the use of Google Ngram Viewer, Wikipedia editing, and incorporating social media in classroom practices—through which emancipatory digital cultural literacy could be implemented.

Neither of the distinguished international keynote speakers was physically present at the conference but the blended format of the symposium allowed scholars at the face-to-face event to engage with their ideas. Indeed, an interesting outcome of the blended format was that the delegates felt more at liberty to critique the ideas of the keynotes than they might have been had they been present physically. This led to some very interesting discussions on the hierarchical structure implicit in traditional conferencing, and which was challenged by the format of the blended symposium.

The remainder of the papers were not screened at the face-to-face event but were discussed by delegates in splinter groups. Some of the presenters were local and were thus able to be physically present at the event but the majority were international. The blended format of the conference made the contributions of these distinguished international scholars cost free. These papers covered a range of topics pertinent to the teaching of languages.

Two papers, one by Simon Musgrave (Monash University, Melbourne, Australia) entitled "Digital Learning: Balancing Specific and Generic Skills" and one by Giovanna Carloni (University of Urbino, Italy) entitled "Fostering Italian Language Development and Intercultural Awareness Through Digital Learning," concerned themselves with the tools and methods most appropriate for digital learning—presenting and analysing the effectiveness of past interventions in blended pedagogies in a series of case studies.

A further two papers concerned telecollaboration as a methodology for target-language enhancement. "Blending Italian Studies in Higher Education Through Telecollaboration" by Margherita Bezzi (Milan Polytechnic, Italy), Giorgia Bassani (California State University, Florence Campus, Italy), and Ilaria Pasquinelli (University of Urbino, Italy) illustrated some features and data related to the international telecollaborative project between the University of Urbino and the University of the Witwatersrand. The aim of the international cooperation was to blend the teaching of Italian language and culture, creating online materials on the basis of the Witwatersrand University syllabus. Synchronous and asynchronous digital activities, as well as students' and online teachers' performances, were analysed and discussed. A similar project was presented by Rachida Sadouni (University of Blida 2, Algeria). Her paper, entitled "Telecollaboration as a Medium Between Learners From Different Backgrounds: PTAM as a Case Study," concerned the establishment of collaborations between students of French in Algeria and Moldova. Sadouni explained the methodology she used to conduct the project, and the outcomes. Her exposition of positive student responses to this technology-mediated, multicultural encounter was particularly pleasing and encouraging.

The remaining three papers can be clustered together because they concerned the implementation of blended pedagogies for the acquisition of high-level foreign language literacy. Nuño Aguirre de Cárcer (University of the Witwatersrand) presented a paper entitled "E-Portfolios as Formative Assessment," which explored the possibility of using digital reading portfolios to enhance and digitise assessment practices in a course on Spanish literature. Andrea Privitera (University of Western Ontario, Canada) discussed his application of the video game, *Europa Universalis*, as an engaging and interactive way of

familiarising students with the political and religious landscape of fifteenth-century Italy, to prepare them better to understand the (Italian) chivalric poetry tradition. Finally, Fiona Horne (University of the Witwatersrand) outlined a digital storytelling project conducted in 2018 in the second-year French foreign language classroom (intermediate A2 level) at Wits University. She discussed its positive, transformative effects in the language programme, especially given the significant challenges encountered in this group (heterogeneous language levels, linguistic insecurity, lack of group cohesion and motivation, poor learning outcomes).

BLOSA Impact in Terms of Educational Research for Social Change, and Where to From Here?

For all the aforementioned reasons, we believe that both the inaugural 2019 BLOSA blended symposium and the BLOSA project in its entirety have had, and will continue to have, a positive effect on the way blended learning can be used as a powerful tool at the disposal of transformation-centred academic strategies. This is true in terms of both the form in which research is conducted and disseminated, within and beyond BLOSA, and the content of such research, with its peculiar focus on developing academic contexts.

The BLOSA 2019 symposium is soon to be followed by a second and further-reaching blended event revolving around the BLOSA platform and BLOSA digital archive. The inaugural conference is the basis of an open access book project currently under contract with *Edizioni Ca' Foscari* (Venice University Press). The book is conceived of as the first installation of a BLOSA-dedicated Gold Open Access book series (directed by Brian Zuccala, Christopher Fotheringham, and Anita Virga) that will secure instant, global, and comparatively inclusive circulation of BLOSA scholarly contents.

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