**Review of Workshop Laura Edwards 23.09.2017**

In true Irish spirit, Laura gave us a very inspiring talk on blended learning. Her main focus, which she specifically stated, was to encourage us to get started using blended learning in our classes and that’s how she approached the workshop. She has a Masters in Communication Theory so she knew her stuff and could speak from experience.

Starting with a definition of blended learning, she went on to detail a whole list of tools which can be used to help students and teachers contact each other. Some of the advantages of blended learning being: combining classroom and online learning, catering to different learning preferences, offering learners more flexibility, creating more time for in-class interaction, putting learners more in charge of their learning. To quote from the talk ‘blended learning is not just a novelty, but an approach that transforms and improves the learning processes’.

The use of digital tools has become commonplace in today’s society and can be harnessed in language learning. Through the large range of tools available, there are many ways in which technology can enhance language learning. The point was stressed over and over that the use of technology should empower students to be more independent, and as such, less dependent on the teacher, more creative and that content can be personalized. It is important for teachers to think about the kind of students they have, whether Business English learners, teenagers, children, adult, examination courses etc. and think about the kind of approach that might work for them before embarking on their journey. Let’s look at some of the tools which Laura presented. She grouped these under the heading: Platform, Playlist or Learning Path:

***Padlet***: For sharing learning content, homework or extra reading resources, creating topic walls for presentation skills etc. Students can also create their own learning diary or language notebook walls.

***Lesson Paths***: Write your own articles, add files, and create quizzes.

Under the Step: Present Information, Teach, we have the tools: ***Word it Out,*** in whichWord Clouds can be created to pre-teach new vocab before reading or listening tasks or to show which words appear most often in a text and ***Vocaroo,*** forrecording student speaking content.

Using technology tools give learners the chance to communicate with each other beyond the classroom plus it gives them the chance to share their work and review other’s work. The feature ***Screen-o-matic*** allows a teacher to record lectures, webinars, demos, games, ***Skype*** calls etc., and share via YouTube or directly in a video file.

Under the heading: ‘Communicate and Collaborate’, ***Today’s Meet*** is a tool which can be used to improve meetings, presentations by allowing learners to interact directly by introducing themselves and/or leaving comments for the others to read and then react to. You can also use ***Skype*** as a teaching resource which can also be used to send files and share screen content. Group calls can also be set up. ***Google docs*** is also a resource which can be used to create and edit docs online or offline.

In the area of ‘Quiz and Assess’, the feature ***Quizziz*** was presented: This is a classroom activity which allows students to play against each other. They can play against each other or even as a homework task.

***Quizlet***: Allows the teacher to create tools for learning such as digital flashcards, games and learning tools and it costs nothing.

What’s the added value of these tools and features? According to Laura, it means that you and your learners can spend more time engaging with English. Students have more freedom to learn when it suits them. Students can create and share content. Tasks are more varies and interesting.

Laura gave us some good tips about how to approach the whole area of blended learning by setting ourselves a goal. You can either set the bar high by deciding you want to offer a fully blended course by, say, early next year, or possibly, offer some tutorials and content as blended learning in addition to your face-to-face teaching. Or, alternatively, a more modest aim would be to say that students should be able to access some online content and do some project work in class.

Steps on the way to these goals would be: creating content and lesson plans for blended modules, be it grammar, pronunciation, presentation, small talk, CV writing, exam preparation etc.

The next step is then to think of how you can use the tools with different students in different contexts and then test tools one by one with different groups at different levels, keeping a note of what worked and what didn’t and getting feedback from students. There are a few things to keep in mind when thinking about blended learning, though. One is copyright and respecting and citing sources, the other is that using social media is not everyone’s thing and that there may be people who would be left out if you insist on using social media in class. Privacy has to be respected and also, of course, there are some technophobes around, hard to believe really, who need to take things one step at a time and not be overwhelmed with new technical features.

Laura also gave us some guidance for pricing. She stressed that preparing and setting up content for blended learning does take time and needs to be taken into account when pricing.

I hope these notes have given you an idea of what is available in the area of blended learning but, of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. I hope we will be able to try out as many of these tools as possible and it would be interesting to hear the experiences of other teachers at future workshops.

Kevin Lilley