

**Flexible Learning in a Workplace Model:
Blended a Motivation to a Lifelong Learner
in a Social Network Environment**

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Flexible Learning in a Workplace Model: Blended a Motivation to a Lifelong Learner in a Social Network Environment

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Abstract: This paper presents a model of learning in a workplace, in which an online course provides flexibility for staff to learn at their convenient hours. A motivation was brought into an account of the success of learning in a workplace program, based upon Behaviorist learning approach—an online mentor and an accumulated learning activities score was applied; whereas a social constructivist concept was also blended to the online learning environment. Ninety-seven staff was in an online program for 12 weeks, with 3 mentors in a social network online platform-- NING. Every three weeks, 3 hours of face-to-face meeting was blended to the 9 weeks online programs. The results showed that all staff successfully completed the online learning program. Their opinions on the mentoring system were at a very high level of satisfaction, and few active staff obtained rewards from their collected scores during the online social network activities. Correlation was found between frequency of staff's participation in social learning activities and achievement with high learning scores at the end of the program. The model was discussed on its strategies to flexible a learning in a workplace with a blended mode of online and offline, a full support from top level management to allocated staff hour for learning, recognition for the outstanding staff, and value their learned skills. Online mentors and social network took significant roles in triggering learning activities in an online social network environment, which motivated learners themselves as lifelong learners in a digital age.

Introduction

Lifelong learning is one of the desire outcomes of learning, stated in the Thai National Education Act of 1999, as a guiding principle for the country competitiveness. It is believed that lifelong learners will continuously build skills and knowledge throughout the life of an individual. It occurs through experiences encountered in the course of a lifetime. In Thailand, lifelong learning has been emphasized in a non-formal education, as a second chance for those who drop-out from a regular program, and wish to return to school to complete their degree. Most often, the issue of the lifelong learning principle is misled; non-formal or continuing education is a matter of completing the unfinished formal learning programs. Flexible learning typically becomes an educational system for a non-formal learning program, concerning with learning opportunities in a distance mode. E-learning Technology has been realized as a solution for the flexible learning. Years of efforts to solid an infrastructure, and quality e-learning contents, now comes to a matter of activating the teaching activities to a full learning potential. As it is emphasized by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, the Vision of E-learning 2008-2011, that the e-learning Framework will be an integral part of the national training system, responding to the challenges of a modern economy and the training needs of Australian businesses and workers. The strategies of flexible learning in this framework is that E-learning is tailored to learners, personalized to suit individual learning needs, making it an engaging experience, and collaborative and networking. Learners are more in control, they are able to choose their training provider and use pathways to their advantage. Similar framework of Thailand national ICT policy since the year of 2000, the Thai government has been strengthening the ICT infrastructure, and to develop a digital content. Thailand ICT National policy of Year 2006-2012, the emphasis has been on an implementation of ICT

application for Education and Business, to drive the country toward a Knowledge Society. Some of the guidelines to develop personnel in general public by the ICT are to strengthen communities and individuals to access and use information in household and communities activities, including seeking knowledge, building wisdom. Increasingly, learning programs and courses have been developed in an online mode to keep personnel in the work updated their skills in work as a lifelong learners.

In particular, flexible learning provides learners with choices about where, when, and how learning occurs. Flexible learning approaches are often designed using a full range of teaching and learning theories, philosophies and methods to provide students with opportunities to access information and expertise, contribute ideas and opinions, and correspond with other learners and mentors. The learning environment in a flexible learning mostly occurs through the use of internet-based tools such as Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or Learning Management System (LMS), with discussion boards or chat rooms. Mostly the activities are designed as a "blended" approach, with content available electronically and remotely, as well as "face-to-face" classroom tutorials and lectures. A blended learning is sometimes used in a synonym of flexible learning. In general, its concept refers to a mixing of different learning environments, rooted in the idea that learning is not just a one-time event—learning is a continuous process. Blending provides various benefits over using any single learning delivery medium alone.

Blended Learning has many specific meanings based upon the context in which it is used. Blending offline and online Learning is at the simplest level, a blended learning experience combines offline and online forms of learning, where the online learning usually means over the Internet, and offline learning is quite often in a more traditional classroom setting. An example of this type of blending often include a learning program that provides study materials on the Internet, while providing instructor-led, classroom training sessions as the main medium of instruction. Blending Self-paced and live collaborative learning, another mix match approach of blended learning; self-paced learning implies solitary, on-demand learning at a pace that is managed or controlled by the learner. Collaborative learning, on the other hand, implies a more dynamic communication among many learners that brings about a sharing. This blended approach is the method of live and on-demand is used to replace the face-to-face mode of learning. Blended approach in a pedagogy point of view, blending structured and unstructured learning; not all forms of learning imply a pre-structured, or instruction with organized content in a specific sequence. Learning, in fact for an adult in a workplace occurred in an unstructured mode, from personal knowledge sharing in a performing work. In this mode of blended learning, the content could be off-the-shelf content, by definition generic,—unaware of an organization's unique context and requirements. The generic content is much less expensive and frequently has higher production values than custom content. Generic self-paced content can be customized with a blend of live experiences in a classroom or in online activities, or with content customization. Another consideration of blended mode of learning; finally, the finest form of blended learning is to supplement learning with practice and just-in-time performance support tools that facilitate the appropriate execution of job-tasks. Cutting-edge productivity tools provide a 'workspace' environment that package together the computer based work, collaboration, and performance support tools. In addition, self-directed learning, incidental learning, and socialization, proposed by Schugurensky (2000) to be an informal learning phenomena. These three forms differ among themselves in terms of intentionality and awareness at the time of the learning experience. Self-directed learning, for example, is intentional and conscious; incidental learning, accidentally by-product of doing something else, after the experience learner becomes aware that some learning has taken place; and finally, socialization or tacit learning is neither intentional nor conscious. The explanation to this model could be explained by the mix and match model of blended learning found in a research at Stanford University. The University diagnosed the problem as a mismatch between the student's learning style—interactive, social, mentored learning—with the delivery technology. The university introduced live e-learning into their program; the improvement was attributed to the ability of a scheduled live event to motivate learners to complete self-paced materials on time; the availability of interaction with instructors and peers; and higher quality mentoring experiences. This program yielded to the rise of the completion rate up to 94%.

Motivation is known to be an activation of goal-oriented behavior, and said to be intrinsic or extrinsic form. Intrinsic motivation, explained by Social Psychology research, refers to motivation that is driven by an interest or enjoyment in the task itself, and exists within the individual rather than relying on any external pressure. Recognition in a workplace is claimed in the Two-factor theory--motivators and hygiene factors-- of

Frederick Herzberg in Nichol (2004) as it results in an employee's job satisfaction. While extrinsic motivation comes from outside of the individual. Common extrinsic motivations are rewards like money and scores/grades. Competition is in general extrinsic because it encourages the performer to win and beat others, while the intrinsic motivation is to enjoy the intrinsic rewards of the activity. On the other hands, Behavioral Psychology research emphasized on the Incentive theory; treats motivation and behavior of the individual, as they are influenced by beliefs, for an example, engaging in activities that are expected to be profitable. A reward, tangible or intangible is presented after the occurrence of the desired behavior with intent to cause the behavior to occur again.

In sum, the research was purposed to design a proper blended mix of an intrinsic by mean of social networking environment, and a rewarding extrinsic motivation, in added to major ingredients of a typical online and offline in an e-learning blended methodology, so-called a flexible Learning in a workplace, that activate a lifelong learner. Flexible learning program provides choices to choose for learners; motivation is an instructional strategy of the program: using self-paced learning and collaborative in a social network method. The study was also designed based upon and awareness of an involvement of the top management, instructors and mentors roles, especially the online learning environments that suit and motivate learners to pursue their ambitious to learn.

The Study

The study, a Research & Development, was conducted into 3 phrases. The first phase was purpose to find a Key Indicator Checklist (KEC) for the institute if the components in the checklist were found in the institute. The KEC was developed based on a review of literature and expert opinions. The second phase was aimed at finding an appropriate teaching and learning model that give flexibility to learners who are in the workforce. The framework of this study was based upon an integration of Behaviorist and Social Constructivist learning theories. Basing on new ideas and exploration of knowledge on existing knowledge is a core tenant of Bruner's constructivist theory. Cognitive Flexible approach, by Rand Spiro's Cognitive flexibility theory, is often a companion theory that is lumped under constructivism. This approach believes that experts learn best using this learning theory, for the reason that new knowledge was built with complex, ill-structured domains of knowledge in mind. In addition, motivation is considered the key to performance: a function of ability and motivation, as it is stated that job performance is equal to ability and motivation. Ability in turn depends on education, experience and training and its improvement is a slow and long process. On the other hand motivation can be improved quickly. Some strategies for motivation in an organization such as positive reinforcement and effective discipline and punishment, which is fell into a behaviorist theory. By the approach of learning in the workplace, adult learning program should capitalize on the experience of participants, and adapt to the limitation of the participants. Participants should have much choice as possible in the availability and organization of learning program. The blended-learning approach in this model, hence, provide a self-service approach to learning and providing online and face-to-face activities that allows learners to build upon their experiences, and contribute to a group in a collaborative fashion. Executive sponsorship of resources and management support are required in this model. Flexibility of learning Time and staff motivation were main issues of concerns in this model. Blended mode of learning, online and offline were considered in this model. The research method in this phase was mainly from an interview with the executive from the selected institution, expert opinions, and learners' need assessment. Sixty percent of online activities and forty percent of face-to-face training was designed to this model. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations were applied to the learning program. Participants accumulated their learning scores by their time spending in online activities, knowledge contribution to the online group, as well as extra score when winning an online game. In terms of intrinsic motivation, it's derived from a recognition to be in a hall of fame in an online environment as and being stated in their certificate, as well as a profile of employee of the month.

In the final phase, the flexible learning Model was tested to a volunteer public institute. The sample groups were 97 staff in an Essential English for work, at an immediate level of English competency. The sample group was selected by a screened test administered by a group of British Council. The contents were from British Council curriculum, and using instructional design approach to reach the standards of E-learning

contents. The Contents were delivered using a social network platform, so called NING. NING, a well-known open source social network platform with more than 300,000 members around the world, was selected to use in this model, as its concepts and tools are matched to the flexible model designed in this study. Four mentors had an experience in teaching English as a second language; two of them were native English spoken and two were non-native. They were on an online duty using the same guidelines in monitoring and mentoring the learning process of the sample group.

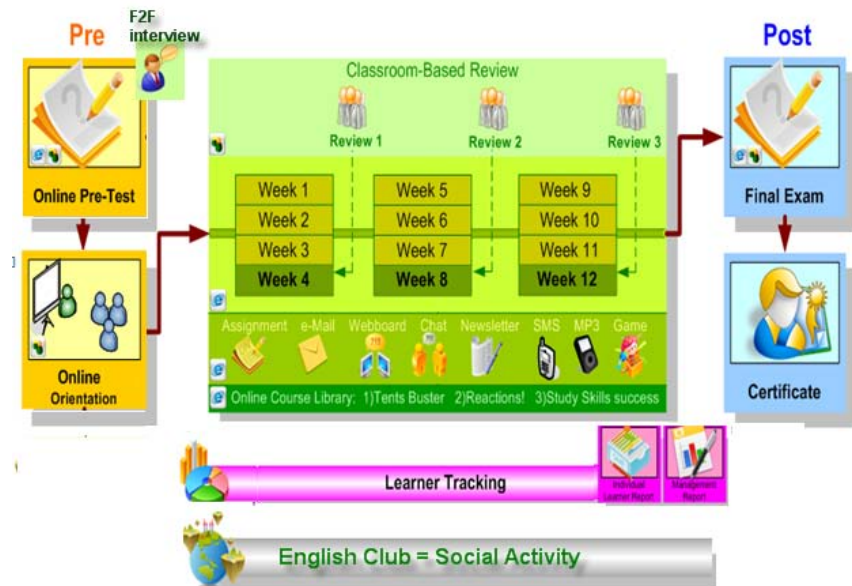
Findings

The Model

The model consisted of five components; 1) Technology such as LMS and Learning Objects 2) Learning Activities 3) Support roles 4) Learning Motivation 5) Assessment

The process in this model was designed into 8 steps, in which some of them can be arranged in the same time; 1) Orientation 2) Social and support sessions 2) Online learning activities 4) online social activities 5) face-to-face reviews 6) On-going assessment 7) Social integration 8) Evaluation and Feedback

Two conditions are ensured the effectiveness of this model; 1) Support of time allocated to staff during the working hours at least 1 hour a day 2) Incentives provided by the institutes both recognition as staff of the month and certificate value for a salary promotion.



Results

1. Results from the experts' opinions indicated the Key Evaluation Checklist (KEC) in 8 components. They are Organization involvement, technology provider, pedagogy, courseware delivery, management, resources and Ethics. Out of 133 items in the checklist, 95 items were found in the sample institutes. The 35 checklists, not found in the sample institute, they were mostly in the components of institution.

2. The model consisted of 5 components and 7 steps in the process with 2 conditions of success. Model was tested in a volunteer public institute the sample groups were 97 staff in an Essential English for work, at an immediate level of English competency. The sample group was selected by a screened test administered by a group of British Council. Eight staff dropped out from the program. The exit interview showed that they were occupied by a major responsible during the period of experiment. They couldn't follow the learning activities and had a feeling of "a behind the schedule". However, they expressed that they realized the value of learning in the workplace in a model of blended mode of an online and conventional class. Only a couple of them felt uncomfortable with the schedule and activities.
3. The study of this model found participants had a post test score higher than the pre-test score at the .05 significant level. The correlation was found between the number of quizzes in each week and the final scores at the 0.01 significant level. A prediction formula to the learning achievement in the learning in the workplace model was

$$\text{Post test}' = -46.388 + .860 * \text{Totalquiz} + .572 * \text{Pretest}$$

$$Z_{\text{Posttest}} = .648 * Z_{\text{Total quiz}} + .174 * Z_{\text{Pretest}}$$

The study found that the staff with a high pretest and their frequently quizzes taking tended to achieve a high score in their final test.

Conclusions

1. The eight components of the Key Evaluation Checklist found in this study. Ninety-five items in the list were found, only 35 items was not. The items that were not found mostly in the categories of institution. The institution component was focused on the involvement of the policy and in a degree to which the online learning was a strategic plan for learning organization. However, the flexible training in the workplace model still achieve its targets only about 10% of the staff dropped out from the program. It could be said that most of institution in Thailand was during the initial stage to a Learning Organization framework. None of the organization currently found to be a Learning Organization. In attempt to have a checklist on the Learning Organization, the researcher then could not find this item appeared in the sample institution. Numbers of institute using this checklist should be further collected.
2. The flexible learning in the workplace model, based upon social constructivism and staff's motivation to learn, has strengthened by a mentor support team, who act as a core group who intrigue a social interaction in an online learning environment. Mentors using the guidelines, motivated members to socially learn, and help motivating group to help each other. It was noted that participants with higher score in the pre-test found to be more frequently accessed to online quizzes and activities often than those who with lower score in their pre-test. The finding of this model indicated in the predictive formula of the online success, staff whose prior knowledge (pre-test) was high, tended to be easily to motivate to the online quiz-learning activities, and finally gained a high final test score. Constructivism is an approach that is most effective when there is a high-context culture that has previous knowledge. The advance learners quicker access the needed information.
3. The result of the model testing showed that a major executives supporting on the one hour a day- time allocated for staff, which couldn't have an access to the Internet at home. This allowed opportunities to staff to fully join the learning activities. The incentive provided by the institution encouraging staff to participate online activities, which yield to the success of learning appeared in

the higher scores of learning at the end. Motivation treated in this model: allocated time, incentives, and recognition for the success; could happen only a support from top management. Accordingly, it could be said not only the flexible of hours, places to learn, but motivation to learn in the flexi program was a key factor.

4. The study also found that those who earlier dropped out from the program were not encouraged by a social networking concept. When they were behind the schedule, they might be impeded by other members in the group. Some of them preferred to study on the own, less social pressure. A different learning style should be taken into an account in the future study.

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