

ICED 2020 proceedings: Towards an integrated support policy based on connected curricula and blended learning

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Abstract

VIVES University of Applied Sciences is striving for future-oriented education. Students are prepared for the professions of tomorrow by confronting them with the complexity they will have to face as professionals. “Connected curriculum” and “blended learning” are the two central educational concepts that shape this ambition. Both are confirmed in the educational policy plan of VIVES and are supported and stimulated in policy terms. In this article, we will elaborate on both concepts and explain how an integrated support policy was elaborated based on them.

1 Connected curriculum and blended learning

“*Connected curriculum*” is defined more broadly than usually is the case. In addition to striving for connection between learning content and teaching methods (e.g., Perkins, 1993) and how education and research can be integrated within each other (UCL, Young & Perović, 2016), VIVES attaches importance to connections within the institution itself, with the professional field and with society. Hence, we strive for strong connections among all crucial actors in higher education. This strengthens and enriches the learning environment, for example through activities in the professional field, in an international or interdisciplinary context.

The “*blended learning*” approach is defined in VIVES as “integration of on- and off-campus learning activities and a learning goal-oriented use of educational technology with a focus on active student-centred learning environments.” The didactic focus is that teachers, depending on the learning objectives, integrate both face-to-face and distance moments in order to optimize learning activities and evaluation. There is no “ideal blend”. A learning goal-oriented approach is always paramount. As a result, different interpretations of a blended learning environment are possible (see Figure 1).

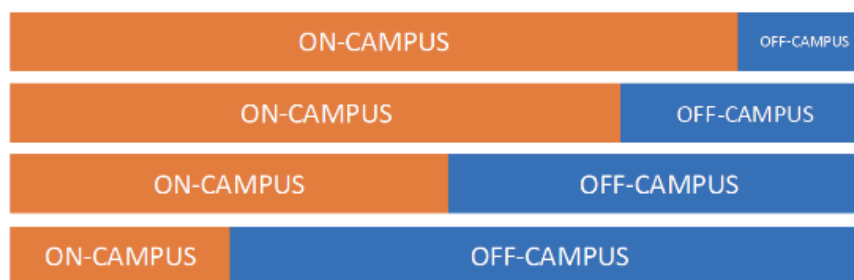


Figure 1: Different approaches of a blended learning environment

2 Professionalization as leverage

The educational concepts connected curriculum and blended learning are both included in the policy plan of the VIVES university of applied sciences. The educational developers of the institution support teachers (teams) in implementing the policy plan. Educational developers within VIVES are therefore strongly committed to mobilizing and supporting teachers in developing blended learning environments. The challenge is to find a specific and easily accessible way to reach as many teachers as possible, from innovators and early adopters to laggards (Rogers, 1995). Hence, in implementing educational innovation there are various groups of teachers with different characteristics, which means that they implement the innovation at a different pace (cf. the “diffusion of innovations” theory, Rogers, 1995). Designing blended learning environments is not easy for “the late majority” or for “the laggards” (Rogers, 1995) among the teachers. Many questions arise when (re)designing a course unit, for example: Which technology or tools are available? How can I implement them and what can they be used for? Do I still achieve the goals of my course?

When giving support to teachers, it is important to focus not only on the what and how, but also on the why (Last, 2019). Teachers need to understand the added value of blended learning and of the learning-goal-oriented use of educational technology. Instead of introducing blended learning as something that replaces current teaching methods, it is important for teachers to realize that blended learning is something that can strengthen and support their current teaching practice. This awareness is essential if teachers are to break away from routines.

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3 Towards an integrated support policy

VIVES applies an integrated support policy based on the Arena Blended Connected learning design method, the “ABC method” (UCL, Perovic & Clive, 2015). This method aims at creating exciting blends of learning activities at course and/or program level. The ABC LD method, based on research by University College London, is a very specific and efficient method for (re)designing curricula or course units. The building blocks of the method – learning activities, acquiring knowledge, researching, applying, discussing, producing and collaborating – were researched by Prof. Laurillard within the conversational framework theory (Laurillard, 2013a, 2013b).

The ABC method is used in VIVES as the basis for an integrated support policy. This integration manifests itself in the connection of the units of educational development and educational technology, which use the same building blocks and terminology from the ABC

method to elaborate their support policies. Here various existing and new educational concepts and support materials are combined which are either based upon or augment the original ABC method.

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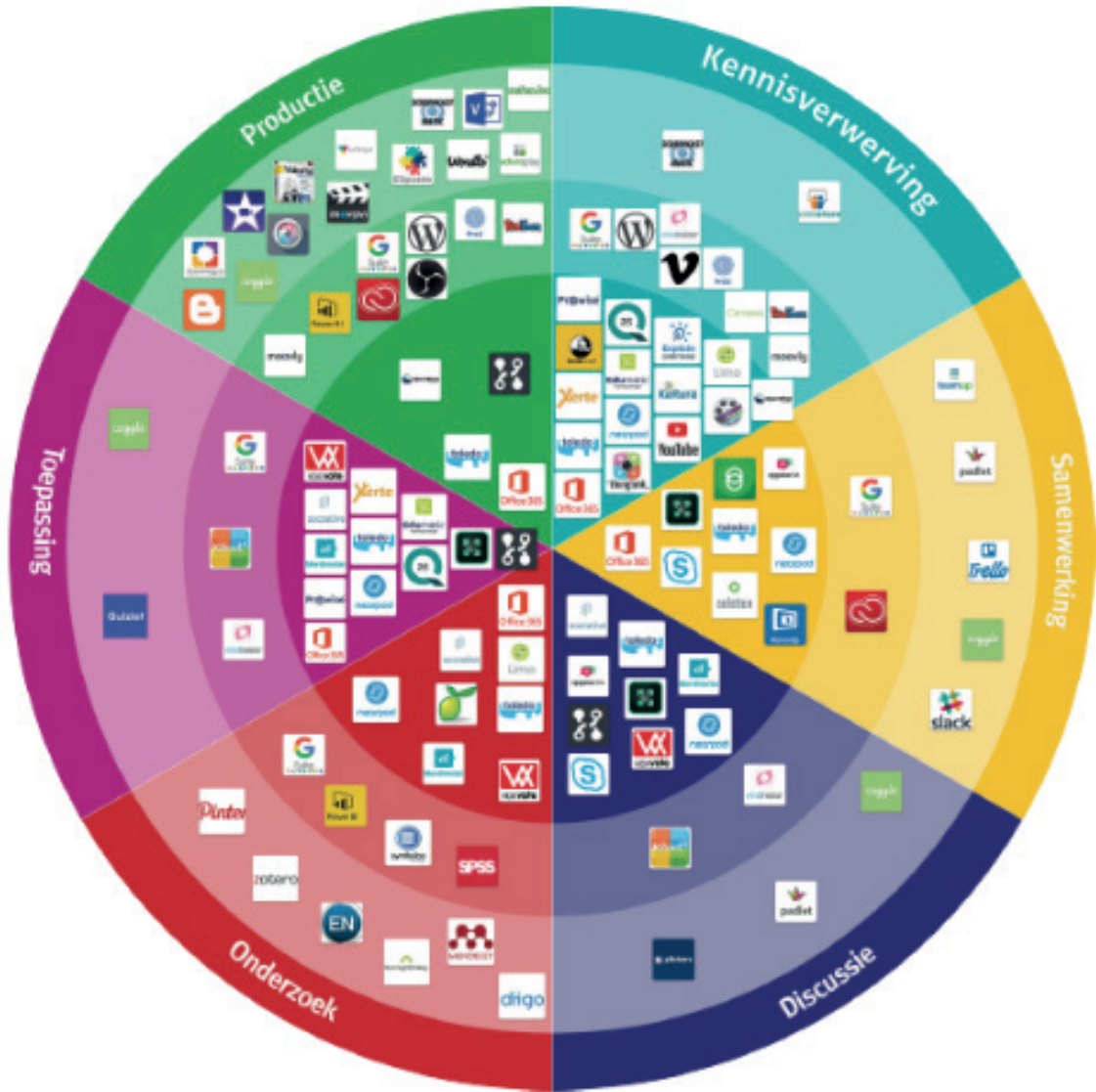


Figure 2: Educational tools per learning activity

One example of how the original ABC material has been applied in the educational development and educational technology units is the elaboration of the professionalization material from the educational technology unit. The range of educational tools and the associated support are presented in an “app-wheel” based on the classification of the six learning activities. Because of this visualization, teachers immediately see which tools are available for the chosen learning activities. VIVES also added the level of support to this in order for teachers to see which level of support they can receive for the chosen tool. Three levels of support are available:

- *Strongly supported tools*: Manuals, research and licenses are available for these tools. ~ tools in the inner circle
- *Supported to a limited extent*: Either a manual, professionalization or licenses are available for these tools. The tool is supported by offering one (or two) of the three forms of support. ~ tools in the middle circle
- *Inspiring tools*: These tools are provided as an opportunity, for inspiration. No manuals, updates or licenses are provided. ~ tools in the outer circle

The wheel is dynamic: the tools in the wheel are subject to change. For example, a tool can shift because of new functionalities of the learning activity, but the tool can also be placed more inwards or outwards in the circle depending on the level of support. For each tool, a tool page is available on the VIVES intranet where all teachers can find explanations, support materials, etc. concerning it.

Next to adjustments and further elaboration of the ABC materials and method, VIVES offers teachers different workshop variants, for example the Start2Blend trajectory. This trajectory is much more intensive than the ABC workshop itself. It consists of three sessions of one and a half to two hours in which the participating teachers are individually prepared. They are supported afterwards. This trajectory is given in a blended format (the “teach as you preach principle”; Kroll and Laboskey, 1996). Hence, the participating teachers get to know the concepts of blended learning and immediately start working with one of their own courses. In each session there is a different didactic focus.

A second workshop variant is a short inspiring workshop in which teachers get acquainted with what blended learning is and why it can be used. In this workshop, teachers experiment briefly with the learning activities and possible working methods. This workshop is primarily intended to get “the late majority” and “the laggards” (Rogers, 1995) excited about this innovation. If, after this brief experience with blended learning, teachers want to continue or further discover blended learning, they can follow the ABC workshop or the Start2Blend trajectory.

A third variant consists of workshops that we design at the request of an individual teacher or teacher team. For these workshops we work in a demand-oriented way and adapt the material and the approach of the ABC method very flexibly.

4 Experiences with blending learning and the ABC method

By integrating support options for teachers across educational topics and different units within the institution, teachers and educational developers speak “the same language”. This integrated approach appears to be successful. Teachers perceive it as meaningful and instructive. In particular, the time and space teachers get during the workshop to exchange experiences and hold discussions with colleagues are considered as valuable. The method is used within the institution not only to (re)design a powerful blended learning environment, which was the original goal of UCL, but also for awareness raising, reflection, discussion with colleagues, etc.

In addition to its benefits for teachers, the educational developers and technologists at VIVES experience the method as a useful tool for working hands-on with teacher(s) (teams). The teachers themselves also have a growing need for innovative teaching. Stimulated by a range of professionalization activities, educational developers offer specific examples of how blended learning is growing at VIVES University of Applied Sciences.

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