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Situational Leadership Theory as a Foundation for a Blended Learning Framework

David Meier
Research Scholar, National School of Leadership, Pune, India

Abstract
Ultimately with the raise of computer technology, blended learning has found its way into teaching. The technology continues to evolve, challenging teachers and lecturers alike. Most studies on blended learning focus on the practical or applied side and use essentially pedagogical concepts. This study demonstrates that the leadership sciences can enrich pedagogy in building a framework for teaching in a blended learning setting. At the core, the study transforms situational leadership theory (Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson, 2008) into a framework for blended learning. The model presented helps in organizing a situationally correct employment of blended learning and crystallizes appropriate teaching methods for specific learning goals.
Keywords: blended learning; situational leadership; teaching; adult education

Introduction

Integrated or blended learning provides a multitude of new opportunities for knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing and knowledge organization. Due to the rapid development of technology in the field of blended learning, the theory mostly covers a best practice approach (Thorne, 2003, or Garrison, 2008). This means that while blended learning is widely used, there does not yet exist many generally accepted theoretical concepts of deployment, and none that tries to combine educational theories with leadership theories. The approach presented here constructs a framework where blended learning is put into a theoretical and pedagogical context. But importantly, the focus extends the field of pedagogy. Lecturers or trainers are also leaders; they need to lead and guide their students to acquire knowledge. This becomes more important in environments where one is confronted with adults, as is the case at universities and in adult education generally. And because the learning and teaching are taking place under diverse settings, the approach presented here incorporates the Blanchard and Hersey (2008) situational leadership theory. In their original theory, Blanchard and Hersey (1977) distinguished different styles of leadership and several maturity levels. Looking into a learning framework like blended learning one is not confronted with leadership styles, but rather with teaching or learning styles as described by Akkoynulu and Soylu (2008) in their research on blended learning and different learning styles. Therefore one of the crucial parts of this study is the transformation of leadership styles into teaching styles.

Definition of Terms

When researching the term blended learning, it is readily noticeable that there is no independent definition of blended learning. In the words of Picciano (2014), a definition is not even possible. Different definitions exist simultaneously. The definition provided here is an attempt to articulate the writer's own view of what blended learning really is.

Blended learning is a rather new concept and has not yet taken hold as a generic term. It seems that one important attribute is its differentiation from e-learning. The latter also is a new, imprecise term. Its lowest common denominator is the computer as a means of knowledge diffusion through computer-aided learning. At the core of blended learning, there is the postulate of networked learning and teaching. Depending on one's perspective, blended learning extends e-learning or is merely one of several e-learning methods. Blended learning combines different teaching and learning methods, and certainly a strong emphasis is placed on e-learning. Location-independent learning platforms connected with the Internet are most often what is directly meant when talking about blended learning. But this is not absolutely necessary, as is shown with yet another term— m-learning or mobile learning. There the emphasis is for sure on mobility and hence more concretely on the Internet. Blended learning can integrate web-based training contents (WBT) and computer-based training contents (CBT), but does not necessarily have to do so. For the sake of completeness, there are two more terms to mention— e-tutor and e-mentor—both of which focus on accompanied learning on virtual platforms, mostly in the form of learning management systems (LMS) or, better, e-learning management systems (ELMS).

Summarized, the key concepts can be put together thus:

a. E-learning - computer technology as a medium of knowledge transfer
b. Webbased training (WBT) - E-learning via the web; the advantage lies in the local independence
c. Computer-based training (CBT) - E-learning with stand-alone applications on a local PC
d. E-tutor and e-mentoring - Learning support through virtual learning platforms
e. Learning Management System (LMS) – An integrated virtual learning platform, mostly web-based

Didactics and Blended Learning

In the context of this article, didactics is the theoretical and practical framework of teaching and learning. Three didactic teaching-learning concepts are of importance (Aeppli, 2005, p. 32):

- Behaviourism
- Cognitivism
- Constructivism

Objectivism and Behaviourism

The behaviouristic approach says that knowledge is universal and objective and that it can be structured. Learners adopt knowledge as a reflection of reality. The teacher or lecturer determines the specific content that is taught, and knowledge is passed through instruction in didactic, refined portions. This methodology is also known as programmed instruction.

While learning new content is introduced in the style of programmed instruction, so-called "drill-and-practice programs" (Schutt, 2009, p. 24) are intended for practicing acquired skills. Today drill-and-practice elements are regularly integrated in language-learning programs.

Cognitivism

Cognitivism is based on thinking processes. It tries to put together a framework of opportunities for learners to understand the real world. Cognitivism distinguishes different types of knowledge. For working on the computer, the distinction between procedural and declarative knowledge is important. On the one hand, it is about processes or procedures that need to be learned. On the other hand, the learner has to deal with factual knowledge, such as learning technical terms.

There is, however, more than procedural and factual knowledge. Developing and assimilating strategies or flexible behaviour in situations require a different type of knowledge. This is where constructivism ties in.

Subjectivism and Constructivism

In subjectivism, there is no objective knowledge; individuals construct their own knowledge. Teaching means creating experiences for the learners and presenting them with real world problems so that they can actively build their own knowledge and skills. The teacher's function is mainly a moderating one.

Constructivism does not teach simplified knowledge, but rather tries to map reality. Learning can only take place in an active process, because only from our own experience and knowledge can existing skills be changed and personalized. It is essential that learning happens in a social context. But constructivism is not limited only to cognitive aspects. Feelings, as well as personal identification, are extremely critical.

Overview

A summary of the theory outlined and adapted to the framework of blended learning is set out below (*qtd*. in Bräzel, 2009, p. 29):

Table 1: Learning Paradigm and Software Typology

Category	**Behaviourism**	**Cognitivism**	**Constructivism**
Brain is a	passive container	information processing machine	informational closed system
Knowledge is being	archived	processed	constructed
Knowledge is	a correct input-output relation	an adequate internal process	to operate actively within a situation
Learning goals are	correct answers	correct methods for finding the answers	handle complex situations
Strategy of the teacher	teaching	observing and helping	cooperate
Teacher is	an authority	a tutor	a coach
Feedback is	externally given	externally modelled	internally modelled
Interaction is	rigidly given	dynamically in dependency of an external teaching model	self referential, circular and autonomous
Attributes of a programme	rigid sequence, quantitative time and response statistics	dynamically controlled sequence, given problem	Dynamic, complex, networked systems, no direct given problem
Software paradigm	learning machine	artificial intelligence	socio-technical environments
Ideal software typology	tutorial systems, drill and practice	adaptive systems, intelligent tutoring systems	simulations, microcosm, hypermedia, interactive-dynamic systems

Based on the above matrix, blended learning cannot be definitely allocated to any of the three teaching concepts. Although the behaviourist approach has come out of fashion, it corresponds to many traditional forms of CBT. A classical example would be a computer course on how to use a certain machine. In such case, interactivity is at a rudimentary state. The computer is used predominantly statically and instructively. In these specific contexts, a behaviourist approach does make a great deal of sense.

In the cognitivist model, we find the most viable approaches for isolated e-learning. As described above, cognitivism distinguishes between procedural and declarative knowledge. An abundance of methods exist for both approaches. These methods are mostly based on interactive e-learning programs that often involve the following three steps: instruction, testing, and evaluation. Within this framework, blended learning is surely applied. An example would be a language-learning program. The grammar is explained but must not only be learned by heart but also understood and put correctly in context. The teaching and learning can play a strong interactive part, including testing and evaluation.

The constructive approach takes us one step further to the highest form of blended learning. The challenge today is to link knowledge, such that learners need to develop situational solutions. Unlike the one-dimensional example of language acquisition, learning is often multi-dimensional. Modern society is increasingly confronted with a vast amount of information. To cope with today's information-society, one needs to find a flexible, situational strategy for knowledge transfer and appropriation. This is where the leadership theory of Hersey and Blanchard (2008) helps.

Situational Leadership Theory

Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory (SLT) is one of the best-known theories in the field of managerial leadership. In their model, a leader applies different leadership styles according to a follower's (an employee/subordinate's) maturity level. The term "(Task Relevant) Maturity Level" was introduced in the first consolidated editions of SLT in the 1970s (Graeff, 1997, p. 154). Later on, SLT underwent many revisions with the wording "maturity level" changed first into developmental levels (Thompson and Vecchio, 2009) and then lately, in their newest edition, into performance readiness levels (Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson, 2008). This change happened in response to many critics and SLT research. This adjustment certainly helped the theory evolve further. In this work, we will retain the original term "maturity level" because it makes it easier to transform the situational leadership model into a teaching-learning model for blended learning.

In SLT, the task-relevant maturity level of the follower is the major situational determinant of leader behaviour (Graeff, 1984, p. 285).

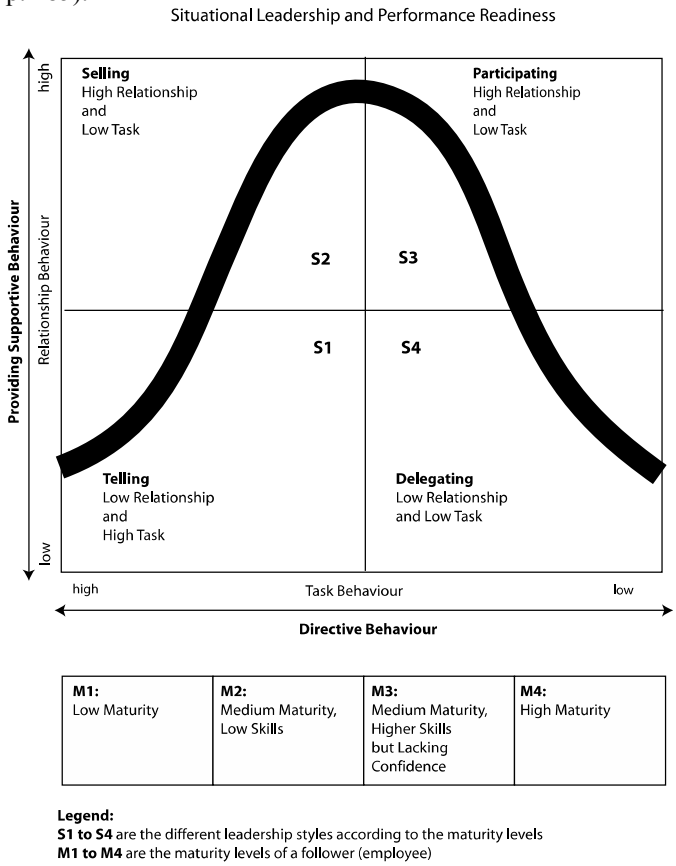

Figure 1: The Situational Leadership Model adapted from Hersey and Blanchard (1977).

If a team leader has to introduce a freshman in his team, then S1 would be a good starting point. When the new employee has gradually acquired new skills and confidence, the leading style can change to S2 or further. This is a simplistic example as one can imagine that leadership behaviour is situational in many ways and maturity is relative. The same person can be very mature in baking bread but not in selling it. Thus, a leader must always analyse the situational context of the task and the follower's maturity for it.

Transforming SLT into a Teaching-Learning Framework

Teaching is in great part leading, and it is nearly always situational, thus borrowing from a situational leadership model seems to be a good idea. The aim of this work is to transform the SLT model into a framework for teaching and learning. Thus, we will have to change the leadership styles into teaching styles and set the maturity category within a new context.

In the field of teaching, maturity level is less controversial than in leadership sciences; therefore, this study will retain the label maturity level when converting SLT into a model for blended learning. But maturity is measured slightly different (*see* Figure 2).

Table 2: Maturity Levels

M1	**M2**	**M3**	**M4**
Low Maturity Beginner • earner is dependent	Medium Maturity, Low Skills • earner is interested	Medium Maturity, Higher Skills • earner is involved	High Maturity Developed Skills • earner is nearly autodidact

Adaptation of the four leadership styles into teaching styles for blended learning is oriented by the above-described didactic priciples:

a) Telling -> Behavioural approach (S1 to Q1)
b) Selling -> Cognitive approach (S2 to Q2)
c) Participating -> Transition from the cognitivism to constructivism (S3 to Q3)
d) Delegating -> Constructivist approach (S4 to Q4)

The following diagram is an attempt to plot the methodological orientation of blended learning against Hersey and Blanchard's SLT.

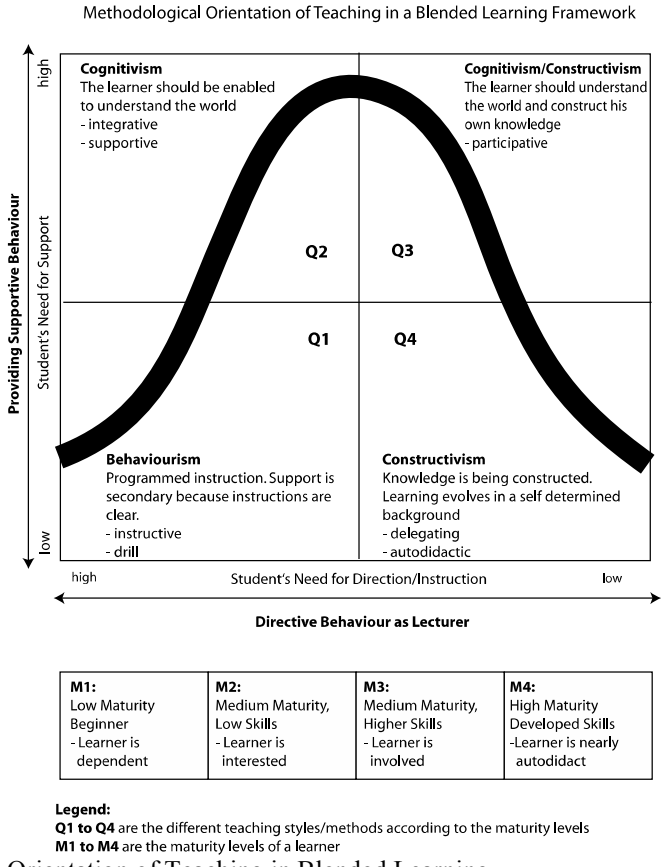

Figure 2: Methodological Orientation of Teaching in Blended Learning

Blended learning is most effective in the last two quadrants—Q3 and Q4. In Q1 and Q2, however, the

method to choose is rather isolated e-learning with the help of CBT or WBT. In Q3 and Q4, the student does not require high directive behaviour by the lecturer. Thus, the lecturer's role is that of a moderator rather than that of an instructor. The following list shows the individual categories:

Table 3: Proposed Methodology for Blended Learning

Category	**Course orientation**	**Required maturity level of the student**	**Learning goal**	**Teaching methods**
Q1	Informatory	M1: Learner is dependent	Knowledge acquisition	Programmed instructions, simple tutorials
Q2	Integrative	M2: Learner is interested	Knowledge development	CBT/WBT with moderate interactivity
Q3	Participative	M3: Learner is involved	Applying knowledge or know how	Mainly interactive systems. Simple LMS, a feedback structure by a tutor or fellow students. MOOC, Social Learning Platforms
Q4	Delegating	M4: Learner is nearly autodidact	Reflection of knowledge and the understanding of complex relations	Professional LMS with strong collaboration tools. Social learning Platforms.

Conclusion

When the amount of information becomes overwhelming, a simple knowledge transfer in an instructional style does not suffice in teaching. It is important to introduce methods that help maintain structure and overview. Blended learning is essential in this regard and will gain in importance. This might be even more true as education is becoming increasingly mobile and flexible. Against this background, it is important to have good insight in how blended learning can best be deployed.

This study has tried to show how blended learning could be applied situationally correctly by transforming SLT into a didactical framework. In this model, a lecturer or teacher employs distinctive teaching styles according to the learner's maturity level. In this regard, our study is interdisciplinary and presents a blend of two fields: pedagogy as basis and leadership sciences as extension.

The final model defines four categories of learning goals with corresponding methods of teaching. The learning goals are derived from the learner's maturity level, similar to their derivation in SLT, and represent four different styles of teaching-learning settings, which are Q1 to Q4. In the context of blended learning, the model helps by offering a choice of *learning goals,* enabling the lecturer to then choose the corresponding *teaching methods*. Especially interesting is the diagram (Figure 2) itself because it is an aid for adjusting and identifying different states of teaching (hence a situational model). Once these stages are recognized, the lecturer can understand what the students need, and based on this, choose the appropriate teaching style within a blended learning framework.

In this paper, we have tried to compound SLT with pedagogy and demonstrate how an interdisciplinary method can be applied to a model for blended learning. In this way, it is also an attempt to show how versatile leadership theories like SLT can be and that it is worthwhile to look at them from research fields outside the pure leadership sciences.

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