The Laureate English Program: Taking a Research Informed Approach to Blended Learning

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Abstract: The aim of this case study is to describe the implementation of the Laureate English Program (LEP), the consequent decision to roll out blended learning across the network, and the Laureate-Cambridge University Press research partnership. Phase 1 of the research was completed in September 2012. The goal of this first phase was to gain a general understanding of student profile, computer literacy and competence, student levels of achievement, and student feedback on their blended learning experience. Six hundred and forty-eight students and 35 teachers responded to a questionnaire, which included multiple choice questions and open ended questions requiring extended comment. The questionnaires revealed that less than 25% of the Laureate student group had ever learned a language online before, which impacted significantly on student perception and use of online learning content. Furthermore, the first phase of research has revealed the impact that a complex interplay of different factors has on the relative effectiveness of these blended programs, and it has acknowledged that research is central to informed decision making in order to provide for effective blended learning.

Keywords: Blended learning, English language proficiency, Laureate English Program, Laureate-Cambridge University Press partnership

Background

Laureate International Universities is an international network of over 60 accredited campus-based and online institutions of higher education, offering undergraduate and graduate degree programs to more than 675,000 students around the world. The Laureate English Program (LEP) started in 2007 when English Department leaders from a few network Hispanic institutions (two from Chile, one from Spain and one from Mexico) came together in a working group to build a program that would connect network schools and bring value to its students. They were asked to put aside all concerns regarding budget and infrastructure, and to come

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up with a wish-list of the components that would constitute the ideal Laureate English Program (LEP). The result of this exercise was a comprehensive program to include teacher training and certification, pedagogy, and student certification. These three components were to be informed by quality assurance and research (figure 1).

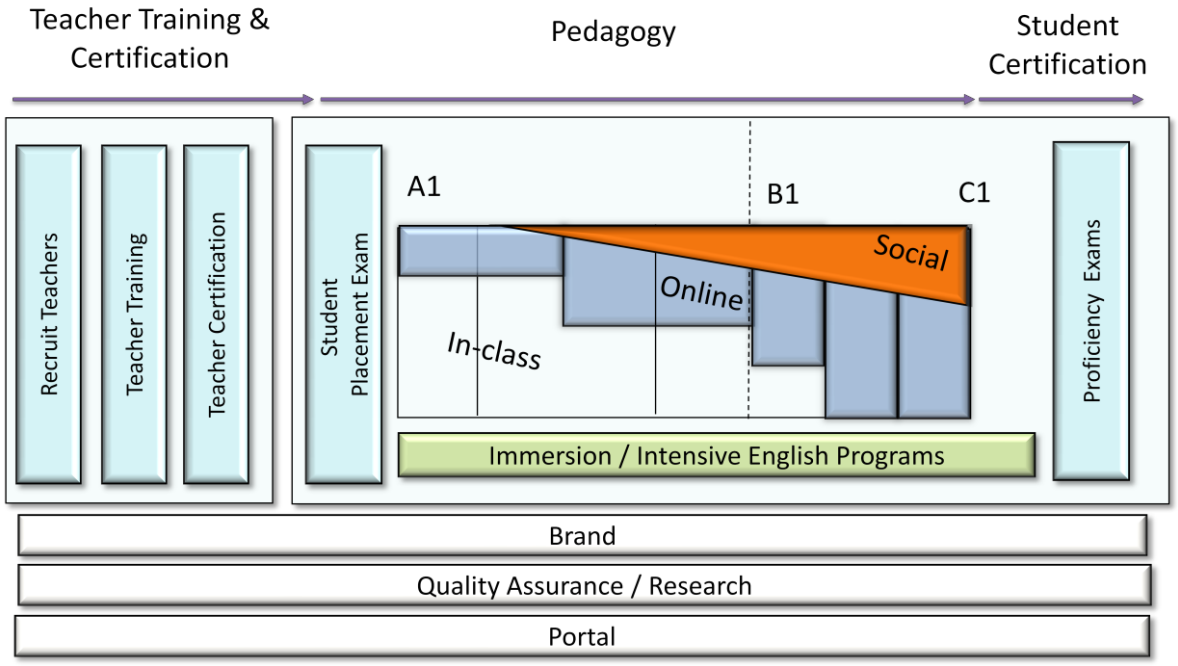

Figure 1. LEP Components.

This is an ambitious program and, although still considered a 'work-in-progress', significant advances have been made in all component areas. However, for the purposes of this article, the focus will be on the pedagogy component (i.e., the English language course structure and delivery) and the research partnership with Cambridge University Press.

The Decision to Implement Blended Learning

The stated objective of the Laureate English Program is to provide all students with an opportunity to reach a 'sufficient' level of English language proficiency while attending a Laureate institution. This 'sufficient level' is identified as B1 (threshold or intermediate level) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards (Council of Europe, n.d.).

However, in order to reach the B1 target**,** 400-500 hours of guided instruction is a recommended minimum and most Laureate programs allow for an average maximum of 50-60 hours of face to face instruction over the course of an academic period. It was therefore considered unrealistic to require universities to introduce eight terms of English language instruction, into what was already fully programed curricula, in order to ensure students had enough face to face instruction time to reasonably attain the B1 goal. As a result, the proposal was for a blended teaching/learning solution to address the issues of time and resource limitations. The blend was conceived in terms of a three-part whole: class time for instruction and practice; online time for additional instruction, practice, and reinforcement**;** and a social

networking platform for students to interact with their peers from other Laureate International Universities (LIUs) as a way to strengthen the usefulness of English as a common language medium and to promote the sense of belonging to an international higher education consortium. It was also considered important to give students opportunities for intensive immersion experiences as a way to strengthen (and reward) the language learning progress.

The Partnership with Cambridge University Press

A request for proposal was sent to a number of the major English as a Foreign Language (EFL) content providers. All were asked to present a solution for some part(s) or for all of the components of the brainstormed wish-list that they could provide off-the-shelf, or would be willing to develop for Laureate. Eventually, a proposal from Cambridge University Press was accepted and the Laureate-Cambridge University Press partnership was formed. Although Cambridge University Press, at the time, had not developed a learning management system (LMS) platform, they offered a partnership in which Laureate could work collaboratively with them to develop appropriate online tools required to create a truly blended content delivery model.

The *Touchstone* series published by Cambridge University Press was chosen as the basis from which to begin development of the online language content**,** and by 2009 the first BETA version of an interactive workbook, with a skeleton LMS of basic features, was made available to the pilot institutions. Three years later, four levels of *Touchstone* were made available in blended delivery format.

The Research Partnership

The rollout of the Laureate English Program has been continuous and steady over the past five years (figure 2). However, not all institutions have chosen to implement the fully blended delivery of their English language programs immediately.

In the early rollout stages, the majority of institutions chose to implement the online resources as student self-study materials, for additional practice and reinforcement of content covered in class. A number of these early adopters continue with the self-study approach. However, a number of other early adopters are today enthusiastically experimenting with different forms of the blend, encouraged by a general optimism and recent studies, such as the one produced by the U.S Education Department, which indicates blended learning can benefit students and have a positive impact on their learning experience (Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R, Bakia, M., & Jones, K., 2009). Other University English departments within the Laureate network, still not so sure, are more hesitant to experiment and fall into the category of ‘wait-and-see-if-it-works-before-buying-in’.

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
UNAB (Chile) UDLA (Chile) UVM (Mexico) JIN JIANG (China) INTERAMERICANA (Costa Rica) **Five institutions**	UNAB (Chile) UDLA (Chile) UVM (Mexico) JI JIANG (China) INTERAMERICANA (Costa Rica) INTERAMERICANA (Panama) ULACIT (Panama) HUNAN (China) TIANYI (China) BILGI (Turkey) **Ten institutions**	AIEP (Chile) BILGI (Turkey) INTI (Malaysia) LATINA (Costa Rica) UDLA (Chile) UDLA (Ecuador) ULACIT (Panama) UNAB (Chile) UPC (Peru) UPN (Peru) UVM (Mexico) HUNAN (China) TIANYI (China) JIN JIANG (China) UIP (Panama) ULACIT (Panama) CEUTEC (Honduras) UNITEC (Honduras) UICB (Morocco) RPI, Riyadh(Saudi Arabia) SFUAD (U.S.A.) **21 institutions**	AIEP (CL) CEUTEC (HN) ESADE (BR) HIEU(CN) INTI (IN) Jin Jiang (CN) RACA (JR) SFUAD (USA) UAM (CR) UDLA (EC) UIP (PA) UNAB (CL) UniRitter (BR) UPC (PE) UVM (CL) Bilgi (TY) CIBERTEC (PE) FG (BR) IBMR (BR) INTI (MY) Latina (CR) RPI (SA) UAM (Brazil) UDLA (CL) UIC (MO) ULACIT (PA) UNIFACS (BR) UNITEC (HN) UPN (PE) UVM (MX) **30 institutions** Tianyi & EIC Tianyi no longer Laureate-owned. UnP (BR) did not join as planned.	AIEP (CL) CEUTEC (HN) ESADE (BR) HIEU(CN) INTI (IN) ISLA (PL) Latina (CR) RPI (SA) ST. Thomas (JP) UAM (BR) UDLA (CL) UEM (SP)* UIP (PA) UNAB (CL) UniRitter (BR) UnP (BR) UPN (PE) UVM (MX) Bilgi (TY) CIBERTEC (PE) FG (BR) IBMR (BR) INTI (MY) Jin Jiang (CN) RACA (JR) SFUAD (USA) Stamford (TH) UAM (CR) UDLA (EC) UIC (MO) ULACIT (PA) UNIFACS (BR) UNITEC (HN) UPC (PE) UVM (CL) **35 institutions** *Spain joining fall 2012
6,000 students	**13,000 students**	**29,475 students**	**47,920 students**	**61,557 students**

Figure 2. Laureate English Program rollout 2008-2012.

None of this should come as any surprise given that the implementation of blended learning involves a significant undertaking and paradigm shift in thinking and approach to language learning and teaching, in all aspects of course design and implementation. Educators in the field recognise that:

Although blended learning lacks a coherent body of research that unequivocally demonstrates learning benefits over online or traditional modes of instruction, there is a growing body of evidence to support the view that blended learning can result in an increase in student learning, an improvement in learning outcomes and greater student satisfaction (Graham, 2006; Sharpe et al., 2006; Vaughan, 2007; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). (As paraphrased in Smyhe, 2011)

The Laureate International Universities network today finds itself in a unique position to conduct such research, which could have a significant effect not only on the understanding within the partner institutions as to the impact and benefits of blended learning, but also on the wider international community. The network has five years of experience of rolling out blended learning programs across a range of educational and regional cultures, and has access to thousands of students and hundreds of teachers engaged practically on a day to day basis in the arrange of different blended learning contexts. Thus, in March 2012 an ambitious research initiative, in partnership with Cambridge University Press, was launched. This initiative involves multiple projects, with different objectives and expected outcomes over an extended minimum period of 5 years**,** and aims to develop a research informed understanding into the effective implementation of blended language learning with the objective of identifying key pedagogical principles to support learning and teaching in different blended contests.

The following are among the current (phases 1 and 2) areas of research:

- student achievement through blended and online learning;
- key factors which contribute to student 'success';
- key factors which contribute to effective institutional and pedagogical support;
- best practice models for blended learning and online learning.

Phase 1 of the research was completed in September 2012. The aim of this first phase was to gain a general understanding of student profile, computer literacy and competence, student levels of achievement, and student feedback on their blended learning experience. Six hundred and forty-eight students and 35 teachers responded to the questionnaire, which included multiple choice questions and open ended questions requiring extended comment. An initial analysis of these responses is presented below.

Phase 1 Research – The Results

Student Profile, Computer Literacy, and Competence

Given the student demographic within the Laureate network, it came as no surprise that the majority of the students (74% of the total student group) fell within the 18-25 year-old category, and that in general the students reported spending between 3-5 hours a day in front of their computers. Again, given research already conducted elsewhere, the results of this research did nothing more than confirm an understanding of the central role technology plays in everyday student life, for work, study, and leisure. These 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) reported relatively little difficulty in accessing and navigating their way through the LMS and the online content, and feedback from teachers indicated that these students need relatively little support in how to use the different tools available to them. Students today are evidently well within their comfort zone when using technology, and this is clearly essential when it comes to the implementation of any blended or online learning program.

Students are often assumed to feel empowered with respect to learning because of their familiarity with and access to technology. Yet, educators are beginning to question this assumption (Gold, 2011; O'Brian, 2010; World Bank, 2011) and a recent study concluded that, for the majority students in their research sample, "although they use the Internet and other [information and communications technology (ICT)] for school purposes, [they] believed that their generation is not as good at learning as the pre-ICT generation" (Kolikant, 2010, p. 1384). Furthermore, the study found only a third of these students "believed that their generation is better at learning than the pre-ICT generation, whereas 68% thought that their generation was worse in this respect" (Kolikant, 2010, p. 1388).

Acknowledging the results of the Kolikant study, the Laureate-Cambridge University Press research considered carefully the question of student computer literacy and competence, not only in terms of their ability to use the tools available to them but also, and more importantly, in order to determine the students' ability to learn using technology. The questionnaires revealed that less than 25% of the Laureate student group had ever learned a language online before, and as will be seen from the discussion below, this lack of experience impacted significantly on student perception and use of online learning content.

Student Achievement

Measuring student achievement across different institutions with differing academic cultures is complex, and student achievement in this first phase has primarily been measured qualitatively through student self-evaluation.

The students were asked to rate their level of confidence in the following areas: vocabulary, grammar, conversation strategies, reading, writing, speaking, listening and pronunciation.

Overall, the student group rated themselves as being **very confident** in all areas. In a closer analysis of the three different student groups, the student groups in Latin America and Morocco both reported their levels of confidence in all areas as **very confident**. In Turkey, students' self-evaluation was also generally **very confident** with the exception**,** however**,** of relatively lower confidence levels reported for *conversation strategies* and *vocabulary*.

Quantitative research is also being conducted in partnership with Cambridge ESOL, which is monitoring a longitudinal benchmarking project with the aim of comparing student level achievement within and across institutions world-wide over an extended minimum period of 5 years. It is too early to state in detail the impact blended learning is having across the institutions, but early quantitative data coming through clearly indicated a steady improvement in the level of attainment among students following the blended learning programs. Here too, however, variances in student achievement have been noted across different institutions and regions.

The dissimilarity in confidence levels and language achievement across the different groups of students requires that further research be conducted in order to understand the possible variables that might explain the differences between the student groups. However, a first analysis of the student and teacher feedback would appear to suggest that these differences 'may' depend on any, or all, of the following.

The Ability of the Students Themselves to Learn Independently

As discussed above, assumptions cannot be made as to students' ability to learn using technology on the grounds that they fall into the category of 'digital natives' and are confident and regular users of technology. Those students who had already learned a language online before reported having relatively more confidence in their language ability, than did those that were provided with some degree of learner training (i.e.**,** skills and strategy training for learning independently).

The Way in Which Blended Learning Has Been Implemented in the Different Institutions

The Laureate network consists of institutions across the world with differing academic and regional cultures, differing resource availability, and time constraints on class scheduling. The advantage of blended learning is that its very flexibility and**,** as such**,** institutions were encouraged to implement a blend appropriate to the local context. However, what is beginning to come through in this first phase of research is the need for these different blends to be buttressed by pedagogical principles. It is too early to determine exactly what constitutes the

'most effective' or the 'most appropriate' blend, but what is clear is the importance of not losing sight of fundamental language learning and teaching principles when introducing technology into the curricula. Further research is now being conducted to determine appropriate pedagogical models for blended learning.

The Nature and Level of Training the Teacher Has Received

Effective blended learning and teaching is much more than simply understanding and being confident with the technology. Just as more than how-to-use-the-tools-training is required for the student, the same can be said for the teachers. It is clear from the teacher feedback that an understanding of the pedagogy is also required, and this will be discussed further below.

The blended learning experience. The students were asked to rate the following aspects of the online learning content: ease of access to content, ease of navigation, amount of language practice, variety of activities and level of enjoyment. The majority of the students rated these aspects as **good** and the *level of enjoyment* scored relatively high overall. The students in Latin America rated higher levels of enjoyment and variety of activities than the student groups in Turkey and Morocco. Overall the student group in Turkey generally rated the different aspects lower than their counterparts in Latin America and Morocco.

The students reported interest and enthusiasm with learning online and, in all aspects 'technical' (i.e., ease of access to content and navigation), the students reported back positively. This would suggest that the online content design is relatively user-friendly and that the students themselves were competent users to understand what was required.

The students were asked to rate the effectiveness of the following: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, language practice, blog writing activities, voice tools activities, forum activities, and the video role play activities. In general, the majority of the students rated all the activities as **good,** with the language activities (vocabulary, grammar and language practice) being rated as more effective than the voice tools, forums, and blog writing activities.

Unsurprisingly, 'fun' and 'easy' were the key criteria by which the students determined their choice of favourite activity, along with the perception of immediate learning gain. It therefore follows that the vocabulary and grammar activities, which provide feedback on correct and incorrect answers and an immediate 'score' out of 10, are rated highly among the students' 'favourite' activities.

The blog writing, the forum, and voice tools activities are frequently rated among the least favourite of the online activities. On the face of it, this relatively negative feedback is somewhat surprising given the 'digital native' tends to "[v]iew the Internet in terms of interaction and participation rather than as passive or one-directional ... [and] [p]refer a- synchronistic or sequential communication, such as email, Facebook, or chat" (Zur & Walker, 2011). As a result, it is reasonable to have expected a more positive response to these activities from the students. However, analysis of the extended comment feedback indicates it is not the communication tool itself that is at issue here, but interplay of different factors which may include one or all of the following.

Students Do Not Necessarily 'Know' How to Learn Online

The research results from phase 1 support similar analysis from other studies. For instance, Zur and Walker (2011) suggested that the digital native tends to "[p]refer to learn just-in-time and what is minimally necessary" [and] '"[s]eeks instant gratification and rewards, do not see the value in waiting". This would indicate that there is a need to create learning content and programmes which meet this 'just-in-time' 'minimal-necessary' approach to learning, and indeed this is what many online content providers are seeking to achieve. But some commentators (Berman, 2012; Richtel, 2012) suggested that we should be wary and take a step a back to consider the need for a balance in responding to changing learner preferences and the need to ensure we provide effective learning content, and early results in this research study would support the view that a balance is required.

Forty percent of the students cited *opportunities for practice outside of the* classroom as an important advantage of blended learning, and yet it is clear that the student perception of what constitutes 'practice' online is generally in terms of quick, fun, and time limited activities. Yet, the very nature of language learning requires practice of production skills, which necessarily involves more creative thinking and extended time on the part of the student, something which cannot be achieved through ticking boxes or dragging items to complete sentences to achieve a 'right' answer. Students need support in developing the skills required to learn a language, skills that, to some extent, are similar to those required in the face to face context.

Other required skills are those related to the ability to learn autonomously and the ability to take responsibility for one's own learning. Fifty-five percent of the students cited *lack of teacher presence* as a major disadvantage of learning online. Many of the students were not comfortable with the requirement to study independently outside of the classroom. This had little to do with the perception that this was homework task, but more to do with the fact that they were required to take responsibility for this component in their program.

There may well be an argument for having a teacher presence online, especially when students have little, or limited, face to face contact with their peers and teacher. However, in all instances the students in this research study had significant contact time with their teacher in the classroom.

Teacher Engagement with and Understanding of the Pedagogy Behind Blended Learning—The Need for Training Teachers

The teachers were asked to rate to what extent the training they received before they started using Touchstone Blended Learning had helped them understand: the basic navigation of the LMS, the general pedagogical principles of the course, their role, and how to use the Web 2.0 tools. Sixty percent of the teachers reported that the training they had received had helped them understand the basic navigation of the LMS, only 20% reported the training had helped them understand the pedagogical principles, and not one teacher reported back that the training had helped understand their role and how to use the Web 2.0 tools. The teachers did report to having had sufficient training on the LMS, but relatively little on either the pedagogical principles of the course or on how to use the web 2.0 tools. The role of the teacher is important in any

learning context and it follows to conclude that should a teacher not be adequately trained then this will impact on the student's learning experience.

Conclusions

Blended learning should incorporate the best of contact and online learning, allowing flexibility while retaining connectedness. Therefore, designing effective instruction requires research-informed choices. (Nagel & Kotzé, 2011)

In 2008, Laureate Education set out to implement an ambitious program of blended learning for English. Five years later the program is beginning to produce measurable results in terms of learning achievement and experience. The first phase of research has revealed the impact that a complex interplay of different factors has on the relative effectiveness of these blended programs**,** and it has acknowledged that research is central to informed decision making in order to provide for effective blended learning.

Three key factors have emerged of central importance in the design and implementation of blended language learning: the teacher, the student**,** and the model of blended learning.

Teachers Are the Key to Blended Learning Success

A key objective of phase 1 was to identify 'key factors which contribute to student success', and without a doubt the role of the teacher remains fundamental. The introduction of technology and blended learning into the curricula does not take away the need for a strong, supporting teacher role, and appropriate training and support is required.

The Confident 'Digital Native' Is not Necessarily a Confident 'Digital Learner'

Just as training is required for the teacher, students too need support and 'training' in how to make the most of the opportunities presented in a blended learning context.

There Is No 'One' Way to Blend

Just as there is no one way to teach a language, there is no one way to design and implement blended learning. There are**,** however, just as in any language learning context, best practice models and principles to be applied. It is too early to determine exactly what these models and principles are, hence the need for this Laureate-Cambridge relationship, which aims to allow for blended learning to be implemented based on informed choices.

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