Blended Learning: Will It Be the Norm?

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Getting Started with the Basics of Blended Learning

Blended learning has been gaining popularity since the 1990s, and continues to positively impact the learning environment (Zimmer, 2015). Why should instructors and students invest in blended learning? Zimmer (2015) describes blended learning as an experience combining in-person class meetings and computer mediated online interactions. Computer mediated interactions may consist of streaming video, e-mails, or chats and often delivered by a single instructor reaching far more students than a typical classroom setting (Zimmer, 2015). Blended learning is mainly focused on two separate paradigms, synchronous and asynchronous. The terms synchronous and asynchronous learning are used to describe the learning environment. Synchronous learning is a traditional face to face setting, and asynchronous learning provides the opportunity for the instructor and student to engage in content at their convenience. If a flexible course-work schedule is important to you, then blended learning may be your best option. The blended learning model provides a balance for students between their lives and education. Education is structured around a student’s life, rather than the opposite (Zimmer, 2015). Blended learning can take many forms and it depends on the format the instructor chooses. For example, using technology as a minor support and relying heavily on face to face instruction is one method of blended learning. Another method is relying solely on technology, and only meeting face to face when requested by instructor or student. There are many additional formats that depend on the instructor and student needs. One particular method, lab groups, can be beneficial to students needing support, assistance with time management and staying on task. Lab groups meet at a designated location and work online together providing the necessary support to group members (Zimmer, 2015). Since many of the technologies used in blended learning may be new to some students, instructors must ease into blended learning to accommodate all learners. If the
adjustment period to blended learning is not considered, students may become anxiety-ridden and give up on furthering their education (Zimmer, 2015). In summary, blended learning combines online delivery of content with the components of classroom interactions in such a way to personalize learning across diverse learners (Kaur, 2013).

Perceptions and Building Capacity

Kuo, Belland, Schroder and Walker (2014) determined computer mediated learning places an emphasis on flexibility and learners must be self-disciplined. Moreover, there is not one best blended learning model to follow, many factors contribute to model choice such as class size, duration of class, available technology, objectives and location (Kuo, et al., 2014). Blended learning has been shown to save educational organizations money, often with tremendous academic gains (Alijani, Obyung and Yanjun, 2014). Online learning has opened the door for students to become expert animators, game makers and video creators (Alijani et al., 2014). But how are we meeting the needs of today’s learner? Among the plethora of responsibilities, instructors are mandated to create Individualized Educational Plans, differentiate learning, use formative and summative assessments and provide quality feedback to students. The implementation of blended learning has provided an opportunity for instructors to increase instructional support for individual students and tackle the mandated responsibilities (Alijani et al., 2014). Kaur (2013) suggests four blended learning perspectives: Holistic, Educational, Perspective, Corporate and Chief Learning Officer. Holistic means the use of multiple instructional media forms in the classroom or distant learning environment. The Educational perspective is the integration of online and face to face class activities. Combining pedagogical approaches to achieve learning outcomes is considered the Pragmatic perspective and Corporate training perspective is an example of sales training, role playing and lectures. Finally, the Chief
learning officer is an integration of multiple delivery modalities to create an optimal learning environment for specific students (Kaur, 2013).

Will Blended Learning become the Norm?

Thompson (2015) suggests that with so much hardware and software in place, it’s not about acquiring technology we must focus on changing mindset. Susan O. Moore, supervisor of blended learning at Meriden Public Schools (CT) believes the implementation of blended learning is divided into five stages: Staff members should observe each other’s classrooms, learn from failure, engage students to assist teachers with new technologies, teachers and students should take ownership of learning, and just take the first step (as cited in Thompson, 2015). As schools continue to transition to the Common Core State Standards, teachers are required to integrate technology, and teachers want assistance. Tucker (2013) realizes not all instructors have technology-rich classrooms, so blended learning is a great approach of mixing technology and face-to-face instruction. Blended learning is student-centered learning which allows each student to achieve his or her full potential, but it is not guaranteed to be successful. Schools must be strategic and follow a process designed to meet the needs of the school. Implemented correctly, blended learning can maintain the benefits of the old and fulfill the potential of the new. (Horn & Staker, 2014). As with many initiatives, school leaders must carefully design a structure of implementation in increments to achieve success. Overloading instructors with programs and expectations without a discovery process can lead to costly mistakes. Thus, from an educational perspective, blended learning must be planned in a pedagogically valuable method. Why is blended learning spreading? How does it work in real and virtual classrooms?
Disruptive innovations fundamentally transform a sector by replacing expensive, complicated, and inaccessible products or services with much less expensive, simpler, and more convenient alternatives. Blended learning is a disruptive innovation in education that can take many forms. Here, we look at what blended learning is, why it’s spreading, and how it works in real and virtual classrooms.

By 2019, 50 percent of all high school courses will be delivered online.

— Clayton Christensen in *Disrupting Class*

**Defining Blended Learning**

Blended learning refers to any time a student learns, at least in part, at a brick-and-mortar facility and through online delivery with student control over time, place, path, or pace.

For example, a student experiencing blended learning takes classes in a traditional school building with a designated instructor and also takes some courses online remotely.

**The Blended Learning Matrix**

A matrix of learning models can help understand what constitutes blended learning and what doesn’t.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point, Blended?</th>
<th>Example of Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Traditional brick-and-mortar school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Home school without online delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Purely virtual school (also called cyber school and e-school). It only figures into blended learning if a student uses it to self-brand with a traditional campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Theoretical pure-play for blended learning (100% online and 100% supervised brick-and-mortar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student learns through a mix of online/offline and supervised brick-and-mortar/remote</td>
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Blended learning can be grouped into six distinct models that vary by teacher roles, physical space, delivery methods, and scheduling. However, as new versions of blended learning are developed, the relationships between these models will evolve. Presented below is a preliminary classification of the blended learning models currently in use.

**Face-to-Face Driver**
Face-to-face teachers deliver most of the curriculum. A physical teacher employs online learning in a technology lab or the back of the classroom to supplement.

**Rotation**
Within a given course, students rotate on a fixed schedule between self-paced online learning and sitting in a classroom with a face-to-face teacher.

**Flex**
An online platform delivers most of the curriculum. Teachers provide on-site, as-needed support through in-person tutoring or small group sessions.

**Online Lab**
An online platform delivers the entire course, but in a brick-and-mortar location. Often, students who participate in an online lab program also take traditional courses.

**Self-Blend**
Students choose to take remote online courses to supplement their school’s traditional curriculum. This model of blended learning is extremely popular among high school students.

**Online Driver**
An online platform and teacher deliver all the curriculum. Students work remotely, and face-to-face check-ins are either available or mandatory.
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Blended Learning on the Rise

K-12 online learning is growing in popularity worldwide.

2000 45,000 K-12 students took an online course.

2009 3+ million K-12 students took an online course.

2019 50% of high school courses will be delivered online (projected)

Higher education online growth has taken off.

2003 Roughly 10% of students in higher education took an online course.

2009 Roughly 30% of students in higher education took at least one online course.

2014 50% of all post-secondary students will take at least one class online (projected)
As indicated in the blended learning infographic, statistics show blended learning is on the rise due to budget cuts, teacher shortages and a demand for higher academic achievement results, thus doing more with less.

Why Blended Learning Works

Kaplanis (2013) suggests the blended learning experience will engage the learner in a variety of ways, by using a plethora of different enhanced material forms. Instructors are expected to differentiate learning for individual students and provide the necessary interventions for success. Students have the option to learn at their own pace without the pressure of maintaining the pace of everyone else (Kaplanis 2013). Blended learning not only works for students, but can be beneficial to faculty and the school as well. Instructors have the option to choose from numerous curriculum pieces or programs and have more time for other tasks as students are working from home or performing online tasks in the classroom. In addition, engaging students and preparing students for the workplace with technological tools is an expectation of all instructors (Landry, 2014). Students are motivated and work well in a collaborative situation. Learning is facilitated by strong social interactions in groups as students work in strategic ways and solve sophisticated real-world problems (O’Connor, Mortimer & Bond, 2011). Too, blended learning exemplifies passive learning to active learning. Students are placed in circumstances which requires multiple communication modalities to be used to create and share information. Hong, Tsai, Ho, Hwang and Wu (2010) blended learning pools traditional and digital learning, its learner centered which leads to choice of how digital technology can be used to enhance the learning experience. The blended learning model provides students with best of both situations due to instructor and student flexibility and accessibility without missing the face to face interaction component (Kaur, 2013). Thus, blended learning expands options, raises
BLENDED LEARNING

academic achievement, and provides optimal working situations for teachers and unlimited access to quality instructional resources (Vander Ark, 2012).

Challenges of Blended Learning

Obviously there are challenges with any educational method or initiative. Blended learning is not unique, so it too, comes with numerous challenges in the educational landscape. For example, Kaur (2013), describes technical, organizational and instructional design as specific challenges. The technical challenges include the successful use of technology and not just using technology because it is available. Organizational and instructional design challenges comprise redefining roles, managing participant progress, choosing the best method of instructional delivery and maximizing the online interactive elements (Kaur, 2013). As suggested by (Kuo, et al., 2014), learners and instructors must be provided with opportunities to become acquainted with blended learning components prior to implementation, this includes professional development, support and incentives. In addition, student data discourse has revealed the need for school districts and institutions to receive guidance when developing student privacy policies for online and software courses (Gentz, 2015).

Joining the Blended Learning Movement

As instructors across the world are extending their reach and developing the necessary skills to use digital content and platforms. Students in rural, urban and underserved communities have more access than ever to licensed teachers online (Frost, 2015). Also, personnel costs are comparable to traditional classroom environments. The blended learning environment demands effective leadership and equitable funding or adequate access to meet the needs of individual learners to achieve academic success (Frost, 2015). Are you going to be left behind?
References


