

Blended Learning: Where Teaching Meets Technology

We are in an era of educational reform. With technologies evolving at a rapid pace in an increasingly-connected global community, modern learners are able to acquire new knowledge anytime and anywhere. Technology has opened up endless possibilities in how we learn and where we go to access information. Instruction is no longer confined to a classroom, and the instructional model itself is shifting from traditional delivery to embrace a more blended approach to learning.

WHAT IS BLENDED LEARNING?

Blended learning has come to mean different things to different people. For our purposes, the term represents an integration of online and face-to-face instruction that promotes engagement and improves outcomes. It's an optimization of the combination of teaching and technology.

This form of instruction provides added flexibility to instructors, allowing them to combine the best of traditional delivery methods with unique online components to achieve optimal outcomes. Blended learning is also considered to be a more versatile approach, enabling instruction to begin in a classroom environment and continue online – or vice versa – as in the “flipped” model. Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, has said, “Blended learning is playing a vital role, as school operators begin to rethink the structure and delivery of education...it is the new normal.” (Staker, 2011)

Online learning has mushroomed in the past decade, from 45,000 K-12 students in the year 2000 to more than three million in 2009. This has involved a shift from, largely, a distance learning phenomenon to the blended learning approach, according to the Innosight Institute (Herff Jones Nystrom, 2012). Blended learning has expanded to become more commonplace in corporate settings, higher education institutions, and K-12 school systems.

Currently, the blended learning model is being implemented in a variety of ways. There are, however, some forms of the approach that are more commonly used than others. These models include the face-to-face driver, rotation, flex, online lab, and online driver.

- **Face-to-Face Driver:** The instructor or trainer decides when to implement online learning, on a case-by-case basis, to help supplement the curriculum.
- **Rotation:** Learners move on a fixed schedule between online learning (which is often self-paced) and traditional instruction or training in a classroom.
- **Flex:** The online platform dominates instruction. On-site instructors or trainers provide support as needed through tutoring or small group sessions.
- **Online Lab:** Courses or training are completed entirely online. Labs rely heavily on software modules, but online instructors or trainers are also available.
- **Online Driver:** An online platform delivers the entire curriculum. Check-ins with a trainer or instructor are often optional, and only occasionally mandatory.

REACHING AND TEACHING 21ST CENTURY LEARNERS

Today's instructors have access to a wealth of tools capable of helping them provide differentiated instruction, and blended learning has emerged as an integral part of that mix. Instruction that accommodates a variety of learning styles in one classroom is more attainable through a blended learning approach. The data collected and tracked through technology also allows for more granular customization. The blended approach is providing learners with more options in curriculum, path, and pace than ever before!

An online environment can give every learner a voice, increase engagement, and drive higher-order thinking. The ultimate goal of using technology to complement the work done in class is to shift the focus in the classroom from the teacher to the learners. (Tucker, 2012) By incorporating technology into the existing classroom, teachers can build community and create a truly learner-centered environment that engages them in discussions and collaborative group work that would traditionally require large amounts of face-to-face time. This helps free up time spent in the classroom to focus on activities that take advantage of the full potential of the group.

Shaun Iles, a professor at Mohawk College, says blended learning has led to the emergence of a new type of student. "In two years, students coming to college will have been raised 'after Google' and rely less on books for their information," he said. In Shaun's class, students are in contact daily through email, discussion groups, Twitter, and other collaborative formats.

At Deakin University, Dr. Jaclyn Broadbent oversees approximately 2,000 students per year, which has led to her using the communications resources in the D2L Learning Environment to connect with learners in meaningful ways when providing feedback. The versatility of News-feeds allows Jaclyn to provide customized guidance and instruction by including embedded links, videos, text, or customizable combinations of each. Automation of other functions in the course environment also plays a key role, freeing up Dr. Broadbent's time to focus on ensuring the feedback provided is both personalized and of the highest possible quality.

The College of the North Atlantic offers several skilled trade programs to support the oil, gas, and mining industry demands in the region. Previously, using a "block" model, learners would spend eight-week segments on campus away from their jobs and families. With a blended approach, six of those weeks are now conducted online – with the remaining in-class time spent developing hands-on skills and conducting testing. An improvement in success rates has been demonstrated in the increased number of apprentices transitioning directly to the workforce.

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE CORPORATE OFFICE

The potential impact blended learning can make isn't limited to educational institutions. To enhance the results of their own professional development efforts and learning organizations, corporations are also leveraging the approach.

Internally, D2L uses a blended learning method to support onboarding initiatives, leadership development, and other training programs. A common approach involves a five-week, pre-work course followed by live lectures delivered using D2L Capture and post-work involving discussions and collaboration between participants. In the fifth week of the course, learners actually create demos based on assigned scenarios and upload them to the Capture portal for their peers to review. Overall, travel time and training costs have been reduced for the company and engagement has increased for remote employees who are now better equipped to work with other teams throughout the organization.

One of D2L's enterprise clients, a company with over 270,000 employees worldwide who spends upwards of \$800 million per year on learning and development initiatives, identified the blended model as critical to reducing their training costs while also maintaining acceptable quality standards. This particular client uses a combination of in-class and online learning to include a variety of methodologies into the delivery of a single course.

BLENDED BENEFITS FOR INSTITUTIONS, INSTRUCTORS, AND LEARNERS

Going forward, many institutions and corporations will deal with one major issue: guidance is needed in order to implement blended learning appropriately. Every institution's needs and learning preferences are as unique as their learners'. Solutions providers must be prepared to support various models and assist in developing comprehensive implementation plans.

Culture is a key component of schools and corporations successfully transitioning to blended learning. The approach works best when it integrates the technology into an already-strong and well-defined learning culture. This facilitates and encourages more efficiency and effectiveness in instruction and learning, but the culture itself is the prerequisite for success or failure. (Ryan, 2012)

Chris Freure of the District School Board of Niagara also cites teacher training as a principal challenge in the region due to limited resources at the board level. Pre-training and providing resources so that teachers can be proficient with their learning solution before rolling it out to students needs to be a priority – the same support provided to learners also needs to be offered to teachers. Creating centralized training courses where every teacher can view relevant content and training resources that reflect their unique skill levels provides major benefits. More importantly, students are using the technology themselves and driving the demand – offering a definitive example of how the blended approach actually helps learners shape their own experience.



BARRIERS TO BLENDED SUCCESS

Although we have seen an increase in the implementation of blended learning programs, there are still barriers to overcome. Public school systems, in particular, are facing with obstacles related to technological availability, funding, and policy. Additionally, every educational market segment – including K-12, higher education, and enterprise – are all struggling to develop an optimal blended learning delivery approach that is both effective and efficient.

Public school systems may struggle to get technology into the classroom and homes of students, especially those in struggling socioeconomic districts. Confronting this problem will be critical for blended learning to move forward. If technology's availability isn't an issue, there can also often be barriers in "seat time" funding models that need to be revised or policy changes that need to take place for blended learning to become an accepted practice in traditional school settings.

The ongoing economic crisis facing school districts is also significant. Those organizations are trying to figure out how to enhance their performance and elevate outcomes while also saving money. Technology offers the best hope for both saving and making gains while maintaining or reducing costs.

The Upper Canada District School Board faces a challenge in the large geographical distance between individual schedules, making blended learning an ideal solution to help students reach their goals. Declining high school enrollment forced the board to change the way they deliver education, and with the province's input on a new eLearning strategy, they were able to use a blended model to provide the opportunity for students to access the courses they want and need – not just the ones their local school offers.

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

From Google Docs to Khan Academy, the online resources available to today's learners are nearly endless. Going forward, instructors will be better equipped to facilitate hands-on and experiential learning through a blended approach. Social learning is no longer confined to personal use, but is also justified in the school and workplace. Perhaps one of the most exciting possibilities facing education today is that learners will only gain more options moving forward in support of true personalization and choice in their own pathway – a journey in which blended learning will continue to play a crucial role.

About D2L

A global leader in EdTech, D2L is the creator of Brightspace, the world's first integrated learning platform. The company partners with thought-leading organizations to improve learning through data-driven technology that helps deliver a personalized experience to every learner, regardless of geography or ability. D2L's open and extensible platform is used by more than 1,100 clients and almost 15 million individual learners in higher education, K-12, healthcare, government, and the enterprise sector—including Fortune 1000 companies. The company has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore. www.brightspace.com | www.D2L.com

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