

Blended Learning: A Supportive Teaching-Learning Process

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Abstract

The rapid growth in the use of learning technologies, particularly the use of the web based technologies and communications have offered educators with many more opportunities to investigate the most suitable learning environments for their students' learning styles. Blended learning as one of the most popular pedagogical concepts of them. Blended learning is essentially considering as a combination technique of face to face and web based environment. And it is also combination of digital content and activity with face to face content and activity. The basic target in the present paper is to explore the necessity and importance of blended learning in the present education system. The study discussed the possibility and practices of blended learning in any academic institution. The work is presented methodologically in a qualitative way. Blended learning also has the potential to reduce educational expenses, although some dispute that blended learning is inherently less expensive than traditional classroom learning. In a blended learning approach, attention is given to the overall instructional design of the learning experience. While thoughtful planning is essential, blended learning is a fluid process whereby learning needs, moments of insight, and unique pathways evolve. Ideally, the learner is offered more choice in how the learning experience unfolds. This kind of flexibility makes it easier to differentiate instruction, satisfying the needs of a diverse population of learners. If Blended Learning technique implemented in a well-planned, organised way with right type of attitudes it can become the future of our educational system. It is in our own benefit that steps for adapting blended learning are soon initiated.

Keywords: *Blended Learning, Supportive, Teaching-Learning Process.*

Introduction

The traditional mode of teaching in spite of its few shortcomings provides a much needed human touch to the teaching learning process. Personality and behaviour of the teachers directly influences the blooming personality of the students. Only face to face interaction meets the affective objectives along with cognitive and psychomotor. Face to face traditional approach helps in developing a strong value system. Social skills like cooperation, sharing, expression and respecting other's views are more easily developed in traditional mode of teaching. Students learn not only from books, or from teachers teaching inside classroom but also from the co-students, through their peer group interaction, they learn many skills in playground and their small social interactions in canteens, lounge etc. As

discussed, the traditional approach has its own benefits but it is not free from deficiencies. Like it failing to meet the individual needs due to improper pupil teacher ratio, Teachers are not trained for integrated classroom, Course are not regularly revised, books are not updated and teachers are not interested in upgrading their own self's, etc.

In the past decade, online learning has become an increasingly important component of education. The growth of online education has been driven primarily by state-led online programs and full-time online schools that were started specifically to provide online learning opportunities at a distance. In some cases, online programs evolved from traditional distance learning programs and represent the latest evolution in distance learning, from the days of the correspondence course, to video courses and real-time two-way video, and now to more convenient and efficient online delivery. The advantage to online learning over these other channels is its combination of rich student-teacher-peer communication and interaction, either synchronous or asynchronous, and robust personalized teaching within instructor-led courses. During the same period, teachers in physical schools have increased their use of Internet-based content and resources in their classrooms. This evolution has often been driven by a small number of tech-savvy teachers and technology coordinators seeking new ways to provide enriching content and to extend learning beyond the walls of the school and the confines of the school day. These efforts are usually not a formal stand-alone program or school, and often build on the computer based instructional materials that pre-date widespread adoption of the Internet.

However, the spread of the Internet has greatly increased the quality of digital classroom resources and has spurred the creation of district-level programs that blend online learning and face-to-face instruction. In recent years many of these programs have been incorporating online content from providers such as Apex Learning and the Monterey Institute for Technology and Education. Because fully online distance learning programs developed in a different place and with different methods than the use of Internet resources in physical schools, the blending of online programs and the classroom setting has been relatively slow to develop in education. However, emerging models in other countries, such as Singapore and Australia, as well as in higher education, suggest that a large part of the future of education will involve providing content, resources, and instruction both digitally and face-to-face in the same classroom. This blended approach combines the best elements of online and face-to-face learning. It is likely to emerge as the predominant model of the future and to become far more common than either one alone. Fully online schools meet an important and growing demand for courses and programs otherwise not available, and the growth and popularity of such programs show no signs of slowing. Though online learning programs will continue to grow, it seems likely that the percentage of the Blending Learning: The Convergence of Online and Face-to-Face Education student population seeking a fully distance-based education will remain relatively low (although likely much higher than the percentage of students now in fully online programs, given current growth of these schools). However, online learning can be either distance learning or blended learning, with both supported by a new, robust instructional approach that takes advantage of the best elements of both settings. The advent of learning that combines online and face-to-face delivery is not merely a theory - it is already being developed and implemented by schools throughout the country and the world, and in some cases has been underway for several years. While some persons call this method of teaching "blended," others call it "hybrid," and others don't bother naming it, they're just implementing an approach that they believe is helping their students.

Statement of the Problem

In view of the importance of the adoption of blended learning approach in teacher preparation on development of educational technology for ICT integration in e-course design it will be useful to teachers in the development of education, to formulate e-learning instructional design, and to present further methods instead of traditional methods of teacher preparing that meet the needs of teachers in their respective field. Hence the study is entitled as; **“Blended Learning: a supportive teaching-learning process.”**

Objectives

The basic objectives of this study were, –

- To understand the concept of blended learning,
- To study the blended learning approach,
- To study the necessity and importance of blended learning,
- To point out the possibility and practices of blended learning.

Research Questions

In the present study the basic questions were, -

- What is Blended Learning?
- What are the Approaches of Blended Learning?
- How Blended Learning strategy support in teaching-learning process?
- What are the methods of Blended Learning?
- What are the Relevancies of Blended Learning?

Methodology

This study is purely qualitative in nature and based on various secondary sources of information. The information was collected from many reputed journals, articles, books, newspapers, websites etc. The generalization is made in this study based on reliable and valid information obtained from the mentioned sources.

Blended learning

Before proceeding any further it is vital to get an understanding of what is blended learning. In a study carried out for the Higher Education Academy, Sharpe et al (2006) suggest the term blended learning was attributed in the 1980s to the Open University's model of blending distance learning with face to face support. They do, however, point out that the term is now rather ill-defined and that it can mean different things to different people/institutions/ organisations.

The University of Hertfordshire's, Blended Learning Unit (BLU) CETL, state that they aim to “develop, promote and evaluate the combination of established ways of Learning and Teaching and the opportunities offered by technology in order to improve students' learning and increase flexibility in how, when and where they study”.

Significantly the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) describe it as a “combination of face-to-face and on-line delivery,” which they believe “suits a wider range of learning styles.”

Singh (2003) sees blended learning as a combination of multiple delivery media designed to complement each other and promote meaningful learning.

Garnham and Kaleta (2002) defined blended learning as “courses in which a significant portion of the learning activities have been moved online, and time traditionally spent in the classroom is reduced but not eliminated”.

The most commons of Blended learning definitions is that which recognizes some combination of virtual and physical environments (**Bonk and Graham 2004**).

From an organizational perspective, **Driscoll (2002)** identifies four different ways in which blended learning can be defined. Blended learning can be seen as:

- a mix of modes of web-based technology;
- a mix of various pedagogical approaches (e.g., constructivism, behaviourism, cognitivism);
- a combination of any form of instructional technology with face-to-face instructor led training;
- a combination of instructional technology with actual job tasks (in order to create an effective mix of learning and working).

Blended learning is the concept that includes framing teaching learning process that incorporates both face to face teaching and teaching supported by ICT. Blended learning incorporates direct instruction, indirect instruction, collaborative teaching, individualized computer assisted learning. Blended learning can be explained by following figure:

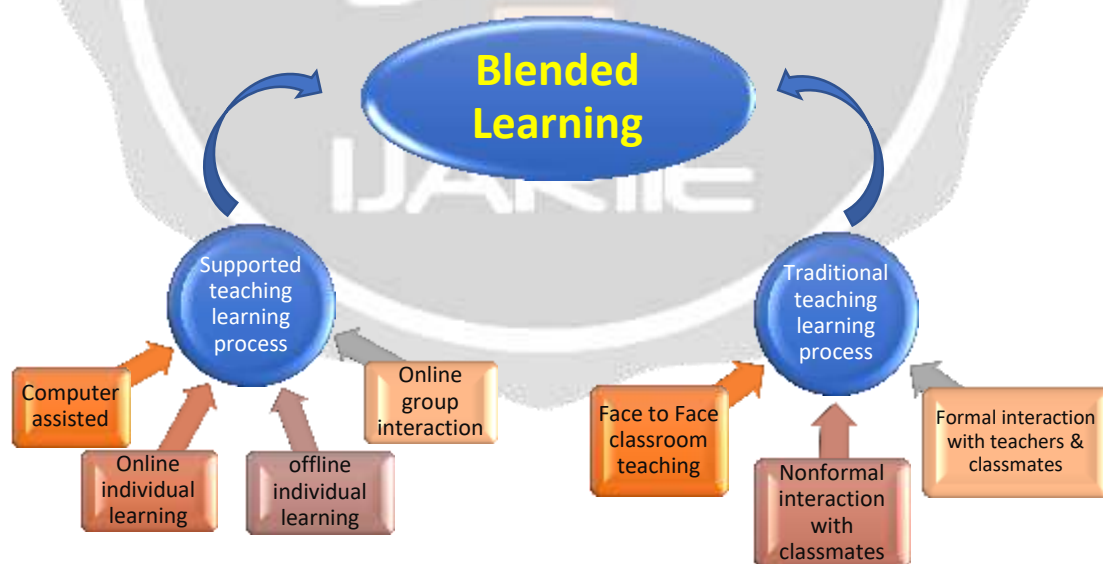


Fig.: Blended Learning Method.

Blended Learning Approach

The interest and early success of blended learning is due to the fact that it is an approach that can preserve and enhance the traditional values of higher education. When thoughtfully designed, blended learning offers an opportunity to enhance the campus experience and extend thinking and learning through the innovative use of Internet and

communications technology. The current challenge for administrators, policymakers, and faculty of higher education institutions is to acknowledge and accept that there have been significant and irreversible changes in societal demands, funding shortfalls, competition, technological innovations, and student demographics. As a result, there is a critical need to move creatively and assertively to confront and adapt to these changes. Successfully responding to these demands involves a change in mind-set and a commitment to reposition higher education institutions in terms of teaching and learning. Addressing this challenge requires creative and innovative action; it also requires a shift in thinking in the way we conduct the educational enterprise. Successful adoption of a blended learning approach to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching and learning will require the following:

1. Policy

Most traditional universities offer some form or forms of technology-mediated education to selected populations of students—often based on individual faculty interest. These programs or courses are typically managed by the individual faculties, or teaching faculty, and require little administrative policy—because the number of students is usually quite small. However, a defining characteristic of blended learning is the ability of the Internet to provide an interactive learning experience to large numbers of students (e.g., high enrolment and/or high demand courses) in ways that are accessible and cost effective. As a result, there is a need for a more formal approach to the development of policies and operations required to support blended learning approaches.

2. Planning

Related to policy is planning. There are two essential levels of planning required to develop and sustain blended learning: strategic and operational planning. Strategic planning involves the identification of needs, goals, and objectives; potential costs; and available resources. Of the strategic planning aspects, cost identification is the most complicated and important. Costs that need to be determined will include technology, delivery model and schedules, human resources (e.g., administrative support, course developers, instructors, and technical assistance), and infrastructure (e.g., hardware/software, Internet access, and office space). Operational plans are necessary to operationalize the goals and objectives in an action plan. With respect to blended learning, operational planning involves attending to the non-instructional components including the following: promotional and advertising strategies; creating relationships for shared resources (e.g., registration, fees); managing technology; and creating an effective assessment process.

3. Resources

The need to carefully assess the resources required to implement and sustain effective blended learning environments cannot be overemphasized. The resources required fall into three broad categories: financial, human, and technical. Financial resources are necessary to initiate and support blended learning initiatives. New initiatives, such as blended learning, need 'seed money,' but in the longer term may prove to be both more effective and efficient (Heterick & Twigg, 2003). Sustained incentives for computers and release time as well as support for instructional design and development are required. However, this cost is remarkably affordable and can be found in existing budgets with a reassessment of priorities. As such, it is essential that there be the commitment from senior administration. Human resources are essential to the development and delivery of blended learning courses. Individuals with instructional design, curriculum development, and technology skills are necessary to support teaching faculty new to blended learning. In addition to these skills, individuals who can provide personal attention and motivational strategies for teaching

faculty who are not convinced of the value of blended learning approaches are required. Finally, technical resources that are dependable and transparent are required to ensure that the technology can enhance the learning process—rather than obstruct it. This requires having course management tools in place that have the capability of meeting the learning needs, is up-to-date, and the technical tools are reliable and easy to use.

4. Scheduling

Blended learning approaches require considerable thought to the scheduling of courses. Specifically, both teaching faculty and administration will need to rethink how courses are being offered. Will blended learning courses be scheduled in the traditional format? (e.g., 3 days a week for 1 h). Or can a more flexible format be developed whereby flexible scheduling can be implemented in ways that provide learners and instructors with the ability to ‘time-shift?’ (In traditional higher education institutions, any kind of course scheduling changes required by the registrar’s office change can be an enormous challenge).

5. Support

Providing support for both students and teaching faculty is a critical component of blended learning. At a minimum, providing effective support for blended learning requires an understanding of the course management environment that students and teaching faculty will be using, in addition to situational, dispositional, informational, and institutional barriers. More specifically, there needs to be a dedicated student service support center to help students with technology access, which includes not only access to a computer with the necessary software and Internet connections, but also support with the skills necessary to succeed in a blended learning environment. Most traditional universities currently have adequate support services for their students’ technology needs. Teaching faculty also require support services, but, unlike their students, these supports are often not in place. Teaching faculty require assistance with course development needs, time management of their learning curve, and technical assistance. The most effective support systems for teaching faculty are those that provide a course development team for the development of blended learning courses. This team is typically comprised of the instructor as content expert, an instructional designer who assists with course design, and a media specialist who assists with the technical creation of course materials.

Blended Learning Models

Due to its modular design, blended learning can come in numerous shapes and sizes and be personalized to fit the individual. These types of models are:

- **Online** – Instruction occurs via an online platform, with periodic face-to-face meetings.
- **Rotation:** Student rotates between self-paced online learning and face-to-face instruction. Schedules are fixed but flexible.
- **Flex:** Most instruction is delivered online, with teachers providing as needed support in small-group settings.
- **Personalised blend:** Teacher designs face-to-face and anywhere, anytime learning options that straddle the physical classroom and virtual spaces. Learning is the constant and time is the variable.
- **Online lab:** Instructions takes place in a brick and mortar lab. Delivered by an online teacher and supervised onsite by paraprofessionals.

- **Self-blend:** Students take online courses to supplement their traditional schools face to face course catalogue.
- **Face-to-face:** Teacher offers primarily face-to-face instruction, supplemented with technology in the classroom or computer lab.

Necessity and importance of blended learning

Blended learning is important because it breaks down the traditional walls of teaching, ones that don't work for all students and now with access to present day technologies and resources we can tailor the learning experience for each student. Blended learning also offers flexible time frames that can be personalized to each person, offering them the ability to learn at their own pace. Blended learning brings to the table that will benefit everyone:

Improves efficiency: Blended learning allows teachers to use a combination of digital instruction and one-on-one face time to improve efficiency in the classroom. When students use adaptive learning technologies to work on their comprehension of new concepts, teachers can use the additional class time to give struggling students the individualized attention that they need. Rather than playing to the lowest common denominator – as they would in a traditional classroom – teachers can now streamline their instruction to help all students reach their full potential.

Saves money: Education can be extremely expensive. From continually reordering textbooks so they're up to date to having school supplies on hand, the costs add up. Blended learning can help school districts save money by allowing students to bring their own technology devices to class to take full advantage of the adaptive learning software. The use of e-textbooks, which can also be accessed on computers, tablets and e-readers, may also help drive down costs.

Personalizes learning: Blended learning is able to personalize education in a way that a more traditional classroom setup simply cannot. When teachers stand in front of a sea of desks and educate students about a new concept, kids of varying academic skill levels are not able to take extra time or work ahead as they may need. Blended learning allows students to work at their own pace, making sure they fully understand new concepts before moving on.

Better student data: Software used with blended learning programs is able to collect student data that measures academic progress. In this way, teachers can clearly see the areas in which each individual student is excelling, and where he or she may need a little more guidance, and act accordingly.

Common Core State Standards: Digital fluency is a goal of the Common Core State Standards, and states working to implement the new academic guidelines will need to make sure that technology is integrated into a variety of subject areas. Blended learning can easily accomplish this task.

Relevancy of Adapting Blended Learning in India

Indian education system is suffering from various problems like failing to expand the system to provide provision of free and compulsory education to all children, abating to maintain quality along with increasing the quantity, education curriculum is not able to meet demands of international market and not even able to conserve and propagate Indian value system, teachers are not fully dedicated towards their profession and teacher's inefficiency is adversely influencing the learning of the students. There is an urgent need of some radical steps and major revolutions within to overcome the challenges. Blended learning to some extent will help in solving these problems of Indian education system.

- In our country due to large population the formal schools system is not able to provide equal educational opportunities to all, so blended learning will be a good option as it will make the area of educational opportunities wider and education will be able to reach to more children.
- The technological and scientific development continuously demands the education system to match their pace and correlate with them so that students are able to cope up with the fast changing market. So, if blended learning will be adapted students and teachers can easily update their knowledge and skills.
- There is another serious issue that teacher working is also not very dedicated towards the profession so blended learning is a good option as online learning can be a substitute of teacher.
- The education of special children also poses problems but blended learning with its diversity can easily cater to the needs of special children.
- Blended learning will be a good option. When students will get experience of both types of modes their knowledge will enrich. Reaching the experts and content material available online our students will gain advanced skills that will make them strong eligible candidates of good jobs.
- blended learning gives equal importance to traditional mode and classroom teaching and thus can give students essence of Indian value system.

Conclusions

Blended learning within a flexible-learning framework, offers a unique opportunity to fully integrate pedagogy and technology with teaching and learning. It may also lead to "significant enhancements of curricula and pedagogy, optimised work integrated learning experiences and an internationalised approach to learning, teaching and curriculum design" (Griffith University, 2008). Consequently it is clear that blended learning offers considerable potential to transform the teaching and learning process despite the difficulty it presents in measuring elements relating to "quality" or "success". As a result it is apparent that this is rapidly becoming one of the defining characteristics of blended learning. A number of institutions are adapting blended learning as part of a strategic statement in enhancing learning and teaching activities. Blended learning offers institutions a unique opportunity to fundamentally alter and enhance teaching and learning. The most effective learning has always involved the use of different strategies and techniques to maximise knowledge acquisition and skill development. For example, university programmes usually combine lectures, seminars, group projects and, quite often industrial visits and placements, to offer students a variety of different learning opportunities. Through careful planning, blended learning can help impart knowledge in new and exciting ways. Traditional face-to-face courses can be modified to fit a blended model which meets student learning needs and expectations and the pedagogical requirements of the instructor. To conclude it can be said that blended learning is to some extent is the solution to problems prevailing in our

educational system. In the case of time and practice, blended learning will become a standard and expected method of instructional delivery.

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