

BLENDING LEARNING: FROM CONCEPT TO IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract: *The paper analyzes the concept and process of blended learning, the key ingredients that form this process, and the models that have been elaborated during the past ten years. It also takes into consideration the possible definitions of this concept and the way they influence the students' and teachers' perception. The use of technology is put into discussion as well as the students' increased responsibilities in the process of blended learning.*

Keywords: *blended learning, interactive classroom, learning environment, online activities.*

1. The concept of “blended learning” appeared in the discussions about education at the beginning of the 21st century at the moment when the concept of e-learning started to lose its credibility. Although this latter concept had many supporters in the 1990s, the end of the century brought as many opponents due to the fact that the students were not highly motivated and responsible to do all the work on their own and they felt isolated and unsupported while learning. Thus, a new concept had to be invented, not necessarily to replace e-learning but add to it. The present study offers an overview of possible definitions of the “blended learning” concept, some models that have been used for ten years in the process of teaching and learning and advantages and disadvantages of applying blended learning to this process.

2. In this respect, the definitions of the verb “to blend¹” provide explanations that can further be used to explain the concept of blended learning. “To blend” means “to combine or mix so that the constituent parts are indistinguishable from one another”, “to combine (varieties or grades) to obtain a mixture of a particular character, quality, or

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¹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/blend>

consistency”, “to form a uniform mixture”, “to become merged into one”, “to create a harmonious effect or result”. As we can extend from these definitions, the concept of blended learning implies a combination of factors that are used together so that we can obtain harmonious results which can be seen in our students’ professional training.

In its early stages, blended learning referred to a mix of classroom interactions and e-learning. At present, with the increase use of technology and its availability, it has developed a larger meaning implying various learning methods combined with an appropriate use of technology. Nevertheless, there is not a unique definition that can cover all aspects of the concept of blended learning, especially because it is more than a concept: it is an on-going process that develops with every teacher or trainer who applies it. In addition to the term “blended”, there are other terms being used to describe the process: “hybrid”, “mixed”, “integrative”, “multi-method” learning are also used by researchers in this field. All these concepts refer to the integration (the “blending”) of e-learning tools and techniques².

The blended learning approach transforms the traditional face-to-face classroom interaction into social on-line interaction, taking advantages of the technology used by most students. Instead of waiting for students to come to class, we may take classes to them and offer them the opportunity to see that Twitter, Skype, Facebook, blogs and You-Tube can also be used for learning in a social environment. Thus, classroom learning activities can be transferred online.

3. Defining Blended Learning

Due to the fact that researchers have not agreed upon a unique definition of the concept and process of blended learning, I shall offer an overview of the most important definitions that have been produced since 2000. Richard Clark, for example, considers that 21st century classroom activities are strongly connected with the use of Internet and learning platforms, blending the interactive and social nature of classrooms with students’ personal learning environment (Clark, 2001). The social component is provided by social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, webinars and blogs, so that blended learning should be more than a lone-learning environment, as e-learning was described.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blended_learning

Most definitions consider that blended learning platforms have a face-to-face classroom component added to the e-learning application (Sharma and Barrett, 2007). This type of learning combines various models of teaching and learning styles. Technology that enabled e-learning has extended from e-learning classes to more options such as on-line help systems, support tools, databases available only to certain groups of learners/ students who are given a user name and a password. This encourages combined systems, where “memorable instructor-led classes are chock full of conversations, examples, debates, and group effort. That should be true for online learning too” (Rossett 2008:126). In fact, blended learning can combine the positive aspects of the two learning environments, classroom-based learning and e-Learning (Bonk & Graham, 2006).

However, some researchers have gone beyond e-learning and out of classrooms. They believe that blended learning implies the use of two or more distinct methods of teaching/ training, that is, a mix of methods that meet the needs of the learners/ students/ trainees regardless of the subject they study (McSporrán & King 2002).

This may include combinations³ such as:

- blending classroom instruction with on-line instruction;
- blending on-line instruction with access to a coach or faculty member;
- blending simulations with structured courses;
- blending on-the-job training with individual informal sessions;
- blending managerial coaching with e-learning activities.

It is a well-known fact that teachers/ trainers have to take into account the needs, the aptitudes and the achievements of their students/ trainees, and also the time spent before they acquire the skills. We should also keep in mind the degree to which a student needs to be guided, their ability to deal with complex tasks, to use objects, to be creative and imaginative, to solve problems. Feedback and assessment are useful to complete the individual profile for each student and, as we all know, time is the enemy. That is why blended learning offers teachers/ trainers a possible solution to spend more time with students/ trainees.

Thus, the process of individual learning is improved as the learning environment is a blend formed of media and different methods which

³ Allison Rossett, (Editor) *The ASTD E-Learning Handbook Best Practices, Strategies, and Case Studies for an Emerging Field* <http://books.mcgraw-hill.com/authors/rossett/bl.htm>

conduct to interactions. The learning experience is based on remembering the interactions and the practice done during the interactions, so that communication is, in fact, the basic 'ingredient' of the blend.

4. Models in blended learning

There are three models⁴ used in blended learning: the supplemental model, the replacement model and the emporium model.

Firstly, the *supplemental model* is based on the structure of traditional courses and uses technology resources to supplement traditional lectures and textbooks. Although technology is incorporated, it does not change the structure of the course. Students work online and receive their study materials online. However, students meet their teachers as often as in the traditional course, due to the fact that the face-to-face meetings are still the basis of the supplemental model.

Secondly, the *replacement model* replaces some of the face-to-face classroom meetings with online, interactive activities. Students witness significant changes during the face-to-face meetings: online resources are integrated in the learning experience, as online communication is encouraged. There are also online resources to be studied, as the time spent in the classroom is dedicated to interactive and collaborative activities.

Thirdly, the *emporium model* renounces to all face-to-face meetings, which are replaced with learning platforms or learning portals. The platforms offer access to online materials, counseling and support. The traditional lectures are no longer available, and communication relies completely on Internet connections.

For all three models there are five key ingredients, as Jared M. Carman⁵ observes: "*live events*: instructor-led learning events in which all learners participate at the same time, such as in a live "virtual classroom"; *online content*: learning experiences that the learner completes individually, at his own speed and on his own time, such as interactive, Internet-based or CD-ROM training; *collaboration*: environments in which learners communicate with others, for example, e-mail, threaded discussions and online chat; *assessment*: a measure of learners' knowledge; *reference materials*: on-the-job reference materials that

⁴ <http://weblearning.psu.edu/blended-learning-initiative>

⁵ Carman, M. Jared. 2005. *Blended Learning Design: Five Key Ingredients*. Available at <http://www.agilantlearning.com/pdf/Blended%20Learning%20Design.pdf>

enhance learning retention and transfer, including PDA downloads, and PDFs." I would also like add that two very important ingredient in the blended learning process are both the students and the teachers. The former must be assisted and guided in using computers whereas the latter must work closely with the IT team in designing online materials or converting traditional materials.

All three models are very flexible and they present both advantages and disadvantages.

5. Advantages and drawbacks in the implementation of the blended learning concept.

The aim of the blended learning approach is to make the best of face-to-face meetings and online tasks. Classroom meetings can be for advanced interactive experiences while the online section can be used for what students were supposed to do outside the class: homework writing, controlled pattern practice, research or any extra work. Students are provided with the online content at anytime, anywhere there is Internet access. The choice of time belongs to the students, which offers a sense of autonomy. Due to the fact that instructions are not always available to help students, they may have to learn how to work independently without any guidance. In this case, some students may become bored or tired, which could lead to a possible drop out.

With the ever increasing use of technology, blended learning is on the rise especially in higher education. One of its main advantages is that it enhances communication skills. Classroom interaction is not completely replaceable, as students need to be encouraged and receive human feedback instead of results from a computer.

Another advantage for the students is that teachers need to better prepare their courses in order to be used online. Teachers also need to pay more attention to develop their instructions more clearly, which is not the case in the traditional classrooms, where students can copy their classmates' behavior.

Time management is another issue: teacher must plan lessons with a multimedia component which requires more planning than a traditional classroom lesson. Moreover, teachers must take into account their students' different learning styles or disabilities in order to adapt the online content for them. In this respect, students with disabilities will find an improvement in the way courses are structured, although it may mean that teachers should allocate more time to lesson planning and structuring.

Other advantages are: easy access to knowledge, the possibility to interact with people from different parts of the country/ the world, cost effectiveness (especially if more universities work on the same platform, with the same teachers, on the same subjects), and the possibility to assess more students at the same time. In addition, we can mention enhanced flexibility, as students may choose to do tasks and research in their own time and not necessarily under pressure.

However, this means that students can be online at any time which implies that the system must function perfectly, so a close relationship with the IT team must be developed.

The degree to which the process of blended learning combines face-to-face interaction and online materials vary according to the course content, the students' needs, and, last but not least, according to the teachers' choices and preferences. All these factors combine when designing a course and the final question is what to teach online and what to preserve in classroom activities: collaborative group work, project presentations, guest speakers, question & answer sessions, debates, quizzes.

Student satisfaction with a course that uses the blended learning approach must be assessed. Students' feedback is useful for future uses of this approach and they should see that a blended course is not only a pile of face-to-face and online materials and activities put together in a hurry but a distinctive set of tasks and activities conceived for each and every individual.

Courses can be developed, designed, re-designed or converted from traditional structures. However, some students may not be accustomed to the use of technology. In this case, they should not be assessed for their lack of PC literacy but should be helped and assisted in their attempt to enter the blended learning process and be part of it. Clear instructions and feedback from students will ensure a better use of technology and an understanding of the reasons this new environment has been chosen to replace the more traditional environment.

Conclusions

As Allison Rossett⁶ underlines (quoting Marc Rosenberg): "the question is not if we should blend. Rather the question is what the ingredients are?" - we may conclude that identifying ingredients is the first step in the blended learning process. It is obvious that, in this format,

⁶ <http://books.mcgraw-hill.com/authors/rossett/bl.htm>

students need to take more responsibility to teach themselves, and teachers need to work more both with the IT team and with students. Time management is another issue that students and teachers must learn. As technical problems might occur, teachers must work closely with the IT team to offer assistance to students, and they also have to prepare a backup plan in case technology fails to function.

Blended learning has begun to take shape at the beginning of the 21st century. Yet, it has already attracted numerous supporters: many universities from all over the world have already designed or converted courses to blend traditional classroom meetings and online activities.

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