

Blended Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Blended learning has become a more widely discussed distance education concept and practice since the year 2000 and beyond. Also known as hybrid learning, these terms refer to more than one delivery system being used for one course. In most cases, when they use the term blended learning in a distance learning context, educators are referring to face-to-face learning combined with some elements delivered through technology.

This chapter will describe the background of this development within distance learning, its benefits, and possible future trends.

BACKGROUND

In 2008, the education and training communities have begun to ride the surge of technology innovation and adoption of the past decade. This fact is evidenced by the growth of distance learning, with online learning being the predominant format. While distance learning has deep historical roots to Ancient times when messages were carried from town to town, 20th Century distance learning has spanned the mail-dependent correspondence course, radio transmitted tutorials and still familiar public TV courses including GED as well as community college courses.

In business, videoconferencing added an additional popular educational delivery format in the midst of this timeline, but was too expensive to be widely adopted in the 1980's-1990's for home users and their own education (King & Griggs, 2007). Since 2005, Web 2.0 technologies and more interactive and participatory options have become available for students and teachers alike- blogs, vlogs, podcasts, wikis and dynamic multimedia of all sorts (O'Reilly, 2005).

With the first wave of distance learning arriving at the gates of higher education, there was the universal cry of "bricks or clicks?" As is often the case, change was nervously perceived solely as an "either/or" possibility. Universities at first decried online learning as

inferior to face-to-face learning, and then major institutions began to participate in the trend. Fast forward to 2001-2003 and we see some major universities pulling back out of their major investments in online learning (Carlson, 2003; Carr, 2001). Why? Because they had invested in the either/or perspective when a "both" option, blended learning, was available during the time of gradual social adoption of new technologies.

Blended learning can be thought of on a course or programmatic level. That is, a course can be offered partially by distance technologies and partially face to face. In addition, why could not a program of study be offered in a blended format- some courses via distance education and some face to face? At a time in 2008+ when we know students look for options, convenience, and flexibility to adapt their learning to their complex lives, this is a critical point some schools, colleges, and universities continue to by-pass as an option (French, Hale, Olrech, & Johnson, 2004; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The details of administering a blended program are not difficult if an institution is already hosting blended courses. Therefore, we will focus on blended classes, which are a microcosm of the same dynamics.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Development of Practice

Today you will find blended learning in many more places than you would have just 2 – 4 years ago. Indeed, the widespread adoption, institutionalization, and sophistication of support services among continuing education and degree earning programs is surprising. Given the history of community colleges, and their mission, student population, and faculty, it should be no surprise. However, given the relative quietness of this blended learning trend in higher education over the last 10 years (1995-2005), it is pleasantly surprising to see the mushrooming development of what has such

sound pedagogical and andragogical bases. (Baker, Dudziak, & Tyler, 1994)

A review of recent books in distance learning reveals a relatively significant number devoted to the specific topic of blended learning. These books show the need, interest and development of practice in this area. Spanning the publication years of 2003-2007, at least 6 books provided insight into this article and practice in blended learning. In addition, research articles published in the educational journals on the topic have proliferated in the last five years, when previously one would have to explain the term at length to those not directly involved in the distance learning development field (Bonk, Graham, Cross, & Moore, 2005). This trend in quality research and publication would appear to confirm the interest and need for educators to understand this specific dimension of distance education.

Forms of Blended Learning

Blended learning may be most easily explained in a table with the variables of technology and time as options, and one can see how they can be combined to create various “blended options.” Several authors are providing frameworks and taxonomies for depicting blended learning (see for example Garrison & Vaughn, 2007). Rather than introducing each of those and their specialized terms and definitions in this brief article, I will provide a simplified, yet conceptual table for the reader.

Table 1 is only designed to be representative of the principles of blended learning and cannot be an exhaustive list as new technologies and capabilities arise each day. However the chart immediately reveals several significant and powerful characteristics of blended learning: (1) there are many possible combinations of time and technology combinations to create unique blended learning opportunities, (2) based on context, learner needs, time constraints, and technology availability multiple options may be at a glance, (3) more than one blended learning option might be selected for a school, class or student based on the specific needs.

Brief examples of these blended learning options are provided in the next table (Table 2).

Benefits of Blended Learning

Researchers, trainers and educators have identified several benefits of blended learning:

- **Flexible scheduling:** A blended class may meet on campus one day per week and have an online session another day (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). In this way students and teachers only have to be at a designated physical location one time per week and can schedule the other time based on their life needs.
- **Decreased classroom space demands:** This benefit is related to the flexible scheduling and the fact that blended learning classes meet on campus less frequently per semester, thereby freeing up

Table 1. Blended learning options matrix — technology and time

	Face-to-Face	Synchronous Online and/or Videoconference (Teacher and students at the same time)	Asynchronous Online (Teacher and students not at the same time)	Pre-recorded Medium (Video, DVD, TV, Podcast, etc)
Blended 1	xx	xx		
Blended 2	xx		xx	
Blended 3	xx	xx	xx	
Blended 4	xx			xx
Blended 5	xx	xx		xx
Blended 6	xx	xx	xx	xx
Blended 7	xx		xx	xx
Blended 8		xx	xx	xx
Blended 9			xx	xx

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