Current Status and Future Directions of Blended Learning Models

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INTRODUCTION

A decade ago blended learning (BL) was considered one of the most important trends in higher education (Finn, 2002; Young, 2002). More recently BL was anticipated to become more common than online or face-to-face (F2F) instruction alone (Watson, 2008), the "new normal" in course delivery (Norberg, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2011, p. 207). Although not yet the most prevalent modality, BL has become a preferred mode of higher education course delivery (Dahlstrom, Walker, & Dziuban, 2013). Robust growth of BL adoption continues in the K-12, higher education, and corporate sectors (Gutierrez, 2012; Picciano & Seaman, 2009). Additionally, interest in BL research increases. Drysdale, Graham, Spring, and Halverson (2012) analyzed themes from over 200 BL related dissertations and theses. Halverson et al. (2012, 2013) catalogued the most highly cited blended learning publications identifying thousands of articles. Additionally, a U.S. Department of Education commissioned meta-analysis looked at evidence-based practices in online learning and found a significant number of BL studies, generally concluding that students in BL contexts performed better than those in fully online or traditional F2F contexts (Means et al., 2013).

This article overviews current models of BL and references the most recent resources to help inform future research and practice.

BACKGROUND

Definitions

Use of the term *blended learning* is still relatively new in higher education, K-12, and corporate settings. In higher education the term *hybrid course* was previously used, and now the two terms are interchangeable. There continues to be debate over the precise meaning and relevance of blended learning (Graham, 2013; Staker & Horn, 2012). The most prevalent position is that BL environments combine F2F learning with technology-mediated instruction (Graham, 2006, 2013).

To clarify the considerable definition disagreement, Graham (2013) described four disputed areas:

1. What blending includes
2. Whether reduced seat time should be part of the definition
3. Whether quantity of online instruction should be part of the definition
4. Whether quality descriptors should be part of the definition

Despite disagreement on an operational definition of BL, many institutions are adapting BL to suit their specific needs. The loose definition thus facilitates localized innovation and customization (Graham, 2013; Staker & Horn, 2012).

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Purposes for Blending

A blended approach offers many advantages; some of which were identified by Graham (2013), Moloney et al. (2011), and Poon (2013) as most closely aligned to the Sloan-C Five Pillars of Quality:

- Improved learning outcomes (including potential for learning communities and collaboration/active learning)
- Cost reduction and effective use of resources
- Access and flexibility
- Student satisfaction
- Faculty satisfaction

Many educators adopt a blended approach to avoid sacrificing benefits of one method for benefits of the other (e.g., convenience of an asynchronous distributed environment without eliminating the benefit of human contact in the F2F environment). While BL is appealing because it can provide the "best of both worlds" (Morgan, 2002; Young, 2002), if not designed and implemented thoughtfully BL environments can also mix the least effective elements of both. Thus clearly articulated models are needed to help guide practice and research.

Institutional Adoption of Blended Learning

Collis and van der Wende (2002) conceptualized the idea of "stretching the mould" to evolve traditional forms of instruction toward BL versus other systemic changes. Their research (like that of others) showed more movement toward BL. In moving toward BL, however, institutions must consider specific issues. Casanova (2011) warned that a disconnect between administrative direction and grassroots movements (even those with the same goals) can be detrimental. Graham, Woodfield, and Harrison (2013) identified some factors influencing successful institutional implementation represented in the literature:

1. Strategy (purpose for, advocacy of, and definition of BL for the institution)
2. Structure (infrastructure needs, scheduling, governance, evaluation, and professional development)
3. Support (technical and pedagogical support, and incentives)

Graham et al. (2013) also described three stages of institutional adoption:

1. Awareness and exploration, characterized by a lack of institutional strategy and limited support for faculty exploring BL
2. Early adoption/implementation, characterized by initial adoption of an institutional strategy and experimentation with policies that support implementation
3. Mature implementation and growth, occurring when institutions have established strategy, structures, and support to sustain BL implementation and future growth.

Three main paths lead to BL adoption: (a) adaptation of a F2F course to a BL course, (b) adaptation of a purely online or distributed environment to include F2F (less common), and (c) development of new BL courses or programs to meet an emerging institutional need. Any of these paths risk a tendency among faculty to keep adding online components to a traditional course without eliminating anything, known as course-and-a-half syndrome (Kaleta, Skibba, & Joosten, 2007).

MODELS

The simple, elegant concept of BL can be implemented in numerous ways in a wide variety of contexts. Thus successful models of BL must be shared to facilitate additional purposeful and disciplined adoptions of appropriate BL strategies. Space constraints prevent sharing many details of the following models, but a rich set of references is provided for locating additional details for examples of interest.

Levels of Blends

The literature identifies four levels of blends (see Table 1).