Chapter 7
Learner Assessment in Blended and Online Settings

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors distinguish between blended and online learning settings, discuss a variety of types of learner assessment, describe contemporary trends, challenges, and recommendations for the effective assessment of learning in blended and online courses, and offer several recommendations for future research. The content targets teachers, instructional designers, administrators, and program managers of K-12 blended and online learning settings. Suggestions are offered for using web-based communication tools for feedback and assessment in blended settings. The authors conclude with a discussion of implementation topics associated with assessment in these learning environments that deserve additional attention and consideration.

INTRODUCTION

As blended learning environments proliferate in terms of new, interactive technologies and K-12 learner access to innovative blended and online settings has increased globally, attention to learner assessment is a critical component of the evaluation and sustainability of these courses. This chapter discusses a variety of types of learner assessments and describes contemporary trends, challenges, and recommendations for the effective assessment of learning in blended and online courses that serve k-12 students. Much of the foundation for this chapter originates in the literature and research on distance education settings within higher education, but the recommendations target teachers, administrators, course designers, and web developers who are committed to improving the outcomes of K-12 students taking blended or online courses.

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BACKGROUND

The evolution of distance learning to include K-12 students has included an expansion of the vocabulary used to describe these learning environments. Virtual schools, cyber schools, and online schools are all terms found in the literature associated with access to educational services offered via computer-mediated, web-based alternatives. These terms are typically used to identify learning environments that are fully delivered through synchronous and/or asynchronous web-based systems. Many contemporary, K-12 distance learning environments are described as *blended*. Staker and Horn (2014) make their case for using blended learning environments as the foundation strategy to improve schools. Whether schools and teachers are looking to flip the classroom, offer flexible course options, supplement study with extended offerings online from other schools, or enhance traditional classroom instruction, blended learning is found in both rural and urban school settings. Murphy, Snow, Mislevy, Gallagher, Krumm, and Wei (2014) describe blended learning as an emerging field with many different conceptualizations. For the purposes of this chapter, the authors will use the Staker and Horn (2012) component definition of blended learning.

- **Blended Learning:**
  - Teaching and learning occur within a formal education program.
  - Students learn at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction.
  - Students learn at least in part through instruction that is delivered away from their home in a face-to-face setting with a teacher present.
  - Students have some level of control over time, place, path, and/or pace of the instruction.

LEARNER ASSESSMENT

The assessment of student learning in traditional settings has challenged even the most experienced, master teachers. Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, and Norman (2010) provide a reminder that when the objectives, assessments, and instructional strategies of a course are aligned, students build positive expectancies for their learning and their success. Figure 1 is a cartoon graphic and quote that has been widely shared in social media to illustrate the importance of valid learner assessments that are aligned with instructional goals and targeted learner outcomes.

"With online instruction comes a change in the nature of teaching, communicating with and assessing students" (pp. 38-39) according to DeNisco (2013). However, DeNisco goes on to emphasize pedagogical strategies for online teachers with no further mention of assessment strategies except that they are different. Measuring student learning in blended or online learning settings brings new considerations for the teacher and/or designer to ensure that students have well-defined learner activities or performance descriptions which include detailed feedback and grading criteria to support learner success (Vega, n.d.). Ferdig, Cavanaugh, Dipietro, Black, and Dawson (2009) noted that the teacher, instructional designer, site coordinator, administrator, mentor, and counselor all share in the virtual school assessment responsibility. In this chapter, the authors argue that the alignment proposed by Ambrose et al. (2010) is critical for student success in blended or online settings so the student does not feel like a fish trying to climb a tree! These authors additionally argue that just as pedagogies must be adapted for online and blended settings, so must the assessment strategies.