

# Learner Engagement in Blended Learning

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## BACKGROUND

### Definitions of Blended Learning

Use of the term *blended learning* remains relatively new in higher education, K-12, and corporate settings. While this is the most commonly used label, the construct is sometimes described with the terms *mixed mode* and *hybrid learning* (Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman 2013; Picciano, 2014b). Due to the flexible nature of blended learning, the debate continues over a precise definition of the term (Picciano, 2014b). While some consider this ambiguity a weakness that prohibits blended learning from use as a discriminating label (Oliver and Trigwell, 2005), others submit that a more narrow definition would impede “great potentials of the concept” (Alammary, Sherad, & Carbone, p. 443, 2015).

The most widely accepted basic position is that effective BL environments are a combination of F2F learning with technology-mediated instruction (Graham, 2006, 2013). Many individuals and institutions build upon this broad definition include caveats about seat time (Mayadas & Picciano, 2007), and the quality of the blend (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004) or quantity of instruction placed online (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Most current definitions of BL focus on the physical dimensions of the blend (e.g., online and face-to-face). However, future definitions may emphasize more

of the psychological/pedagogical dimensions of the blend (Graham, Henrie, & Gibbons, 2014).

Across contexts and institutions, varying ideas exist of what constitutes a BL environment (Porter, Graham, Spring & Welch, 2014). This distinction is most noticeable between postsecondary and K-12 sectors. Although BL at both levels is similar in many ways, it must be adapted to fit the K-12 setting (Staker & Horn, 2014). Horn & Staker’s (2015) three-part definition of BL focuses on the element of student control over their own learning experience, learning in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home, and the importance of an integrated learning experience. The integration aspect focuses on the coherence between the F2F and online components to deliver cohesive instruction for the learner about a given topic (Horn & Staker, 2015). An effective implementation of blended learning is well-coordinated with each component supporting the other.

Despite disagreement on an exact definition, many institutions are adapting BL to suit their specific needs. In each case, institutional context plays an important role in the construction of an operational definition and strategy (Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2013). The loose definition is “plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” and thus allows the creation and implementation of customized institutional blends (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 393)

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## Reasons for Blending

A blended approach offers many advantages for both instructors and students. Stein & Graham (2014), Moloney et. al (2011), and Poon (2013) found that these benefits closely align with the Sloan-C Five Pillars of Quality:

1. Improved learning outcomes (including potential for learning communities and collaboration/active learning)
2. Cost reduction and effective use of resources
3. Access and flexibility
4. Student satisfaction
5. Faculty satisfaction

Reduced seat time, flexibility in time and space, and maintaining F2F interaction are some of the advantages of a blended approach (Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2013). Many educators choose to 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 can provide the “best of both worlds” (Bonk & Graham, 2012; Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2013), if not designed with thoughtful consideration of the combined methods, content, and intended learners’ needs, BL environments can also mix the least effective elements of F2F and online instruction. Thus clearly articulated models are needed to help guide practice and research (Graham, Henrie & Gibbons, 2014; Halverson, Graham, Spring, Drysdale & Henrie, 2014).

## LEARNER ENGAGEMENT IN BLENDED LEARNING

Learner engagement has been heavily researched (Azevedo, 2015) and termed the “holy grail” of learning (Sinatra, Heddy & Lombardy, 2015). Engagement is strongly connected to a variety of benefits (Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006; Mountford-

Zimdars, Sabri, Moore, Sanders, Jones & Higham, 2015). Some positive student outcomes linked to learner engagement include student performance (Casuso-Holgado et al., 2013; Kuh et al., 2008), persistence and resilience (Kuh et al., 2008), and psychological growth (Harper & Quaye, 2009).

## Defining Learner Engagement

The educational field has yet to agree upon a standard definition of engagement (Sinatra, Heddy & Lombardy, 2015). Possible competing and/or overlapping definitions span integrating learning strategies and motivations (Richardson & Newby, 2006), a combination of motivation and cognition (Järvelä, Veermanis & Leinonen, 2008), and “emotionally positive” and “cognitively focused” (Skinner and Pitzer, 2012). We suggest that engagement may be conceptualized as the “quality and quantity” of energy exerted (Henrie, Bodily, Manwaring, & Graham, 2015).

The student experience is different in an online setting than in a traditional one, and blended engagement presents unique challenge and opportunity for engagement. While the research has not clearly identified the underlying causes for improved outcomes in blended contexts (Means et al., 2013) Blended learning has been identified a means for increasing student engagement (Graham & Robison, 2007; Northey, Bucic, Chylinski, Govind, 2015). More research is needed on the types of blends that produce “deep and meaningful learning” (Bernard, Borokhovski, Schmid, Tamim & Abrami, 2014, p. 116).

## Models of Learner Engagement

There are several models that researchers have used to conceptualize engagement. One prominent model characterizes engagement as part of three domains: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioral engagement is connected to a student’s actions and participation, emotional engagement is related to a student’s feelings about the learning

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