

Active Blended Learning: Definition, Literature Review, and a Framework for Implementation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter focuses on the joint implementation of blended learning and active learning. The authors analysed 152 institutional websites containing definitions of these concepts. Blended learning is commonly, though arguably simplistically, viewed as the combination of face-to-face and online components. Active learning is often described as a pedagogical approach that engages students in higher-order thinking tasks, usually requiring collaboration with others. The authors systematically reviewed the literature on active blended learning (ABL). Health sciences is the most common field where empirical studies have been conducted. Most research used quantitative or mixed data and focused on the perspective of students. The tone of the discourse is predominantly positive, with an emphasis on the benefits of ABL. The chapter concludes by defining ABL as a pedagogical approach that combines sense-making activities with focused interactions in and outside the classroom. It puts forward a rationale and a framework for the implementation and scaling up of ABL in a higher education setting.

INTRODUCTION

With the growing use of technologies in educational interventions, approaches to learning and teaching have evolved to take place in different environments with a variety of strategies and techniques. Blended learning programmes have thus become pervasive within academic institutions (Adams Becker et al., 2017; Sharples et al., 2014). As these courses cater to a wide range of needs and lifestyles, they represent an attractive option for both traditional and non-traditional learners (Waha & Davis, 2014). Although researchers have largely reported non-significant differences, particularly in terms of student outcomes and satisfaction, blended learning courses have been found to be as effective or better overall than similar ones in other modes of study (Liu et al., 2016; Stockwell et al., 2015). Comparative studies often attempt to replicate teaching practices in face-to-face, blended and online settings. However, the combination of curriculum materials, pedagogy and learning time seems to create the real advantages (Means et al., 2010). The most effective blended courses enable students to learn in ways not feasible in other formats (Adams Becker et al., 2017).

Active learning is particularly useful for achieving a successful and rewarding educational experience. It can result in fewer failing students, higher performance in examinations (Freeman et al., 2014), enhanced problem-solving skills (Hake, 1998), critical thinking (Shin et al., 2014), increased attendance and learner satisfaction (Lumpkin et al., 2015; Stockwell et al., 2015). It can also reduce the attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students (Haak et al., 2011). The move towards active learning makes classrooms resemble real-world work and social settings that foster cross-disciplinary interactions (Adams Becker et al., 2017). Students perceive that active classrooms promote creativity and innovation (Chiu & Cheng, 2016). When learners participate in active learning environments, they tend to outperform their peers in more traditional classroom settings (Cotner et al., 2013).

This chapter focuses on the joint implementation of blended and active learning to maximise the benefits of both approaches in higher education settings. We addressed three main areas:

1. *Institutional definitions.* We analysed the information available on public-facing university websites to establish a starting point for the study of these approaches.
2. *Academic literature.* We systematically reviewed the literature on active blended learning (ABL) published in indexed, peer-reviewed journals up to June 2020 to identify trends and patterns.
3. *Framework for active blended learning.* We present and describe an evidence-based framework to guide and scale up the implementation of ABL in higher education.

INSTITUTIONAL DEFINITIONS

Despite its widespread usage, it is surprisingly difficult to find a universal definition of blended learning. In their review of 97 articles relating to blended learning in higher education, Smith and Hill (2019) reported a lack of consistency and clarity in the literature. Perhaps the only consensus relates to the combination of online and face-to-face elements (e.g., Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). The nature of these components remains ambiguous, and could relate to content availability, teaching strategies, learning opportunities or social interactions. Thus, descriptions of blended learning can refer to the ratio between web-based and traditional provision (Allen et al., 2007; Sener, 2015), the delivery methods (Clayton

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