Blended Learning: A New Concept in Education

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Abstract:

Life in the new knowledge society demands more independent and responsible behavior. The progress in quality of life can't be achieved without preparing people for the knowledge society. They need to learn how to seek out new information, think critically and take initiative to meet the challenges of a fast-changing world. Learning is a journey, and has intrinsic merit if it moves in the right direction. Education in general is undergoing rapid transition form the traditional teacher dominated teaching to the more self-motivated mode, constructivism. This paradigm shift frames learning holistically, recognizing that the chief agents in the process are 'learners' and they construct knowledge out of their experiences.

Keywords: *Blended learning, Education, ICT*

1. Emergence of Blended Learning

In recent years, ICT has paved the way for accelerating he paradigm shift through providing more flexible ways of learning. The demands of new technologies and the 24/7 global environment can't be satisfied with the only sources of classroom instruction, with its inherent classroom limitations (Warrier, B.S). The students can do self-learning using enormous potentials of Internet and providing them with several online exercises. Online learning is defined as the use of Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor and other learners, and to obtain support during the learning process. (Khan, 1997). Providing several online options in addition to traditional classroom training actually increased what students learned. (Dean, 2001).

Several researches explored the various potentials of online learning in different educational settings, but the question which haunts the minds of people remains-how the ubiquitous problems of speed, scale and impact associated with online learning can be resolved. Some of the researches show that focusing purely on the technology would be wrong (Russel, Jonasson & Ehramam, 1999). The main focus should be on learning rather than on technology. It is critical that research should explore not only the development of appropriate ICT to be used, but also the role of effective pedagogy that can maximize students' learning using ICT tools (Lim, Ping & TayYong, 2004). It has been widely recognized that harnessing the power of ICT requires appropriate learning strategies to harmonize effectiveness in learning with the technology role. (Keams $Papadopoulose, 2000). On the other hand, the significance of face-to-face instruction can't be ignored since the live human interaction in 'teaching' (or learning can't be denied to a large extent. Sciences, Mathematics, languages and other humanities subjects as disciplines demand certain live experiences such as experiments, drill and practice field work etc. keeping all these in view, a consensus has emerged among educationists working in the area that there is a need for tapping the wide applicability of online learning with face-to-face instruction and then evolve 'blended learning'. This article is an attempt to explore 'what blended learning is' and which are the promises and challenges it offers to teaching-learning processes in our educational settings.

2. What is Blended Learning?

Blended Learning is a planning combination of online learning and Face-to-face (F2F) instruction using a variety of learning resources. It a flexible learning strategy that integrates innovative and technological advances of online learning with interaction and participation of traditional F2 classroom learning. Thorn (2003) describes Blended Learning as a way of meeting the challenges of tailoring learning and development to the needs of individuals by integrating to innovative and technologic of advances offered in the best traditional learning.

Blended Learning reflects motive conscious intentional approaches designing optimal instruction learning environments following strategy of blending components while the blended character traditional instructional contexts largely the result of habit (tradition convenience or happenstance (American Management Association). As both the F2F instruction and online learning suffer from limitations, it is natural to combine the strengths of the two into Bleno Learning. Combining face-to-face and fully online components optimize both environment in was impossible in other formats (Dziubaz and Hartman, 2004)

Blended Learning is educational formation that integrals online learning techniques including online delivery of materials through web pages, discussion boards and/or email with traditional teaching methods. The pedagogy of Blended Learning is based on the assumption that there are inherent benefits in face-to-face interactions as well as the understanding that there are advantages using online methods (Clark, Ian & James Patrick, 2007)**.** Kim, Won (2007) has classified learning into 3key dimension: physical class based Vs virtual, formal Vs informal and scheduled Vs self-paced. There are several possible combinations that can be formulated out of these three dimensions. He has defined Blended Learning as a combination of two or more of all possible learning types. He has given one important qualifier to this definition. At least one of the learning types must be a physical class-based type and at least one other learning type must be online learning type. This is to make sure Blended learning remains a combination of some form of additional learning and some form of online learning.

3. Ingredients of Blended Learning

Five ingredients of Blended Learning are

- Live events
- Self-paced learning
- Collaboration
- Assessment
- Performance Support

4. Live events

Synchronous, teacher-led learning environments in which all learners participate at the same time. Teacher may use lecture, demonstration, discussion or computer-based instruction to all the students in live. For many learners, nothing can replace the ability to tap the expertise of a live teacher. It can be in real classroom or can be in virtual.

5. Self-paced learning

Learning experiences that learner completes individually at his own pace and on his own time such as recorded live events, Internet-based or CD-ROM-based; it implies on-demand learning at a pace that is managed or controlled by the learner.

6. Collaboration

It implies a more dynamic communication and interaction among many learners that brings about knowledge sharing. Collaborative learning has more advantages which are not available

from traditional instruction because a group can accomplish meaningful learning and solve problems better than any individual can alone. It can be extended from discussion in the live classroom to synchronous communications in chart room or in open discussion forums and asynchronous communication by using e-mail and threaded discussion.

7. Assessment
It is both live and online measure of learner's knowledge to determine prior knowledge as well as to measure learning transfer.

8. Performance Support
These are the reference materials that enhance learning, retention and transfer. It may be printable references, downloaded multimedia learning objects, documentation etc;

Assessment*		
Self-paced Learning	Live Event	Performance Support
Collaboration		
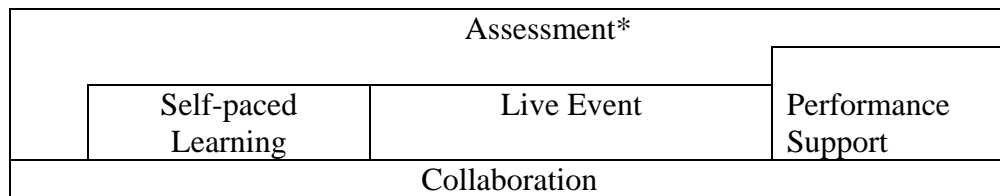
*Taken from Jared M. Carman, Knowledge Net

9. Advantages of Blended Learning
- Blended Learning caters to individual preferences in learning style. Students are free to choose their preferred learning style to some extent though some components may be compulsory in Blended Learning (Harding, Ansie et al.;). It optimizes the achievement of learning objectives by applying the right learning technologies to match the right personal learning style at the right time. Thus differentiated instruction is possible in a large extent.
- Self-pacing allows the engagement of every learner at any given time in Blended Learning. Students also appreciate learning as participatory process that takees place in shared social context both in live and in online, not isolated individual leaning tasks.
- One of the most specific advantages is the opportunity to quaickly establish a sense of community amongst students learners (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Within the Blended Learning classroom, students meet in face-to-face instruction, and then have opportunities to collaborate, communicate with the open dialogue, to experience critical debate through a worldwide open platform which in turn facilitates greater reflection on the part of learners. Learning takes place in multiple contexts to support flexible knowledge transfer. For example, the students can be instructed to explore a topic 'pollution' in the context of different countries by interacting with students of various countries through an online learning platform and further discussion and consolidation of the topic can be done in the live classroom where students will be able to participate with much more rich experience.
- Blended Learning approach provides room for the development of autonomy, self-efficacy and individual organizational skills since it gives scope for self-regulated learning. Blended courses can offer good opportunities to foster self-regulated learning skills. (Dettori, 2007)
- Blended Learning can be visualized as real application of Gagen's (1999) idea of providing different instruction for different learning outcomes.' Blended Learning extends its scope in providing a close relationship between learners' internal mental processes and external instructional activities.

10. Challenges in Blended Learning
The challenges in a Blended learning environment can be looked in two different perspectives-learner perspectives and teacher perspective, in focusing on the learner perspective, there is a need to consider the learning style and perceptual skills learning style and perceptual skills and

abilities of students while designing Blended Learning strategy. If these are not taken into consideration when organizing the Blended Learning environment, the students may not be able to cope with the demands of the strategy. Students' physical sensory and perceptual skills and abilities, prior knowledge and proficiency in the use of technology may contribute challenges to a Blended Learning situation. (Draffan & Rainer, 2006). Learner's proficiency in using ICT is also important in a Blended Learning environment. For example, if students are lacking in e-skills, they may feel overwhelmed by the amount of information and their interaction with the content may be limited. Therefore determining the skills and the ways students acquire and construct knowledge online is very important while designing Blended learning strategy.

Solomon (1994) states that the effectiveness of medium depends upon its match with the learner, the context and the task. In Blended Learning, ascertaining this match becomes very crucial and challenging. From the perspective of pedagogy, teaching and learning in a Blended Learning environment can highly unstable and fluctuating. One of the major challenges the teacher faces while designing a Blended Learning strategy is to determine the balance between online and face-to-face instruction. Designing the curriculum can be a major issue in expertise on the part of teacher to design the strategy by considering both the educational provision of the institute and the learner's needs in a Blended Learning environment. A great amount of effort and time may be needed to properly combine both online and face-to-face instruction and that may be real challenge.

11. Conclusion

Blended Learning offerings are gaining momentum, with good reason. But the issue arises in deciding the balance between online and face-to-face components. There is no unique model and the difficulty resides in identification of the balance point. (Fernandes, Rothlisberger & W. Forte, 2004). The balance varies from course to course depending on their instructional goals, student characteristics, instructor background and access to online resources. (Clark, & James, 2005). Therefore it demands high attention on the pat of teacher to design learning environment with appropriate ingredients in correct proportion. It is the responsibility of authorities to provide necessary learning support in providing access to online learning so that our student's become 'blended learners' with self –regulatory authentic learning experiences.

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