



Best Practices:

Blended Learning

What is Blended Learning?

Blended learning is a style of education in which students learn via both online media and traditional face-to-face teaching (Oxford Online Dictionary, 2020). Allen and Seaman (2013) recommend that blended learning environments have between 30-79 percent of their content online. Blended learning is optimal when there is an explicit relationship between the online components of a class and the face-to-face sessions (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Salmon, 2013). Therefore, teachers need to be effective facilitators in both face-to-face and online mediums to effectively scaffold learners through class content and material (Whiteside, 2015).

What Does Blended Learning Look Like?

Effective blended learning is designed from the learner's perspective. When blended learning is learner-centered, teachers should notice an increase in student acceptance, success, and retention. Successful blended learning requires a shift from teacher-directed to learner-centered instruction.

The first step in achieving learner-centered instruction begins with developing learner-centered learning objectives. Designing blended learning from the learner's perspective achieves active student learning (Alberts et al., 2020). When making the learner-centered instructional shift, teachers should begin to notice that learners in blended learning programs use significantly higher goal- and help-seeking strategies than those in traditional learning settings. Additionally, blended learning teachers find that students learning online content in the same physical classroom spend less time on off-task behaviors than those in traditional settings (de la Varre et al., 2011). Blended classroom teachers should choose instructional strategies that can be used across both face-to-face and online mediums. The selected strategies should employ multiple steps, higher-order thinking, and active learning (McGee & Reiss, 2012). Blended learning should also incorporate metacognitive strategies within the learning material to help students monitor and reflect on their own learning.

When the above practices are implemented in a blended learning setting, active learning should occur as learners become aware of what they know and where the gaps reside in their learning (Bransford et al., 2002).



The Application of the Community of Inquiry in Blended Learning

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is a social constructivist model of learning in online and blended environments (Garrison et al., 2000). The CoI framework is divided into three equally important presences: teaching, cognitive, and social. When designing a blended learning program, teachers must remain conscious of the learning community's social dynamics. Any change in the learning environment, however small, can alter the social dynamics of a learning community (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Whiteside, 2015). According to Salmon (2013), the importance of relationships among students is paramount to the success of blended learning programs. Effective student relationships can take shape in a variety of ways, such as by building trust, promoting intentional social interactions in both face-to-face and online settings, providing opportunities for students to work in pairs and small groups, establishing support measures among teachers and students, and embedding support mechanisms that help students clarify, receive feedback, or ask questions (Picciano et al., 2012).

Blended Learning: Tips and Tricks

For teachers who are designing blended learning programs, it is important to maintain regular presence and visibility online. It is also important to avoid repetition of class content that has already appeared in online learning or face-to-face learning sessions (Garrison, 2011). As you design a blended learning course, keep the following best practices in mind (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Salmon, 2013):

- Scaffold digital learning and cognitive skill requirements slowly.
- Provide learners with a course timetable that outlines the major components and due dates of the online and face-to-face learning. Be sure to avoid multiple deadlines and conflicting approaches.
- Vary and rotate the tools and activity types that you employ throughout the course, while still allowing learners a sufficient opportunity to become familiar with a particular tool and not overloading them with too many tools.
- Reduce learners' cognitive load by avoiding a combination of challenging content and tasks and new tools at the same time.
- Foster a positive, experimental attitude toward technology for learning.



Rovai and Jordan (2004) discovered that students value the time, effort, and energy that is put into developing high quality resources. Many students commented that they felt much more inclined to engage with blended learning when they could clearly see that the materials were well-made, well-designed, and interactive. Rovai and Jordan offer the following recommendations when developing learning activities:

- Build in opportunities for feedback.
- Chunk (scaffold) the information into steps that are relatively simple, straightforward, and communicated in a clear timetable.
- Use high quality visual and multimedia content that abides by copyright laws, is captioned, and is informative rather than decorative.
- Use accurate, up-to-date content that is accessible across diverse platforms.
- Be consistent with color usage, using no more than three colors within a palette. Being mindful of color usage is an accessibility issue, which is important for learners with differing abilities.
- Use consistent typography throughout the course.



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