

## **Blended Learning: An Insight to the Challenges and their Solutions**

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### **Abstract**

The term online learning has become a buzzword during the past few years. Now a days blended or online teaching is in high demand. Many higher education institutions are carrying many of the minor and major courses in form of blended learning. Blended learning provides an environment that is a combination of conservative face to face teaching along with computer mediated or online teaching. It is believed that this form of learning can engage online students at various locations. This contributes in widening knowledge exchange and participation. Although, research says lot of improvement is required in methodologies for a better educational effects of online learning and teaching.

Due to these qualities, blended learning is becoming the need of the hour. Certainly it is more challenging than the traditional teaching as the instructor have to encounter some common myths related to online teaching like online teaching is lower in quality, it is easier to cheat for online courses, it's easier to earn a degree online etc. This paper provides an insight to the challenges and their solutions so as to bring about a clearer picture of blended teaching mode.

**KEYWORDS:** blended learning, technology, higher education, rubrics

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### **Definition of blended learning**

The definition of blended learning, according to the Clayton Institute for Disruptive Innovation, is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and pace; at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home; and the modalities along each student's learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.

In blended learning, essentially, a student learns with a blend of self-paced online and classroom instruction. It echoes the practice of distance education that emphasized flexibility of time, place, and pace of student learning. Research suggests that the student experience varies considerably and results in variable learning experiences, indicating a need to clarify how a blended approach can support the learning process. It has been observed that the instructor plays a vital role in the blended courses that turns to be successful. Studies states that, not only the well managed program but the instructor's competency and interest towards the program had also contributed towards its success. With the advent of technology in education the dimensions to reach education had increased tremendously. The co-location in time and space of teachers, students, and resources is the sine qua non of education.

### **Components of blended learning model**

For a thoughtful look at blended learning today, three important components to be considered are hardware, curriculum and facilitator, or instructor. An individual student needs all three. Each of these parts would vary based on the student's academic level.

Success of blended learning depends on well-defined online and offline instructions, the right selection of LMS, course curriculum and individualized instructions. The instructors would need to address the students in way that is appropriate for their age and skillset. This may be a big challenge for the instructors because the transition away from a traditional face to face teaching in a classroom structure into a blended model can appear daunting. Blended learning comes alive when students make a fundamental shift from being a passive recipient of information to become actively involved in the learning process. A blended teaching provides deeper contents online that help students to master basic skills and grants them more autonomy. The rapid emergence of technological innovations over the past half century has had a huge impact on the possibilities for learning in the distributed environment (R Graham)

### **Major Challenges**

**1. Stimulating Interest/ Capturing attention:** Students need to know what they are learning is applicable to them. They will be interested in the course if they find it relevant with their real life requirement. Thus, capturing student attention by making them understand the relevance of the course at the very start of the course must be achieved before effective learning can take place. Start with smaller initiatives, and once the technology works, build on that success, and incorporate lessons learned.

Two major types of strategies were identified as being important are primers to attract students attention and secondly social presence and belonging. Relevance factor and curiosity are the two primers for getting students attention. Curiosity is experienced as a result of awareness of a knowledge gap, which creates the motivation to find the answer. A topic that has personal relevance to a student stimulates an optimal level of arousal for learning.

Social presence and belonging also help to attract their attention. Teacher enthusiasm, immediacy and an inclusive environment contribute in learning process. Students are less likely to feel alienated and more likely to become engaged when they feel a sense of belonging to their class and subject discipline. Teachers play an important role in social presence. This is particularly true of online environments which can be more impersonal students. A sense of teacher immediacy is important to students.

**2. Clear structure of a course plan:** At the start of a new course, students expect a clear course outline that includes the content structure and other organizational features. For the success of any course, clarity in content structure is *sin qua non* and when it is an online program it becomes an unavoidable factor as it lays the foundation of the entire course. Clarity of content would lead to better understanding of how the delivery of the program should take place, what kind of assignment would contribute to assessment pattern and the feedback strategy can also planned. A thoughtful design process can determine what pieces may require face-to-face time and what pieces require collaboration. The success of the course can be decided after one cycle and thereafter

appropriate changes can be inculcated for the better improved results. Technology selection should not be the last step of the design process. Instructional designers need to go through a thorough evaluation to validate learning objectives and determine appropriate assessment methodologies, before determining how to deliver content for each learning objective. A realistic look should be given the at the platform selected and one has to take care that at the end of the course delivery they are able to achieve the learning outcomes of the designed course then only the objective of the process is fulfilled. Realistic look at the content in the context of the students is important, make sure students know about the assessments, and send the message that they will not be able to move on to live sessions unless the assessments are completed successfully. Then, enforce the requirement.

**3. Role of instructions and guidelines:** Clear, unambiguous instructions and guidelines in assessment play a role in stimulating student's interest in the course. The high levels of anxiety that students typically feel about this aspect of the learning process can be alleviated by clear guidelines. When learning technologies are introduced, attention often is paid to the technology implementation, while the actual design of appropriate content is left with too little time and budget to create a successful program.

**4. Getting students engaged by challenging tasks:** Students engagements can be broadly monitored on three levels-beginning of the course, during the course and by re engaging and recapturing the disengaged. The third one can be achieved by monitoring for early identification. Personal contact with students can also prove helpful by understanding and eliminating the exact problem thus, providing appropriate support. Challenging tasks encourage the student work to the limits of their ability. Learning results from effort: The greater the effort, the greater the sense of achievement and motivation. When designing for self-paced learning for knowledge objectives, consider a 12- to 20-minute maximum timeframe per topic or module. If you have content that requires more than 12 minutes (the typical time between TV commercial breaks), try to find a way for learners to save their work, and come back later. For virtual classroom interactions, find a way for participants to do something (click a green check mark, send a chat, or participate in a breakout exercise) every three to five minutes.

**5. Insertion of rubric:** A rubric is a set of criteria for students online activity having levels of descriptions keeping quality of performance as the criteria. The rubric should be executed so that it should be descriptive and not evaluative. Effective rubrics have appropriate criteria and well-written descriptions of performance. The main purpose of rubrics is to assess performances. Rubrics can be broadly divided into analytic and holistic rubric. Analytic rubric can be used where activity is assessed on separate criterion whereas holistic rubrics describe the work by applying all the criteria at the same time and enabling an overall judgment about the quality of an activity.

For most classroom purposes, analytic rubrics are best. Focusing on the criteria one at a time is better for instruction and better for formative assessment because students can see what aspects of their work need what kind of attention. Focusing on the criteria one at a time is good for any summative assessment (grading) that will also be used to make decisions about the future—for example, decisions about how to follow up on a unit or decisions about how to teach something next year.

As the rubrics just have the description of how to shape the answer and clarify the correct approach to the activity and do contain any information that the students are supposed to be developing themselves thus it can be shared at the time of course launch. If the rubrics are the same each time a student approach towards taking the activity remains same. This may help them to learn general qualities of good discussions, problem solving, and so on. Thus sharing rubrics at the time of course launch encourages students to think about building up general knowledge and skills rather than thinking about school learning in terms of getting individual assignments done. Rubrics provide scoring directions for the person who is grading the work.

Framing rubrics is again a difficult task where to write or select rubrics, teachers need to focus on the criteria by which learning will be assessed. This focus on what you intend students to learn rather than what you intend to teach actually helps improve instruction. Rubrics help with clarity of both content and outcomes.

Effective rubrics show students how they will know to what extent their performance passes muster on each criterion of importance, and if used formatively can also show students what their next steps should be to enhance the quality of their performance. This claim is backed by research at all grade levels and in different disciplines.

**6. Timely, effective feedback:** Effective feedback can be maintained by maintaining an encouraging tone and by being responsive to student inquiries and also by delivering feedback at the right time. Instructors who provide thoughtful online feedback provide learners with explicit expectations for the performance outcomes for their work and an opportunity to understand areas where academic improvement is needed. Additionally, feedback is not limited to the learner teachers also benefit from the feedback learners provide. Learner feedback allows instructors to assess course content, pedagogy, and feedback for professional reflection about instructor presence in the online environment. Therefore, online feedback should serve as a learning opportunity for both the instructor and learner.

The evidence strongly suggests that in most circumstances feedback that is immediate and specific, results better learning. Contact information for the facilitator, producer, and technical support should be easy to find on this page. Also, a Frequently Asked Questions section can provide a forum for participants to work through logistical and technical roadblocks. Make sure you have a solid communication plan—with template content and dates for each communication—and keep a copy of each e-mail on the course web page so students can access it when they are away from their primary computers.

**6. Handling failures by re-engagement:** In most courses a proportion of students will delay or fail to engage at the start of the course, or stop engaging during the semester, usually at key points such as assessment. The literature identifies two critical strategies for re-capturing the engagement of these students.

**a. Early pickups:** Monitoring students to identify students in danger of dis-engaging or those who have failed to engage, is important to recover these students.

**b. Personal therapy:** The most effective strategy for re-engaging students is personal contact by the teacher. Such contact works best when the teacher works with the student to provide help and support.

### Conclusion

Though, students face challenges adapting to the demands of their programs and learning appropriate academic discourse. Faculty running online education programs will have to use innovative teaching methods to overcome the challenges of online learning while still meeting the course outcomes of their course. Some of the research reviewed was conducted with students, indicates that thoughtful and creative design of the course, engaging activities and a timely constructive feedback can help overcoming these challenges. Some suggestions include creating challenging tasks, infusing diverse perspectives, utilizing social media, and being mindful of how asynchronous conferencing tools are used. While utilizing these methods, instructors are urged to do so with care to socialize students with one another, the instructor, and appropriate academic discourse. In addition, instructors should be mindful of the type of feedback provided, clarity of instructions, and consider allowing students some autonomy over their work. In these ways, some of the challenges of online doctoral education course creation and implication can be overcome.

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