Blended Learning Gives Congenial Learning Environment

Dr. T.O. Singaravel

Asst. Prof. of Education, Vidyaa Vikas College of Education, Tiruchengode Namakkal (Dt.)

Abstract

Learning is acquiring new, or modifying existing, knowledge, behaviors, skills, values, or preferences and may involve synthesizing different types of information. The ability to learn is possessed by humans, animals and some machines. The Traditional (Blackboard) Learning System is a virtual learning environment and course management system developed by Blackboard Inc. Blended learning in educational research refers to a mixing of different learning environments. It combines traditional face-to-face classroom methods with more modern computer-mediated activities. This paper talks about Traditional learning, Blended Learning and why we need it in the present situation and its benefits to the congenial learning environment. Blended learning takes advantage of the power of technology to deliver training "just in time," anywhere and anytime.

Key words: Blended Learning, Traditional Learning, Congenial Learning Environment.

Introduction

Learning is acquiring new, or modifying existing, knowledge, behaviors, skills, values, or preferences and may involve synthesizing different types of information. The ability to learn is possessed by humans, animals and some machines. Progress over time tends to follow learning curves. Learning is not compulsory, it is contextual. It does not happen all at once, but builds upon and is shaped by what we already know. To that end, learning may be viewed as a process, rather than a collection of factual and procedural knowledge.

Human learning may occur as part of education, personal development, schooling, or training. It may be goal-oriented and may be aided by motivation. The study of how learning occurs is part of neuropsychology, educational psychology, learning theory, and pedagogy. Learning may occur as a result of habituation or classical conditioning, seen in many animal species, or as a result of more complex activities such as play, seen only in relatively intelligent animals. Learning may occur consciously or without conscious awareness. There is evidence for human behavioral learning prenatally, in which habituation has been observed as early as 32 weeks into gestation, indicating that the central nervous system is sufficiently developed and primed for learning and memory to occur very early on in development.

Traditional Learning

The Traditional (Blackboard) Learning System is a virtual learning environment and course management system developed by Blackboard Inc. Features includes course

management, a customizable open architecture, and a scalable design that allows for integration with student information systems and authentication protocols. It may be installed on local servers or hosted by Blackboard ASP Solutions. Its main purposes are to add online elements to courses traditionally delivered face-to-face and to develop completely online courses with few or no face-to-face meetings.

The traditional educational system relies almost entirely on intellectual learning without including experiential learning. This style of learning is intended to allow students to gain an individual meaning to the subject matter. An example of experiential learning is when a child first touches a hot stove and learns that it is hot. The individual experience greatly increases the meaning of the concept to the child. Carl Rogers, a humanist psychologist, asks "why is it that left to his own devices the child learns rapidly, in ways he will not soon forget, and in a manner which has highly practical meaning for him, when all of this can be spoiled if he is 'taught' in a way which involves only the intellect?"(Rogers 4). The Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development concluded that "The process of human learning always has two parts: (a) confrontation with new information or experience, and (b) the learner's personal discovery of the meaning of that experience. Teachers are forced to teach students only the information that is going to be presented on the standardized tests because of the importance of those tests in determining school funding and student aptitude.

Blended Learning

Blended learning in educational research refers to a mixing of different learning environments. It combines traditional face-to-face classroom methods with more modern computer-mediated activities. According to its proponents, the strategy creates a more integrated approach for both instructors and learners. Formerly, technology-based materials played a supporting role to face-to-face instruction. Through a blended learning approach, technology will be more important.

For example, consider a traditional class meeting schedule. Say that the course would normally meet MWF, from 1-3 PM. If the institution were to apply a blended learning approach, the course may change so that it meets once per week instead of the usual three-session format. Learning activities that otherwise would have taken place during classroom time can be moved online. In other circumstances, a greater reliance on technology within the classroom may occur. Activities may be structured around access to online resources, communication via social media or interaction with distance learners in other classrooms or other learning environments.

There are many different approaches to blended learning. It can take on many shapes or forms, depending on the teachers and learners involved. As of now, there is no

consensus on a single agreed-upon definition for blended learning. The terms "blended," "hybrid," and "mixed-mode" are used interchangeably in current research literature.

The Other Names of Blended Learning

Blended Learning has been around for many years, but the name has changed as the uses and recognition have increased. Many people may be using a form of blended learning in lessons and teaching, but may not realize it or be able to give it an actual name. Blended learning is something that is used in the world of education as well as the world of business. Blended learning is not a new concept, but may be a new term to many users. Below is a list of just a few of the more common, but older, names of blended learning.

"You may hear blended learning described as "integrative learning", "hybrid learning", "multi-method learning" (Node, 2001)."The term "blended learning" is being used with increasing frequency in both academic and corporate circles. In 2003, the American Society for Training and Development identified blended learning as one of the top ten trends to emerge in the knowledge delivery industry" (cited in Rooney, 2003) (Graham, 2004).

Blended learning began as online learning when poor rural school districts had to rely on online learning for students who were taking higher level classes that they could not afford a teacher to come in and teach.

Mixing Synchronous Learning and Asynchronous Learning

A blended learning approach can combine face-to-face facilitation with computer-mediated instruction and/or discovery learning opportunities. It also applies science or IT activities with the assistance of educational technologies using computer, cellular or Smartphones, Satellite television channels, videoconferencing and other emerging electronic media. Learners and teachers work together to improve the quality of learning and teaching, the ultimate aim of blended learning being to provide realistic practical opportunities for learners and teachers to make learning independent, useful, sustainable and ever growing.

Why is Blended Learning Important?

One clear advantage of blended learning in education is its connection with differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction involves "custom-designing instruction based on student needs." In differentiated instruction, educators look at students' learning styles, interests, and abilities. Once these factors have been determined, educators decide which curriculum content, learning activities, products, and learning environments will best serve those individual students' needs. Blended learning can fit into a number of these areas. By using blended learning, educators are definitely altering the learning environment

when students work collaboratively in learning communities online, for example. Teachers could also add relevant curriculum content that would be unavailable or difficult to comprehend outside of the internet. Learning activities and products can also be changed to use technologies in a classroom that uses blended learning.

In a study by Dean and associates, research showed that providing several online options in addition to traditional classroom training actually increased what students learned. (2001) Another study showed that student interaction and satisfaction improved, along with students learning more, in courses that incorporated blended learning. (DeLacey and Leonard, 2002)

Another advantage of blended learning is pacing and attendance. In most blended learning classrooms, there is the ability to study whenever the student chooses to do so. If a student is absent, she/he may view some of the missed materials at the same time that the rest of the class does, even though the student cannot be physically in the classroom. This helps students stay on track and not fall behind, which is especially helpful for students with prolonged sicknesses or injuries that prevent them from attending school. These "self-study modules" also allow learners to review certain content at any time for help in understanding a concept or to work ahead for those students who learn at a faster pace. (Alvarez, 2005)

Because of the ability of students to self-pace, there is a higher completion rate for students in blended learning classrooms than to those in strictly e-learning situations. (Flavin, 2001) This self-pacing allows for the engagement of every learner in the classroom at any given time. Students also see that the learning involved becomes a process, not individual learning events. This revelation allows for an increased application of the learning done in the classroom. (Flavin, 2001).

Benefits of the Blended Learning

Blended learning — a strategy that combines online and classroom learning activities and resources to reduce in-class seat time for students in a face-to-face environment — can be a tremendous boon for a university. It can help the institution enhance under-enrolled programs, complete faculty teaching loads, and improve cost effectiveness. However, convincing the institution's constituents that a blended course or program is a good idea may take some work.

Teachers don't have to make a decision about which single solution is the best; instead blended learning allows organizations to put together a number of solutions that are appropriate for each part of the learning problem, therefore taking the opportunity to combine more traditional formats with newer formats to introduce the learners to newer ways of learning. A variety of formats and elements lead to more stimulated and motivated

learners. It ensures that different learning styles are catered for in a solution e.g. auditory, visual, practicing, discussing and researching.

Using an e-learning element can reduce travel and hotel expenses and allows organizations to execute a blended approach that selects the lowest cost media which solves the problem e.g. job aids, and move to more expensive media only if the problem demands it. To reap the benefits of blended learning, ensure that the different elements are fully integrated; as learners may try to select the parts of the training course that they prefer and therefore not concentrate on other elements required. Learners will need to understand that the "package" of learning solutions is greater than the parts and that each element adds something important to the total solution and should not be disregarded.

Ensure robust learning management is in place in order to detect any problems or issues with the rollout effort. Find creative ways to ensure that the asynchronous modules and other pre-class assignments were completed, such as the forms that learners had to complete to understand the synchronous class.

Conclusion

Blended learning takes advantage of the power of technology to deliver training "just in time," anywhere and anytime. However, in blended learning, technology (and in particular, online education) is not used as an isolated tool, but as a key part of a comprehensive workplace performance solution. E-learning, therefore, is not considered the only means to educate, but it should be considered an adjunct to the overall training process.

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