

Models of Blended Learning



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Esteemed delegates to the North Zone meeting of the Vice-Chancellors of Indian Universities under the auspices of the Association of Indian Universities and the Graphic Era Hill University. I am thankful to the organisers, the AIU President, and Secretary General for this invitation to speak in this important event, at a time when Indian universities are taking new and innovative pathways and implementing the National Education Policy 2020. Thanks to the chair of this session Prof Pant and other speakers, who will be sharing their perspective too on the topic. My presentation provides an overview of the topic and indicates to the available resources where leaders can get insights for systematic implementation of blended learning for student success.

I serve the Commonwealth of Learning, an intergovernmental organisation mandated to help Commonwealth governments and institutions use technologies to improve and expand access to education and training.

Our goal is 'learning for sustainable development' with a focus on social inclusion, economic empowerment and environmental conservation.

The technology-enabled learning initiative of COL supports blended learning in post-secondary institutions. The COL model is based on the tested framework of Policy, Capacity, and Technology, where learning material, in various formats and open license, also plays an important role.

This approach has been implemented in several institutions across the Commonwealth. It takes a three-phase process where we take an evidence-based approach to policy development, build capacity of teachers, and recommend the use of low-cost open-source tools for implementing blended learning. Clarity on policy is a key indicator of success, as it brings in the necessary resources and guidance to make things happen on the ground. For example, in India, there are regulations for minimum standards for instructions, credit transfer for MOOCs, attendance requirements etc. It is necessary to have a regulation on blended learning.

COL is a Resource Centre for blended learning, and we have guides to help institutions navigate the process of implementation of blended learning systematically. Based on some of these, let me provide a brief primer on models of blended learning.

We know that blended learning is a thoughtful fusion of face to face and online learning experiences for the student. The issue comes when this thoughtful fusion becomes arbitrary. We need guidelines to avoid confusion to make this 'thoughtful fusion' happen.

Blended also means more than just face-to-face and online. It may also include a range of media and instructional methods.

Blended learning may happen at four levels: Activity-level blending occurs when a learning activity contains both face-to-face and computer mediated elements. Course-level blending is one of the most common ways to blend. It entails a combination of distinct face-to-face and online activities used as part of a course. Program-level blending observes that blending is happening throughout a programme. Similarly, blended can happen at the institutional levels. All these would require appropriate policies to be in place.

In order to provide some guidance about the blending on modalities, the Sloan Consortium indicated that a course where the learning happens between 30-79% online, can be attributed as a blended course.

A typical example of blended course may have 50% online and 50% face-to-face component.

In practice, all blended learning requires a kind of learning management system combined with the face-to-face delivery of teaching and learning. This is where the choice of technology as well as capacity building of teachers become important.

Creating an effective blended learning environment requires a number of things from better understanding of technology to how technology enables learning. This will include how to facilitate a discussion forum, and use online assessment tools available on the LMS, and how to create authentic assessments online.

As leaders, it is important for us to have clarity on why we want to use blended learning. Is it providing more flexibility for the learners and attracting a larger student body? Is it improving the learning experiences? Is it about effective use of space and meeting the needs of 21st century learners? Maybe we focus on everything, but clarity will help to assess the impact of blended learning.

Blended learning is of various types. Rotation model – a program in which within a given course or subject (e.g., math), students rotate on a fixed schedule or at the teacher's discretion between learning modalities, at least one of which is online learning. Flex model – a program in which content and instruction are delivered primarily by the Internet, students move on an individually customized, fluid schedule among learning modalities, and the teacher-of-record is on-site. Self-Blend model – describes a scenario in which students choose to take one or more courses entirely online to supplement their traditional courses and the teacher-of-record is the online teacher. Enriched-Virtual model – a whole-school experience in which within each course (e.g., math), students divide their time between attending a brick-and-mortar campus and learning remotely using online delivery of content and instruction. In essence, blending is contextual.

What are the institutional success factors for blended learning? Policy is definitely a starting point for success. But a strategic approach to blended learning is important. Are you ready for blended learning? Do you have the capacities, both technical and human resources? Taking a scholarly approach to blended learning rather than a mere techno-administrative approach is more useful for success.

Teachers are key to developing blended courses, and training teachers help. Research shows that a mentoring programme where teachers are supported in instructional design has been successful in building the trust and confidence of the teachers. Creating guides and online resources to assist teachers are important for transitioning to blended learning. Experience sharing from teachers' perspective in a community of practice serves in creating a collaborative learning environment for blended learning.

Students also need preparation for the transition. However, most of the students entering universities are now millennials and also expect more digital learning. But not all students may have access to online tools at home. Also, assuming that they use social media effectively means that they also know how to learn effectively in the blended learning could be an assumption that may prove to be a barrier in the success. So, preparing students to develop self-regulation and time management skills are significant. Providing clear expectations, especially in assessment, is important for the learners.

While developing the blended learning environment, it is important to focus on pedagogical considerations. Cognitive alignment of the blending of face-to-face and online with the expected learning outcomes is crucial. It is where the capacity building of teachers plays a significant role, and the availability of dedicated instructional designers to guide and support teachers could assist in creating programmes that are of high quality.

How much interaction, and how much independence may be provided in the course to achieve the learning outcomes? The key is getting the blending right.

Often, I receive a question about whether blended learning works? Do students learn better? My typical response is to give a quote "The strongest predictor of success is in previous academic performance. Historically, students who have done well in courses do well in any mode; a course is a course."

That also means we need to ask the right questions. Nevertheless, there is a lot of research available on how technology applications, including blended learning improves student learning. A second order meta-analysis revealed that students in blended learning had on average about 10.7% improvement in academic performance compared to face-to-face instruction. I urge you to explore the summary of this report.

I thank you again for your attention.