

To blend, or not to blend?

Blended learning is on the agenda of every institute, but the concept is often misunderstood. Is it really a matter of choice whether to start blending?

Introduction

In the past 2 years, the whole of education has been turned upside down. In this period of crisis, teachers worldwide have learned many lessons through the shift to emergency remote teaching and learning. To sustainably embed these lessons 'blended learning', the blending of traditional face-to-face classroom activities with online or digital media, is often presented as the solution. New vision and policy documents about implementing blended learning pop up like daisies. I see phrases like "The future is blended" and "Blended learning is the new normal". Then I wonder, is that the right way forward? Is blended learning really that new? Is "To blend, or not to blend?" even the right question?

A little thought experiment

Imagine this: you are a teacher that is going to teach on a desert island (after Norberg 2011). All you have is a tree, four students and your knowledge. No textbooks, no pencils, no internet, no nothing... How will you teach? Well, you'd probably gather the students below the tree and start talking about your subject matter. After your explanation, you might ask them some questions or start a discussion. That is about the only thing you can do in this situation!

This goes on for a couple of days, until one day a small boat arrives. A boat filled with pencils and empty paper. What a relief! Everything becomes easier: students can work on assignments, make notes, formulate ideas, answer questions...they can create! What now changes in your role as a teacher? Will you still only instruct and ask questions? Or will you start using these new tools? By the way: is it really such a relief? With today's knowledge perhaps yes, but the



introduction of pencils and paper also means you – and the students – have to learn new skills in order to use them effectively.

Let me continue the thought experiment. A week later, another boat arrives. This one is filled with textbooks about exactly your subject matter. Wow, now you don't have to lecture any more! After all, the students can read about the subject themselves. This is great news, because you were already growing pretty tired of spending most of your time explaining things. Instead of you putting in all the effort, you want the students to engage on their own. Even more interesting is that the students can now also read about the subject matter at another location: at home alone, or together with a peer on a different island. You could even design a remote course. What now changes in your role as the teacher?

You understand where I am going with this, right? Because, of course, it does not stop here. The boats keep on coming. One day radio is introduced, another day video, podcasts, internet, access to thousands of tools and possibilities for communication, creation and interaction, and so on... What is now possible? And how do you integrate all these opportunities for teaching and learning into your education? This is where the concept of blended learning comes into play. Because it is exactly this concept that tries to integrate all opportunities

for teaching and learning – all these boats with technological advancements – into one logical whole: the blend. The blend that seeks to enrich learning experiences, by applying different activating strategies and technologies that support them.

Technology and the role of the teacher

When thinking of the technological advancements that we use to enrich the learning experience, it might be a good idea to dive into the concept of "technology" a bit more. Because what exactly is technology? Wikipedia uses the following definition:

"Technology is the sum of any techniques, skills, methods, and processes used in the production of goods or services or in the accomplishment of objectives, such as scientific investigation."

...or education!

This makes it interesting. Because according to this definition, one might argue that when we give technological advancements that support learning a place in education – as we once started doing with the introduction of, for example, pencils and paper – we are in fact already "blending" education since the start of formal education.

However, there is another interesting finding from this back to basics thought experiment. While it is a simplistic characterization of the history of education and multimedia learning it nevertheless, in my opinion, shows us

not only that the role of the teacher is changing, but also how it is changing. It went from narrator to task creator, to facilitator, and to designer. And with all these new opportunities for teaching and learning, new skills come into play as well. Skills needed to deal with all those technological developments in an effective way. And even more: if learning no longer only takes place under the tree, stimulating and motivating students in other locations is just around the corner. This does not necessarily make the teacher's life easier, but it does make it richer. The teacher toolbox grows with every new technological advancement. The role of the teacher is indeed shifting, or even expanding, from instructor to designer. From transmitter of knowledge to facilitator of learning.

Then I wonder... should we try to put all those roles into one person? Does a teacher have to be an instructor as well as technician, a networker and coach? Food for thought. I often see successful teachers who are successful because they work in teams. Together with ICT experts, managers, educationalists, and so on: they must all work together to ensure that students receive the best education that they deserve. That learning takes place as effectively under the tree as in other locations: online, face-to-face, synchronously, asynchronously, alone, together, formal and informal. All brought together in one harmoniously integrated whole.



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The real revolution

Time to return to the question from the introduction of this column: Is "To blend, or not to blend?" the right question? Not as far as I am concerned. What I have tried to show is that it is not a matter of choosing between online or face-to-face education, let alone a combination of both. The world has been a blend for many years. Technological advancements have existed since the invention of the wheel. Our education was, and will be blended.

Therefore, my final message is simple: I think we should stop presenting blended learning as the future or the new normal, or as yet another new form of digitization that could lead to the holy grail. As long as we continue to present it as "new" or the "future", it will always feel somewhat intangible and hard to grasp. In my opinion, it is much more important to focus on educational design: where we use technology only if it adds value, aligned with the intended goals.

The added value of blended learning and the revolution we need is not hidden in yet another great new technological advancement, but in its effective use. Technology is not by definition good, and something we can simply stack on top of all existing education. The resulting courses

could be 100% face-to-face, 100% online, and everything in between. That is why I hope that in a few years we will no longer be talking about blended learning, or whatever synonyms are out there, but rather about great education. And what is great education? It is education that achieves all goals, both written and unwritten, within any given context. Because what teacher does not want that?

References

Norberg, A. 2011. *A back-to-basics thought experiment about blended learning*. Available at: <https://blended.online.ucf.edu/2011/09/06/a-back-to-basics-thought-experiment-about-blended-learning/>. (Accessed: 23 February 2022).

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