
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Addressing Individual Differences through Blended Learning: A Perspective Article

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| ABSTRACT

Blended Learning, a unique and comprehensive approach that combines several learning environments, is designed to engage the learner fully in the education process. However, the current literature reveals different considerations on the potential disciplinary gap in blended learning utilization. This study, therefore, aims to explore and analyze this literature to develop a theory. The research is guided by two questions: Why should blended Learning be used? What activities, classroom or otherwise, would capture the interest of 21st-century learners? Blended Learning is based on the idea that Learning is ongoing, not a one-time event. It offers advantages over single learning methods. However, more than just combining methods is optional. The focus should be on learning outcomes, using the right technology for each person's style to teach the right skills at the right time.

| KEYWORDS

Individual differences, face-to-face and online Learning, Blended Learning

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Blended Learning sounds easy (classroom + online) but is complicated. There are many ways to do it, with different learners and teaching methods. Different technology and teaching styles have been used in in-person and online classes. New learning techs like podcasts and social media make blended Learning even more complex. The cultural diversity of learners and the technology-rich experiences of some Net Generation students pose additional challenges for blended learning design. The extent to which ICT has been incorporated or embedded within programs adds complexity.

Blended Learning has been used for over 15 years, but its meaning has constantly changed. In the late 1980s, the Workers Education Association (WEA), Ruskin College, and the Open University collaborated on a blended learning program for adults without qualifications returning to education (Moore & Bryant, 1989).

Blended Learning provides evidence to support the benefits of online collaborative environments. It encourages more reticent individuals to participate to a greater extent and interact in online environments, as there is less opportunity for intimidation between individuals and less time pressure on them than in face-to-face settings. In blended Learning, the instructor has a broader choice of complementary delivery mediums. With that wider choice comes greater complexity and pressure on the instructor and designer. The many new tech options and lack of a one-size-fits-all approach make blending learning even trickier. These issues must be addressed upfront and considered during the design. It needs to consider this due to its effects on the learner. Such changes require the learner to adapt.

Blended Learning offers excellent flexibility and effectiveness as it can choose the best medium for every objective; however, the challenge is making the blend effective and efficient. In cases where multiple instructors are used, it is natural for each to perceive their part of the blend as having disproportionate importance. Blended learning design integrates cost control with maintaining quality and learner results.

2. The Set of Assumptions

2.1 Blended Learning Accommodates Varied Learning Environments

According to Sharpe, Benfield, Robert, and Francis (2006), blended learning models that respond to local, community, or organizational needs should be developed rather than using a generic approach. However, Mason and Rennie (2006) advocate putting the learners' needs first, ahead of the context or the teacher's biases in making such choices.

2.2 Blended Learning Involves Face-To-Face and Online Learning Environments

The importance of a strong integration between the two environments (Garrison and Kanuka (2004). More recently, Garrison and Vaughan (2007) have operationalized the integration requirement in a four-phase model anchored around the face-to-face environment. A sequence of activities before, during, after, and in preparation for the next face-to-face session are described, and suggestions for various technology options that incorporate both environments' strengths are provided. The central role of the face-to-face environment in the model provides the comfort of a traditional learning environment for students and teachers. The model also reflects existing good practice where teachers often plan courses around learning activities 'before, during, and after' class.

2.3 Blended Learning is Not Addition of Technology to the Traditional Face-To-Face Classroom Environment

In the professional development context, blending technologies with face-to-face interaction is a means of establishing a community of practice. Wenger (1998, 1999) introduced the idea of a "community of practice"—groups who learn together about a shared interest by regularly interacting. This concept has been adapted for workplace learning by combining in-person interaction with online communication tools (Stacey et al., 2004). This blend creates a more prosperous learning environment.

2.4 Blended Learning Has Varied Interests Due to Individual Differences

Blended Learning should combine more than just online and in-person elements. It should consider the advantages and limitations of each for the specific learners involved. Examples of good practice in the online discussion literature can inform blended learning design, for example, Meyer (2004). Walker and Arnold (2004) have extended this by providing a pedagogical framework where the different phases of the course utilize the strengths of the different media and add value to the learning activities.

2.5 Blended Learning Requires Creative and Purposive Use of Available Learning Environments

Blended Learning should be introduced as a scholarly and transformative redesign process within the institution that rebuilds the course rather than simply adding on technology (Sharpe et al., 2006; Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

3. The Working Propositions and Consequences of the Assumptions

3.1 Blended Learning Accommodates Various Learners' Maturities

Blended Learning involves blending different learning environments, which addresses learners' differences. Through the creative and purposive use of the existing learning environment, blended Learning stimulates learners' interest. While blended learning is widely used by educators, Whitelock (2004) argues that theorists still need to embrace the term entirely. This is perhaps due to the technology focus of current blended learning studies: the variety of educational theories remains unchanged during the mixture of online and traditional classroom practice (Chew, 2008). While research shows what makes blended learning successful, it needs to be clarified whether these models work equally well across different subjects and with different teachers.

3.2 Blended Learning Stimulates Interest in Different Kind of Learners

Blended Learning is like a living organism constantly changing and growing. According to Siemens (2003), this makes it a more effective way to learn than relying on static, unchanging content. Some institutions were aware of a holistic view of technology and Learning, including the use of the learners' technologies (mobile phones, online communities, instant messaging, etc.) to support their Learning, sometimes in unexpected ways: *the general philosophy that our IT services have is in terms of more a managed learning environment than a virtual learning environment -- is any device, any place, any time, and we are trying to work towards that. It is that sort of philosophy we must recognize that the whole thing will be blended, any device, time, or place.* (Kilderhill, 1)

3.3 Blended Learning Includes Varied Activities in Different Environments Other than Classroom and Online Through Formal and Informal Activities

Individuals will see work as learning how to address unique situations, recognize where to turn for Learning, support, and advice, and formally or informally share that knowledge widely with others. The traditional approach of the teaching-learning process will be replaced with multiple opportunities to learn and grow on the path to successful, rewarding knowledge. Blended Learning may include activities such as Providing appropriate support for learners (time, technology, guidance), Developing explicit learning and performance goals, making objective decisions based on the best learning outcomes (not cost or prestige), Making collaborative decisions (across departments, from learner's perspective); Obtaining visible, enthusiastic management support; Moving essential skill development to eLearning and use the classroom for more advanced topics.

3.4 Blended Learning Addresses Individual Differences Through Creative and Purposive Utilization of Learning Environment

Understanding blended e-learning holistically needs to be seen as part of Learning. Here, we highlight educational rationales for blended e-learning that most clearly express how they have been based on a particular approach to understanding student learning. In reviewing studies with a clear and specific educational rationale, we used the framework provided by Mayes and de Freitas (2004) of associative, cognitive constructivist, social constructivist, and situative learning theories.

4. Theory

Blended Learning combines several learning environments to engage the learner in the education process fully. Learning, in general, is facilitated and maximized when students are involved and engaged in activities that they are interested in. It can be attained through blended Learning because it allows the students to accommodate multiple activities and varied learning environments.

The varied learning environments blend tools and delivery modes from formal to informal. With informal Learning, learners tend to pull and extract what they want or need to learn. In traditional formal Learning, content is typically pushed to the learner. Informal learning tools can enhance formal learning activities.

Learning is not a one-shot deal! Combining formal activities with informal ones reflects the understanding that Learning is ongoing, not a single event in a single place. Blended Learning offers advantages that traditional, single-method teaching cannot match. Research from universities like Tennessee and Stanford shows that blended learning works! It caters to different learning styles and boosts student achievement.

Hence, blended Learning can be described as a learning program where multiple delivery modes are used to optimize the learning outcome and cost of program delivery. Do not stay focused on just throwing different teaching methods together. The key to blended Learning is keeping the focus on student achievement.

Finally, blended Learning is more than a one-size-fits-all approach. The goal is to pick the perfect technology, match it to individual learning styles, and teach the right skills at the right moment to maximize Learning.

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