Nilufar Abdurashidovna Abdurashidova
Tashkent State Transport University
English teacher
Department of Foreign Languages

WHY BLENDED LEARNING: THE MEANING OF BL FOR TEACHERS

Abstract: In today's digital age, online learning has become an inseparable facet of the education and we, educators cannot imagine academic learning procedures without an access to online learning. Although the phrase "online learning" is no longer contemporary, today's leaders in online learning are making progress in the technological evolution of education. So, why has online learning become a momentous trend in education?

The most irrefutable reason is that online learning serves as a basis of high-quality curriculum which creates and recommends up-to-date opportunities, full-standard courses for all students in spite of their sites and resources of their schools, colleges or universities. Apart from chances for students, it offers professional development for teachers.

Key words: digital age, online learning, technological evolution of education, important trends in education.
Language: English

Introduction

Another reason for the widespread usage of online leaning is that today's students belong to the generation of digital age, possessing rudimentary skills such as setting an easy access to the recent data and ideas with the help of the Internet and organizing interactions with their peers on the latest material they have found on the Internet. They are outright keen on the Internet and elements which are available on it. What is more, online courses through the Internet can easily motivate and challenge any talented, genius students and provide opportunities to work on these courses at any pace and time which is convenient for students in the library, coffee shops, at home or any other locations outside the classroom.

It is highly acknowledged that online learning is the most momentous trend in education along with workforce. Today virtual schools supply access to online, collaborative and self-paced learning environments that consolidate advancement of skills that are significantly important in the highly competitive 21st century global workplace. The skills embrace global awareness, self-directed learning, information and communication technology literacy, problem solving, time management and personal responsibility. Nowadays, 30 percent of employers in the US utilize online learning training for their workforce (Patrick, 2007).

In the educational sphere, according to the research Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning in the year 2006, in the US 38 states formed online courses and programs. Furthermore, one-third of all K-12 school districts commenced offering and implementing e-learning. In the year 2005, 500,000 students enrolled in online courses. Online learning, in general, technology has made and still making progress and trends in the educational sphere. It intends to amplify the following factors such as:

performance-based learning: personalized instruction relying on data-driven feedback and adjustments. Performance is measured through demonstration of standards-based competency, not by "seat-time" hours spent in a classroom;

teachers who become entrepreneurs in education: experimenting; coordinating video, audio and graphics, as well as text content; and monitoring and tailoring content for individual students while enjoying more flexible work schedules for the first time; changes in the paradigm of how and where students access their education: no longer does time

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or classroom location dictate where and when a student learns. Time becomes the variable, and achievement the constant, in the online classroom;

a shift in the funding and budgeting model: from seats in classrooms to a student-based, competence, per course basis (Patrick, 2007, p 2).

Except from fostering the above mentioned factors, online educators and leaders have invented a number of applications which serve to blend technology and real-world experience. In education, evolution and advancements in technology and online learning led to the birth of new approach, that is blended learning – a combination of online-instruction and face-to-face environments.

It is a very vital task to clarify why exactly blended learning is being chosen in all educational sectors. What does Blended learning mean for teachers? What standards does it possess for students and teachers? And to what extent does it differ from other forms of learning? These are main questions to answer before going deeper to discover other essential features of blended learning.

It is known that blended learning is the mixture of online tools and in-class instructions. It totally differs from the model where learning is delivered only online like virtual schools, and the model where no online is used like traditional schools. Today, in different parts of the world including Uzbekistan, various models of courses are conducted through blended learning. Although the implementation number of blended learning is increasing, it is very significant to identify how online resources and web applications are being utilized in teaching and learning some certain courses. Blended learning, in the 21st digital age, is serving as a major approach to implement the resources and apps and discover how well they lead to success in teaching and learning.

It is commonly deliberated that becoming competent in learning online and using online resources accurately is another main contemporary 21st century skill. In the preface of the book, so-called "21st Century Skills: Rethinking How Students Learn", Ken Key claims that "Twenty-first century skills are the ticket to moving up the economic ladder. Without 21st century skills, people are relegated to low-wage, low-skill jobs. Proficiency in 21st century skills is the new civil right for our times" (Key, 2006). Thus, students have to be taught and prepared to accomplish the needs of today's digital age. The curricula of the courses should be focused on information, media and technology literacy.

The life of humanity has already been blended, that is we live in the mixture of digital and real world. The spread of mobile phones is a simple illustration to this. Technology owns a very stable and strong position in this real world, and the evolution of technology led to blend the real and virtual lives.

In the educational sphere, this blending offers a variety of opportunities. To prove it, we have to refer to other forms of learning. The study in the Ontario Ministry Education reveals the plethora of opportunities blended learning offer by comparing them with two other forms of learning, namely Classroom Learning and E-Learning. The study compares their opportunities in terms of some certain goals. The table below clearly demonstrates the findings of the study.

Table 1. Blended Learning vs other forms of Learning

Goal	Classroom Learning	Blended Learning	E-Learning
Communication between a teacher and students	Full group lessons Small group lessons or tutorials Individual conferences Marked assignments and rubrics	Full group lessons Small group lessons or tutorials Individual conferences Marked assignments and rubrics Digital course materials Online discussions E-mail Instant messages News announcements Online calendar Dropboxes Online grade tool Rubrics	Digital course materials Online discussions E-mail Instant messages News announcements Online calendar Dropboxes Online grade tool Rubrics Web conferences

Collaboration among students	Learning centres or other room arrangements Class discussions Face-to-face group work	Learning centres or other room arrangements Class discussions Face-to-face group work Online group work Online discussions E-mail Instant messages Blogs Electronic portfolios	Online group work Online discussions Chat sessions E-mail Instant messages Blogs Electronic portfolios Web conferences
Demonstration of learning	Paper-and-pencil tests and assignments submitted in person Live presentations, labs, performances, or exhibits of skill Models, works of art, posters, and other physical artifacts submitted in person	Paper-and-pencil tests and assignments submitted in person Live presentations, labs, performances, or exhibits of skill Models, works of art, posters, and other physical artifacts submitted in person Blogs Electronic portfolios Online discussions Online surveys and quizzes Assignments, such as essays, worksheets, slide shows, photographs, and videos submitted to electronic dropboxes	Blogs Electronic portfolios Online discussions Online surveys and quizzes Assignments, such as essays, worksheets, slide shows, photographs, and videos submitted to electronic dropboxes Web conferences

In all terms, communication, collaboration and demonstration of learning, blended learning recommends a multitude of opportunities both for teachers and students. That is why, blended learning is replacing both classroom learning and e-learning. The reasons are very simple. Firstly, blended learning offers different opportunities for learners who have a variety of learning styles, and meets needs of the learners. Secondly, teachers may benefit from implementing it, such as learning to give an instant feedback, enhancing the ability to immediately evaluate learners' performance, and organizing quizzes or test through LMS. Thirdly, blended learning delivers the content of the course to a great number of learners around the world. Fourthly, learners can obtain information on the particular course through different channels. Fifthly, if they miss face-to-face classes, they can learn information elsewhere in the World Wide Web. Finally, blended learning is a very contemporary as well as learner-centred approach which demands individual learning and individual discovery from the learners. Thus, it provides students with the profits of traditional classroom as well as the flexibility of e-learning.

Blended learning has a wide meaning for teachers to understand. Since it proposes a diversity of opportunities for teachers to have an effective lesson or course, teachers are supposed to understand complex but at the same time simple angles of blended learning. Ben Jackson (2014) in his article, so-called "What Blended Learning Means for Teachers" reveals how teachers reflect on the course which is being delivered through blended learning. According to him, blended learning is not an approach in which computers, tablets and new software should be stood in front of students. It is an intentional integration of online and face-to-face environment to provide students with a great number of chances for students. Teachers should own and clarify their goals before implementing this new approach into teaching and learning. When online and in-person settings are respectively and effectively combined, students will have a multitude ways to practice skills and a diversity of chances to present their learning.

Moreover, "as necessary as technology is, the real secret to effective blended instruction remains the same as any other classroom: It's all about the people" (Jackson, 2014). That is to say, selecting software is not a sufficient key to the prosperous blended course since planning and designing a course which are carried out by teachers play a noticeable role in the success of any blended course. Teachers' role in blended learning varies from other conventional classrooms. They are no longer responsible for preparing a list of activities for each lesson, and they are no longer sole operator. Rather, they have to collaborate with school, college or university staff and administrators discussing content areas, assessment levels, and sharing responsibilities amongst them starting from the piloting contemporary approaches till analyzing the consequences of them. Thus, blended learning demands teachers to team up in order

to plan the course, scrutinize new instructional methods, and evaluate their effectiveness and outcomes of the implemented approaches.

The standards which teachers are supposed to follow in blended learning completely vary from the standards of conventional classroom. In K-12 sectors, National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS-T) are set and this guidance embraces the following sections (Patrick, 2007):

I. Technology Operations and Concepts: teachers are to demonstrate introductory knowledge, skills, concepts, and continual developments in technology.

II. Planning Designing Learning Environments and Experiences: teachers are to design the course which is delivered via technology enhanced instructional strategies, identify technology resources and arrange strategies to manage student learning in an online environment.III. Teaching, Learning and the Curriculum: teachers are to utilize learner-centred strategies and implement technology to develop students' skills and creativity.

IV. Assessment and Evaluation: teachers are to implement technology and different assessment techniques in order to evaluate student learning, students' appropriate use of technology sources for learning, communication and productivity.

V. Productivity and Professional Practice: teachers are to utilize technology and technology resources to involve in ongoing professional development, to accelerate productivity, to interact with peers, parents and to reflect on professional practice.

VI. Social, Ethical, Legal and Human Issues: teachers are to implement technology and technology resources to present various backgrounds, characteristics and abilities and to encourage safe and healthy use of technology resources.

Thus, it is very important for teachers to be aware of how to use technology and apply technology resources in the blended courses. They have to differentiate blended learning from alternative learning forms and to find and fulfill their roles in both online and face-to-face environments. Moreover, it is highly significant for teachers to understand the goals and objectives of blended learning. There is a rapidly growing literature which shows the goals and objectives of blended learning.

In one of the international conferences which was held in Tomsk Polytechnic University in Russia, the goals and objectives of the effective blended learning were presented. According to it, any system will function efficaciously, if its elements are methodically appropriate to the objectives of the approach. The following goals and objectives were demonstrated in the conference:

1. To prepare students to independent productive activity, develop the following skills: Constructive and algorithmic thinking;

Creative thinking due to decreasing the amount of reproductive activity;

Communicative skills on the basis of performing team projects; Ability to find solutions in computer-simulated situations; Research skills;

Skills of information culture and information processing.

2. To implement the social order:

to train specialists in working with information technologies;

to train specialists in independent lifelong learning by means of information technologies.

3. To intensify all levels of the educational process:

to increase effectiveness and teaching quality due to the use of information technologies; to expose and use stimuli of cognitive activity promotion;

to deepen interdisciplinary connections2. If teachers understand the purpose of using any approach, it will be not a demanding task for teachers to set the goals and objectives of the course. What is more, being aware of trends and standards of ICT and keeping up-to-date educational technologies serves as a key tool to develop as a professional teacher.

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