Blended Learning: A New Approach to Be Considered In the Teaching-Learning Process

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Abstract

Teaching is not a mechanical process. It is an intricate, exacting and a very challenging one. Like an artist the teacher is also responsible for shaping or reshaping the behavior of the young ones in a society. But, today's world is passing through rapid changes and great advancements. In such a climate, even education system can't resist change. As a result, the imperatives of new times, new demands and new visions assign more challenging role and responsibility to the teacher as well as in the teaching-learning process. If we are to give this new generation children the education necessary to succeed in our technologically intense, global future, then a new form of educational practice that builds on children's native learning abilities and technological competence must replace our existing methods. The demand of new technology and uninterrupted global environment can't be meeting with the only source of classroom instruction. within this context, blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through delivery of educational content with the best features of classroom instruction via digital and online media to personalize learning and to facilitate thoughtful reflection with some element of student control over time, place, path, or pace. Since, blended-learning can enhance the student's learning experience. Therefore, we must facilitate the growth and promotion of this blended learning approach by considering its positive impact and effectiveness in the current teaching- learning process.
Key Words: ICT, Paradigm Shift, Face-to-Face Interaction, Online Learning, Blended-Learning.

Introduction: Teaching is not a mechanical process. It is an intricate, exacting and a very challenging one. Though teaching is being considered as a science and skill, basically it is a sublime art; because the teacher unconsciously designs the growing tender mind of the child. Like an artist the teacher is also responsible for shaping or reshaping the behaviour of the young ones in a society. But, the teacher can't give any shape to the young living being he comes in contact with; rather he has to be a very careful artist.

Throughout history, people called teachers have played many different roles and they continue to do so today. But, today's world is passing through rapid changes and great advancements. In such a climate, even education system can't resist change. As a result, the imperatives of new times, new demands and new visions assign more challenging role and responsibility to the teacher.

Now a day, advanced technology has effectively revolutionized human society. An unexpected byproduct of this revolution has been the emergence of a generation of children weaned on multidimensional, interactive media sources, a generation whose understanding and expectations of the world differ profoundly from that of the generations preceding them. If we are to give these children the education necessary to succeed in our technologically intense, global future, then a new form of educational practice that builds on children's native learning abilities and technological competence must replace our existing methods.

Since, challenges in educational system have no permanent and fixed answers, so, teachers themselves will have to make the final choices from among many alternatives. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to constantly reevaluate their choices. This can be achieved through introducing or promotion of innovative ideas and practices in teaching-learning process.

Emergence of Blended Learning: In recent years advanced communication and information technology has revolutionized the teaching-learning process. The demand of new technology and uninterrupted global environment can't be meeting with the only source of classroom instruction. As today's children have grown up with remote controls and they spend more time in computers, internet, playing video games etc. than reading books; even toys are now filled with buttons and blinking lights. The present generations are enough smart that their wants, needs can't be satisfied only with formal bookish and traditional classroom teaching. Thus, today's children are learning through information, learning through interaction, learning through collaboration as well as participation and learning through classroom-experiences by using enormous potentials of internet and online exercises.

But the main focus should be on learning; where ICT (information and communication technology) plays a bigger role in maximizing students learning ability. But the significance of traditional face-to-face instruction can't be denied as teaching learning process revolves around the live human minds. Keeping this in view, a consensus has emerged among concerned educationists, intellectuals working in the area that there is a need for blending or infusing the wide usability of online learning exercises with traditional face-to-face instruction results in the emergence of *Blended Learning Approach* in the contemporary period.

Meaning of Blended-Learning: Blended learning means many things to many people. The terms "blended," "hybrid", "technology-mediated instruction", "web-enhanced instruction" and "mixed-mode instruction" are often used interchangeably. But blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through delivery of educational content with the best features of classroom instruction via digital and online media to personalize learning and to facilitate thoughtful reflection with some element of student control over time, place, path, or pace. In general terms, blended learning refers to an approach to learning where teachers use technology, usually in the form of web-based instruction in concert with and as a supplement to live instructions.

Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal (2004) in their research study noted that Blended Learning is a pedagogical approach which combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online exercises, rather than a ratio of delivery modalities. In other words, Blended Learning is a fundamental redesign of the instructional model with the following features-

- ➢ A paradigm shift from lecture dominated to learner centric instruction where students play a more active and cooperative role.
- ➢ Facilitating development in interaction between student & instructor, student & student, student & content and student & outside resources.
- ➢ Emphasizing integrated formative and summative assessment process for students and instructor.
- ➢ A planned combination of online learning and traditional face to face instruction using a variety of learning resources.
- ➢ An educational program that integrates online learning techniques such as online delivery of materials through web pages, discussion boards, and email with traditional teaching.

Most importantly, in this view Blended learning represents the term used to describe the way e-learning is being combined with traditional classroom methods and independent study to create a new, hybrid teaching methodology. It also represents a much greater change in basic technique than simply adding computers to classrooms; it represents, in many cases, a fundamental change in the way teachers and students approach the learning experience.

Components of Blended Learning Approach: Blended learning, the combination of traditional face-to-face teaching methodology with authentic online learning activities, has the following ingredients-

- ➢ *Live events* referring teacher-led learning environment in which all learners participate at the same time. It can be in real classroom or in virtual classroom.
- ➢ *Self-paced learning* referring recorded live events, internet based or CD ROM based which helps the learner to learn at his own speed and pace.
- ➢ *Collaboration* referring a more dynamic and active communication and interaction among many learners which develops knowledge sharing spirit.

➤ *Assessment* implies both live and online measure of learner's knowledge to determine prior knowledge as well as to measure transfer of learning.

➤ *Performance support* referring to those reference materials which enhance student's learning, retention and transfer ability. These may be printable references, downloaded multimedia learning objects, documentations, etc.

In other way, Blended Learning is also characterized by the following ingredients:

➤ *Online Learning:* It is a teacher-led educational instruction that takes place over the internet using a web- based educational delivery system which includes sophisticated software to provide a structured learning environment. Here, the teacher and learner are usually separated geographically, but instructions may be delivered synchronously i.e. communication in which participants interact in real time, such as online video or asynchronously i.e. communication separated by time, such as email and online discussion forums. It may be accessed from multiple settings (in school or out of school boundaries).

➤ *Personalized Learning:* It is designed to student's needs, tailored to learning preferences and customized to the diverse interests of different learners. Technology, therefore, gives students ample opportunities to take ownership of their own learning.

➤ *Customized Learning:* It refers to a sequence of multimodal learning experiences queued by a smart recommendation mechanism driven by a comprehensive learner profile. It is informed by improved and expanded student data, which is applied to boost, motivation and achievement.

➤ *Competency Based Learning:* It is an educational system often referred to as proficiency or mastery based in which student's progress is merely based on demonstration of mastery. Competencies include explicit, measureable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.

Creating Conditions for Success of Blended Learning Approach: Blended learning approach allows for more creative and interactive course assignments. But it is a big, complicated and multifaceted project which requires a lot of support building before and communication during implementation. It is difficult to prescribe a perfect blend; thus we should ensure effective integration of two main components i.e. Face-To-Face interaction and internet technology. The factors and conditions influencing the blend are course instructional goals, student characteristics, instructor's experience and teaching style, developmental level and online resources. The success of a blend primarily depends on the right mix of the elements. A good blend would provide optimum role of live interaction. Some of the conditions and factors which need to be considered in improving the blended learning approach are-

➤ Appropriate course instructional goals,
➤ Improvised student's profile,
➤ Improving hours of training and learning,
➤ Modernizing teachers experience and teaching style,
➤ Consulting cultural dimensions,
➤ Checking resource availability,
➤ Budgetary requirement for training implementation.

Effectiveness of Blended Learning Approach: To cater to the growing and diverse needs of population, infrastructural crunch, implementing effective pedagogy, convenience, cost-effectiveness and to have easy access to the latest data and information, it becomes increasingly important to use blended learning approach in teaching learning process. These tell us that students learn best when teachers create a supportive learning environment. Thus, blended learning provide opportunities for-

➤ It provides a means to ensure learners are supported and guided as they undertake independent learning tasks.
➤ It is anticipated that blended-learning will enhance the student learning experience.
➤ It emphasizes more on learner centered instruction.
➤ It focuses more on active and collaborative learning strategies.
➤ Greater emphasis is given on peer to peer learning.
➤ Encouraging new ideas and innovation in instructional process.
➤ Developing spirit of shared learning.

➢ Enhancing the relevance of new learning.
➢ Developing connections with prior knowledge and learning as well as previous experiences.
➢ Allowing room for more creative and interactive course assignments.

Challenges of Blended Learning Approach: Blended learning is more than electronic textbooks and productivity tools. It means inventing or adopting new learning environments that work better for students and teachers. Blended learning as an approach has a strong dependence on the technical resources with which the blended learning experience is delivered. But this blended learning model is affected by some factors like computer worms, power failures or power interruptions and other technology related problems. Additionally, IT literacy can serve as a significant barrier for students attempting to get access to the course materials. Generally, the challenges of blended learning approach can be looked in two different perspectives- learner perspective and teacher- perspective. In learner perspective, there is a need to consider the learning style and perceptual skills and abilities of students while designing blended learning strategy. Even, learner's mastery in handling ICT is also an important factor in a blended learning environment. Thus determining the skills and the ways through which students acquire and construct knowledge online is very important while designing blended-learning strategy. Likewise, there is a need of great expertise on the part of the teacher to design the strategy by considering both the educational provisions of the institute and the learner's needs in a blended-learning environment. This demands high attention on the part of a teacher to design learning environment with appropriate elements in correct proportions. In addition to that, the responsibility of authorities in providing necessary learning support for easy access to online exercises is also playing a major role in the success of blended learning approach.

Conclusion: In today's era information and knowledge stands out as very important and critical input for growth and survival. Rather than looking at education simply as a means of achieving social uplift, the society must view education also as an engine of advancement in an information era propelled by its wheels of knowledge and research leading to development. Innovation is the path to progress for any nation and the future of the nation is in its classrooms. Hence, we need to respect such innovations as well and promote innovative methods and practices in the teaching-learning process. Blended- learning, as a new pedagogical approach has the tremendous potential to transform student's learning experiences and outcomes. Today's students can be better known as *Digital Natives* because of the integration of technology into their lives. Since the use of advanced technologies including computer, laptop, tablets and cell phones allow this new generation to access information quickly; so, it is one of the best option for this new generation to make blended learning as a part of their teaching-learning process. Therefore, we must facilitate the growth and promotion of this blended learning approach by considering its positive impact and effectiveness in the current teaching- learning process.

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