Blending for Teaching Learning: A Paradigm Shift in Higher Education

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Aim:

The original objective of e-learning and web-based learning programs was the transformation of the brick and mortar system of education to virtual classrooms. Additionally, the first recipients/implementers of the e-learning merely imitated the classroom-based courses into online mode. The experience and the outcome of these learning helped to real- ized that Online quizzes, and rapid turning the pages are merely performing the duties of the single instructor mode. This method fails to suffice the learners' autonomy of learning as it delimits the choices, social contact, engagement, relevance of the context. This gave the rise to many learning designers to incorporate numerous teaching learning methods. It goes without saying that Blending learning succeeds in availing ample of choices and it proves to be effective method of learning.

Blended Learning: Concept and Meaning

It is but obvious for many of the academicians and researchers: What actually is Blended Learning? Blended Learning has become quite familiar term in both corporate as well as the Higher Education. However, very little is known/explored about the term. The use and the meaning of the term is full of obscurity. The question always remains there how blended learning is different from other forms of learning such as e-learning, flexible learning and distributed learning?

There are ample of definitions of Blended Learning available. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) opine blended learning to be the organic integration. In their view, this organic integration always consists of carefully selected face to face and online approaches and methods. They are always communicating and complementary to one another. John Watson of *North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL)* further defines the blended approach as a combination of the best of the elements of online and face-to-face learning processes. There are all possibilities that in near future it may emerge as a dominant teaching – learning model and may also prove to be more effective than any of the two it is made up of.

As the *Sanskrit subhashita* says, intelligence and thinking differ from person to person. And hence, the meaning and use of the Blended Learning differ from expert to expert. Though the term Blended learning appearing to be very commonly used in education and academic activities, it has still remained unexplored. It forms very strong base why Blended Learning is widely accepted and implemented. Not

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surprisingly, blended learning is the reinforcement for the organizations to develop the e-learning modules.

Blended Learning integrates in itself all the learning methodologies. Couple of times Blended Learning is also discussed and in fact understood as *Hybrid* or *Mixed Mode* of learning. It is the mixture of both conventional Face-to-Face/ brick and mortar ways of teaching along with digitally computer-assisted tasks. A blended approach aims at reducing the face to face meet by introducing online learning activities.

The very use of blended learning has proved to be very beneficiary not only to the learner but also to the trainees and the organization's bottom line. Blended Learning takes the organization to adopt the radical change of transaction from traditionally classroom learning to virtual/digital learning. The essential feature of this novel change is that is learner friendly and very easy to accept. In the utilization of the blended learning, the instruct tors and instructional designers have to works the skills needed in it. For an instance, in many organizations training professional can be done one line and thus it will help them to cultivate e-learning skills. Another important factor for many organizations is cost and resources. It is indeed a fact that many organizations have in- vested a great amount of money and resources to develop teaching-learning material and in fact no organization is going to throw it away. In such scenario, blended learning proves to be boon for such organizations as it does not aim at replacing the traditional way but rather it aims at supplementing it.

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Blended Approach	Resource Examples

Online and on-demand Learning	- Online Seminars – Webinars - Wikipedia and other open resources - Multi-media-based learning material - Unique Platforms like FAQs - Frequently Asked Questions - Bookmarking useful pages - Open online resource sharing
Social Media driven Learning and Communities	- Web-logs (Blogs) - Online Discussion Forums (ODFs) - Special Interest Groups (SIG) - Profiles and networking through Skype, Susuu, LinkedIn, Lingualia, Research Gate, Research Scholar and other platforms
E-learning	- Self-paced teaching – learning, profile activities, tutorials and practical exercises - E-assessment - E-certification - Advanced Courses through webinars – MDPs, FDPs, Certificate Courses, etc.

Reasons to Blend

It has several bases which forms the adoption of blended learning for trainers, instructors and learners. There have been six reasons to implement Blended Learning proposed by Osguthorpe and Graham (2003). They are presented hereinafter with some changes:

  (i)   Effective Pedagogy

  (ii) Easy access to recent knowledge

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(iii) Academic interaction in the social semiformal environment

(iv) Catering to personal needs the personal way

(v) Affordable

(vi) Ease of revisiting with freedom of time, space and efforts in learning

The understanding of blended learning indicates that Blended learning incorporates the good of both the learning methodologies. One of the facts of the Blended learning is also that if utmost attention or care is not given while designing the blended learning it can proves to be futile also in both the environments of learning; face-to-face learning and e-learning. Graham et al. (2003) found that Blended Learning is

preferably chosen for three reasons which include (with some changes): (1) pedagogical improvements, (2) Flexibility in T-L Process- es, and (3) Affordability.

Pedagogical Improvements

One of the salient reasons why there is a need for blended learning is the effectiveness in the pedagogy. The contemporary teaching learning methodologies in the higher education have an aim of having Transmissive tricks instead of interactive tricks. Looking at the contemporary teaching strategies, it is apparent that many in- structors implement the lecturing method for their teaching. In the same way, distance education has an aim to prepare the sources and make them available for the learners to acquire it by their own. It is observed that blended learning tricks have attained the highest boost up the levels of several other strategies like active learning, peer learning, and learner centered learning.

Flexibility in the T-L Processes

One of the key advantages positively affecting the distributed learning is the flexibility or access to the learning. In many of the situations where the learners are engaged with several other outside assignments are always seeking for such autonomy and flexibility that they can learn at their own convenience. This serves the purpose of add on education for such learners. Many learners are seeking for this convenience offered and at the same time they never want to be detached from the traditional method of face-to-face learning as they are well acquainted with it.

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Affordability

Another significant reason for the blended learning is the cost effectiveness for both the education institutions as well as the corporate sectors. One of paramount importance of the Blended learning is, it creates the platform to reach to the maximum learners and being available to the heterogeneous learners in very short span of time. Moreover, it is continuous and somewhat similar to that of face-to-face mode of teaching.

Constraints and Challenges

It has been very uniquely observed that to meet the students' needs, the support to adopt the initiative and the awareness is lacking at institutional, regional and national level. A very little grant is availed for bringing the innovations in such a teaching methodologies. After taking some initiatives, many drop the innovations on ac- count of the dearth of resources.

Many researches have been carried out and in that is found that basically that are two main problems in such teaching methodologies as long as the institutes are concerned. The chief among them is that the institute/faculty/department should have clear goals and objectives to adopt the Blended Learning. Target based adoption of blended learning will help the instructors to achieve the goal of the education (Wallace and Young, 2010). Another drawback is that blended learning does not form the integral part of the strategic plans of the universities. University of Waterloo has pointed out that there is no clear vision and action plan and instead of adopting the blended learning in a more organized way, the movement for blended learning is marching in an organic way. There is also a threat in this that it may end up in using the available resources in an ineffective way, may bring frustration among the learners and it will end up having poor results of it (Wallace and Young, 2010). Abel (2005) presents the clear connection between the policy and the achievement of the learning methodology enhanced with the technology. He furthers states that there were several driving factors for which the successful institutes have backed up this learning methodology. The main purpose of this mission was to be at the service of the working adults who require the flexibility in attaining the education. Vaughan (2007) pro- poses to prepare such framework which showcase the vision, values and principles of the any organization and it also incorporates in it the strategic and action plan.

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Another noticeable drawback of the Blended Learning is that it is not supported with the adequate leadership. Garrson (2011) presents his agreement stating that collaborative leadership has an aim of taking leaders of all the levels and then jointly contribution to develop the vision and the plan of learning. This approach may break the discontent among the faculty and may pave a way for adopting the Blended Learning.

At last, it is a clear fact that there is a dire need of proper adaptation and adequate implications of the blended learning. If the national policy is taking a lead in this field it would bear great fruits and may then make the system very strong because though the system is there it is enveloped with several challenges.

Ways and Processes to Blend

Rethinking Course Design:

In order to have effective completion of the any course with the blended learning, the instructors have to be in examining the course objectives and the goals of, and also very aptly designing that online learning tasks in or- der to attain the course objectives and goals and also integrating those online activities with the face-to-face interactions. Mode of delivery requires to be changed from lecture or presentation oriented to student-centered active learning.

New Approach to Teaching:

As the new method is a mixture of both the online methods of learning and traditional face-to-face methods of teaching, the instructor has to be extra prepared in providing adequate platform for the online discussions and also applying the conventional ways of evaluation keeping the new approach/method of learning.

Dual Learning Environment:

As the Blended learning comprises of both the traditional face-to-face teaching methods and online learning so the instructors and the learners both have to make extra efforts. It may invite several other challenges for the instructors and learners such communication barriers, extra scheduling. Couple of times

both the learners and the instructors may feel overloaded with tasks and schedule.

Preparing Students:

It forms the moral and academic obligation of the teachers to make their learners ready for the new teaching methodology. The teachers have to play an active role in guiding and explaining their learners. The instructor has to be at the help of learners in completing their assignments, and also adopting several novel strategies to solve their problems.

Multi-level Benefits

For Students:

There is a plethora of uses of Blended Learning. The students can;

- Go through the course materials and resources as many times as they wish with an aim of gaining success in their academic pursuit
- Have better peer interaction
- Take up the course as their own convenient time
- Be motivated for self-directed learning
- Have learner autonomy
- Enhance communication skills in multiple spheres
- Master their technical skills

For Instructors/tutors/faculty

Blended learning is beneficial not only for the learners but also for the teachers. The instructor can:

- Acquire and implements such pedagogy that can enhance the learning experience greater
- Have the interaction with the learners fruitfully
- Schedule their interaction timing flexibly and can work from any place. (It breaks the barrier of place-bound teaching.)

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- Can link the course with the subjects from other disciplines (Multidisciplinary concept of education will then be truly served.)
- Can master their technical skills and adapt online pedagogical skills along with the face-to-face pedagogy for better interaction.

For Institutions:

Blended learning can also be greatly useful for the institutions.

- The effective implementation of the Blended Learning earns a good name and reputation to the institute as long as the combined learning method is concerned.
- It also helps to effectively use the classroom space and reduce the higher flow of classroom.
- The institute has a wide range resources to be offered to the learners.
- Concerning the sustainable goals of the 21st century goals, blended learning offers a great deal of innovations.
- The learners' learning is highly enhanced.

Other Limitations

There are several limitations of the blended learning as well.

- Before creating the Blended learning environment, the instructor has to devote oneself in a very meticulous and extensive work. The preparation for the Blended Learning requires very long time.
- The direct contact between the teacher and the leaners gets reduced which mars the charm of the face-to-face learning strategies.
- It is quite obvious that as the learners shifting from face-to-face mode of learning to online learning, it becomes somewhat difficult for them and as they are quite habituated with the paper-based materials, e-content seems to be challenging for them.
- The handouts that were prepared for the face-to-face classroom delivery does not seem to be fitting for the online interaction. In order to guide the learners in a better way, the reformations in preparing the materials for the online classroom is the need of the hour. These additional

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efforts made the faculty have to be well admired.

- It is the general tendency among the learners that when they are opting for the distance education, they are overloaded with the works/assignments.

Conclusion

Several Institutions that are engaged in Higher Educations have determined to adapt the blended learning methods in the and also ready to welcome the courses and curriculum that support the blended learning and the effective use of technology for the conducting sessions, Faculty Development Programme, and several other academic assignments. These institutes have greatly realized the importance and significance of the Blended Learning. This is quite necessary as long as the current competitive scenario is concerned. Not only that it helps in reducing the workload of the faculty and serving the learners with minimal cost. At last, the sole purpose of the blended learning is to make the teaching learning activities more interactive, collaborative and focusing on the learners active engagement of the learners in the pursuit of knowledge.

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