

Blended Learning: A Comprehensive Guide to Implementation

Terri Evans, Adnan Ezad, Barbara McCarty

New Jersey City University

## **Introduction**

Online and blended learning provide opportunities for learning beyond the geographical limitation of the school building and beyond the time constraint of the bell schedule, to foster the development of 21st century skills for success; as such, widespread implementation in schools is prudent. Whereas, 19th century classrooms were designed to standardize teaching and testing at a time when most adults moved into industrial jobs that did not require advanced knowledge or education, the 21st century global society demands much more. Online learning has changed how knowledge is accessed and acquired, and blended learning combines online learning with traditional classroom practices, to meet those demands. As it is student-centered (personalized and mastery-based, with web based content and instruction that adds to the traditional classroom), blended learning can be used as a means of developing both hard and soft skills, thereby increasing opportunities for student success. Thus, a comprehensive guide for successful implementation of blended learning has been offered in the subsequent sections.

### **Mobilizing for Blended Learning: The First Step**

When administrators are mobilizing schools and staff for blended learning, they must consider what goals the blended learning initiatives help to accomplish in terms of sustaining and disruptive innovations, as well as what technologies will complement those goals. Such goals might include “...boosting student outcomes...doing more with less, or improving the ability of teachers to do their jobs” (Horn and Staker, 2015, p. 98). These goals are examples of sustaining innovations, which provide functional improvement to existing systems. When generating goals for disruptive innovations, administrators must consider how the technology can meet the needs of constituents, which are not being met by the current system. Selecting the specific technology

within the context of these goals will prevent cramming — which involves the incorporation of technology for no specific purpose (Horn and Staker, 2015) — and will ensure the school’s success.

For instance, in terms of goals that constitute sustaining innovations, teachers might have to do more with struggling students in less time. In a classroom full of students with varying needs and skills levels, it is difficult for the teacher to provide everyone with the support they need, within the allotted time frame for class. However, use of adaptive learning systems can afford the teacher opportunities to provide extra attention to the students who warrant it, as they can “...focus on smaller groups while other students receive personalized, adaptive content that the teacher did not have to create...” (Horn and Staker, 2015, p. 104).

In terms of disruptive innovations, a goal may be to provide opportunities for credit recovery (Horn and Staker, 2015). In this instance, administrators can make classes available on a learning management system (LMS), which will allow students to take an extra class, whereas the time allotted within the confines of a normal school day would not.

Additionally, goals must be “specific, measurable, assignable, realistic, and time-related [SMART]” (Horn and Staker, 2015, p. 101), in order to develop teams to effectively aid in carrying out these goals. Having a realistic, specific goal in which responsible stakeholders can be identified and success within a given time-frame can be determined will help the administrator to decide what types of teams to employ and which stakeholders should be placed in a given team. For instance, functional, lightweight, heavyweight, and autonomous teams can be formed with appropriate constituents to address goals concerning single departments, several

departments that affect one another, organizational reconstruction and disruptive innovations (Horn and Staker, 2015), respectively.

Administrators must also communicate the benefits of the blended learning initiatives in a palatable fashion to all stakeholders, in order to convince them to embrace the initiatives. For instance, instructional staff can be made aware of threats posed to them if successful implementation of the initiative is not carried out (Horn and Staker, 2015). This can be subsequently be reframed as an opportunity, which will cause “...the implementation team [to become] creative about ways to...serve students” (Horn and Staker, 2015, p. 108). As for students, who typically feel that “...education isn’t a job that they are trying to do” (Horn and Staker, 2015, p. 143), blended learning activities can be designed with students’ specific goals in mind. These goals include feeling “...successful...[and having] positive, rewarding social experiences with others” (Horn and Staker, 2015, p. 143). As such, the technology employed must be conducive to the aforementioned goals.

### **Designing the Virtual and Physical Space**

While the success of a blended learning environment is clearly more than the technology used, it is important to carefully consider how online resources will be incorporated in the process. Educators typically choose to populate their course with online content using four common strategies (creating original content, using one outside provider, combining multiple providers, or using a facilitated network), each with its strengths and weaknesses (Horn & Staker, 2015). While choosing to create original online content helps educators gain complete control of the material, this choice can be very time consuming and difficult to accomplish solely with in-house resources. Others choose an outside provider, sacrificing control and money for

the convenience of content collected and presented by experts in the field. The alternative popular strategies, combining multiple providers or using a facilitated network, involve the complications of weaving content together that is avoided by relying on a single method.

Educators must consider their finances, teacher resources and time constraints when choosing the source of their content.

As blended learning takes place in both a virtual and physical environment, educators must also consider their physical space when planning an effective blended learning approach. Horn and Staker (2015) suggest that traditional classroom designs created to support traditional teaching approaches limit customization and flexibility, so educators should creatively look at ways to modify their classroom space to reflect the blended learning model. From rearranging desks to purchasing flexible classroom furniture to renovating towards modular architecture, educators should consider their finances and modify the physical space to align with the focus on student agency, flexibility and choice, qualities at the core of the blended learning model.

### **Choosing a Model**

As blended learning is still in a relatively early stage of development, it is difficult to definitively categorize approaches, yet Horn and Staker (2015) identify four main models, each of which have specific benefits and purposes: Rotation, Flex, A La Carte and Enriched Virtual. The Rotation model involves students moving among different learning modalities, one of which is an online learning component. Horn and Staker (2015) recognize four common forms of the rotation model: station rotation (movement occurs to all stations, all in one classroom), lab rotation (movement occurs between stations in the classroom and separate computer lab room), flipped classroom (students interact with raw content online at home and engage in active

learning in class) and individual rotation (movement occurs between stations based on an individually customized schedule). Another model of blended learning, the Flex model, focuses on online learning supported by offline activities, customized to accommodate individual need. The third model, A La Carte, is often utilized in high schools that wish to offer more class variety and involves students taking online courses inside of a traditional school building. While the online courses do not have a face-to-face component, these are considered blended learning because the courses are completed in a brick-and-mortar school, either during study hall or after school hours. The final model is referred to as Enriched Virtual and consists of required face-to-face learning sessions with online components. This allows students the flexibility of an online education mixed with the support and community building that comes from a traditional classroom setting. Although Horn and Staker (2015) identify these distinct models, they also acknowledge that there are many variations and combinations of these models being used today.

According to Horn and Staker (2015) when choosing the most effective model, educators need to consider several important factors including:

- The nature of the problem; does it relate to mainstream students or revolve around issues that cannot be addressed in the classroom?
- The autonomy of the student; to what extent will students control their pace and path throughout the blended learning activity?
- The role of the teacher; will the teacher be providing direct instruction, tutoring, enrichment or serving as an online teacher?

- The availability of physical space; will all or a portion of the blended learning take place in an existing classroom, computer lab, open learning space or a general supervised setting?
- The availability of devices; are there enough devices for all or some of the students to use at school or at home?

The answers to these questions, will help educators decide the most effective model to apply to their blended learning experience.

### **Implementing Blended Learning**

As blended learning offers the most benefit in organizations where students and all stakeholders create common goals and work toward attaining them, creating a culture that inspires innovation is among the first steps for successful implementation. “If culture has formed, people will autonomously do what they need to do to be successful” (Horn and Staker, 2015, p. 250). This can be done by forming teams — built on a relationship of trust — within the organization, whose goal is to create solutions for identified problems. By creating a common goal to solve a recurring problem, a positive culture is built.

Moreover, reinforcing resilience and persistence in the problem solving process will further develop a positive culture, among both staff and students. As Horn and Staker point out, “Shaping culture begins one task at a time” (2015, p. 260), and each problem associated with those tasks will vary in terms how cumbersome they are to solve. As such, the teams may need to try more than one solution. They must understand that failure is part of the learning process. Furthermore, when the team has a solution, it must be implemented every time the problem occurs. This repetition of the problem-solving process develops culture, as the team’s repeated

implementation of a solution to a problem causes that behavior to become instinctual, thereby becoming an inherent part of the culture (Horn and Staker, 2015). Leaders must record, promote and model the culture and “...talk about it as often as possible” (Horn and Staker, 2015, p. 254), in order to continue to shape the culture. Moreover, as organizations find what works for their teaching and learning organization through trial and error by responding to problems and creating solutions, students also adapt these behaviors.

Another part of building a positive culture is having the foresight to consider the various assumptions the organization may have regarding blended learning and the implications of those assumptions on the desired outcome. For instance, one must begin planning the implementation of the blended learning initiative with the outcome in mind, and list all of the assumptions — conditions that are assumed to exist — that must be met for the outcome to be actualized (Horn and Staker, 2015), Implement a plan to test whether or not the assumptions are reasonable and implement the strategy when the assumptions prove to be true. (Horn & Staker, 2015). The list of assumptions should be extensive and include all of the assumptions made by schools. Include team members, student and teacher experience, hardware, software, infrastructure, facilities, and the blended learning model (core or elective). Check the assumptions with measures that do not take a lot of time or money. Having such a meticulously planned itinerary for the blended learning initiative will earn the leader trust among constituents, as the blended learning initiative will be feasible, thereby further shaping a positive culture.

### **Conclusion**

By adhering to the protocols suggested in this guide, creating and implementing blended learning initiatives to support student success will be a manageable task. Plan the first

implementation by creating the initial SMART goals, which will be based on recurring problems. Introduce these goals to staff members and ensure that staff members are motivated to implement the initiatives. Select the appropriate technology and blended learning models — customizing them as appropriate — that will accomplish the goal, and ensure that there is a positive culture. These solutions will help students prepare for participation in a global society.

### Bibliography

Horn, M. B., & Staker, H. (2015). *Blended: Using disruptive innovation to improve schools*.

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