Blended Learning in the Traditional Classroom

What Is Blended Learning?

Blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns in part online, where they have some control over the time, place, and pace, and in part at a bricks-and-mortar location away from home. The combination of face-to-face interactions and online components vary dramatically from school to school, and in some cases from classroom to classroom. As more traditional teachers begin to weave online elements into their curriculum both inside and outside the classroom, the definition of blended learning will continue to evolve.

The Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation identifies four blended learning models: Rotation, Flex, A la Carte, and Enriched Virtual (Christensen Institute, 2013). These blended learning models require fundamental institutional shifts in the school schedule, learning environment, and curriculum delivery.

Of the four blended learning models described by the Clayton Christensen Institute, the rotation model is the most accessible for teachers in a traditional school setting. The Clayton Christensen Institute defines the Rotation Model as "a program in which within a given course or subject (e.g., math), students rotate between learning modalities, at least one of which is online learning." Within the Rotation Model, there are four different types of rotations: Station, Lab, Flipped, and Individual.

Exploring Rotation Models

The Station Rotation can occur on a fixed schedule or at the teacher's discretion, and students move through multiple stations (i.e. online, small group, direct instruction, and one-on-one tutoring). This type of rotation is possible in a traditional classroom if teachers have technology available to create at least one learning station. Students move in small groups around a physical space to learn using a range of tools. One group might work together to complete a hands-on activity, while another group might practice their skills using a computer program. It is helpful to have a teacher's aide or parent volunteer available to support this model and assist students as they move through the stations.

The Lab Rotation moves students to different locations around a school campus to engage in different types of learning experiences. Like the Station Rotation, this can occur on a fixed schedule or at the teacher's discretion. Students typically move between work in a learning lab with computers and work in a classroom. This approach is less accessible for the traditional teacher because it requires students to work in multiple locations on a single campus.

The Flipped Classroom occurs "on a fixed schedule," rotating students "between face-to-face teacher-guided practice (or projects) on campus during the standard school day and online delivery of content... from a remote location (often home) after school" (Christensen Institute, 2013). This model is currently being used by a growing number of traditional teachers adopting a blended learning model. In this model, the instruction is shifted online (often in the form of video lectures), and class time is used for hands-on application. According to the Flipped Learning Network (2012), "membership on its social media site rose from 2,500 teachers in 2011 to 9,000 teachers in 2012." The flipped classroom model will be discussed at length in Module 2, "Flipping Your Classroom."

The Individual Rotation is different from the previous three rotation models because students move through their work on an individually customized, fixed schedule (Christensen Institute). Students participating in specialized sports training programs or those who are home schooled are likely to find this model suitable for their learning needs. In this model, students have more freedom to decide what coursework to pursue and complete; therefore, this rotation would be difficult to create in a traditional classroom or school setting.

Although a growing number of schools are adopting more formal blended learning models, many of the models described by the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation are challenging, if not impossible, for a single teacher to replicate. As a result, traditional teachers may feel they cannot adopt and implement blended learning if they are not teaching at a blended learning school. This misconception is important to address. Teachers must feel empowered to weave together instructional media using a wide range of web 2.0 tools—tools that aid in the development of user generated projects, as well as the implementation of social media—to improve learning outcomes for students even in a traditional school setting.

Although some definitions of blended learning emphasize online delivery of content and instruction, that definition does not radically redefine the traditional teaching paradigm. It digitally replicates the classic teaching model where teachers deliver information and students passively consume that information. The only difference is that a computer is disseminating information instead of the teacher. Instead, teachers should use technology to drive critical thinking, problem solving, innovation, and creation. To accomplish these goals, objective-driven learning and engagement must be paramount to content and instruction. New education models must strive to redefine the role of the student to ensure they are active and engaged participants in the learning process.

Teacher-Designed Blend

Individual teachers can create their own blends that combine face-to-face interactions in the classroom with online engagement. This approach to blended learning values the teacher as the primary designer of curriculum and deliverer of content while offering students more opportunities to research, discuss, collaborate, and create asynchronously online (Tucker, 2012).

The teacher-designed blend honors the teacher as both an expert in the field of education and an invaluable part of a strong education program. Teachers add experience, expertise, humor, compassion, and variety to a class in ways that a computer alone cannot. The teacher-designed blend supplements the traditional classroom but does not replace it, giving both teachers and students the best of both worlds.

Ultimately, blended learning models should provide students with more time and more opportunities to learn (Pankin, Roberts, & Savio, 2012). The online space should not be used to simply disseminate and collect information. There is nothing truly transformative about that approach to online learning.

Educators must embrace the changing landscape of education. Technology has made it possible for educators to pair any learning activity with the best learning environment—an exciting opportunity. The online space can be used to extend learning beyond the walls of a classroom to improve and deepen students' understanding of concepts and their ability to apply what they learn. Simultaneously, the online environment can be leveraged to strengthen student

relationships to build a learning community that works together to construct knowledge. That said, everyone is at a different place in terms of their ability to use technology. The "Rubric for Effective Teacher Technology Use" is a tool educators can use to evaluate how they are currently using technology in their teaching practice. This self-assessment will help you identify areas of strength, as well as areas that could use development. You will work with this self-assessment tool in this module's application.

The teacher-designed blend is a logical progression from the traditional classroom. As technology permeates society, education needs to mirror this change to prepare students for a rapidly changing world. For educators shifting to the Common Core State Standards, it is also important to note that the new standards require students to "use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others." In fact, many of the higher-order thinking skills identified as necessary to succeed beyond high school require that students communicate, collaborate, research, and publish online. The more successfully educators weave online work into their existing curriculum, the easier it will be for students to utilize online tools for learning both inside and outside of the classroom.

By choosing the model that works best for their classes, teachers and students can both reap the benefits of a blended learning curriculum.

References

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