Asian Journal of Distance Education

In Pursuit of the Right Mix: Blended Learning for Augmenting, Enhancing, and Enriching Flexibility

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Abstract: Blended learning, which has emerged as a mainstream approach for bridging onsite and online learning, promises flexibility to stakeholders in the educational process. This paper argues that blended learning can be understood as a process that combines onsite and online learning by blending the strengths of one modality and neutralizing the weaknesses of the other to provide flexibility to learners, instructors, and educational institutions. This flexibility can be afforded to time, space, path, and pace through sequential or parallel designs. In blending modalities and pedagogies, it is important that technologies are properly utilized in achieving the required systematic approach to get a right mix. This paper draws attention to the issues of confusion in terminology, the need to apply a theoretical and conceptual approach to blended learning, the empowerment of educational technology with a suitable pedagogy, the development of liquid curricula to increase flexibility, the extension of the boundaries of blended learning, and the application of blended learning to social contexts as well as to pedagogical contexts.

Keywords: blended learning, flexible learning, hybrid learning, flipped learning, hyflex learning

Blended Learning as *Deus Ex Machina* in a Time of Pandemic

Flexibility is a required feature of resilience, as understood from our experience with the pandemic. Considering the global impact of COVID-19, all segments of our lives, including education, have been affected. Emergency remote teaching and learning was put into practice to soften the repercussions of the pandemic, sustain education, and survive in the new normal (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020a). It has been argued that the normal as we once knew it was problematic, and that therefore we must adapt to the changes of the new normal to be resilient (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020b). One of the most significant changes to the educational landscape has been the increased demand for blended learning, as this approach has offered greater flexibility during the tough times of the pandemic.

Following the first waves of the pandemic, rather than maintaining the normal onsite learning or switching to only online learning as a mainstream approach in the new normal, the educational system has largely embraced blended learning to take advantage of both modalities. (Bozkurt, 2022; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2021; Pelletier et al., 2021; Raes et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2021). Blended learning appeared as a *Deus ex machina*, a working solution to solve the problems caused by the pandemic. At a time when convergence is shaping our educational approaches (Brown, 2021), blended learning is being recognized as the new normal in the educational landscape (Dziuban et al., 2018).

In addressing the conditions unleashed by the pandemic, it has been argued that “educators will take the role of the alchemist and develop, refine, purify, and perfect the educational system to achieve a successful learning ecosystem” by reimagining, redesigning, and recalibrating it (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020b). To be an educational alchemist, we need to merge, mix, combine or converge the educational elements. In this context, we must revisit the blended learning approach to get the right mix and transform educational elements into something new, something workable, something that actually functions properly.

Published by Asian Society for Open and Distance Education (ASODE), Japan
ISSN 1347-9008 http://www.asianjde.com/

Blending to Achieve the Right Mix!

It should be emphasized from the outset that blending for the sake of blended learning has never worked and will never work! Before considering blending learning processes, we must first ask the following questions to identify our needs and to get the right mix. What is the purpose of blended learning? What and why do we mix, merge, flip, combine or converge different approaches? Do we blend just modalities, just pedagogies, just technologies, or all of them?

Onsite and online learning is not a choice of red or blue pills (The Wachowskis, 1999), nor is the purpose of blending to create an *ecstasy* for synthetic stimulant and hallucinogenic effects. In fact, the goal is to chase *the white rabbit* (Carroll, 1865) to blend and get the right mix. In this sense, the design of blended learning systems requires going beyond simply shifting from onsite to online and vice versa. Rather, blended learning is an approach that requires us to consider many factors in the equation and to make decisions accordingly. For instance, it is crucial that we compare and decide on the use of *sequential* or *parallel* designs, as well as consider the factors of *time, space, path,* and *pace* to adopt an ideal blended learning model.

- Time: Online learning can be synchronous or asynchronous, where the preference for either one will be highly related to the pace of blended learning.
- Pace: By default, onsite modalities require real-time participation, whereas online modalities, capable of being synchronous or asynchronous, can either require real-time participation or allow students to participate at their own pace, respectively.
- Space: Blended learning connects and combines onsite and online learning processes. The focus should therefore be on ensuring that online and onsite spaces supplement one another rather than replace one another.
- Path: In blended learning there can be either a single path to follow or multiple paths that students can traverse.

All in all, each of the designs (*sequential* and *parallel*) and factors (*time, space, path,* and *pace*) governing blended learning approaches, by their nature, have limitations and strengths. We must therefore choose which ones work best to enrich learning experiences and provide flexibility.

Blended Learning: What does the Term Literally Refer to?

The blending of different modalities is indeed a complex process. The term, blending learning, has evolved over time, making it extremely difficult to understand both semantically and in practice (Irvine, 2020). Typically, the term has been used to describe different blended learning models, such as flipped, mixed, and dual-layered (Ashraf et al., 2021), but these terms are used interchangeably and loosely which has led to even greater confusion (Hrastinski, 2019). It should also be noted here that blended learning and hybrid learning refer to the same educational processes (Irvine, 2020; O'Byrne, & Pytash, 2015), but hybrid learning is also used in some parts of the world interchangeably with hybrid flexible (hyflex) learning. Within the context of this paper, blended learning is used as a generic, umbrella term (Graham, 2006), and the arguments are developed by applying hyflex learning (Beatty, 2019) and flipped learning (Tucker, 2012) as models for blended learning.

Another source of confusion is the online and onsite dimensions of blended learning models. In effect, they are not two halves of a whole, but rather, two different modalities that should be properly blended to get the right mix. From the perspective of blended learning, the amount, ratio, and sequence in a mixing process matter, in that they serve to identify what you are actually doing. Context and content in a blended learning process are crucial, as these terms mediate and moderate the blended learning process. For the online and onsite dimensions, deciding on how to link them smoothly is key to ensuring a seamless learning experience. Here, it is important to recognize that both online and onsite learning require specific instructional/learning designs and different pedagogical approaches. To clear the confusion over terminology, we propose the following definition for blended learning:

> Blended learning refers to combining onsite and online learning by blending the strengths of one modality and neutralizing the weaknesses of the other to provide flexibility to learners, instructors, and educational institutions. The flexibility can be afforded to time, space, path, and pace through sequential or parallel designs.

Déjà Vu and *Vu Jàdé* of Blended Learning

While the flexibility that comes with blended learning is certainly one of its most promising features, there still are challenges to consider. For example, Boelens et al. (2017) report that when incorporating flexibility into blending learning models, stimulating interaction, facilitating students' learning processes, and fostering an effective learning climate are issues to pay attention to. Rasheed et al. (2020) note that challenges related to self-regulation, technological literacy and competency, students' isolation, technological sufficiency, and technological complexity should be taken into account when designing blended learning models, while Ashraf et al. (2021) highlight that issues like lack of ICT skills and infrastructure are among the most encountered challenges experienced by teachers, students and institutions. That being the case, we need to revisit the *Déjà Vu*s, that is, the recurring known factors and also *Vu Jàdé*s that is less knowns or never experienced factors in the educational matrix.

The meta-studies on blended learning (Park, & Shea, 2020) report that some of the most cited studies on blended learning are those that compare and contrast onsite and online learning and that examine whether they are equivalent. This suggests that there is ongoing skepticism on the effectiveness of the online dimension of blended learning, an issue that Russel (1999) addressed as "the no significant difference phenomenon". This also implies that future research on this subject must explore blended learning horizontally and vertically to strengthen its pillars and dispel the clouds of skepticism.

There is a wide range of theoretical and conceptual lenses through which to augment teaching and learning practices (Farrow et al., 2021). If these lenses are used as foundational constructs during the instructional/learning design processes, then approaches that are technology-informed and based on design-thinking and user experience (Saçak et al., 2021) can serve to improve blended learning implementations and help them to reach their full capacity for meaningful learning experiences. For example, the concepts of Community of Inquiry (Garrison et al., 2000), Community of Practice (Lave, & Wenger, 1991), Transactional Distance (Moore, 1993), and Interaction Types (Moore, 1989) can be useful conceptual landmarks in our exploration of educational landscapes. The concept of Social Presence (Gunawardena, 1995), which refers to the degree of being perceived as real, should be added to this list, as the nature of learning in onsite and online modalities differs fundamentally.

One important thing to keep in mind when designing blended learning models is to avoid the human tendency of reinventing the same wheel. In many cases, we simply rename or rebrand the same interventions (Irvine, 2020) by applying different, shiny, and cool names to them (Ashraf et al., 2021). The confusion in terminology hinders the advancement of blended learning and leads to a loop where we craft the same proverbial wheel repeatedly. This situation implies that we have to be careful in the use of terminology, definitions and renaming our practices.

The current focus of blended learning is formal/structured learning. However, when it comes to the benefits of networked learning, which in many cases extends its boundaries to informal learning spaces and unstructured learning experiences, there are not many footprints to follow in the related literature. It is perhaps the right time to consider extending the boundaries of blended learning in order to provide learners the ability to cross-pollinate between different educational landscapes (e.g., formal and informal) as well as different modalities (e.g., onsite and online). Such an approach would give more agency and autonomy to learners and thereby provide them with deeper, wider, and more meaningful learning experiences. To be more specific, the online modality gives much needed flexibility to blended learning and therefore, extending its scope to informal learning spaces could be a real upgrade.

Conclusions and Final Remarks

The ultimate purpose of blended learning, taking into account the factors of time, space, path, and pace within sequential or parallel designs, should be to facilitate a flexible learning and teaching experience that would transform learning into a dynamic process. However, this does not involve simply blending onsite and online learning, but rather, adopting a new praxis. While blending onsite and online learning spaces necessitates the proper use of educational technologies, the use of appropriate pedagogies for onsite and online modalities should not be ignored. The failure to empower educational technology with a suitable pedagogy would lead to all the efforts at blending producing nothing more than a *placebo effect*.

In the blending of two modalities, timing, rhythm, and tempo are also crucial and therefore requires that the curriculum be updated accordingly. Proper transition needs to be provided to ensure the communication, interaction, and flow of knowledge between onsite and online modalities. To achieve this, liquid curricula that take the shape of the different modalities need to be developed, different entry and exit points need to be provided for smooth and continuous transitions, and pedagogical standards that ensure quality assurance and adaptive flexibility need to be implemented.

Last but not least, it is important to recognize that flexibility does not always aim for efficiency and effectiveness in academic achievements and excellence of learning processes. As learned from experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, the flexibility of blended learning models can perfectly serve the resilience and sustainability goals of educational systems. Moreover, if the issues related to the digital divide are eliminated, blended learning models can be used to increase accessibility to learning opportunities. That is, blended learning models can be used for reducing the inequity, inequality and injustice issues stemming from accessibility. It should also be noted that increasing the flexibility through blended learning models gives agency to learners by providing a wider space to navigate in the learning ecology. In that, we have to position blended learning not only within a pedagogical context but also within a social context to reveal its real potential and benefit from it at full capacity.

Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to Grace Slick who wrote to song White Rabbit and Jefferson Airplane who recorded the song for their album Surrealistic Pillow in 1967.

One pill makes you larger
And one pill makes you small,
And the ones that mother gives you
Don't do anything at all.

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Suggested citation:
Bozkurt, A., & Sharma, R. C. (2021). In pursuit of the right mix: Blended learning for augmenting, enhancing, and enriching flexibility. *Asian Journal of Distance Education, 16*(2), i-vi. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5827159