

Blended Learning: The View Is Different from Student, Teacher, or Institution Perspective

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Abstract. There have been many attempts to define blended learning or hybrid learning. The purpose of this article is to present the views of the authors on defining the concepts of blended learning based on the perspectives of instructors, students, and administrators. Depending on the perspective model used, there can be implications on budgetary and support issues to institutions. Developing successful blended learning programs requires a sound institutional strategic plan. Best practices will be presented as reference for instructors to plan and implement a successful blended learning program.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Hybrid Learning, Online Learning, eLearning, Instructional Design.

1 Introduction

Online learning has been gaining popularity in recent years since computer and Internet technology has grown tremendously in terms of speed and affordability. This makes learning convenient and accessible as well as self-paced and personalized instructions.[1] Online learning usually means no face-to-face in-class meetings within a physical environment and learners will have the complete learning experience on a computer or mobile device. Nevertheless, there are limitations in online learning. Students may find it difficult to navigate within the course site either due to their computer literacy level or the design itself. [2][3].

However, many institutions have incorporated online learning to complement in-class meetings. Usually the online portion will provide learners with supplementary materials or collaborative discussion forums. This has coined the new terms: blended learning and hybrid learning. There are numbers of research studies covering this mixed learning mode and described how instructors have adopted this type of learning approach. [4][5][6] With the combined modes, learners can have the best of both worlds in their learning experience. Course material and class discussions can be accessed at any time. Research has shown that students favoured this type of delivery mode. [1] On the other hand, some institutions decided to move towards a blended learning space because of the increasing growth of student enrollment and limited numbers of classrooms available on campus as well as budgetary restraints to hire

more in-class instructors. Some studies suggested that offering an online option would encourage students' participations and in-class attendance. [7][8]

Teaching a class in a blended mode is not an easy matter. The instructor must be capable of delivering the in-class portion of the course, for example, conduct an inspiring lecture, while managing the online portion of the course. The expectation from the students increases as they can now be in touch with the instructor 24x7 instead of the traditional classroom mode where students will meet the instructor at a pre-scheduled in-class time or office hours. Moreover, the instructors also have to be flexible by adopting new tools and technologies in order deliver online materials. [9] From a students' perspective, one has to learn how to manage their time as they have to progress through the online course material using "self-study". Students tend to be easily side-tracked by browsing other sites or by their social network sites while they are taking the course "on-line." Online learners need to be independent learners, and, most importantly, feel comfortable with technology. [10] One should not be discouraged by these potential challenges in implementing a blended mode of learning. Having a carefully managed strategic plan in place can ensure the success of the program and acceptance from the instructors and students.

In this paper, the authors will investigate the definitions of such combined modes of learning and the best practices in offering such learning space successfully.

2 Definitions of Blended Learning

There are many attempts to define blended learning or hybrid learning. Depending on an individual's perception of this type of learning mode, one will get a variety of definitions. [11] Mason suggested that the term had been so overused that it lost its meaning. [12] The fundamental concept of "blended" implies "greater flexibility, responsibility, and control that students have with regard to their learning activities;" [13] and collaborative in the learning process. Blended learning offers an integration of in-class and online interactions between instructors and students.

Graham saw four possible levels where the blended learning concept can be applied: [14]

1. activity level, where a single classroom meeting could be preceded or following by online study;
2. course level, where online lessons alternate with face-to-face classroom meetings;
3. program level, where totally online courses co-exist with totally face-to-face courses; and
4. institutional level, where both totally online programs and face-to-face programs are offered.

This provides a much broader definition on blended learning than any others but there is minimal fundamental difference.

Another attempt to define blended learning is based on its proportion of online and in-class instructions. Allen, et. al. conducted a survey, funded by the Sloan Consortium, Eduventures and Babson Survey Research Group, defined blended courses as "having between 30 percent and 79 percent of the course content delivered

online” and “‘Face-to-face’ instruction includes those courses in which zero to 29 percent of the content is delivered online; this category includes both traditional and web facilitated courses. The remaining alternative, online courses, are defined as having at least 80 percent of the course content delivered online.” [15] The term “hybrid” was implied in the definition of “blended” in this survey report that made no distinction between these two terms.

A different definition of blended learning is that the learners would have a choice between attending an in-class on location and participating online through a synchronous connection. [16]

To help better define the online portion of the blended learning, the following is the selected list of tools and applications for online delivery: webcasting, audio/video lecture streaming, podcasts, mobile device compatible, wikis, blogs, journals, e-books, interactive gaming, digital libraries and other online resources. This is by no means a comprehensive list as the list is expected to change or grow upon the latest technology development.

In this paper, the authors’ position is that blended learning is the same as hybrid learning. The definitions of these two terms are the same and the terms may be used interchangeably in the paper.

3 Models of Blended Learning – Three Perspectives

The commonly accepted definition of blended learning places it in a continuum with conventional face-to-face classroom courses on one side and fully online e-learning on the other side [17]. While it is easy to place markers at the 30 percent and 80 percent markers within the continuum, these are relatively arbitrary clip levels and focused entirely on delivery instead of educational pedagogy.

It is important to have a clear understanding of blended or hybrid learning as it is the primary source of confusion in the expectations of the student, teacher, and administration. When a course is offered in the calendar as hybrid, students do not automatically think “that means between 30 percent and 79 percent of the course is online”. Instructors, particularly those whose predominant experience is teaching in the classroom, are often surprised to find that they are expected to be “available” seven days per week as opposed to showing up at the same designated time each week. Finally, schools may charge students different fees for online versus classroom courses and may pay instructors on different pay scales as well. Does the introduction of hybrid learning mean a third pricing and financial structure?

The authors will present a model of blended learning with viewpoints from the student, instructor and administration perspectives. It will be argued that a definition based purely on delivery is oversimplified and inadequate.

3.1 Student Perspective

When students enroll in a hybrid course, they are often looking for the best of both worlds. They enjoy the convenience of being online and learning at their own convenience along with the option of interacting with their teachers and classmates,

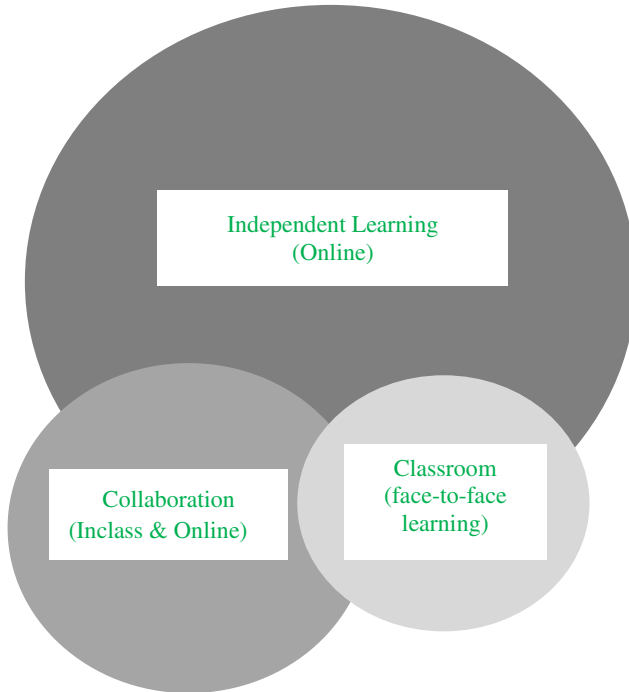


Fig. 1. Independent Learning, Classroom and Collaboration Model

but on their own terms. Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the student expectations for blended learning. The size of the circles is approximately representative of the amount of activity they are willing to devote to learning.

The majority of the course can be completed in independent learning. This is the classical online model where the lectures, assignment, homework and evaluation can be done in an asynchronous manner. In a hybrid course, the collaboration component occurs naturally if left on its own as students are familiar with reaching out to classmates. However, instructors who are keen on seeing interaction may sometimes assign participation marks to the discussion board or other online collaborative tools. The attempt to measure collaboration often has the unintended effect of forcing contrived discussion as students comply with their obligatory postings.

From the student perspective, the face-to-face classroom component is preferred to be optional. It is nice fall back plan in case the student is having difficulty comprehending the subject material with the online lessons. Having the opportunity to meet with the instructor and other classmates is appreciated, but students prefer to come in on their own terms. As with online collaboration, instructors often try to force the students to come in for face-to-face learning by assigning marks to these sessions.

3.2 Teacher Perspective

Instructors are naturally familiar with lesson plans, curriculum, classroom activities and following a syllabus. The commonly held view is that online is simply an alternate delivery channel for some of these classroom activities. The sum total of activities throughout the course remains the same; the benefit of hybrid learning is that classroom time can be reduced by transferring some portion of the classroom workload to online.

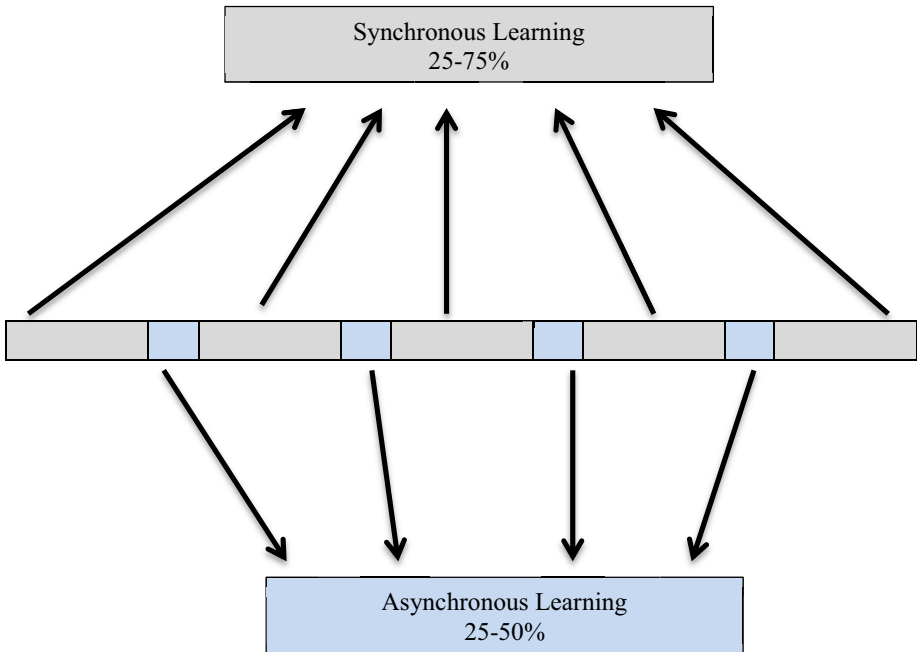


Fig. 2. Synchronous Learning & Asynchronous Learning

The teachers' conceptual model of hybrid learning is represented in Figure 2. Classes are often run with the same syllabus and timeline as the equivalent face-to-face classroom course. Students are expected to be in the classroom, learning synchronously, as a class cohort. There are modules where the students are expected to study independently and asynchronously. However, the overall educational pedagogy for a hybrid course is fundamentally the same as an in-class course. The benefit of a blended methodology is often the convenience of not having to come into the classroom for a pre-defined period of time, such as the total number of customary required face-to-face meetings in a semester or quarter. This is a delivery focus, often packaged as a new educational offering.

3.3 School Administration Perspective

Schools have the practical concerns regarding booking of space and finding the right classrooms capable of accommodating the enrolled number of students. Additionally, they must have user logins, course shells and content loaded into their learning management systems. A decision to offer a hybrid or blended course is deliberate and must be planned in advance of the start date.

Figure 3 is a representation of the considerations that must be taken into account from a school administration perspective. In order to run a class, either a physical or digital classroom must be in place, and sometimes both. If an instructor elects to utilize the physical classroom and not the digital classroom, this falls into the category of the traditional in-class format. Similarly, a traditional online course would only require the digital classroom.

The authors propose a subtle, but significant difference in defining blended and hybrid courses. Courses which are designed and delivered around a mandatory classroom component typically use the online capability of wikis, blogs, webinars to supplement the classroom learning. In these cases, the term blended shall be applied to the course. There will not be a need to further define percentages of time dedicated to classroom or online delivery.

The authors use hybrid to define an educational pedagogy where the key focus is on the digital classroom and optionally on the physical classroom. The synchronous learning components of the course are still important, and but from a student perspective, they have the option of participating face-to-face or through the use of webinars and other educational broadcast and replay technologies.

By describing a course as a hybrid offering using this definition, prospective students who may be located in different countries or busy professionals with unpredictable schedules can still enroll. The requirement to attend face-to-face is at their option and not dictated by the instructor.

		Digital Classroom		
		Mandatory	Optional	Not needed
Physical Classroom	Mandatory	Blended	Blended	Traditional inclass
	Optional	Hybrid		
	Not needed	Traditional online		

Fig. 3. Blended, Hybrid & Online Classrooms

4 Conclusion

There is still no universally accepted definition for hybrid versus blended learning. Similarly, terms like online education, distance learning and e-learning have been used interchangeably in consumer media and educational institutions alike. Each model as described above will have an impact on the budget for resources, e.g. human resources: instructional designers, technical support; system resources: learning management system, licensing costs, maintenance and backup costs, etc. Expectation of the instructors and students must be clearly defined. It is critical for an institution to have a sound strategic plan for blended learning delivery before implementation and as part of the academic curriculum development.

The model presented in this paper does not factor the consideration of cultural difference in defining the terms. Different cultural may have a completely different perception of online. In some countries, in-class is still considered as the recognized mode of instruction. Further research should investigate the cultural perspectives on understanding and defining blended learning.

The fundamental concept of “blend” best described “the greater flexibility, responsibility, and control that students have with regard to their learning activities.[18] No matter which model of blended learning, the main focus of a successful learning environment should be learner-centered to encourage student engagement and collaboration in the learning process. The tech-savvy and e-mobile younger generation and the non-traditional student population now expects more contents via technological media on multi-platform mobile devices and values the convenience factor. Blended learning can meet this growing demand which might be in one day when it becomes a norm. A classroom surrounded by a brick wall is unlikely to disappear but Internet technology has already become a virtual component of this physical classroom.

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