2017

# Blended Learning Benefits Academic Growth

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## Introduction

Technology surrounds our daily lives and the 21st century classroom is no exception. In recent years' technology has become a prominent daily fixture in classrooms across the United States as a tool that is incorporated into learning.  The process of integrating technology regularly into classroom instruction is called Blended Learning, which combines traditional face to face classroom instruction with an online technological component that students are partially in control of (Giarla 2017). Blended Learning is intended to maximize teacher instruction and planning time, and provide teachers with accurate student data. Additionally, Blended Learning provides students with an opportunity to participate in a stimulating differentiated learning environment.  Blended Learning is engaging to students, promotes deeper thinking, and caters to many different learning styles that allows students to learn at their own pace and take more ownership and responsibility over their school work (Giarla 2017). Online learning can be incorporated by teachers putting students into small or large groups, working to complete online assignments in short or long timeframes, and worked on at school or home. While it is initially time consuming to integrate the Blended Learning platform into schools, the benefits of the program are evident in the success of both students and teachers (Young 2015).

## Blended Learning Success

A lot of schools have gone from saying why should we do Blended Learning to how do we do Blended Learning. One of the best ways is to hear about other schools' success, how they did it, and what worked well for them and their students (Slusser 2015).  When the principal at Cesar Chavez Elementary School in California rolled out the Blended Learning initiative in his building he recognized that staff was receptive to the plan, but not entirely comfortable with it (Slusser 2015).  The principal provided staff with professional development during staff meetings which gave teachers a chance to interact and learn from each other and to discuss what was or wasn't working for them in their classrooms (Slusser 2015). Prior to this school's Blended Learning transition teachers felt that they were not able to make much academic progress with many of their students through face to face instruction (Slusser 2015).  However, once the platform was implemented, teachers saw student growth begin to happen and learning goals being met through online instruction which seemed to work as a great incentive for everyone (Slusser 2015).

Since Blended Learning allows students to work at their own individual learning level, it gives students the opportunity to be challenged while learning and reach their individualized learning goals. One example of this involves an elementary student who typically worked one on one with a classroom aide in a traditional classroom setting and was often anxious trying to learn and understand different concepts being instructed face to face (Allen 2017).  When Blended Learning was introduced into this student's classroom they were able to complete their work online independently without the assistance of the classroom aide and was able to understand the concepts being taught through the online program (Allen 2017).  It is clear that this student

thrived using this type of learning model since it could be customized to their learning needs (Allen 2017). Another Blended Learning student success story involves a gifted student who often chose not to participate in class in fear of looking like they were showing off (Allen 2017). However, when Blended Learning was implemented in this student's classroom they were also able to work at their own pace to meet learning goals and their confidence as a successful gifted student grew without feeling like they were showing off (Allen 2017). While these are only two examples of Blended Learning student success, they showcase two very different types of learners who prove that Blended Learning is beneficial.

It is important to choose diverse online program options for different types of learners in order for teachers to be able to personalize student learning and for students to reach their learning goals. It can be time consuming to find a successful program, but it is important to understand that the end goal is not to deploy technology on students, but provide them with meaningful learning measures (Horn 2014). Some examples of how teachers can do this is by providing students with videos to watch as an extension to traditional learning, working collaboratively on documents online with classmates, and participating class in discussion boards. Many online learning programs track student growth data and in turn this saves teachers valuable time of trying to track all of this information on their own. A lot of online programs also provide teachers with supplemental instructional materials that are related to curriculum standards, which saves teachers time from preparing lesson plans from scratch (Brooke, 2017). An example of this is an interactive book called LightBox that is directed towards elementary students. The product combines a physical book for students to read along with online supplemental materials such as ready to use activities for teachers to utilize during traditional classroom instruction (LightBox 2017). Additionally, LightBox provides students with concept related videos, slideshows, vocabulary, and quizzes that students can access independently online (LightBox 2017). The quizzes are self graded by the website and the results are emailed directly to the teacher (LightBox 2017). The results of the assessment provide immediate data to the teacher letting them know whether or not the student understood the concept that was taught through the various traditional and Blended Learning materials (LightBox 2017). While the Blended Learning concept could seem disruptive in comparison to the traditional classroom, statistics prove that schools using Blended Learning models have demonstrated significant growth measures in the subjects of Reading and Math since implementing the platform (Horn 2014). For example, Blending Learning public schools in the District of Columbia saw a 19-point increase in Math standardized testing scores in comparison to non-Blended Learning schools who only saw a 5-point score increase (Letsch 2015). Another study shows that Horry County Schools in South Carolina incorporated Blended Learning and saw a 4-point increase in Reading standardized testing scores compared to non-Blended Learning schools who saw no score increase at all in comparison to the previous year (Letsch 2015).

## Blended Learning Models

There are four main Blended Learning models that teachers can follow. The first model is called the Rotation Model, which involves students working individually, in small groups or as an entire class rotating through different learning stations that may be both technology based and paper and pencil driven. The learning stations can be specialized to student's learning needs which can be time consuming to prepare, yet very beneficial (Brooke 2017). Another example of this model is called the flipped classroom where instructional content is learned online outside of

the classroom for homework through online lectures and activities that are typically completed for homework are done within the classroom with assistance of the teacher which would typically involve answering questions on paper about learned concepts (Knewton 2017). In a study of freshman English students, 50% of students failed the class before a flipped classroom was implemented (Knewton 2011).  The following year a flipped model was incorporated and only 19% of students failed freshman English, which clearly shows the success of the model for students (Knewton 2011).

The second blended learning model is called the Flex Model.  The Flex Model involves students following a predetermined plan by their teacher online and teachers offer student support as needed (Brooke 2017).  An example of the Flex Model is Google Classroom, which is an online platform that simplifies the creation, distribution, and grading of assignments in a paperless way (Education 2017). Google Classroom also allows teachers to post class announcements, start discussions, and communicate with students to clarify assignments (Education 2017). This model is successful because it allows students to access learning materials from school or home and directly communicate with their teacher about posts and assignments which eliminates excuses for not completing school work.

The third Blended Learning model is called the A La Carte Model.  The A La Carte Model involves students having a particular subject instructed through online materials (Brooke 2017).  Many teachers "test out" the Blended Learning platform with their student's in this manner before taking out the time to plan and transition all student subjects to this form of learning (Brooke 2017). For example, students may continue have traditional learning in all of their subjects except for math where the teacher will incorporate technology in combination with face to face math instruction. This could be done through online programs that are aligned with curriculum standards and student textbooks that act as a learning extension and supplement for students to further practice learned concepts.

The final Blended Learning model is called the Enriched Virtual Learning Model.  This Blended Learning model requires students to meet with their teacher on specific days face to face and on other days they complete coursework remotely and submit it to their teacher (Brooke 2017).  The Enriched Virtual Learning Model is often used with students at the college level and is simple to follow.  The majority of the coursework is completed independently online and on specific days' students meet with the teacher in person for class lecture or to discuss progress on independent student projects.  Students who participate in the Enriched Virtual Learning Model need to be self motivated, efficient at time management, and have good technology skills.

It is clear that Blended Learning offers a lot of flexibility in learning, but it is important that educators have a learning management system in place to ensure that whatever Blended Learning model they utilize is effectively implemented with their students and provides them with meaningful data. For example, the principal at Marshall Pomeroy Elementary School in California had the goal of providing teachers with purposeful online data collection and curriculum tools and a new approach to differentiated learning through Blended Learning (Slusser 2015).  This was successful because teachers were trained on the new online programs and understood the benefits of using them and because teachers had a positive outlook on integrating Blended Learning it carried over to their students (Slusser 2015).

**Blended Learning Transition**

There are three main components to ensuring a smooth transition to the Blended Learning platform which includes a strong implementation plan by administration, the willingness of classroom teachers to accept the challenge of implementing Blended Learning into their classrooms, and the necessary technology devices and network infrastructure supported by the Technology Department. Once all of the above is in place students need to feel prepared and supported by their teachers for the transition as well. While it seems like most of the focus of implementing Blended Learning is placed on classroom teachers there are other pieces to the puzzle. It is important that the building principal has delivered a solid plan of integrating technology into the classroom curriculum by offering teachers the opportunity to attend trainings that will instruct them on the necessary technology skills that they will need in order to run a Blended Learning classroom, how to instruct student use of specific programs that they may plan to utilize, and understand the necessary steps to collect and access student data. If teachers feel well supported and prepared by administration, they will feel more on board with the transition. For example, the principal at Thomas Russell Middle School in California set a goal for teachers to implement a minimum of one hour of technology per week into their classroom (Slusser 2015). Additionally, the principal set up teacher visitations to Blended Learning school districts so they could see the platform in action and gain ideas for them to do it themselves, which also lead to a positive transition in their building. (Slusser 2015).

As schools are transitioning into the Blended Learning platform it is important for educators to keep in mind that they do not need to convert all of their existing lessons into a format that includes technology. Educators should continue to utilize effective face to face instruction pieces while transforming lessons that could be more meaningfully instructed through a technology program (Blended Learning Edutopia 2014). Educators may feel overwhelmed transitioning into the unknown territory of Blended Learning, but as one educator so honestly shared, "My school is going through the process of adopting the Common Core, and there is a tremendous push to create student-driven classrooms using technology. In short, I am overwhelmed and fear that I am too old, too used to the way I have taught to make the change—although I am willing to learn." (Tucker 2013). While this teacher is likely one of many educators who feels this same way, it is important for teachers to think big, but start small in the implementation phase so they don't become too overwhelmed with the transition into Blended Learning (Tucker 2013). Teachers should not attempt to convert their entire curriculum to incorporate technology at once, but instead transform one unit or subject at a time which will make them feel more comfortable instructing the new platform (Watson 2013). It necessary for teachers to be honest with students that the new technology is a trial, that mistakes will occur and that adjustments will need to be made throughout the transition process, and that the transition will be a learning curve for everyone. In turn, students will be receptive to the new learning format and teachers will feel a sense of accomplishment when they can see their students enjoying learning in this manner.

While it is clearly important to have administrators, teachers, and students on board with the transition it is equally important to make sure that the school district is properly prepared technology wise to take this leap. Without the necessary electronic devices and network infrastructure, the Blended Learning program will not properly be able to get off the ground. It is important for teachers to know what technology devices they will have regular access to and if the school district plans to purchase additional electronic devices. Additionally, the Technology

Department will need to work ahead of the classroom integration to ensure that there is a plan to keep electronic devices up to date and that the district network can support the implementation plan and make necessary upgrades if needed.

## Challenges of Blended Learning

While it is important to cover all viewpoints on the topic of Blended Learning, there is no evidence that Blended Learning negatively impacts student learning. However, it is important for educators to keep in mind that during the initial implementation and planning phase that extra time will be needed to research the platform, how to incorporate it into their classroom, and work through unexpected challenges that they may encounter. For some teachers Blended Learning will add a new level of complexity to their teaching that they are not used to and may feel overwhelmed. This tends to happen when teachers use software and websites with too many features for them and their students which can result in an unsuccessful Blended Learning classroom. While online programs that track student progress are beneficial, it is still important for teachers to check in with students to make sure they are understanding concepts they are practicing independently online and to collect a combination of online data and through teacher created student assessments.

A large challenge of the Blended Learning platform, that most people do not think about, occurs outside of the classroom and involves online program designers. Program designers often focus on the visual appeal of student learning programs, but also to keep in mind and be familiar with student curriculum when deciding what concepts to include and what format to deliver them in. If learning concepts are not properly delivered to students in a meaningful way, instruction time is lost and the concept will need to be instructed again in another format (Majumdar 2017). Due to this issue, teachers need to preview programs ahead of time and be selective in the online programs that they choose to add to their instruction plans. Overall, it seems as though the challenges of Blended Learning can be avoided with a well thought out transition phase with the end result of the program implementation being positive for both students and teachers.

## Conclusion

It is evident that integrating technology into the classroom on a regular basis is beneficial to both students and teachers through several different Blended Learning delivery models. While teachers continue to utilize effective face to face classroom instruction they can incorporate an online technological component to enhance and individualize student learning and academic growth. Blended Learning ultimately maximizes teacher instruction and planning time, and provides them with detailed student data through the online programs that they use. All of this is possible with a well thought out implementation plan and the support of school administration and the Technology Department. There is significant evidence that the Blended Learning platform is a success model as reported in studies from entire schools and through reports of individual student success stories from many different districts across the United States. While there are challenges in implementing any new program, there is no evidence that Blended Learning has a negative impact on student growth. In order to be an engaging and challenging classroom in the 21st century, it is evident that technology should be a constant tool that is incorporated into learning and that is beneficial to both students and teachers.

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