

BLENDING LEARNING: WHAT IT IS LIKE AND WHY WE HAVE TO ADOPT IT?

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INTRODUCTION

As we are living in IT society, it is teacher's duty to utilize relevant technologies for enhancing our learner's learning objectives. "A" university in Tashkent, Uzbekistan is operating Learning Management System (LMS) for all the stakeholders involved in teaching and learning process. Furthermore, "A" university established new Learning Board with blended learning for feasible coherence among the 3 didactic triangles of teacher, student and contents.

This article is to introduce the necessity to adopt blended learning considering 1) Good relationship with learner, 2) Backward design of learning outcomes with assessment and learning activities, 3) Formative assessment with ongoing feedback, and 4) Learner's engagement emphasizing that adopting new technologies in new environment is unavoidable for teacher looking for learner-centered approach to teaching.

Background. "A" university provides all the first-year-students with the modules of Context of Business (1st semester), and Business in its Environment (2nd semester) before they choose specific faculty after one year. These modules are consisting of lecture (2 hours) and seminar (2 hours), and as lecture is provided one week earlier, practical learning activities for applying same learning outcomes and activities can be exercised in the seminar in the following week. There were good reputation for these management modules, however, several areas shall be improved.

- As well known in teaching and learning practice, it is essential to establish and maintain good relationship with learners, however, it is not easy as seminar teachers take responsible for average 6 seminars, not to mention of lecture with large numbers of learners. During introductory session in first teaching week, seminar teachers try to find who are learners, and what they want, what are the goals for the modules with any suggestion after teachers show how they are professional and passionate, however, it is still challenging to address learners individually considering their different level and type in traditional class only.

As a result, there are very limited opportunities for learners to actively engage in the contents for lecture/seminar or peer review among learners in written form.

- Even though there are learning outcome for whole module mainly for teacher-centered, however, specific learning outcomes for each seminar designed in advance matching with assessment/feedback and learning activities are not fully provided properly.

- There are summative assessment such as coursework, video presentation, and examination and teachers provide feedback in diverse ways, however, feedback is not properly organized in LMS as this is communicated with emails or personal contact. Furthermore, there are short of formative assessment with ongoing feedback for individual learner in general.

- During seminar, there were activities for case study, video discussion, group works mainly for discussion and presentation, however, without proper notice or preparation in advance, it cannot be deep in general with time constraint. In addition, learning activities with reciprocal communication are rare and not coherent before and after the class - out of class.

To overcome these common concerns in traditional class, I established telegram channels for each seminar group for regular communication and provision of materials in advance motivating and advising learners to read and think before they come to seminars, and provided all the feedback in written form. It worked partially for formative assessment and timely feedback for active learners, however, I realize the fundamental problems in the above areas could be properly addressed with the adoption of blended learning.

What Blended learning is like? “It Is now clear that, as a result of ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessor...What should we call these “new” students of today?...Digital natives.” (Prensky, 2001a)

With this new environment, improvement could be obtained utilizing new ICTs to meet the requirement of each learner.

“We are moving from analogue to digital, tethered to mobile, Isolated to connected, generic to personal, consuming to creating, and closed to open” (Wiley and Hilton III, 2009) as you can see in the below 2 different situations;

1) Consider the in-class experience of a typical undergraduate:

After applying for admission to the university, registering for classes, and paying tuition (universities are closed unless you’re approved to enter and you can afford to pay), Jay makes his way into a large, stadium seating-style room (he is tethered to that place and time if he wants to hear the lecture). Talking during the lecture is taboo and the professor has a strict “lids down” policy to help students focus on the course material (Jay is effectively isolated because even though he is surrounded by friends and peers, and wireless Internet is available across campus, he is forbidden from drawing on these resources during class). Having read his textbook and reviewed the assigned handouts (analog materials), Jay joins 150 other students in listening to a 50-minute lecture (every student is a consumer of the same generic information regardless of their academic preparation).

2) Now consider Jay’s experience throughout the rest of his day:

From his dorm room, the student center, a cafe, and a bus, Jay connects to the Internet via his laptop and mobile phone (he is mobile) in order to search Google for information (digital resources are open for him to freely access) relevant to tomorrow’s test. Temporarily stymied, he chats with friends on the phone and by Instant Messaging to see if they can assist in his search (he is connected to other people). Finally finding a good source, he follows some links to explore related information (the content is connected to other content), ignoring material he has already mastered (reading only what is important to him personally). Later that evening at study group Jay shares his find with friends (participating in the teaching process). (Wiley and Hilton III, 2009)

Blended learning was introduced as a new technological tools in education sector. “Over the last decade, blended learning has been growing in demand and popularity in higher education and has become a widespread teaching phenomenon. It becomes increasingly evident that blended learning can overcome various limitations related to online learning and face-to-face instruction. The literature shows that blended learning courses are designed in many different ways, ranging from adding extra online activities to traditional face-to-face course, to building the whole blended learning course from scratch.” (Alammary et al., 2014)

The blended learning has huge numbers of different definitions with different perspectives, however, it is like “a recent development in education, combining face-to-face classes with e-

learning modules, which makes it possible to enjoy the advantages of both teaching methods. Other advantages obtained include its greater flexibility and reduced costs in comparison with traditional classes, especially when a large number of students are to be taught.” (López-pérez et al., 2011)

One more important concept emphasizing strategy aspect describes Blende learning is like “an integrated strategy for delivering on promises about learning and performance. Blending involves a planned combination of approaches, such as coaching by a supervisor; participation in an online class; competence descriptions; reading on the beach; reference to a manual; collegial relationships; and participation in seminars, workshops, and online communities.” (Rossett et al., 2003)

Allisson presents the possibilities of what can constitute a blended learning approach as below;

Live face-to-face (formal) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructor-led classroom • Workshops • Coaching/mentoring • On-the-job (OTJ) training 	Live face-to-face (informal) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collegial connections • Work teams • Role modeling
Virtual collaboration/synchronous <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live e-learning classes • E-mentoring 	Virtual collaboration/asynchronous <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email • Online bulletin boards • Listservs • Online communities
Self-paced learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web learning modules • Online resource links • Simulations • Scenarios • Video and audio CD/DVDs • Online self-assessments • Workbooks 	Performance support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help systems • Print job aids • Knowledge databases • Documentation • Performance/decision support tool

(Rossett et al., 2003)

Why we have to adopt blended learning? “Administration, faculty, and students in higher education know there has to be change in how we design educational experiences. Most recognize that the convergence of the classroom and communications technology has the potential to transform higher education for the better. However, blended learning is more than enhancing lectures. It represents the transformation of how we approach teaching and learning. It is a complete rethinking and redesign of the educational environment and learning experience. Technology is an enabling tool. Because blended learning is an approach and design that merges the best of traditional and Web-based learning experiences to create and sustain vital communities of inquiry, many higher education institutions are quietly positioning themselves to harness its transformational potential.” (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008)

Considering the areas of improvement as I observed in traditional class, I want to share the 4 aspects why we have to adopt blended learning.

1) Establishing and maintaining friendly and reciprocal relationship with learners

“Kids don’t learn from people they don’t like” - argues Rita Pierson, a school teacher, in her moving TED Talk, *Every Kid Needs a Champion*, and voices her concerns over less discussed, but of significant concept in education - rapport with learners. Whatever learning

environment, traditional or blended, establishing rapport with learners is one of the preconditions to success. For one thing, there are certain teacher qualities prized by learners such as empathy, respect, trust without the presence of which it is impossible to expect learning to happen. Good relationship between students and teachers allow such qualities to be formed in the classroom.” (Kurbaniyazov, 2019)

How to make a good relationship with learners is one of the most important success factor in teaching and learning. Teacher prepares what to teach and how the learners will learn properly with each learning outcomes. However, successful learning and teaching depends on the relationship of teacher, student and contents in each process as the context of learning situation is always changing. The relationship shall be friendly with trust as friends, and it shall be reciprocal without involving any money matters.

It is important to establish friendly and reciprocal relationship with learners, however, it is not easy as we live in materialistic society. It is the teacher’s role how to make learners can trust teacher without any condition.

After establishing good relationship in face-to-face class successfully, it is more important to maintain that relationship with on-line activities to address each of learner’s different interest and level. Teacher can be available 24/7. It will take time for igniting learner’s passion and curiosity with digital tools.

“One recommendation to build a rapport with your learners before teaching them in blended learning model. It took a semester to accomplish this with days up and down. Possibly it may take you more or less than our pilot; yet, the key message here is to reach students on a real, human and personal level.” (Kurbaniyazov, 2018)

Face-to-face and online class shall be interwoven and coherent for this purpose. “It is important to provide clear instructions at first and every stage in on-line activity providing students a great deal of support for adjusting to the potentially new ways of communicating that they will encounter in online course where the material presented and worked through is broken down into a series of learning segments... What is important is that students are involved with an array of activities that are interesting, challenging, and pedagogically sound.” (Vai and Sosulski, 2011)

It is with this friendly and reciprocal relationship with trust where teacher can provide learner with any better opportunity to improve in learning process with teacher’s design and formative assessment with ongoing feedback.

2) Backward design

“Blended learning not only fits into the modern, connected lifestyle, but can also provide specific benefits to students, teachers, and administration for increased access and convenience, improved learning and decreased (or more flexible) costs and all of these benefits can be obtained if blended course design is done intentionally, with a purposeful course design process and adherence to standards. “ (Stein and Graham, 2014)

Teachers are facilitators and coordinators, however, in connection with Blended learning, teachers are designers. “An essential act of our profession is the crafting of curriculum and learning experiences to meet specified purposes. We are also designers of assessments to diagnose student needs to guide our teaching and to enable us, our students, and others (parents and administrators) to determine whether we have achieved our goals...Designers in education

must be mindful of their audiences. Professionals in these fields are strongly client-centered. The effectiveness of their designs corresponds to whether they have accomplished explicit goals for specific end-users. Clearly, students are our primary clients, given that the effectiveness of curriculum, assessment, and instructional designs is ultimately determined by their achievement of desired learnings.” (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005)

There are a series of key questions to reflect to start design process. “These are;

- a. What do you want your students to know when they have completed your blended learning course?
- b. What types of learning activities will you design that integrate face-to-face and online components?
- c. What means will you use to assess these integrated learning activities?
- d. How will information and communication technologies be used to support blended learning?” (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008)

For this design for Blended learning, I would like to introduce Backward design.

“Among the various design of blended learning to achieve learner-centered approach, Backward design principles can be adopted as we can start small and grow over time of modular approach. This puts the learning outcomes at front. “What learning goals do I want my learners to achieve” rather “What content do I want to teach.”” (Kurbaniyazov, 2019)

There are three-stage approach to planning “backward design” and this is paraphrased form of the above-mentioned 4 key questions.

Stage 1: Identify desired results

What should students know, understand, and be able to do? What content is worthy of understanding? What enduring understandings are desired?

Stage 2: Determine acceptable evidence

How will we know if students have achieved the desired results? What will we accept as evidence of student understanding and proficiency?

Stage 3: Plan learning experiences and instruction

With clearly identified results and appropriate evidence of understanding in mind, it is now the time to fully think through the most appropriate instructional activities. (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005)

In other perspectives, we can consider 3 distinct approaches for designing blended learning; (Alammary et al., 2014)

- a. Low-impact blend: adding extra activities to an existing course
- b. Medium-impact blend: replacing activities in an existing course
- c. High-impact blend: building the blended course from scratch

Detailed benefits and challenges for each design approach are fully described and finally concluded with advice that “teachers with no experience in designing for blended learning should start with the low-impact blend, and when they gain more experience they can move to the medium-impact blend, and only when they have enough confidence, knowledge and experience in blended learning design, they can try the high-impact blend.” (Alammary et al., 2014)

In this context, we had better initially adopt backward design for blended learning with the concept of low-impact blend.

3) Formative Assessment with ongoing feedback

“In blended and online learning environments, the integration of digital tools into the assessment process can bring out new opportunities that don't exist or difficult to achieve in traditional settings. Online tools like Wikis or discussion forums can enable teachers to observe individual student contribution in group work assignments. Similarly, students can enjoy more frequent practice tests and immediate feedback on their performance. Faculties who employ

online assessment tools and strategies therefore report that such assessment opportunities often lead to enhanced student learning, teachers' efficiency and effectiveness.” (Kurbaniyazov, 2019)

“Assessments—and the outcomes they are based on—should reflect the kind of real-world activities or skills that you envision students performing in the future, after they’ve left your course and are applying what they’ve learned. In other words, onsite, teachers can carefully monitor exams and directly observe presentations, demonstrations, or communication. Online, student work can be submitted and reviewed digitally. Performances can be recorded or live-streamed, knowledge can be objectively assessed through computer-based testing, and progress can be tracked over time through logs, blogs, and analytics.” (Stein and Graham, 2014)

With this digital tools and environment, teacher has better opportunity to maintain friendly and reciprocal relationship with learner with constant and ongoing provision of feedback for assessment (summative and formative as well). However, I will focus on the important meaning of formative assessment with online feedback in blended learning context.

There are good example of using Screencasts for formative assessment.

“Like most writing teachers, I regularly collect and comment on partial or incomplete copies of student work, such as an outline or a rough draft. I now use screencasts to assess this work. Specifically, during formative assessment I use screencasts to:

- Visually highlight a passage that needs attention.
- Highlight an error repeated throughout the document.
- Describe errors at length and explain how those errors interfere with my ability to follow the paper and be persuaded by it.
- Employ analogy and example to assist students in understanding the error.
- Demonstrate corrections to an error.

I use screencasts as the primary means of providing feedback to students with learning disabilities. When they already have difficulty with written text, it seems unfair to ask that they decipher cramped handwritten notes; the visual nature of the screencast better demonstrates for them the strengths and weaknesses of their work. Thus, the screencast is key in differentiating instruction, making room for diverse learners in the classroom.” (Von Megan, 2017)

Assess online learner is an ongoing basis.

“Ongoing assessment engages the learner throughout the course. This is especially true when teacher feedback is timely. Regular and timely feedback helps students to improve. It should highlight areas that need improvement, present suggestions for future learning, and indicate where progress has been made. It is important that you communicate when and how students will receive feedback on their work. In an onsite course, the teacher may do this through a class announcement. In an online class, the teacher can use the announcements tool to communicate to learners when and how feedback is given on a particular assignment.” (Vai and Sosulski, 2011)

At this moment, we can think of learners’ online peer assessment as an important meaning in blended learning context as collaborative skills and co-work is getting more important.

“Peer assessment can provide students with faster, more comprehensive feedback on their work without overburdening the teacher. Peer review doesn’t have to be the only assessment of student work; it can be in addition to the teacher assessment. By assessing their peers’ work, students can gain critical insight into the grading process, which can lead to a better understanding of learning outcomes that inform improvement of their own performance.

Identifying strengths and weaknesses in peers' work can help them recognize similar attributes in their own work." (Stein and Graham, 2014)

Teacher can have better opportunity to provide ongoing onsite feedback utilizing digital tools so that the diverse learners can find their own ways in future.

"The goal of all schooling is transfer; the goal is not to get good at school and prove through assessment that you learned what was taught. On the contrary, in a truly modern assessment, the challenge is to look forward, not backward: We must determine if the student is ready for future challenges in which they must transfer prior learning. We should look at whether the student can draw creatively and effectively on their repertoire when handling a novel challenge, not merely determine whether they learned stuff. Think of how far we have come in medical, law, engineering, and business schools, where educators believe the best training for the future is case-based or problem-based learning (hence, assessment). Those of us who have been longtime coaches, musicians, and developers of software have known this for years. When will schools finally make the leap to the modern era of assessment?" (Wiggins, 1998)

4) Learner's engagement

"The 3 Es are commonly used criteria for evaluating the quality of an instructional experience:

- Effectiveness—refers to how well students are able to achieve the learning outcomes for a course
- Engagement—refers to the emotional and mental energy that students are willing to expend during a learning experience.
- Efficiency—refers to the resources (teacher/student time, effort, money, etc.) invested in the development and implementation of an instructional activity." (Stein and Graham, 2014)

Teacher can have better opportunity to engage learners with blended learning context and it is teacher's role to associate with learners so that they can follow with self-paced, diverse and independent learning styles to attain learning objectives and outcomes.

"Instruction that does not engage learners will not be effective in the long run. This is especially true in blended courses, as moving activities online may increase the sense of distance between student and classmates. There are no absolute recipes for engaging all learners. Learners come to the table with different desires, goals, and limitations. One of the strengths of a blended learning environment is that it increases the range of tools and potential strategies that can be used to reach learners. Instruction that takes place both online and face to face can provide a mix of approaches that allows all learners to engage in meaningful ways. Through experience, instructors can learn which combination of approaches works best for different students." (Stein and Graham, 2014)

Engaged learners are active participants in the learning process and it is essential for learner to be engaged to accomplish learning outcomes properly. "They are responsible for their own learning and frequently contribute to others' learning. As active participants, learners explore, and are encouraged to construct, their own understandings of knowledge. They interact with the material, the technology, real-world situations, and others in the course to develop their understandings. The specific roles will change depending upon whether they are working alone, in pairs, in groups, or as a class. Active learning simply means the learners are "doing." Doing includes writing, discussing, asking, questioning, critiquing, and collaborating." (Vai and Sosulski, 2011)

Learner's engagement can be considered in 3 categories. Learners can interact directly with the teacher, with other learners, or with contents which is known as didactic triangles in learning context. These 3 categories are well described as below; (Stein and Graham, 2014)

a. Student–instructor interaction.

This is the interaction that a student has with the instructor. This interaction can be one-on-one, as might occur during office hours or in a personal email exchange. It can also be one-to-many, as when one instructor interacts with a group of students in a classroom lecture and discussion.

b. Student–student interaction.

Interaction between learners can happen informally (e.g., self-organized study groups) or it can be a formal part of a course with classroom discussions, debates, group projects, etc.

c. Student–content interaction.

Interaction with content has traditionally involved reading textbooks and other text-based materials. Now students may also have access to digital content in the form of videos, animations, simulations, etc., all accessible on the open Web.

Learners can be engaged not only during class (face-to-face or onsite activities), but also before and after class (online), therefore, in blended learning, onsite and online can be connected, coherent, and complementary each other, therefore, it will enhance the learner's improvement of learning objectives and outcomes.

Problems and limitations. Blended Learning course was delivered from November 11 to December 14, 2019 in A university to introduce faculty members to the key notion of Blended learning and provide an opportunity to practice planning and building a blended lesson with Backward design framework on the “A” university's new LMS.

It consists of four modules over the course of six weeks.

Module 1: Readiness of Blended Learning

Module 2: Design and plan of Blended Learning

Module 3: Assessment and Feedback in Blended Learning

Module 4: Learner Engagement in Blended Learning

The course structure and contents were excellent with experienced trainer with high communication and delivery skills. It is essential for the higher education to provide this kind of professional development course before they implement new technology.

I joined late, but with the help of trainer's sincere advice and support, I can accomplish all the necessary online and onsite courses with self-regulated skills. I found it is essential to establish personal and friendly relationship with teacher to learn what is necessary for learner.

I found several areas of improvement with this introductory blended learning course as below;

1) Blended learning cycle

There shall be coherent before-during-after class. On-line and face-to-face learning is closely related, therefore, it should be emphasized learners shall provide reflective activity after they completed online learning activities before they attend at face-to-face class. However, only few learners provided required reflective activities.

2) Flexible schedule in face-to-face class

It is necessary to find the best time for all learners can attend at face-to-face class. For this purpose, it can be also considered to provide two different time schedules. Once discussed and fixed, it is also advisable to check attendance and measured as one of key criteria for completing the course. However, only few learners participated in face-to-face class.

3) Ongoing feedback

There were online activities before and after face-to-face class with reflective activity, quizzes, assignments etc., however, only few learners accomplished these online activities before each deadline and there were no active peer review.

4) Technical maintenance

There were technical problems, therefore, several learners could not access to participate in quiz or assignment before deadline. Due to this technical problems, deadlines were postponed several times and active feedback and discussion were not possible as scheduled.

Therefore, after fixing any feasible technical problem, it is advisable to stick to the original deadline. This will be one way of learning self-regulated skills which are essential for Blended Learning course.

There are several limitations on this article as below;

1) No application in my class

2) Lack of literature review for detailed cases especially for the problems or failures in applying blended learning

3) No review of progress of technologies and necessity of degree of Blended learning in Uzbekistan

4) No research for the readiness and willingness of adoption from the different perspectives from other faculties or administration within “A” university etc.

CONCLUSION

It happened that a big forest accidentally caught fire. Two men were there, one was blind and one was lame. The lame one couldn't walk, couldn't run, but he could see; and the blind one could walk and run, but he could not see. So they made a pact: the blind man took the lame man on his shoulders, and as the lame man could see and the blind man could walk, they became one man. They came out of the forest – they saved their lives. (Panchatantra story, India)

The Master said, “They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who find delight in it.” (Confucius, 1869)

Blended learning is unavoidable tools for the teacher looking for learner-centered approach in teaching and learning context.

“In order to provide quality experiences for learners, some important elements have to be managed, such as technology, the structure of the course, the instructor, technical support, assignments, student engagement and learning flexibility. Blended learning has been implemented with various designs and has shown a considerable positive effect on the learning process. Students not only learned more when online sessions were added to traditional courses, but student interaction and satisfaction improved as well. Obviously, the most common purpose of blended learning is the ability of combining the best of both worlds; traditional and online learning... not all students learn the same way, therefore the traditional approach is not ideal for all students. Blended learning provides more guidance to online learning by integrating face-to-face learning with distance learning, while it provides flexibility and accessibility to traditional learning by incorporating online learning.” (Alebaikan and Troudi, 2010)

Marc Prensky once discussed how the difference between our Digital Native students and their Digital Immigrant teachers lie at the root of a great many of today's educational problems and submitted that learning via digital games is one good way to reach Digital natives in their

“native language.” after presenting evidence from neurobiology, social psychology, and studies done on children using games for learning. (Prensky, 2001b)

Blended learning, however, is not technology only. It is one of the suggested tools to adopt in current IT society where teacher, learner and administration can consider. Blended learning can provide powerful tool and strategy, however, it will be much more important to realize what teachers are aware that they know, and what learners are aware that they do not know so that they can work and walk together with other stakeholders in teaching and learning context. Teacher can forward first small step with blended learning, and teach and share the lessons for the endless improvement of learners to find their ways by themselves in future.

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