

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF BLENDED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Key words: blended learning, online learning, e-learning, model of education, face-to-face teaching.

Since numerous institutions have chosen to drop all in-person classes, including labs and other learning meetings, and have ordered that staff move their courses online, blended learning has become one of the learning approaches embraced by many higher education institutions. The reason for its increased use can be found in the fact that blended learning cannot be confined to space and time, nor can it be assigned a single specific method or delivery mode.

The definition of blended learning is the one proposed by Graham [2], that is, blended learning is “the combination of face-to-face instruction and computer-mediated instruction” and “the thoughtful experience integrating face-to-face and online learning” by Garrison and Kanuka [1].

Even though the most common case of blended learning is the mix of online and offline forms of learning, the “blend” can be seen as taking place at various levels, going beyond the method of delivery. Thus, it can refer to the combination of self-paced and collaborative online learning, but it can also designate a mix of structured and unstructured learning, acknowledging the fact that the learning process does not only occur in an institutionalized, formal environment but also throughout day-to-day activities and contacts [4].

So, blended learning is a flexible model of education that can support a project or course of study to progress without requiring teachers and learners to be in the same physical space at all times. But, it demands careful consideration of the pedagogical approach.

The concept of Blended Learning includes three components that can be blended: distance learning (also known as live e-learning, including virtual classrooms, webinars, web conferencing, etc), face-to-face learning (classroom lectures), and online learning (online training modules).

There are six models of blended learning:

Face-to-Face Driver (a model aimed at reinforcement of traditional full-time training). The teacher in the classroom gives the main volume of educational material using online training technology. This model often covers classroom work on computers.

Rotation Model. There is an alternation of traditional full-time classroom training and independent online training in individual mode.

Online Lab. The online platform is used to conduct the entire course of study. Such training takes place under the guidance and control of a tutor. This program can be combined with the traditional one within the usual schedule.

Flex Model. Most of the curriculum is studied in the context of e-learning. The teacher accompanies each student remotely, but to explain difficult topics he can organize face-to-face consultations with small groups or individually.

Self-Blend Model. The student himself decides which courses he needs to supplement with online classes.

Online Driver Model (mostly distance learning). This model involves distance learning. Student contacts the teacher online using a certain platform.

It should be mentioned that these models are rarely used separately. They are usually combined. For example, face-to-face with flex: in addition to attending classes, students are engaged in online learning, and unclear points they can discuss with the teacher.

Well-organized blended learning can have several benefits. First of all, it's time-saving. Students can access all educational materials online, that is the standard practice in blended learning. Besides, they save time not having to travel to the university campus every day.

Secondly, blended learning trains students' autonomy and responsibility and raises emotional intelligence through continuous interaction of students in the group, which contributes to better assimilation of the material.

Blended learning makes students' communication with peers and teachers more effective. The online part of students' studies allows them easily to communicate through instant messaging, emails, and video calls.

One of the biggest advantages is flexibility, allowing the teaching and learning process to be fully adaptable to the time schedule, previous knowledge, and learning style of the user. Nevertheless, this "unbounded educational discourse" [1, p. 96] can only be successful if the main components of the mix are effectively integrated, following a logical and pedagogically sound structure.

However, the drawbacks of online learning became quickly apparent: the lack of social interaction and immediate feedback can lead to a decrease in the level of motivation. It is in this context that blended learning emerged, to balance these disadvantages by combining traditional and online learning in a way that preserves the added value of both methods, adding to it the benefit of flexibility

So, a blended learning approach appears to be suitable in the educational process of higher education institutions, as it combines the online component with the more traditional face-to-face teaching and assessment methods, allowing and even facilitating the creation of a "space of learning" [3, p. 24] that can benefit both the educator and the student by addressing their specific needs.

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