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Blending Learning: Towards Transforming Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

"Blending Learning (BL) has advanced from an experimental novelty to a nearly common teaching-learning approach in academia recently. The Covid-19 pandemic has encouraged the global use of blended learning approaches. It is a novel method that blends traditional and modern teaching-learning paradigms and is becoming more popular, providing value to the learning environment by incorporating technology. It not only changes the way information is delivered, but it also redefines the old roles of education and opens new vistas of learning opportunities. Various universities, colleges, and other educational institutions across the world are establishing deliberate strategies for employing blended learning. Blended learning environments have been shown to outperform traditional classroom education, but they do not prove to be superior, till date. This paper seeks to investigate this paradox and recommends that the government, authorities, instructors as well as students must establish an engaged, collaborative, technologically advanced and supportive teaching-learning environment of global competence in order to fully realize the potential of BL.

Keywords: Blending Learning, BL, Higher Education, NEP, Online Education

Introduction

The world is continuously changing, and this change has had an impact on a wide range of key sectors, including education. Traditional educational techniques have largely been pushed to the sidelines as a result of the rise of digital learning platforms in educational establishments. Today, "Online, mobile, and blended learning have become a part of our future" (Rosenbusch 87). As a result, the term "Blended Learning" (BL) was emerged to represent the combination of digital learning resources with conventional face-to-face teaching approaches used in the classroom and "Technological innovations such as blended learning (BL) are rapidly changing teaching and learning in higher education" (Anthony, et al.). "Blended learning has been growing in popularity as it has proved to be an effective approach for accommodating an increasingly diverse student population whilst adding value to the learning environment through incorporation of online teaching resources" (Alammary, et al. 440).

India's new National Education Policy 2020 also recommends the use of blended learning models, citing the rise of digital technologies and the increasing importance of leveraging technology to improve learning at all levels, from elementary school to higher education stating, "Top institutions accredited for ODL will be encouraged and supported to develop high-quality online courses. Such quality online courses will be suitably integrated into curricula of HEIs, and blended mode will be preferred (35)… HEIs may blend these online courses with traditional teaching in undergraduate and vocational programmes" (58). Blended learning models should be selected for specific courses based on their suitability for replication, according to the NEP 2020 recommendations. This has prompted India's University Grants Commission to offer some novel ideas

for implementing a blended learning strategy, including a proposal that up to 40% of instruction be conducted online. In response to the wide-ranging of COVID, the UGC issued a concept note on 'Blended Modes of Teaching and Learning' and has "recommended blended learning, under which up to 40 percent of a course will be taught online and the rest 60 percent through traditional, offline methods in all higher education institutions" (Firstpost par. 1).

Teachers and students have used a number of ways to address the teaching-learning issues that have arisen as a result of the current state of COVID lockdown affair. Blended learning, however, is a combination of offline and online instruction that can be provided during a normal period such as pre or post Covid time. The bulk of instructional activities in blended learning are carried out remotely, with certain activities in the classroom depending on the needs and possibilities of the situation and students involved. In this mode, teachers must be able to adapt not only how they offer instruction but also how they use technology. This mode can assist learners in taking responsibility for their learning while also fostering a sense of belonging among them. When it comes to meeting educational objectives, BL requires an integration of use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as well as face-to-face tutoring activities. Individualism cultural variation, and increased flexibility in educational delivery can be promoted by it. The popularity of blended learning is growing because it is a more flexible that can be used in democratizing access to education.

BL- Definitions

Blended courses mix online and face-to-face education in a planned, pedagogically beneficial way, and do not just combine but trade-off face-to-face time with online activities, or vice versa. It is a "thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences" (Garrison and Vaughan 5). In the concept note of UGC, it is defined as "an instructional methodology, a teaching and learning approach that combines face-to-face classroom methods with computer mediated activities to deliver instruction. This pedagogical approach means a mixture of face-to-face and online activities and the integration of synchronous and asynchronous learning tools, thus providing an optimal possibility for the arrangement of effective learning processes. Blended learning is the term given to the educational practice of combining digital learning tools with more traditional classroom face to face teaching" (UGC 1). Partridge et al defines it "Blended learning is a flexible term, used to describe any and all varieties of teaching where there is integration of both face-to-face and online delivery methods" (2). Katherine Rosenbusch opines, "One of the primary purposes of blended education is to fuel learning both inside and outside the classroom" (89). These definitions acknowledges that such combinations can take many different forms, but underlines that they must be pedagogically sound and should be regarded as more than just an "add-on" to a course.

Background and Review of Literature

She Online and blended education is not a new thing to the Western countries. Due to the combination of new technology and global use of the internet, online education in its many modalities has continued to develop worldwide. Dziuban, Picciano, Graham, and Moskal explain the growth of online education in terms of "four phases using primarily USA context: 1990s (Internet propelled distance education), 2000–2007 (increasing use of Learning Management Systems–LMS), 2008–2012 (growth of Massive Open Online Courses–MOOCs), and beyond with growth of online higher education enrollments outpacing traditional higher education enrollments" (Dziuban, et al.). "The University of Phoenix, known today for its fully online programs, began to use online technology with CompuServe (the first online service provider) in 1989, and then the World Wide Web in 1991. The year 1998 marked the beginning of a rise in online programs, when New York University unveiled NYU Online, which along with many of the other online programs that followed but did not survive. This initial failure of online programs to meet expectations also led to the concept of "blended" or "hybrid" programs that surfaced in 1999/2000 and combined face-to-face classes with online classes hoping to synergize the advantages of both" (Palvia, et al. 235). So, most college and university strategic plans include blended learning worldwide.

The beginnings of blended learning may be traced back to before the invention of digital technology. The concept "blended learning" was at first unclear, encompassing a number of different technologies and pedagogical strategies in various combinations. Despite the fact that the ideas behind blended learning were initially generated in the 1960s, "the formal terminology to describe it did not take its current form until the late 1990s. One of the earliest uses of the term appears in a 1999 press release, in which the Interactive Learning Centers, an Atlanta-based education business, announced … "The Company currently operates 220 on-line courses, but will begin offering its Internet courseware using the company's Blended Learning methodology" ("Blended Learning"). However, with the publication of Bonk and Graham's first 'Handbook of Blended Learning' in 2006, the concept became more precise. Graham defined "blended learning systems" as learning systems that "combine face-to-face instruction with computer mediated instruction" (Pandey 48).

However, for developing countries like India, though some distance-mode universities were introduced few decades ago, their importance is felt more seriously in the COVID pandemics as this pandemic drove online/blending learning everywhere. "Although India stands second globally in terms of sheer number of internet users, our internet penetration rate stood at 45 per cent in 2021, which is much lower than most developed countries and the other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations. In addition, more than 65 per cent of the Indian population lives in rural areas, but internet density in those areas is significantly lower than urban regions, which suggests the existence of a large digital divide between urban and rural India – a divide that presents a major challenge to ensuring equal access to online education" (Rajput and Swain). Nonetheless, Indian higher education has been transformed to better meet students' specific learning requirements and styles. Everything from LMSs to different adaptive learning tools like videoconferencing has altered how and where students study. Distance learning and educational technology have been effectively integrated into many colleges and universities for over a decade. In times of crisis or uncertainty, such as the current worldwide pandemic, blended learning approaches have proven successful and safe to keep students enrolled, active and safe.

Several studies on the performance of BL show that it has a positive influence since learners enjoy the flexibility to study at their own pace, which can boost participation, particularly among socially awkward students. It provides them control over the time, location, pace, and progress of their courses. Accessibility issues, inconsistent internet connection in some areas, lack of training and/or adoption of technology and techniques, and community concern about the quality of courses are just a few of the obstacles that BL faces. Alammary, et al. found that "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" (440). Ma, et al. found "the blended approach forces students to look for information online dependently, rather than just relying on a lecturer or a text book" (5). Helen Partridge found "The flexibility and convenience of blended learning is of benefit to both faculty and students" however, "blended courses take longer to prepare and administer than their traditional counterparts" (4). Garrison and Vaughan observe "Blended learning is both a simple and complex issue; it is simple in concept, but more complex in practical application" (5) whereas Garrison and Kanuka opines that "blended learning is not a technological fad. It is an approach and strategy that can be built upon in a progressive, systematic, and thoughtful manner, and over time, will transform the institution in a manner congruent with our highest ideals" (103). Shivangi Dhawan found "Combining face-to-face lectures with technology gives rise to blended learning and flipped classrooms; this type of learning environment can increase the learning potential of the students. Students can learn anytime and anywhere, thereby developing new skills in the process leading to life-long learning" (6).

These findings indicate that blended learning environments can outperform traditional classroom instruction, but they do not prove it as superior. This paper attempts to explore this contradiction and reach

to findings that the government, authorities, teachers and students must create an engaged, supportive, and collaborative learning environment to harness the potential of blending learning.

BL- Pedagogies for F2F and Online Learning

Many educational institutions are presently implementing blended learning and mixing face-to-face education with technology-mediated instruction, which is becoming a reality as "A blended learning mode provides ultimate flexibility in many aspects. And most of all, it can be applied to any program which holds on to the values of traditional learning and incorporates digital media with that" (UGC 3). BL takes advantage of the both online and face-to-face contexts, fostering collaboration, engagement and communication, as well as conceptual comprehension, analytical skill growth and group integration.

On the teacher's side, the technological transformation of the previous several decades has pushed them to rethink their approach to teaching with information and communication technologies. However, BL is still in its early stages despite the enormous possibilities for openness it creates. The possibilities generated by this new space of learning are influenced by the teacher's ability to adapt them. "BL shifts the teacher's role from knowledge provider to coach and mentor" (UGC 5). Teachers must adapt to the new technology paradigm and acknowledge the shift in responsibilities. They must be trained on a regular and consistent basis in order to seamlessly integrate new information and communication technologies (ICTs) into their teaching. The current technological revolution motivates them to gain the required abilities to integrate and teach material using technology. A consequence of blended learning is that the teacher's role shifts from that of a provider of knowledge to that of a facilitator as put by Dykman and Davis, "there is a shift in emphasis from the "sage on the stage" approach to a "guide at the side" (9).

On the student's side, today's students are raised in an atmosphere where technology is an integral component of daily life. Their expectation is that technology should be utilized appropriately to assist them in learning, developing important informational and technical literacy skills, and mastering the fluency required in their particular subject domain. On the student side, the blending modes of instruction demand a great deal of self-directed chores and activities, both individual and group, and the student must keep up with the needed pace. It "instills a sense of 'student ownership over learning' which can be a powerful force propelling the learning" (UGC 6). The use of ICTs in the educational arena allows students to acquire instructional content in novel ways by giving self-directed activities and assignments that must be completed at specific times. It also tips the balance in favour of cost-cutting methods that are more profitable and sustainable in the long run. It stresses that BL infrastructure costs per student are far lower than in traditional approaches. This is one of the reasons blended learning has become more popular in schools, colleges, and universities. "Moreover, blended learning is appropriate for students who live far away from the university or have other commitments that conflict with the on-campus class time" (Alebaikan and Troudi).

However, when integrating in-person and online teaching and learning, numerous aspects must be addressed. Blended learning is becoming the new normal around the world as a result of COVID-19 outburst. Blended classrooms combine face-to-face education approaches such as direct instruction or lecture, group discussions, and small-group work with technology-based in-class online learning that students may access from home if they have the required technology. The student-teacher contact and direct instruction should take place in the classroom wherever required, while materials and maybe supplemental activities should made available through online mode only. Students may pick which tasks they complete online and which they complete in class in blended learning settings. Blends should ideally be customized to the age, lifestyle, and educational demands of each student. Blended learning must seek to combine the best of in-person and online learning experiences for students.

A standard Learning Management System (LMS) should be used to support the online portion of this blended instruction by the HEIs and teachers. An LMS is where the teacher organizes all of the lessons and activities that students must complete in order to pass the course. Teachers can use LMSs to create courses that only enrolled students can view.

LMSs also come with a number of tools to assist you in improving your course. Uploading and sharing documents, having online chats, administering quizzes and surveys and collecting and grading assignments are all made easier with them. Teachers and students must get training on how to utilize LMSs and Open Educational Resources (OER). It is recommended that INFLIBNET's e-PGPathshala, SWAYAM MOOCs, and NPTEL courses be used more frequently. The learning management system (LMS) is only one part of the technical base required to provide blended learning properly. Google Classroom, Cisco Webex Education Connector and Webex Classrooms, Zoom, or Google Meet are all also excellent choices for combining these capabilities into a familiar interface for teachers and students.

A deliberate, structured strategy for BL deployment is required. Knowledge and skills in the use of applicable pedagogies and technology are required for effective teaching and learning in a mixed environment. Introverted or shy students should be able to express their thoughts and learn from others in blended classrooms by utilizing discussion boards where discussions that started in class can continue long after the session has ended. Schools and college administrators must decide how teachers will synchronously interact with students for online meetings. When compared to traditional face-to-face education, blended learning represents a shift in perspective. A blended learning environment does not just consist of transferring in-person lesson plans to an online platform and calling it blended.

Additionally, it demands teachers to rethink how courses are organized and prioritize which components are best suited for online education and those that should stay in-person. Not to mention that the components that go online will almost certainly require reorganization to be effective. Institutions that organize it wisely will enjoy the full benefits of blended learning. As you create your course, it's important to know the overall background of the students enrolling in it. Gaining an understanding of their prior knowledge and technological competency will enable you to determine the support they will require and tailor your instruction accordingly. This will assist you in developing course content, activities, and assessments that are aligned with your learning objectives, as well as selecting the appropriate technology. As stated by Bleed "blended learning be considered as not simply "bolting" technology onto a traditional course, but as an opportunity to completely redesign course development through a combination of "bricks and clicks" (18). Due to the increased autonomy and responsibility of online learners, it is important that they are assisted in planning, monitoring, and analyzing their comprehension and performance. By setting clear objectives and establishing a clear path through the content, students may better manage their speed. By adding links to resources, making oneself available to students and fostering collaborative peer issue solving on the discussion board, you can provide enough technical help for learners. "In online or blended courses some or all of the nominal contact hours may be asynchronous (self-directed) rather than tutor-facilitated)" (University Of Worcester). New tools should be experimented with for examinations and assessments. "UGC suggests implementing BL as a new mode of teaching-learning in higher education and hence the area of assessment and evaluation needs to be explored again in the light of BL mode" (UGC 26).

Discussion

When many universities and colleges turned unexpectedly into online/blending learning, owing to continuous safety concerns of COVID-19, a range of difficulties from technical to learning experience were exposed. Therefore, institutions of higher education need to be prepared to meet blended learning issues. At the beginning of the course, teachers should prepare students in order to achieve effective adoption by using the technology. "BL is not a mere mix of online and face-to-face mode, but it refers to a well-planned combination of meaningful activities in both the modes. The blend demands consideration of several factors, mainly focusing on learning outcomes and the learner centered instructional environment" (UGC 4). Higher education institutions need to focus more on formalizing BL with commitment required, careful planning, multidisciplinary teams, a solid technology platform and quality educators. Each BL programme must establish the scope of the basic objectives, evaluate issues, identify the difficulties and measure

the outcomes. BL's application must consider a suitable physical, technological and platform framework. It offers tremendous advantages, including flexibility, convenience, content quantity and quality and sharing expertise with teachers and students. It is also an instrument for democratization in education. It is, "consistent with the values of traditional higher education institutions and has the proven potential to enhance both the effectiveness and efficiency of meaningful learning experiences" (Garrison and Kanuka 1).

It is now being observed often that the classroom and on-line education is now more closely integrated under the generic name of blended education. A successful blend of teaching and learning necessitates a focus on what works best on campuses, such as personal interactions between students and faculty, as well as what works best online, such as flexibility and broad access to resources and expertise. In this way, the students, teachers and external specialists who engage in person or virtually will need to reconsider teaching and training as well as classroom arrangements. In reaction to new technological capacities, educational paradigms for both classroom and online delivery need to be recalibrated and revised. On the student side, students are supposed to become more motivated, autonomous, disciplined and devoted. Blended learning may save expenses by placing courses in the internet realm and effectively substituting costly textbooks with electronic gadgets. E-text books can also contribute to driving down the budgets of textbooks digitally.

With the UGC focusing on integrating ICT into teaching and learning by 2022 as part of its quality mandate, Indian higher education might go the next step and adopt a policy of 'blended learning' to offer teaching and learning to meet the global competency. "UGC encourages higher education teachers in India to create such BL environments for at least some or else for all courses being taught in the HEIs. Though such BL environments help Indian higher education teachers and institutes in the development of the twenty first century learners, it will demand rigorous planning" (UGC 27).

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, well-facilitated online education has the potential to equal or even exceed traditional classroom learning. Blended education allows teachers to be more creative in how they plan and deliver courses, allowing for the incorporation of new technology into their classes. Both the teacher and the student must be on their toes, since technology evolves and both must adapt it. Blended learning has its advantages and disadvantages, but because the 21 century educators believe that it is here to stay, they are concentrating on finding the optimum combination of techniques for it. By integrating the advantages of face-to-face and online learning, a blended learning course offers the best of both worlds. Some forms of learning may be aided by technology, and class time can be reduced and/or devoted to activities that require more face-to-face interaction. By providing flexibility, additional learning alternatives, and the integration of activities that lead to deeper learning, an integrated course model serves a wider spectrum of learners. To implement it, "the governments (too) must ensure the availability of reliable communication tools, high quality digital academic experience, and promote technology-enabled learning for students to bridge the disparities originated in the education system before and after COVID-19 catastrophe which is also inevitably necessitated for uninterrupted learning" (Mishra, et al. 100012). However, globalization of blended education is possible only if there are common technological platforms (such as the Internet), a bridge over the digital divide, accommodations for various languages and cultures, a common curriculum, and standardized evaluation methods. "Now is the time for us to rethink and revisit the real meaning of learning and its outcomes. Only once we've done that can decide whether blended learning in India is just a lofty dream or a potential reality" (Rajput and Swain). Since our current HE system works hard to achieve worldwide excellence, we are ready for such a major change - much more towards blending education.

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