

## **Maximizing Learning by Teaching Blended Courses**

**Sam Hijazi**  
**Professor of Computer Technology**  
**Maureen Crowley**  
**Vice President of Instruction**  
**M. Leigh Smith**  
**Dean of Business and Technology**  
**Charles Shaffer**  
**Professor of Biology**

**Florida Keys Community College-William Seeker A. Campus**  
**5901 College Road**  
**Key West, Florida 33040**  
**(305) 809-3541**

### **Abstract**

A blended course is defined as a course that combines face-to-face learning and distance learning to provide students with the best practices of both delivery methods. Learning and teaching through this method require a close evaluation of those components that should be adopted from traditional learning and distance education. This paper defines and discusses the reasons behind offering class in this mode. Further, this research discusses the benefits of using this method to meet the strategic plan of an institution. The planning and the design of a blended course are discussed in order to provide an understanding for both administration and faculty. Further, there is an examination to the existing technology to effectively deliver quality education in this mode. This research should greatly enhance the reader's understanding of blended learning as a balanced teaching method.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research is to give a brief understanding of blended learning. It distinguishes blended/hybrid learning from both traditional learning and distance education. Although not all learning methods are perfect, this paper emphasizes mostly the benefits and advantages that blended learning can provide to both students and instructors. This paper discusses briefly some of the existing blended learning models. Further, this paper examines some of the existing models for blended learning.

### **Blended Learning Definitions**

There are multiple definitions for blended learning. From the web portal, TeAchnology, the author defined blended learning as "an educational formation that integrates elearning techniques including on-line delivery of materials through web pages, discussion boards and/or email with traditional teaching methods including lectures, in-person discussions, seminars, or tutorials."

In their attempt to define blended learning, Singh and Reed (2001) focused on the learning outcome instead of the process of mixing and matching of different delivery methods in order to optimize the learning process. Also, to make it clearer, Singh and Reed proposed to refine the definition of blended learning by stating that "blended learning focuses on optimizing achievement

of learning objectives by applying the ‘right’ learning technologies to match the ‘right’ personal learning style to transfer the ‘right’ skills to the ‘right’ person at the ‘right’ time.” The authors decided to embed four main principles in the definition. These include:

1. The focus must be on the learning objective instead of the delivery method.
2. To satisfy many learners, different learning styles must be applied.
3. Each person involved in the process of learning brings his/her own experience to the learning environment.
4. Most often, what the learner needs to know within a certain time period is the “most effective learning strategy.”

Blended learning has become a widespread teaching phenomenon. From Vaughan and Garrison (2005) presentation to Educuase, the authors referred to Arabasz and Baker who found out that 93% of doctoral programs and 80% of all American universities and colleges offered blended learning classes. The above mentioned fact does support the notion that blended education has become a reality in the higher education. Further, the authors referred to Marquis whose study showed that 94% of British universities and colleges believe that combining traditional education with online learning can produce a more effective teaching style than face-to-face learning alone. Also, 85% of Britain’s faculty believes that the use of teaching technologies are enhancing access to learning.

### **Maximizing Learning through Blended Learning**

Skill and knowledge are prerequisites for succeeding in the business world these days. The life span for any system is a fraction of what it used to be a few years ago. Gray (n.d.) revisited these thoughts by stating how in order to excel in the business world, a business needs an able and trained workforce. In order to continue being competitive, an organization needs to create a learning place that will provide a continuous enhancement to its employees. The author is not only calling for behavioral changes but for sustaining good behavior. The author stated that blended learning allows for “sustainability to occur” in less costly and in a timely manner. This conclusion was reached as a result of comparing blended learning to both face-to-face learning and pure distance learning. Blended learning allows for the use of the most effective methods within the different phases of the learning process.

Another experience was observed in teaching technical writing. Spilka ( 2002) noted that most professional workers write their documents in the following manners:

- Without direct supervision. They also do it by themselves or collaboratively.
- Without dependency on their local coworkers, but they also depend on other members who might be geographically dispersed.
- With office automation equipment such as computers.
- With autonomy to make decisions as to when and where to communicate with other coworkers, how to deal with lack of response and how to submit the final outcome on due dates regardless of the hindrances and problems faced through the process of completing the project.

Spilka’s observation was followed by a good question, which asks how business and professional writing professors can include all of the above mentioned points to be part of a traditional class. Spilka’s finding noted the hardship she had to face in stimulating the class to represent the reality of the business world. In the hybrid class, it was obligatory for the learners to show maturity, accountability, and the agility to start, maintain and uphold the process in order to complete a pro-

ject. In addition to that, they needed the ability of judging their environment to succeed in collaborating with different people to produce a highly desired outcome. They needed to use their own judgment to overcome the challenges of collaborating with people they hardly knew, in order to produce coherent, high-quality documents.

From Spilka's experience it is obvious that traditional learning is capable of providing the learners with different activities that only blended learning is able to provide. Since blended learning by definition is to use whatever is best for the learner, it is clear that the freedom applied to choose any technique or approach gives the instructor and the learners multiple inputs to choose from before they arrive at the best possible learning experience.

### **Some Difficulties to Blended Learning**

No situation is perfect and that is a given. The following list is to remind decision makers and educators that there are some points that need to be addressed. To avoid these points might reduce the quality of teaching in this mode. These might include:

1. Arabasz and Baker (2003) stated that "E-learning classes cannot function if instructors and students cannot operate the necessary hardware and software. "
2. Faculty compensation and initial difficulties to cope up with the learning requirement to teach in this mode.
3. Not all instructors are as effective in teaching blended courses.
4. Lack of time to train on various technological tools.
5. Students might have different computers with different bandwidth capabilities.
6. Different speed of computers used by the students.

### **The Benefits of Blended Learning**

According to the research, blended learning replaced distance learning as the choice to meet the need of the learner in academia or in the business world. In the 1990's many people were fascinated by distance education (Bersin and Associates). The article continues to state that the expectations of distance learning were not the answers for all learners. The reality of learning required multiple solutions with multiple mixes of delivery methods and media. Further, the article noted that to succeed in obtaining the right training is to use "the right mix to a given business problem." As a result of all that mix, blended learning has become the effective choice compared to e-learning.

One of the most notable benefits to blended learning is the ability of the learners to continue asking questions about a topic that was not clear in the classroom in the first place. Learners usually don't have the ability to grasp the whole lecture in a traditional class. They have to wait until the next class or schedule a meeting to see their professor in person for the additional clarification. The waiting period for an answer could limit their understanding of subsequent materials in the same chapter.

Since most blended learning is supported by the use of technology in order to make up for the missing time in the classroom, students can easily communicate with their instructors or leave them a question in the discussion section. Students don't have to wait until the next meeting or

schedule some time to see the instructor in their office. The quick response time through the utilization of technology provides an additional level of interactivity.

There are many other benefits to blended learning. To answer the question “*Why use blended instruction,*” the author of *UCLA Blended Instruction Case Studies* came up with a comprehensive list of these benefits. The author started by emphasizing the goal of blended instruction as a method of teaching to provide quality education by increasing the benefits of both elearning and traditional education. The list contains the following items:

1. Class goals can easily be met.
2. Uniformed classes for multi-section offerings.
3. Redesigning courses so the educational outcome can be measured easily.
4. Effective use of class time
5. Enhanced computer literacy among students and instructors.
6. Flexible classroom scheduling.
7. Increased chances for doing research.
8. Course documents are available to learner 24 hours a day.
9. Using the World Wide Web resources to support class activities.
10. Students can participate at any time.
11. Students can collaborate on their own time.
12. Supply students with additional learning materials if they need them.
13. Reduce the instructor’s redundant tasks.
14. Increase the quality of communications between the instructor and learner.
15. Better ability to monitor student involvement and advancement.
16. Using interactive programs that produce quick feedback and an advice for any remedial work.
17. Reduced rates of “DFW” which stands for drop, fail, and withdrawal respectively.

### **Advantages at a Local Level at Florida Keys Community College (FKCC)**

The following paragraph states the administration’s stand about blended learning. There is a clear understanding that blended learning is another avenue that FKCC should consider in attempting to serve the community better.

One of the most important factors in education is meeting the needs of the students. This is a creative task for institutions that must face fiscal restraint on one hand while providing opportunity to learn on the other hand. Blended learning meets this challenge in many ways. First, it accommodates the student’s life schedule. Second, it provides for a necessary social connection that is so important for true communication to take place and for retention and success to occur. Today’s educational delivery must reflect the changing nature of the medium while maintaining the crucial elements of quality instruction and design. Educational leadership must embrace this and ensure that students and faculty have the resources and support necessary to strengthen the learning continuum with advances in education such as blended learning.

At FKCC, the concept is new to the college teaching environment, but it is supported as seen by the above paragraph. Students usually meet the instructor on a face-to-face for a percentage of the time allotted for the class. In addition to the classroom time, students have access through the internet to a learning support system, Desire to Learn. The basic components can include but are not limited to:

1. Lectures notes usually written using PowerPoint presentation software
2. Readings and other explanatory materials relative to the topics of the course
3. An open discussion section where student/teacher and student/student interaction occurs around questions put forward by either the teacher or the students. This can be done at any time, day or night.

For the short period of time using blended learning, instructors have started to realize the advantages of blended learning at FKCC. These might include:

1. It gives the instructor and the student full time access to each other through the buffer of a course web page.
2. It allows students to ask questions when they occur to them and get answers promptly.
3. It allows for the discussion of nuances that might not come up in the classroom.
4. It allows the instructor to more accurately and specifically determine student progress.
5. It allows the instructor to add more elaborate clarification when student questions indicate it is necessary.
6. It promotes deductive and inductive reasoning skills by posing thoughtful questions for students to answer and giving them the time necessary to think them through.

In addition to the above pedagogical benefits, other advantages can result from taking blended classes. These include:

1. Less time spent in driving to attend classes at the college. This time can be invested in learning.
2. Less cost associated with traveling for long distances. Some students attending FKCC, even though the number is small, might have to drive about 50 miles to attend classes.
3. Less number of cars in the parking lot all the time.
4. More utilization of classroom space.

Some of the above points were truly emphasized after an interview with Ms. Julie Bailey, the Coordinator of Distance Learning at FKCC. When I asked Ms. Bailey “how does blended learning maximize learning,” she noted that blended learning is able to:

1. Fulfill the mission statement of the college by serving the community better. For example, blended learning reduces the commutable distance.
2. Utilize the space of the college more efficiently.
3. Save students the extra expense by reducing the use of fuel because of attending classes one time a week instead of three times a week.
4. Continue the train of thought after the lecture by utilizing the “simmer effect.”
5. Encourage creative thinking by not binding or limiting the thinking process only to a physical lecture.
6. Reduce inhibition of students by reserving their own judgments imposed by themselves or others. Students don’t have to ask a question within the lecture, rather they can wait to ask it through the other communication tools available to support the activities after the class.
7. Enhance critical thinking since students don’t have to come up with spontaneous answers to the questions asked in the classes. Students usually have longer period of time to come up with an answer.

## Quick Review of Blended Learning Models

Valiathan (2002) discussed different types of blended learning models. Valiathan categorized these models into three types:

1. Skill driven model which requires an instructor or facilitator to support self-paced learners in order to acquire a pertinent skill or knowledge. This model demands constant feedback from the instructor to build the activities of the model. The author also emphasized a list of requirements that must be established for the process to be successful. These include:
  2. A strict plan for a self-paced learning style but with a schedule.
  3. The instructor should discuss an overview and a closing for each learning session.
  4. Use a synchronous delivery method including online and face-to-face teaching to explain procedures.
  5. Use email systems for additional communication.
6. Attitude-driven model which requires the collaboration between traditional classroom meeting and the use of multiple technological innovation to develop certain behaviors. For example a “behavior-driven approach” requires an effective communication among multiple participants in a “risk-free environment.” Group projects and assignments should be completed offline. To accomplish these tasks, learners can use simulation and apply role-playing with the other learners.
7. Competency-driven model which requires the extraction of tacit knowledge from the experts at the job site. The learning can be supported by using various technological applications such as email and online discussion, assigning mentors as part of the learning and the creation of a knowledge warehouse are part of the learning model.

Other models do exist. Oliver (n.d.) discussed three types of models for blended learning. The model names are Model A, Model B and Model C. Model A has some of its elements available electronically but doesn't require students to be online. Model B requires student to access part of the materials online. Model C is fully delivered on online where students must access all materials online. A model by Drummond and Guerin (n.d.) includes multiple technologies including live satellite presentation to cover a larger geographical area. Other methods of delivery include traditional tutorial sessions, course materials, self-evaluation and collaborative learning.

It seems no matter what is the existing model for blended learning, a model tends to be unique and more pertaining to the local need or specific learning environment. The blending of the different delivery methods is not to establish a general model that can be applicable to all situations, but rather to create a model that serves a particular institution's or business' mission.

## Conclusion

Not every moment of teaching is a teachable moment and not every moment for a learner is a learning moment. Blended learning allows students to come back and ask the questions they could not have an answer for during the face-to face lecture. The different technological tools and telecommunication innovations can extend the level of interactivity between the learners and the instructor. These technologies include the Web; the teaching support tools such as Desire 2 Learn and WebCT; the discussion and chat forum found in these tools; and email. With the ability to mix the benefits of traditional learning with the technological tools, which deals with the factors of distance and time, the benefits of blended learning have exceeded those found in both traditional learning and distance education.

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